



# Changing Lives

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- My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic
- Original Character
- Other
- Cloudkicker
- Romance
- Sex
- Slice of Life

## Description

[Time loops? The end of existence as we know it? Fate itself conspiring against you?](#) Who has the energy to deal with that kind of thing?

Not Cloud Kicker, that's for sure. She's a mare who knows what she wants out of life. An easy job, a nice house, and an endless supply of potential banging partners. Then one day a simple little flower vendor moves in down the street and everything starts to change.

As a side story to the main Time Loop Trilogy, you can expect massive spoilers in the comments for both the original stories and unwritten chapters of this one.

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# What's Not to Like?

## WHAT'S NOT TO LIKE?

Hi there. My name is Cloud Kicker.

Wait, no, hang on. I didn't set this up right. If I had, then you'd know that for this to work I'm going to need you to think "Hi Cloud Kicker" right after I say that. Just trust me on this.

So, right. Hi there. My name is Cloud Kicker, and I am so bucking amazing- and so amazing at bucking- that I really shouldn't be allowed to exist.

That's the only thought that comes to mind as I wake up, uncomfortably smothered by body heat, and find that I'm sharing my bed with two other ponies, both of whom are out cold. An especially adorable mare is actually wrapped around my shoulder, pinning me down. Not that I'm complaining. I only wish I remembered her name. Time for the usual Saturday morning ritual of 'what did I do last night, and how many ponies did I do it with?' At least I already know the answer to the second part of that is 'two or more.'

What can I say? If you know you aren't going remember more than a few bits and pieces of an evening, all you can do is make sure those bits and pieces you do remember are spectacular enough to make up for it. Not that any of us managed to get *quite* that plastered. Things are a lot more fun when you don't have to worry about one of your partners passing out in the middle of it, and the notion of losing control of my own actions hasn't ever been one that's appealed to me. Well... unless fuzzy hoofcuffs are involved. I debate whether I should get moving or whether I should bask in the afterglow for a little longer. The sudden sensation of drool running through my coat tips the balance, and I ever so gently extricate myself from the situation.

This is, in fact, my bedroom, so I won't be going very far. The familiar bookshelves and the decorative wingblades hanging on the wall tell me that much. The mare who was cuddled up

against me shifts and moans at my absence, but soon just rolls over to latch onto the unicorn stallion on her other side instead. I can't help but smile. Spiral is one of my regular banging buddies, on the off days when he can manage to ditch his daughter at a sleepover or something. Who knows, maybe he and this mare will hit it off. Wouldn't be the first time an orgy I threw together turned into a matchmaking opportunity. That's me, practically Cupid except with a vastly improved love-spreading technique compared to stabbing somepony in the chest from range.

If I want that to pay off, though, I'm going to need to get going. Fact of life number one: Nopony will ever fall for a partner when they're ravenously hungry. Fact number two: Nopony who just spent the night with two other ponies will awaken and *not* be ravenously hungry, especially when one of those ponies was me. If the pleasant ache in my thighs and back is anything to go by, we all got quite the workout last night.

Slipping downstairs, I start the routine that's tested and proven to get ponies up and moving from my bed as quickly as possible. Not that I'd throw them out, but a mare's got stuff to do on her day off and leaving strangers alone in my house has never sat well with me. Luckily, there's one thing that'll bring even the heaviest sleepers back to reality, and that's the smell of freshly-cooked breakfast.

I've gotten quite good at making a meal big enough for three on the spur of a moment. I once had a partner of mine tell me, half-joking (but only half) that the main reason she kept coming back was for the food. The punishment I'd inflicted upon her in response was as devastating as it was sexy, and by four in the morning she'd begged to retract her previous statement. I graciously allowed it. Turning my attention to the contents of my refrigerator, I take stock of the ingredients within and what I can do with them. I've got everything I need to whip up a quiche, and some spinach to stick into it. Pulling out what I need and rooting around for a mixing bowl as my oven starts to heat up, I pull out a loaf of bread for toast and put on some coffee. After a moment's consideration, I toss in an extra scoop of grounds. I'm still a little hung over.

As I get everything moving right along, there's a short window where everything that needs to be done is done, and there's nothing to do but wait. I take that opportunity to take a lingering look outside my kitchen window at the sun rising over Ponyville. My professional opinion is that the weather should be pleasantly cool, especially since the afternoon is scheduled to be overcast. That's the weekend shift's problem though, not mine. They're a younger, less experienced crew, part-timers who just do weather work to earn a couple extra bits. What they lack in practice they make up for in being extra worshipful of Rainbow Dash.

I'm distracted from my ruminations by the sound of a door slamming shut from the direction of my bathroom. That fresh coffee smell gets 'em every time. A minute later, as I'm pouring coffee into a trio of mugs, my two partners from the night before emerge with a sleepy yawn.

"Morning, Spiral," I say as I hoof over the first cup to the red stallion along with the two lumps of sugar he takes it with. "And good morning to you too. Sorry, I'm terrible with names first thing in the morning."

"It's Vibrant," says the little yellow unicorn. The memories of last night come racing back. They're enjoyable ones.

"Oh, yeah! Hey, you were awesome at karaoke last night. Not that I'm complaining about anything else you can do with that tongue of yours. Neither is Spiral here, am I right?" I ask as I grin at him.

His red coat utterly fails to hide the way he's blushing. Honestly, some ponies. He a pretty charismatic guy when he isn't trying to be, but tease him a little and he just goes to pieces. "You really do have a beautiful voice," he says to her.

Yes! Go Spiral! Vibrant's turn to look bashful now, pushing a bit of her mussed-up mane away from where it's hanging from her own horn. "Th-thank you, Spiral. It's just a hobby though, I'm a composer and songwriter, not really good enough to sing professionally."

"That's not true, from what I heard last night I'd come to see you perform in a heartbeat," says Spiral.

“Hey, Spiral, weren’t you saying that you were thinking about getting vocal lessons for Twist?” I ask. He hadn’t said anything of the sort, actually, but he’s not dumb enough to contradict me when I’m moving in for the kill.

“Who’s Twist?” asks Vibrant.

“She’s my daughter,” says Spiral. “I love her to death, but her mother and I didn’t really get along that well. When she was offered a research position in Manehattan... We haven’t been together for a couple years now.”

“It’s really great how you take care of her on your own *and* run your own business,” I call back to the table before I wrap a dish towel around my hoof and reach into the oven to pull out my quiche.

“Your own business?” asks Vibrant, leaning over a little closer to him.

“Well, I don’t like to brag...”

Heh. Liar. “Oh, don’t be so modest Spiral. Your candy is the best in town. Don’t tell Bon Bon I said that, though. Anyway, maybe Vibrant could come over and give Twist some pointers on being a better singer.”

“Cloud Kicker, you can’t just volunteer her like that.”

“I wouldn’t mind!” says Vibrant quickly. Quickly enough that she has to know she’s given the game away and blushes a bit as I cut the quiche into three portions. “I mean, I’d love to meet her sometime.”

“Perfect,” I declare, “it’s a date. Now be careful, this just came out of the oven so it’ll be almost as hot as the mare who made it.” I slide the plates over to them with a wink. My work done, I excuse myself to head to the bathroom and run a brush through my own mane so they can chat by themselves while the food cools. On an impulse, I flash a winning grin at the mirror just so I can see exactly how devastatingly attractive I am. “You still got it, babe,” I tell that hot piece of fuschia pegasus looking back at me. I splash a little cold water on my face to finish waking myself up, then head back to the kitchen for my own breakfast.

Half an hour after the food is gone, the budding couple leaves together. It's time for me to begin going about my day. It's off to a great start. I knew, last night, when I saw Spiral gaping over at the mare up on stage, that they'd hit it off. Not that I only hooked them up out of altruism, though. Uniting happy couples pretty much guarantees future opportunities for them to thank me, and they're *very* open minded about all the ways to do so.

I whistle a cheerful little tune, an old marching song from West Hoof, as I scrub the grease and cheese out of the pan. It's an old pan, and its seen better days, but I like it. Gives my cooking a little more personality, I think. Besides, I'm not going to blow my bits on replacing something that still has plenty of life left in it. My family got rich the old fashioned way; by not spending money on stupid crap we didn't need. It was something my mother took care to beat into my head at an early age, and it stuck. I guess they can take comfort that *something* did. The usual post-banging cleanup routine is over within an hour or so. Replacing the dirty sheets on my bed with a fresh set and tossing the old ones into my rickety old washing machine with a healthy scoop of detergent and bleach, I go down the mental checklist of things I need to do today. It's a fairly short list; the most pressing thing is restocking my pantry. That quiche this morning wiped out most of the food left in the house, so if I want to eat a lunch that's more satisfying than the almost-stale heel of a loaf of bread I'll need to go shopping. No way I'm blowing my food budget on an extra meal out.

Sliding my saddlebags over my head and tightening it around my barrel with a quick tug on the strap, I step out into the morning sunlight. It's still early, so I'll have my pick of freshest fruits and vegetables down at the town square. Everypony with some wares to hock should be set up by now, and I trot along waving at the neighbors who are starting their own routines. A few of them get extra winks and bigger smiles than the others. Nothing, to say nothing of nopony, on the agenda for later tonight. A repeat of last night wouldn't be unwelcome, though. Wouldn't want any of my regulars to start feeling unloved.



I probably should pay less attention to my fantasy about that flexible little filly with the orange mane and more to where I'm headed. Colliding with the wagon in front of me is a well-deserved consequence.

"Oh, my goodness," says the light green pegasus who's pulling the wagon. "Are you alright?" She unhitches herself from the front and walks around to where I'm sitting in the street rubbing what will soon be a bump on my head. She pushes one of the two long, blonde braids, tied off with some orange ribbons, out of her face and looks at me closely.

"I'm fine," I reply, "totally my fault, wasn't watching where I was going." I almost turn to leave, but something nags at my mind. I know most ponies in town, or at least recognize them, but not her. She's cute in a kinda understated sort of way, so I might not have noticed her before, but... "Hey, have we met?"

She shakes her head. "Doubt it, since I'm only moving into town today. My name's Azalea. I live, uh, well I'm actually having trouble finding the house but I think it's around here somewhere."

"What's the address?"

"1273 Rockefilly Street."

I brighten right up. "Oh, wow! That's right around the corner from my place. Not many pegasi live groundside around here. I'm Cloud Kicker, by the way."

"Tough to grow flowers if your front yard is made of cumulus," she says. A grin starts to spread over her face, and she blushes a bit. Oh Princess, I know that grin. She's interested in me. Not that she shouldn't be, of course, and if I play my cards right there could be another name crossed off my 'to bang' list by the end of the weekend. "If you could you point me in the right direction I'd be really grateful."

"No way! I'll walk you there." Her blush gets a little deeper.

"You really don't have to do that," she says.

"Hey, I remember how tough it is moving to a new town before you know anypony," I say. I walk back with her to the front of the wagon and grab hold. The first pull surprises me.

“Geeze, this is heavy. How far have you been dragging this thing?”

“All the way from Trottingham. Took me a couple of days,” she replies as she takes the other side. With both of us working together the trip to her new home only takes a few minutes. The mousey little thing is a lot stronger than she looks. We pull it into her driveway and I reach over to her and with a few quick pats of my wing knock some of the dust off her cutie mark, a purple flower. She startles a bit at the contact, and the blush that had started to fade from her face returns in full force. “Thank you. So you said you moved here too? Where from?”

“Canterlot, originally. My whole family’s from there.”

“Kicker... wait, you’re Kicker clan?”

I blink a couple times. I guess our name is well known enough that even ponies in Trottingham have heard of us. “Yep, that’s us. Most of my family’s in the royal guard, I’m kinda an exception though.”

“Hey, my family just grows flowers. I’d love to hear all about what your family does in the guard,” she says. I chuckle. This mare must have it bad for me if she’s so desperate for a conversation topic that she’d volunteer to be exposed to the weirdness of my extended family. Before I can reply, though, the wagon she’s been hitched to starts to rattle and shake. Out of the heap of stuff piled into it pops a very pink and poofy head.

“Hold it right there, pal! You can’t fool me!” declares Pinkie Pie with an accusing hoof pointed towards Azalea.

“Who are you, and how did you get into my wagon?” asks Azalea with equal parts alarm and confusion painted on her face. To be fair, that’s a pretty standard reaction to encountering Pinkie for the first time.

Pinkie looks at her empty hoof for a moment, confused by something’s absence, then reaches it into her mane and pulls out two small notes. She thrusts them out at us again. “I don’t know how you snuck through my checkpoints, but you’re new

in town! And if you're new in town that means it's time for a Welcome to Ponyville Party! This afternoon! As in this afternoon this afternoon! Oh, and I'm Pinkie Pie, of course!"

"I guess I'll see you this afternoon, then?" says Azalea. Looking down at the invitation, I see that Pinkie's already booked the reception room at Town Hall from four to seven. Seems I have plans for tonight now. It's a bad idea to blow off her parties without a good reason. That's a good way to get yourself hunted down by the party planner until she corners you in a dark alley where she'll ruthlessly be adorable at you until you promise to come to the next one.

"Thanks, Pinkie," I say and she ducks back down into the wagon. It rocks a couple more times, then goes still.

"Is... is she just going to stay there while I unload my things?" asks Azalea.

"Oh, she's not in there anymore. She'll have gotten somewhere else by now."

"But I just saw-"

"You'll get used to her. Well, sort of." I explain. Indeed, most of the ponies in town had come to terms with Pinkie's... Pinkieness. Those who couldn't rarely stuck around very long, or if they did they did so as permanent residents of the hospital's mental health ward. That was only the one time, though.

"Isn't she some kind of superhero or something?"

"You mean one of the Bearers? Yeah, they all live around here. Most of them aren't quite like that, though." I smile at her.

"Want me to introduce you to them before the party?"

Azalea's eyes go wide and she can't shake her head fast enough. "That's not necessary, they probably have way better things to do than hang out with me. But I do appreciate the offer."

"You'll run into them eventually, I guess. Well, I'm heading to the market for some food shopping if you want to come with me. I'm guessing that there isn't any food in your cabinets if you just moved in."

Azalea nods. "Yeah, I don't really feel like unloading now. I've been pulling this thing for hours now just trying to get here, and I won't last long as a salespony if I eat all my flowers. Speaking of which..." with a flap of her wings she lands on the top of one of the piles in the wagon and goes rooting around in it before pulling out her namesake flower, "...this is for you, just as a 'thanks for helping me' present."

I'm not really hungry after my breakfast earlier, but I'm not about to turn down anypony offering me flowers. Three bites later, I've munched it down. "Mmm. Mmm! These are good."

"Thanks, I grew them myself. I had a unicorn put a bunch of them under a preservation spell, so I can start selling them first thing tomorrow while I get my garden tilled and fresh ones growing." With that, she throws a tarp over the wagon and scoops a few bits into a bag around her neck. She gestures that she's ready and we head into town for a shopping trip, chatting away. She tells me all about her parents and her younger brother, while I regale her with only-slightly-exaggerated stories about some of the exploits my relatives have gotten up to, along with a few of the saucier stories of things I did when I was just a cadet at West Hoof. She's hanging on every word. I guess she actually is interested in this stuff, go figure. Just as we're passing the library, I seize on an impulse.

"Hey, you should meet Twilight Sparkle. She lives right here," I say. If there's one mare I don't have to worry about stealing Azalea from me, it'd be her. I don't think she even knows what sex *is*. Wait, strike that, she could probably give me an extensive definition of it she read about in a book sometime. She's a nice enough pony, even if she does tick me off sometimes. I learned pretty quickly that she didn't appreciate being teased, so I don't do that to her anymore. Much, anyway. Still, she seems to resent the fact that I even exist.

"I don't know, Cloud Kicker. The Element of Magic probably has important stuff she should be doing," says Azalea. The way her ears have gone flat make me reconsider my idea.

I step over to the front door and raise a hoof to knock anyway. "Nah, she's probably just sitting around with her nose in a-"

“Spike!” calls out a voice from behind the door, cutting me off. “Grab the fire extinguisher, a lead-lined fishbowl, and the orange hazmat suit from under the sink and bring them down to the basement *right now!*” Azalea and I stare at the door for a few more seconds, before a loud ‘WUMPH’ sound shakes the entire tree.

“Actually, you’re right. She’s probably busy. Sounds like they’re in the middle of something kinky,” I say, winking at her. She giggles, an adorable giggle, and we head for the market stalls. We part ways after I point out a couple of vendors she should get to know, and as I head over to buy some tomatoes I see Azalea striking up a conversation with Applejack. I guess she got over her hero worship, or just doesn’t realize who she is. It’s not long before my bags are full to bursting with produce, but I’ve lost track of Azalea in the process. Oh well, I’ll catch her at the party later, at least. No need to smother her with attention all day; better to leave her craving more than wear out my welcome. I head back home to get the food put away, and then turn to the very dull task of sifting through the mail and bills that have piled up on my counter over the last couple of days. Mostly bills and junk, although one cream-colored envelope with a familiar return address and the strong smell of perfume gets put aside to be read last. Business before pleasure, or these bills won’t get paid on time.

By the time I’ve finished the mail, adding an appointment to visit the home of a very attractive masseuse who does some incredible things with her hooves in the process, I find myself without too much else to do before the party tonight. I grab a quick workout with the weights I keep down in my basement and just generally knock around the house at loose ends for a little while before I hop into the shower to start getting ready. I skipped lunch knowing that any Pinkie party will be well-catered, if a bit heavy on chocolate and icing concoctions. Cleaning the dust and sweat out of my coat, I find my mind wandering back to what I’d told Azalea about my family. I really should make plans to go to Canterlot one of these days and see them, it’s something I’ve been putting off for a while now. Still, five minutes after I set hoof in my parents’ house

I'll be on the receiving end of a lecture that I could probably deliver word for word myself at this point. Dad at least pretends to be okay with me living here in Ponyville and working on the weather team, but Mom can't resist any opportunity to tell me I need to settle down and 'make something of myself,' whatever that even means.

It's a good thing I'm standing under cold, running water because it helps fight back the heat I feel rising up in my chest whenever I think about these kinds of things. I love my parents, but on this particular issue they can go buck themselves. I'm happy, I work enough to make ends meet, and I have a bunch of friends around town. What's wrong with any of that?

They aren't even really here and I'm getting defensive just imagining seeing them. Rather than dwell on that any longer I try to psych myself up for the party. Sitting around the house alone all afternoon makes my hooves tingle, I'm glad I have somewhere to go and be around other ponies to recharge. Plus if the party's done by seven, there'll be plenty of time for me to take anypony I connect with home for a celebration of our own. Probably not the guest of honor, I'd rather play that out a little slower, but that leaves plenty of other options open to me. Shutting off the water and toweling myself off, I go back and forth on the question of whether to wear anything before finally settling on *au naturale* with a simple little necklace that used to belong to my great-grandmother. Why not show everypony at the party what they could have if they just say yes?

I arrive at the party a few minutes after four, and about a half-dozen guests have beaten me there. "Hiya, Cloud Kicker!" says Pinkie Pie, rushing over to greet me as I walk into the room. "Thanks for coming to the welcome party for my new friend Azalea. Let me introduce you to her."

"I've met her, Pinkie. I was standing next to her when you handed us our invitations this morning, remember?"

Pinkie blinks several times and I imagine I can hear the gears in her head grinding against one another. Actually, I'm not entirely sure I'm imagining it, or if there's some mechanical

contraption in that mane of hers that she forgot to properly maintain. “Oh yeah!” she finally says and the odd noise I’m not sure I was hearing in the first place stops. “Well, enjoy the party. Oh, hey Fluttershy. You made it.”

With that, she darts away to greet her friend who’s walked in from the other side of the room. I glance over to Azalea, who’s chatting with another pony. There’s a pink paper crown perched on her head marking her as the center of attention. The whole room is completely decked out in balloons and streamers cover every available surface. She looks back at me and smiles, giving me a small nod of acknowledgement before turning back to the stallion.

“Hey Cloud,” says Rainbow Dash as she lands next to me.

“Heya Dash. Having fun so far? What do you think of the new mare?”

“Eh, she seems cool, I guess. Kinda boring though. When I told her I ran the weather team she started asking all kinds of stuff about the weather schedule, what the town disaster plans were, what forms she had to fill out to join the weather reserve, not one question about how I got so awesome,” says Rainbow.

“So you told her you were the weather manager, and she mistakenly assumed you were a responsible pillar of the community,” I say with a roll of my eyes. Despite coming to her defense, that was kind of a nerdy thing to talk about at a party. Still, pegasi are supposed to register with the weather office in case they need to be drafted for weather emergencies so maybe she was just being responsible, or assumed that Rainbow Dash would be the kind of pony who gave a crap about paperwork.

“Whatever. You know where she lives, right? So it’s not like I couldn’t get in touch with her if I needed to. Who cares if it’s written down somewhere?”

“No pony, Rainbow. Well, except for our bosses in Cloudsdale, the central weather office, the mayor...”

“Yeah, yeah. I get your point,” says Dash.

“...anypony who might need to fill in for you one day, anypony who might need to fill in for *me* one day, the inspectors who have already written you up twice for misfiling information, want me to keep going?” I ask. When she glares at me I give her my most innocent and adorable smile.

“You’re just taking her side because you want to bang her,” says Dash.

Guilty as charged. “Why, you got your eye on her too? Give me a couple days and I’m sure I could talk her into letting you join us.”

Dash scoffs. “Never going to happen. Still, you could at least give her a while to settle in before you try to jump her. Raindrops told me how you two were all chummy in the market this afternoon.”

“I was home all afternoon. We just walked into town together after I ran into her cart and helped her find her new house, but that was this morning,” I say. Raindrops must have been wrong about the time, or she must have seen Azalea talking to somepony else and thought it was me. More guests are starting to trickle in, but nopony I’ve been especially hoping to bed. The afternoon is still young, though. Rainbow Dash chats a little more with me about a downpour coming up in a few days before losing interest in discussing work. We wander over to the refreshment table together and hang out there for a bit longer munching on the snacks before we naturally drift away to talk to other ponies. I’m in the lurch for a few minutes before I spot Cheerilee against the far wall, and decide to see if she’s got any school uniforms that would fit a grown mare...

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“Sorry, Cloud Kicker. Not interested,” says the stallion before he abruptly walks away.

Damn it. Struck out again. The party’s starting to wind down now and I haven’t managed to find anypony to take me up on my suggestions of how to spend the rest of the evening. Everypony either isn’t interested or already has other plans that don’t include me. I did snag a rain check from Flitter so that’s something, but it’s a small comfort. I hang out a bit



longer salving my wounded pride with the tangy fruit punch and brownies.

“Hey,” says Azalea sliding up to the table beside me.

“Hey there,” I say. Maybe this night is looking up after all.

“How was it meeting everypony?”

She laughs. “Exhausting. I’m pretty sure I’m about to pass out on my hooves, and I’ve already forgotten half the names they told me.”

“Well, the party’s pretty much over. If you’re tired I’ll walk you back home.”

“Really? Shouldn’t I help clean up?”

“Nope!” says Pinkie Pie, popping out from underneath the table. To Azalea’s credit, she only flinches a little bit. Already well on her way to being a proper resident of Ponyville. “What kind of host makes her guest do all the cleaning? I’ve got this.”

“Wow, thanks Pinkie. You’re a really good friend,” says Azalea.

Pinkie squeals with glee and grabs her in a big hug. I’m close enough that I end up wrapped up in it too, somehow, but I take advantage of it to wrap a wing around Azalea too. Once Pinkie’s wandered away Azalea nods to me and takes me up on my offer. We walk out together into the starry night, a cool breeze in the air, and start the walk back to our neighborhood. It would probably be quicker to fly, but I take a longer route than we did this morning so I can point out a couple points of interest around town. When we get to the residential area our conversation peters out a bit until Azalea leans into me.

“Looked like you were hitting on quite a few ponies back at the party tonight.”

I grin. “How interesting that you were watching me closely enough to notice.”

She stiffens up a little knowing she’s busted, but then relaxes again. “I just... a couple of the ponies I talked to said you have kind of a reputation for that kind of thing.”

“Yeah, that’s true. I’ve certainly earned it. Some of my friends used to joke that I must actually be part changeling.”

I keep walking, but stop when I realize that I can no longer feel her body against mine. I turn and see her standing very still underneath a lamppost, the shadows it casts over her face making her impossible to read.

“I hate changelings. They’re a bunch of disgusting insects and they should all be squashed accordingly,” she says.

Yikes. I think I hit a nerve there. “Sorry, Azalea, it was just a joke. Did something... happen to you because of them? Do you want to talk about it?”

She shakes her head. “I’ve never met one, or at least don’t think that I have. Ever since the invasion during the royal wedding, though, the idea’s crept me out. Sorry, I know you were just kidding. Maybe we could talk about something else instead?”

I gesture for her to keep walking, and a moment later she does. “Sure. So how was it meeting the Bearers at the party tonight?”

“Twilight Sparkle wasn’t there, but I got to talk to the others a little bit. I don’t think Rainbow Dash liked me very much.”

“She’ll warm up to you. You just have to talk to her about something other than paperwork. Next time you have a free forty-five minutes ask her about the Wonderbolts.”

Azalea chuckles, her good mood back as quickly as it had vanished a moment before. “Thanks for being so good to me today, Cloudy,” she says. The sudden appearance of a nickname is a good sign too.

“It’s no problem,” I tell her as we turn the corner onto her street. As we walk up to her house, we both stop and stare at what’s in her driveway. Her completely loaded cart full of all the furniture she brought along.

I feel the vibration in my ribs as Azalea growls at the defiant cart, as if she’s willing it to unload itself. “Ugh, I’m too tired to deal with this tonight. Help me fish out a blanket and a pillow and I’ll just crash on my floor.”

“No way, Azalea. Come stay at my place tonight instead. You’ll sleep a lot better,” I offer.

She looks up at me with a raised eyebrow. “Cloudy... I might be interested in that kind of thing down the line. I do like you. But I really am way too tired tonight for what sounds like a sneaky plan to get me into bed.”

“It absolutely isn’t that. Unless it’s working,” I say with a smile. “Seriously, I’ll even take the couch and you can sleep in my bed if you want to.”

“That’s a very generous offer,” she says, leaning forward and giving me a peck on the cheek that speeds up my heart rate a little bit. “Lead the way.”

We trot back the way we came and take another turn, and a few blocks later we’re home. I hold the door open for her as she walks in and looks around, getting a feel for the place as I grab an extra blanket from the hallway closet. Azalea’s already settling onto my couch as I drape it over her. She doesn’t protest when I crawl under the blanket with her and snuggle up between her body and the cushions. “Comfy?”

“Yeah,” she says and her voice already sounds like it’s drifting away. “You feel nice. Fuzzy.”

With a quiet little snort of amusement I drape a hoof over her shoulder and lay there with her, both our eyes closed, and Azalea drifts off to sleep. It’s not all that late, I should get up and go do something. Can’t quite seem to find the motivation to pull myself away from this nice, warm spot.

Twenty minutes later, there are two sleeping ponies cuddled up together on my too-small living room couch.

# Roller Coaster of Love

## ROLLER COASTER OF LOVE

The sun shining directly into my face is what finally wakes me up the next morning. I pat around myself looking for a friendly wing I can pull back over my face to block it out, but there's nopony next to me on the couch. The spot where Azalea was sleeping has already cooled. I can still smell her scent on the fabric. Something stands out against the lingering mustiness and various food stains that cuts straight through all my defenses and just screams 'her' to my half-awake mind.

"Good morning, sleepyhead," says Azalea from somewhere nearby. I sit up and stretch, still groggy and out of it despite the fact that I must have slept for a solid twelve hours. Who knew that platonic cuddling could be so draining?

"Hey," I respond before staggering over to the bathroom for relief. Once that's out of the way and I'm feeling a touch more like a living pony I return to the kitchen, where a cup of blessed, steaming coffee is sitting on the table waiting for me. Not caring about the heat, I guzzle it down and wipe my mouth with a foreleg. "Do you want me to make us some breakfast?"

"Thanks, but I'm fine. I had a snack while you were still asleep," she responds. She smiles gently and reaches across the table to place her hoof over mine. "I really enjoy spending time with you, Cloudy. I need to head home and start unpacking, but I hope we'll be seeing a lot more of each other."

"I'd like that," I say. This mare's made quite an impression on me in just the one day I've known her. She's definitely one I'll be keeping an eye on. "I'm having some friends over in a couple days for a private party, if you'd be up for that."

At that, she frowns and withdraws her hoof. "That sounds like a lot to take all at once."

“Not if you stretch first.” She swats me gently as I hold up a leg to deflect it before continuing. “But seriously though, it’s not like I’m throwing an orgy. Just a couple friends I’d like you to meet. Sometimes stuff happens and sometimes it doesn’t, but we always end up having a good time.”

Continuing to eye me warily, she gives me a cautious nod. “I guess I wouldn’t mind getting to know them. You’re not going to try to push me off onto one of them, right? Some of the ponies last night told me you like to play matchmaker.”

“Azalea, hey. Look at me.” I walk around the table and sit down on the floor beside her chair, gently lifting her chin so she doesn’t have anywhere to look but into my eyes. “I know I tend to come across as kind of aggressive sometimes, and I don’t have the greatest track record for always thinking things through. But if I am ever, *ever* doing anything that makes you uncomfortable you just smack me on the head and tell me to stop being a jerk. Got it?”

She doesn’t say anything, but she does nod as best she can as I pull my hoof away. Her gaze isn’t going anywhere, though. We both stare at each other a great deal longer than necessary and then slowly, almost imperceptibly, she leans forward bringing her face closer to mine.

This would probably be a good time to mention that the chair she’s sitting on has never exactly been the most stable thing. I would have warned her, but at that particular moment I was slightly distracted.

The legs of the chair slide out from under her and she falls the rest of the way forwards, catching me by surprise and knocking me back. If I ever retell this story, I plan to tell anypony who asks that ‘I nobly dove to catch the falling maiden’ rather than ‘I couldn’t get out of the way in time.’

Either way, the end result is me pinned down on the floor underneath the sweet little mare who just tried to kiss me. She looks up, a bit dazed, and then seems to notice where she is and freezes. “Um...” I say to break the silence, “are you going to get off of me any time soon?”

“I’m seriously considering it,” she says with bashful smile. There’s that odd scent again, the one that seems to make everything that isn’t her fade into the background. When she doesn’t move after a few seconds longer, I run a hoof through her mane and lean up to meet her lips for a kiss. She ever so gently returns it, and when it breaks she nuzzles at my chest and mutters something that I can’t quite make out.

Whatever it was that she just said, it triggers a total one-eighty in her personality. She leaps off of me and covers her mouth while I look across the room at her, confused as all get out. “Azalea? What’s wrong?”

“I’m sorry! I didn’t mean that. Oh, shoot shoot shoot shoot shoot why do I always *do* that? Can we just pretend I didn’t say that?”

“Say what?”

She chuckles. “Thanks. I’ve blown up more relationships by saying those three words too soon than I care to admit. I’m getting out of here before I screw this up anymore, but I’ll see you at the party.” With that she bolts for my front door and is out of my house before I can reply. My half-awake mind finally processes what ‘those three words’ would have to be.

Uh oh.

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“She said that she loved you?” asks Blossomforth as she gives the cloud next to the one I’m sitting on a good whack, sending pieces of it off in all directions. “And you, of all ponies, didn’t run away screaming?”

“Well, she did take it back before it even registered with me what she said,” I reply as I flop down on my back. “You’re okay with talking to me about this, right? I mean, it isn’t going to dredge anything up for you?”

Blossomforth lands on my cloud and leans down to boop my nose with hers, a gesture that’s never failed to brighten my mood. “Don’t flatter yourself, Cloud. I got over my crush on you a long time ago. Besides, I have Davenport now.”

There's a reason Blossom is my go-to for serious relationship advice, besides being my best friend. "So what do I say to her at the party tonight to let her down gently without freaking her out?"

"Are you sure you *want* to let her down?"

"What are you suggesting?"

Blossomforth shrugs. "It's just that this mare is obviously getting to you. Have you considered the possibility that you might actually be interested in her beyond wanting to take her to bed? That she's actually a possible candidate for a real relationship?"

I sit back up and glare at her. "Have you been talking to my mother again?"

She sighs. "See, this is what you do. Whenever anypony so much as suggests you try to be flexible about these things you get all defensive." She covers my mouth before I can reply. "Oh, and if you try to change the subject by jumping on the word 'flexible' I will kick this cloud right out from under you."

With my planned retort anticipated and thwarted, I'm left stewing in silence while Blossom continues her work around me. Even the clear blue sky above the layer of clouds Dash asked us to clear away isn't enough to cheer me up. Flapping my wings a couple times half-heartedly kicks up a breeze, but it's clear that my mind isn't on my job. "You're coming to my party, right? Maybe you could sort of feel her out for me?" Must... resist... innuendo...

"Maybe you could pony up and ask her on a date instead," grumbles Blossom. When she glances over at me I give her my best pleading look and she sighs. "Fine, I'll talk to her at the party tonight. Stow the hurt puppy eyes."

"You're the best, Blossom. Hey, if you ever need any new tricks to spice things up between you and Davenport, I picked up some juicy ones."

"I'll keep that in mind," says Blossom in a tone that suggests she's actually trying to force her mind to discard the idea as

quickly as possible. Poor ponies don't know what they're missing. If I owned that many couches, I'd put them to way better use.

After we finish clearing away the clouds I make a detour on the way back to the weather office. I'm in no hurry to face the stack of paperwork that I know is waiting for me. Flying over the market, I glance down at Azalea's stall. It's set up right next to Applejack's, and the two of them are each talking to a small crowd of customers, haggling away. I don't linger to watch them or anything; that would be creepy. Turning over what Blossomforth suggested to me in my head, I wonder if she might be onto something. I do like Azalea, although I don't know that I like her *that* much. I've barely seen her since the morning after she stayed over. Sure, we hit it off and I wouldn't mind banging her, but that's hardly like saying I'm desperately in love with her. I'm not even sure if I know what that would feel like. On the other hoof, it's not like if I ask her on one date we're suddenly engaged or anything and *why can't I get this stupid idea out of my head?*

I land by the roof entrance to the weather office, where the other pegasi on the roof are milling around not paying attention to me. With a huff, I decide to drown my worries about tonight in leave forms and requisitions. No point running myself ragged trying to figure all this out right now, I'll just wing it at the party and see what happens.

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"Hey Lyra! Thanks for coming. Is Bon Bon with you?" I ask the unicorn standing at my door. Behind me, my friends are laughing and chatting away with one another, and Blossomforth has just started her friendly little interrogation of Azalea. I'm trying to steer clear of that for now, at least until Blossom signals me that she's found something out. It isn't easy; Azalea wore a little yellow sundress that keeps pulling my eyes towards her flank.

Lyra steps inside. "She had a big order come in at the last minute, I think she's swamped. She said she'd try to get away and at least swing by later if she could, but I wouldn't hold my breath."



I nod, completely getting it. Running a shop like that would leave you with a whole lot less free time than being assistant manager of the weather team. Bon Bon being able to meet up with us is always a little iffy, but we take it in stride. “You want a drink?”

“I’ll take some white wine, if you’ve got any open.” I nod and move over to pour her some. My parties tend to draw a slightly different crowd than Pinkie’s events, a crowd that prefers something a little stronger than punch. The gang’s all here now, and Blossomforth is smiling at Azalea which I take to be a positive sign. I only hope she isn’t giving the mare any expectations.

My train of thought is derailed when there’s another knock on the door. That’s odd, I thought everypony was already here. I wander back to the door wondering if I forgot I had invited somepony, or maybe Bon Bon decided to come to the party after all.

I open the door, and it turns out it’s neither of those things. Instead it’s a mare with a dirty white coat and a perpetually-oily blue mane who holds the rare distinction of a spot on my ‘would not bang with a ten foot pole’ list.

Well, actually I wouldn’t bang most ponies with a ten foot pole. It’s uncomfortable and the logistics are tough to work out in a normal-sized bedroom. You know what I mean.

The other mare and I stare at each other for several second before I decide to make the first move. “I don’t remember inviting you to my home, Algae Bloom.”

At first I hope against hope that she’ll just turn around and walk away, but those hopes are dashed when she puts on a cocky grin. “Minuette told me she’d be here, said that I should stop by for a while and pick her up when I got off work at the pet shop.”

I’m halfway into planning the menacing rant I’ll be delivering to Minuette in the near future about who she’s allowed to invite to my house when I pause. “Wait, isn’t Minuette still going steady with Thunderlane? Did they break up?”

Algae Bloom shrugs. “No idea. Maybe. Maybe they just decided to do the open relationship thing, or maybe Minuette decided she wanted a little something on the side. That’s her problem, not mine. Now can I come in or not?”

“...Fine. Just don’t do anything to piss me off.” I step aside and regretfully allow her inside. The worst part about being in the same room with her is that ponies see us together and assume we’re anything alike, when she’s about the last pony in Equestria I’d care to be associated with.

“Who’s the new mare?”

I bite down hard to suppress a growl. Algae would narrow in on the one pony who doesn’t realize she’s bad news. “She just moved into town last week. As far as you’re concerned, her name is Off Limits.”

“Relax, Kicks. It was a perfectly innocent question. I’m here for Minuette tonight.”

“There’s no such thing as an innocent question coming from you,” I snarl. Oh, no, Azalea and Blossom are coming over to us.

Before they get to us, Algae Bloom gives me a grin. “Like I said, calm down. I’m happy to let you and flavor-of-the-week here run your course before I put any moves on her.”

“Hi Cloudy, great party. Want to introduce me to your friend here?” asks Azalea. My nostrils flare as I catch her unusual scent, a perfume I don’t recognize.

“No need,” says Algae as she steps between us. Blossomforth gives me a quizzical look from behind Azalea and I just roll my eyes. “My name is Algae Bloom.” She holds a hoof out to Azalea.

Azalea is quick to bump it. “I’m Azalea. Just moved here from Trottingham.”

“That’s a nice dress, Azalea. It’s very pretty on you.”

“Why, thank you!” says Azalea, her smile brightening.

“It’ll look even prettier on my bedroom floor tomorrow morning.”

Azalea's smile vanishes. Quick as a flash, I've got a foreleg around Algae's neck and I yank her off her hooves. She goes limp and cackles as I drag her across the now-silent room to where Minuette is talking to Cloudchaser. "I believe that this-" I let go of Algae and she drops to the floor "-belongs to you. Take it and get out." For a moment Minuette looks like she's going to protest, but then she wilts under my glare.

"C'mon Algae, let's get going."

She helps Algae Bloom back onto her hooves and they begin to trot towards the door, the last little shred of their dignity the only thing keeping them from galloping away. Minuette opens the door in her magic and lets Algae walk out first. Before she can follow I call out to her. "Hey, Minuette? Say hi to your coltfriend for me." She stiffens and wrinkles up her nose before turning and wordlessly marching out after Algae. It's only when they're gone and the door shuts behind them that I give myself permission to start relaxing. My other guests are still subdued and quiet and all their attention is on me as I walk back to where I started.

Azalea looks around, and when she realizes that almost every pony in the room is looking in her direction she shudders. "I should... I have kind of an early morning tomorrow, so maybe I should-"

"Want to go on a date?" I ask. She spins back towards me, and Blossomforth's jaw drops open. Flavor of the week, my plot. I'm going to prove to everypony, not least of all myself, that I've got it in me to be in a real relationship. Maybe with Azalea, maybe with somepony else, but it's time to get started.

"You're asking me out?"

"Yeah. Something casual, why don't I take you to lunch sometime in the next couple days?"

Azalea blinks a few more times, then smiles. "Sure, that sounds like a lot of fun." She looks down at her empty cup. "Excuse me, I'm going to get a refill." She disappears into my kitchen as Blossomforth steps up to me.

“Well, having just talked to her for fifteen minutes the way you insisted you needed me to, I’m reasonably confident that if you ask her out she’ll say yes,” Blossom deadpans. Then she breaks into a grin. “Seriously though, way to step up. We just might make a grown-up pony out of you yet.”

“Don’t you dare,” I reply with a grin of my own. Still, the full impact of what I’ve just done is starting to dawn on me. I’m going to need to cancel on a lot of ponies who I was planning to be with over the next couple weeks, unless Azalea is open to multiple partners.

Not going to start worrying about that right now. This could be good for me, a change of pace. A couple weeks... or months... or longer... of relative celibacy.

Sweet Celestia, I’m gonna die.

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“Are you sure you don’t want to go somewhere fancier than a deli? I’m buying,” I ask as we walk down the street side-by-side on a final approach to our destination.

Azalea shakes her head. “Nope. It’s not the food that matters to me, it’s the company. Besides, I have to get back to work this afternoon. The deli’s perfect.” We step into the the open storefront of Reuben’s Deli, a local institution. The walls are covered in framed pictures of famous ponies who have eaten here during its thirty year history. The place of honor goes to a slightly faded shot of the then-young proprietor posing with a dazed grin next to Princess Celestia herself. If you look closely, you can just make out a little dab of mustard on one of her cheeks. Dried vegetables hang in loose netting from the ceiling, and you can hardly walk past the store without catching a whiff of the spices and oils from back in the kitchen. We’re here ahead of the lunch rush so there aren’t many ponies inside. Azalea steps right over to the counter and taps the little silver bell with the tip of her wing.

“I heard ya’ come in, Az, be with ya’ in a second,” calls a voice from the back.

“They know you here?” I ask.

Azalea nods. "I've kinda had lunch here three of the last four days. I think I'm already an honorary regular. All the customers seem to just love the food."

"I could show you a couple other good places, if you ever want a break from sandwiches every day," I offer.

"And just what's wrong with sandwiches?" asks the imposing purple earth pony stallion who steps out from the kitchen at just that moment. A bit of his graying mane sticks out from underneath the discolored chef's hat he wears, a victim of several decades worth of accumulated sauce stains and grease spatters.

I grin mischievously at him. "Nothing, Reuben. Not the way you make them."

"That's more like it. What can I get for you two? Same as last time?"

Wow, I know Reuben prides himself on solid customer service but I haven't been here for a meal in weeks. Even I don't remember what I had last time I was here. I'm just about to ask when Azalea lowers a wing onto my back and practically beams up at him. "We're on a date!"

"Well, dang! You move faster than I suspected, Az," he winks at her. "Watch out for this one though. She's a wild one, and I wouldn't want a sweet, innocent little filly like yourself to be corrupted."

"Oh, I'm not *quite* as sweet and innocent as you might think, but thanks for the warning anyway."

I can't help but smirk at that. I've been taking it easy on the banter around her, but maybe I don't need to bother. "Got any culinary tricks left that we haven't seen, or did you run out of new ideas years ago?" I ask.

"Ha! I've forgotten more about making sandwiches than you'll ever know, filly," he boasts.

I nod solemnly and turn my head towards Azalea, then lean in to stage-whisper into her ear. "The memory is the first thing to go, at that age." She doesn't try very hard to hide her giggling.

“Alright, alright, no more picking on your elders, ya whippersnappers. Go grab a table, I know exactly what I’m bringing you two to eat.” He disappears into the back again, and a moment later I hear something beginning to sizzle.

We wander out onto the patio and I pull a chair out for Azalea to sit down in. I’m not *completely* without tact or manners. “So, not so sweet and innocent, huh?” I ask as I sit down across from her.

She flinches a little, but then tries to cover it with a nervous laugh. “I really just said that, didn’t I? Not sure what came over me there.”

“Hey, I’m not complaining,” I say as I pour a glass of iced tea and push it over to her. “In fact, if you want I’ve got a regular thing with the spa twins, have you met Aloe and Lotus yet? If you wanted to go together, they have some stress relief techniques that are *very* hooves on.”

Rather than chuckle or say anything flirty back, Azalea just stays stock still and the atmosphere takes a turn for the distinctly uncomfortable. “Cloudy... remember how you said I should tell you if you’re being a pushy jerk? You’re being a pushy jerk.” Damn it. Guard training taught me fifteen different ways to take down a target with my bare hooves, but that pales in comparison to the number of ways I’ve discovered to kill a moment. “I get that you’re... experienced in this particular area, but I’m looking for something deeper than just a fling. At the very least, I want the first time to feel special.” I must be gaping at her because her eyes go wide. “With you! First time with you! Not... noooooo no no, trust me, that ship has sailed.”

Okay, phew, that’s a bullet dodged. I’m bad enough at this without having to worry about bridging a gulf in relative experience that’s quite that wide. “I’ll give it a shot, but I have to tell you upfront that stable, monogamous relationships aren’t my strong suit. There’s a lot that I’m probably going to feather up along the way.”

Azalea gives me a comforting pat on the shoulder. “Then it sounds like we have plenty that we’ll each learn from one

another.”

“Order up!” shouts Reuben, louder than necessary since he’s walked over to our table and set down a tray holding two plates. “You’re going to love this. Eggplant on rye, covered in melted bleu cheese and topped with a shredded cabbage and caper slaw. Take a bite of that and tell me it’s not the best thing you’ve ever tasted, I dare you.”

We each take a big bite of our sandwiches, and I can’t deny that he’s completely correct. This might be the tastiest sandwich I’ve ever had. “Sweet Celestia, that’s delicious,” says Azalea from across the table, holding a hoof in front of her face as she talks with her mouth full.

“You’re damn right it is. You kids enjoy.” He walks away, leaving us to our meals as I wonder if I could ever recreate something half this tasty back in my kitchen.

“Cloudy, you want my pickle?” asks Azalea as she picks at the potato chips on the plate, but I shake my head no. The sandwich has all of my attention. This place was a good call. It’ll be a tall order to top this if there’s a second date maybe this weekend I can-

I cough and nearly choke on a stray bit of eggplant. This weekend. It completely slipped my mind until just now. Azalea looks over at me, concerned. “Are you feeling okay, Cloudy?”

“Yeah, I just remembered something I need to do this weekend. It’s the first weekend of the month, right?”

“I think so, why?”

“I completely forgot, I have to catch a train to a guard camp outside Manehatten.”

“I thought you said that you weren’t in the guard.”

“I’m in the reserves. It’s... complicated,” I say as I desperately hope she won’t press me for details. Luckily, she seems content to let it go.

“So what’s the big deal? There are trains running that way all the time.”

“The big deal is that I promised Rainbow Dash I’d help her out with a major project this weekend. Carrot Top put in a special request for some extra localized precipitation over her farm, and Dash is already swamped trying to get everything ready for her vacation next week. Last thing she needs is for me to disappear for an entire day.”

“What vacation?” Azalea asks, her ears suddenly perking up.

“Oh, she and her friends are heading to Canterlot for a couple days, I guess Twilight Sparkle’s gone ahead of them to work on some crazy magic project or whatever, and they’re going to meet her there and hang around the city for a few days.” I give a reluctant sigh. “I guess I can call up a special inspector from the guard and have them come here to recertify me. They won’t be happy about it, but at least it’ll get done.”

“No,” says Azalea. “I think I know someone who can cover for you. Worst comes to worst, I’ll do it myself. I can handle a few rain showers. You go to your thing.”

She’d do that for me? Just on the spur of the moment like?

“Really? I don’t want to put you out if you already have plans.”

“This way will be better for everypony,” she says. I’m skeptical, and it shows. “Cloudy look at me.” I turn to stare directly into her eyes, and suddenly my neck locks up and I can’t look anywhere else but at her. “Trust me, Cloud Kicker. Trust. Me.”

I’m not quite sure if I sit there staring into eyes for a few seconds or a few hours, but I’m shaken out of it when something hot and sticky falls into my lap. Not the good kind of hot and sticky, either. “Ah!” I shout, leaping up from my seat and trying to wipe melted cheese out of my coat, which only smears it in further.

Azalea gets up and walks over to my side. “Leave it. Come on back to my place and I’ll help you get it out.”

“It’s fine, I’ll just head to the restroom and-”

She leans in so I can smell the capers on her breath and feel the heat on my cheek. “Help you get it out. With my tongue.”



Wow. How did I miss that? Get back on your game, Kicker!

“But don’t you have work?” I ask her. Why is part of me fighting this? The mare is practically throwing herself at me.

“Everything will work out fine. Don’t you trust me, Cloudy?”

“Of course I trust you,” I answer automatically. Something in my head settles, and I flash her a flirty grin. “Let’s go. Do you want to wrap up the other half of your sandwich?”

“Nah, I’m not really hungry,” she says with a shrug. “I’m headed back to my house to get ready. Go pay Reuben, but don’t take too long. I don’t like to be kept waiting.” With that, she takes off into the air, she does a quick half spin to look back at me, and when she catches me staring she gives me a little wink. I gallop inside with indecent haste and barely look at the check before I drop the appropriate number of bits on the counter.

“Thanks, Reuben,” I call out behind me as I chase after the pony who’s waiting for me.

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What happened next? What do you *think* happened next?

Even a few days later, the memories of that afternoon, along with the associated ones from later that night and again the following morning, still linger in my mind as the train to Manehattan makes its final approach to the station that services the little fort at the edge of the city limits.

I’ve been lost in thought for most of the trip. The last few days have been very confusing ones. Every time I’m around Azalea, I feel all goofy and lightheaded. Could I actually be falling in love with her? Like, fairy-tale love? I’ve never been shy about telling ponies I loved them, and until now I never believed it wasn’t the absolute truth. I always thought the whole ‘one true love’ thing was silly. Who cares if I feel that way about more than one pony? That just makes me lucky, right?

Now this goofy little mare is throwing it all into question. Love is supposed to feel good, but this? This feels more scary than good. But is it just scary because it’s unfamiliar and

intense? It feels so good so much of the time, but now that I look at it from the outside...

The train comes to a stop and I grab my bag from the rack above, more confused than ever. A few other ponies hop off with me, of all ages. Must be other reservists. Every couple months we have to drop in and let the officers run us through a little PT to make sure we're up to guard standards. From the look of some of the other ponies getting off the train, not everypony is going to pass muster. It's not exactly an auspicious crew, but it's a few extra bits in the bank every month and, more importantly, it beats being thrown in a cell for deserting after I had... second thoughts about finishing at West Hoof.

The fort itself is a lot closer to an office complex with an obstacle course out back than a proper military base. The atmosphere is pretty relaxed, as well. No reason to believe Equestria's in any kind of danger as far as I know, most of the work being done here is just precautionary. We all file into a large auditorium and get handed a packet of information; unimportant updates to unimportant regulations and boilerplate legal stuff, ninety percent of which is irrelevant to anything any of us will ever do. Then there's a lecture on the importance of the reserves and blah blah blah sweet Princesses this is dull. My mind drifts back to my troubles at home, if they can really be called troubles at all. I don't want to lose it, but at the same time I can't shake the nagging sense that something about it is just *wrong*, that it's all too much too fast and it's only going to end with Azalea getting hurt when I change my mind. If I do change my mind. What if I don't though? What if we settle down and get married and I make Alula an aunt and-

"Cloud Kicker? Would you care to share with the rest of us exactly why the revised uniform standards are making you shudder like that?" asks the presenter, glaring daggers at me. Busted.

"It's..." I look up at the picture of the new uniforms being projected onto the screen behind him. "It's just that I'm worried about all the buttons I'm going to have to sew back on

after the mares back home tear it off of me. I tend to drive them a little wild when I put it on.”

The others laugh, and I think they bought it. “Pay more attention, or the only thing you’ll have to be worried about is where I’m going to shove this pointer,” he says.

“Promise?” I ask under my breath, just loud enough for the reservists around me to hear, which wins me another snort of amusement.

He glares at me, but then carries on with the presentation no pony actually give a damn about. Then it’s off to the physical fitness portion of afternoon. My assessment of the others on the train is proven mostly correct: a bunch of the other pegasi barely remember how to properly hold a quarterstaff, much less proper form and technique. For me, though, it’s still second nature. My mother and father started drilling me with the things when I was six years old, that’s not the sort of knowledge that slips away quickly. Plus I’m still plenty fit. Regular cardiovascular workouts are a big part of my lifestyle.

The drill sergeant signs off on my performance and hands me the slip of paper to take over to a desk on the edge of the field where we’re exercising. A desk with a familiar face seated behind it.

“Glint!” I call out to him and wave as I get close.

“Excuse me, that’s *First Lieutenant Glinting Steel* to you, ma’am,” he says with a stern glare. Then the facade cracks and he gestures me over to give him a hug.

“Promoted, huh? That’s fantastic! So I guess this means no pony ever found out about the time when we-”

“Finish that sentence, and I’ll have you doing wingups until the sun rises tomorrow morning. How’ve you been?”

My smile fades a little bit. Glinting Steel and I have been good friends ever since we were classmates at West Hoof, and if things had gone a little differently we could easily have been commanding side-by-side for the rest of our careers. Fate had other ideas, though, and every time we see one another the

conversation eventually drifts back to the same thing. “I’m good. Weather management fills the time and pays the bills, and Ponyville’s still the same old Ponyville.” I sigh. “So can we skip the lecture?”

“It’s not a lecture, Cloud Kicker, it’s an open invitation. You know the guard would take you back in a heartbeat. You’re wasted on this reservist crap. Sure, you’d start a few years behind the rest of the old gang, but you’d catch up.”

“You’re just hoping I’ll join your unit and try to sleep my way to the top, aren’t you? Not that I would mind...” I catch myself and wince. Old habits die hard. “Sorry. I’m actually kinda-sorta in a relationship right now, that was inappropriate.”

He gasps and presses a wing to his forehead in mock horror. “Cloud Kicker? Inappropriate? Inconceivable! Still, congratulations. I’m glad to hear that you finally got over all that wild child stuff and joined the rest of us in adult land. So, what did it finally take for the lucky mare or stallion to get you to shape up?”

I bristle a little bit. Glinting Steel is a good guy, except when he’s being a judgemental prick. Still, it’s hardly like I’m not used to getting that from all kinds of ponies. “She’s just...” my words trail off as I try to verbalize my feelings about Azalea for the first time. I know I like her, so why is it so hard to put my hoof down on why? “She’s just really cool.”

Okay, that’s it. When the best I can do to describe her is a phrase that would make Rainbow Dash look eloquent, something is *off*. I guess I just had to take a step back to get a better view of the big picture. “Well, you’ll have to have her come by sometime so I can meet her,” he says, not picking up on my discomfort. “Maybe she can give me some pointers on how to land a mare of my own.”

Another pony standing behind me loudly and rudely clears her throat. “It was great seeing you again, Glint. When I get a chance, how about I come down for a couple of days and we catch up properly? I’d stay tonight, but my boss is leaving

town tomorrow so I have to get back. Weather's not going to run itself."

"Anytime, Kicker. Just give me a heads up and I'll round up as much of the old crew as I can. Anyway, you're recertified and good to go for a few more months." Glint presses his hoof onto an ink pad, then stamps his mark onto the paper I brought him. "Take care!"

Rather than hang around, I decide to head for the train station. I've got enough on my mind right now without running into any more old acquaintances. Rainbow's trip is a convenient excuse.

One thing, above all, is clear: I need to break things off with Azalea. Maybe it's the change of scenery, or maybe it's just the fact that I finally got a workout that didn't involve being pressed up against her hot, sweaty body. Either way, I've remembered to trust my gut in these matters, and my gut says that if I don't slam on the brakes right now, somepony's going to get hurt.

I mope on the station platform, staring down looking for patterns in the gravel as my mind churns. A tiny, shrinking part of it is rebelling against the idea of dumping her, but with each breath of the slightly-smoky-tasting Manehattan air it fades a little bit more. That doesn't mean I'm looking forward to it, though. I'd like to stay friends with her, at least. Maybe even leave the door open to dating her again when I've got a better handle on what this feeling is, but that'll take a light touch when I break things off. So I'm looking at breaking up with my fillyfriend in the morning, then going straight to the office and finding out just how much neglected paperwork Rainbow Dash has left me as she catches the train to Canterlot.

I don't think tomorrow is going to be a very good day.

# Not A Good Day

## NOT A GOOD DAY

It's fair to say that I have a lot on my mind when I leave the house in the morning.

I probably could have gone straight to Azalea's after my train arrived last night, but I convinced myself that it was late and I shouldn't bother until the next morning. My original intention had been to catch her on the way into town, until I accidentally slept through my alarm and got moving a half an hour later than I meant to. Looks like I'll be doing this in public, then. Not exactly ideal, but I'm going to be slammed for the next couple days with work and I don't want to put it off that long.

Stopping in at the office, I touch base with Rainbow Dash about what needs to get done while she's gone. It's all fairly run of the mill stuff, no big surprises. Blossom and I should be able to handle it easily between the two of us. Once she's done with that she explains that she hasn't started packing for her trip that afternoon yet and excuses herself with a final 'good luck' to the two of us. Right, wouldn't want to rush into anything by packing a suitcase the night before. That would be crazy. Still, it's just us in our temporary shared office for the next couple of days.

"Hey, Blossom, would you mind if I took lunch first? I have an errand to run."

"Sure," she says, "what's up?"

I hesitate, but I already roped her into this. She'll find out sooner or later anyway. "I'm going to stop seeing Azalea."

Blossom puts the schedule she'd been reading down on her desk and stares at me, befuddled. "Why, did something happen? Do you need to talk about it?"

"It's not that, exactly," I begin as I settle down into my chair, "it's just a feeling I have. Something about our whole relationship is just... off. I need some time to figure it out."

She watches me for several seconds like she's waiting for me to go on, and when I don't she closes her eyes and slowly shakes her head. "Oh, Cloud Kicker. I'm really disappointed to hear you say that."

"Why? It's *my* relationship. I just need some space."

"You finally find a mare who you're falling for, you date her for a couple of weeks, and now that you have all these feelings that you don't know how to deal with you're turning tail and running away."

I jump back up and press my forehooves into the desk. "I'm not running away! I'm trying to sort out whether that's how I really feel for her."

"By avoiding her?" Blossom squeezes her eyes closed and rubs her forehead with a hoof. "This is sort of becoming a pattern with you, Cloud. If you stay with her, what's the worst that could happen, really? But this? This is you and West Hoof all over again."

"This is *nothing* like my decision not to go into the guard. That was--"

"A big, long-term change that would have taken you outside of your comfort zone," Blossom finishes for me. "Look, I love you, and it's your life, but if you don't take a chance on somepony someday..." she trails off.

"So it's marry Azalea or die alone. Thanks, Blossom, that's really helpful." I spin around to face the wall rather than watch her talk down to me. Just because she's in a long-term relationship she's suddenly the expert on how I should live my life?

"That isn't what I said at all, and you know it. Don't be difficult." I hear her chair squeak behind me, and soon there are two white wings wrapped around me, chair and all, reaching just far enough around that the tips almost touch across my chest. "You wouldn't ever be alone. If you're sure this is what you really want to do, then go ahead. I'll watch the office until you get back."

"Thanks, Blossom. I love you too, okay?"

“I know.” She kisses the top of my head and leaves the room to me and my thoughts. Blossom isn’t really a ‘trust your instincts’ sort of pony in the same way I am, so it might just be that she can’t relate to the idea that I’d make a decision based on what feels right.

Or it might be that she’s completely right, and I’m running away.

I don’t regret my decision to leave the guard, but it’s certainly has cast a pall over my life for the last couple of years. Not to mention it made things difficult for a lot of ponies that I care about. But then again, didn’t Glint tell me just yesterday that they’d take me back if I ever changed my mind? Can’t I explain that this is just temporary? Or do I just want to believe I can have it both ways?

I could spend hours going around in circles in my head. Heck, I already have. When in doubt, action is better than inaction. I force myself out of the chair and through the door, leaving via the roof and then gliding down to the street below. I trot towards the square on autopilot, lost in thought. Carrot Top wanders down the other side of the street and waves as she goes by. “Thanks for the rain!” she calls out. I just wave back and keep going. I guess Azalea’s backup plan came through. Great, another reminder of something I owe her for while I’m on my way to hurt her. Just when I thought I couldn’t feel worse about this.

I approach Azalea’s cart during a lull in the hoof traffic. She and Applejack are the only ponies close enough to hear what we’ll be talking about, assuming nothing escalates into a screaming match.

“Cloudy!” she says as I catch her eye. “Want a flower? It’s on the house. How was Manehattan?”

“Azalea, can we talk for a minute?” I ask. She nods and trots over to me, but when she moves to kiss my cheek I back away.

“Is something wrong?” she asks, confused and a little hurt.

“I think that we should stop seeing each other romantically,” I say. There’s a sharp intake of breath from Applejack, but she



doesn't say anything. Azalea just looks confused.

"I'm... surprised that you feel that way, Cloudy," she says. Her voice is rigid, like she's choosing her words very carefully. "I was under the impression that you felt pretty strongly that everything was going well."

"I did, I mean, I do, err, that is..." I suddenly struggle to find the right words. I was expecting angry, angry I could handle. But nothing I've seen from her thus far prepared me for her turning frigid. "You're great, really, and these last couple of weeks have been a lot of fun. But it's like I said before: I'm new to this whole relationship thing. I just want to take a little time to sort out how I really feel, and I don't want to lead you on if I'm just going to hurt you down the road."

"What kind of dang fool excuse is that?" interjects Applejack.

"Applejack," says Azalea without looking away from me, "I appreciate your support, but I want to talk to Cloud Kicker privately about this. Why don't you take your cart back to the farm? It's almost time for you to head off to meet your train anyway, and I'd hate to make you miss it."

"Alright, alright, ah know when ah'm not wanted. You better tread real careful, Kicker. Ah don't take kindly to ponies hurtin' one another." With a few quick, well-practiced kicks, the cart she's been selling her apples from folds right up for travel and she pulls it away from us, mumbling as she goes.

When I turn back to Azalea, there's a little more of the hurt I expected to see in her face. "Did... did I do something wrong?"

"No, Azalea, absolutely not. I know this is a cliché, but it's not you, it's me."

She takes a deep breath, then lets it out in a huff. "I think I understand. You've got an awful lot of love to give, Cloudy, that's clear. You just need to find somepony that knows how to take that love and put it to good use, right?"

I frown, but she's taking this pretty well so I see no need to contradict her. "I guess that's one way to think about it."

“You’ll find them, Cloudy, or they’ll find you. Maybe sooner than you expect. Just try to hang in there a little longer, okay?” She steps towards me and gives me a big hug.

“So you’re okay with this?” I ask. “I’d hate for you to disappear out of my life before I figured this out.”

“Oh, you can’t get rid of me *that* easily,” she says with a little giggle. “If you say there’s still a chance for us to be together then I trust you.”

“I trust you, too,” I reply. It feels good to say.

“You have no idea how happy I am to hear you say that,” she says. She gives me a peck on the cheek and backs away again. “That flower I offered you is still on the table by the way.”

And so I end up walking away from the market with a spring in my step, munching away on the petals of a flower. I can’t believe how well that went. This day is looking up.

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Well, the day *was* looking up until I discovered that Rainbow Dash decided to leave the entire next two weeks’ schedule and payroll to us while she went off to have fun in Canterlot. I glance over at the clock: half past five. She’s probably laughing it up with Pinkie Pie while they take a cushy chariot ride up to the palace. Not that I can begrudge them too much what with all the ‘saving the world’ stuff they keep getting roped into, but asking her to do the paperwork associated with her day job half-competently doesn’t seem that unreasonable.

I twist my neck to one side and hear something crack. Cramps make me cranky, I’ll admit. Maybe my appointment with Aloe and Lotus should go ahead after all...

I shake my head and put down the paper I’m pretending to read. No way. I owe it to Azalea to figure out what I really feel for her before any of that. Maybe one more hour of paperwork, then I’ll head home, pour myself a bubble bath, and just stay in for the evening. That sounds like just the ticket.

So naturally, the clanging of the bell summoning the town to some kind of emergency meeting rings out through my office at just that moment.

“What now?” I mutter to nopony in particular, but dutifully make my way out onto the street anyway. I’m not the only one who’s confused; I’m passed by a pair of stallions complaining about having some game they were playing interrupted, but as I get closer to the town square I see Mayor Mare waiting impatiently for us to assemble.

“Hey, Cloud Kicker, any idea what’s going on?” asks Lyra from behind me. I turn to her and just shrug.

“Whatever it is, let’s just skip it,” says Bon Bon. “I have a batch of cookies that’ll be ruined if I don’t get them out of the oven in the next few minutes.”

Lyra gives her a gentle whack to the back of the head, although she follows it up with an apologetic kiss. “If they’re calling an emergency meeting, it’s probably more important than a dozen cookies, Bonnie.”

“Lies and heresy. Besides, there were *two* dozen cookies in there when you yanked me away.”

“We’re going to try to get a little closer before the speech starts. See you later?”

“Sure.” I reply. The two of them squeeze into the crowd, while I spread my wings and jump into the air, hovering nearby to give the earthbound ponies a bit more space. The multihued crowd mills about for several more minutes before the mayor decides that enough ponies are present for her to begin.

“Good afternoon, my little ponies,” she says. She clears her throat while the townsfolk come to order. “I’m afraid I come before you with very serious news. We’ve just confirmed preliminary reports from Canterlot, and I’m afraid there’s no good way to say this. Canterlot has been attacked by changelings.”

“What?”

“Not again!”

“Are the Princesses alright?”

“Are we next?”

“The horror!”

The mayor holds up a hoof and silence falls instantly. “Now there’s still a great deal we aren’t sure of yet, and information is patchy at best. I’m afraid all we can do for now is remain safe and hope for the best. In any case, I think the one thing we can be sure of is that we need to prepare ourselves for a long, dragged out-”

And then the world explodes.

Well, not the *whole* world, although the initial impact of the pressure wave would have fooled me. The force sends me flying and I plummet into the pony below me, and I don’t even have time to mutter an apology before a deafening roar drowns out all the sound around me. I look up, and from the direction of Canterlot I see a dome of twisting rainbows spreading out at impossible speed, obscuring everything in its wake. It’s rushing towards us over the fields and plains without stopping or slowing, and I have only a few seconds to mutter a quick prayer consisting of *Please Shadow please don’t let me die today* before it slams into the edge of the town. A second later later it overtakes me and...

...does absolutely nothing as it passes through me and travels onward, phasing through building like they aren’t even there. Well that was something of an anticlimax.

I hear a familiar voice start to scream.

The ponies around her back away to create some space, and from my vantage point I see Bon Bon rolling around on the ground wreathed in multi-colored flames. Lyra is trying to reach for her, but she’s forced back by the heat. Before I can collect myself enough to find a raincloud, her coat disintegrates revealing shiny black chitin beneath it. Her face melts away to uncover huge compound eyes and fangs. The flames abruptly extinguish themselves, and everypony knows what the creature laying there in the street is.

Before any of us can react, a thin crack starts to open up along its side and a violent, blinding light shines out from it. The crack widens and spreads, spiderwebbing over its entire body as the light only grows in intensity, forcing me to look away. There’s an unearthly screech, and the light starts to fade away.

In the spot where the changeling was just a moment ago is a smoldering husk of changeling skin and, once again, Bon Bon. She opens her eyes, blinks rapidly, and squeezes them shut again. "Oh... my head... what... what..."

Lyra stares down at the... something... on the ground in front of her. Eventually, it opens its eyes and looks up at her. It smiles and raises a shaky hoof towards her.

And that's when Lyra slaps the creature across the face.

"Where is she?" Lyra demands before striking another blow, kneeling over the thing and pinning it to the ground with her knees. "Where's my Bonnie, you disgusting little bug?"

"Lyra! Please, that hurts. I-"

"Good!" Lyra screams into the thing's face. "Did you hurt her? Did you kill her? *Where is she?*"

"I... give me a second, there are all these memories-"

"Quit stalling!" she lifts the thing's head off the ground and bashes it down onto the hard cobblestone. "Tell me what you did to the real Bon Bon!"

"But I am... but I remember... Lyra, I remember everything. I remember *us*! Remember our fourth date? When I made the little chocolates with the harp marks on them? When you and I decided to call them Sweet Hearts?"

"Don't you dare. Don't you *dare*! Those aren't your memories, they're hers. You will tell me what you did with her or I will *destroy* you. Do you understand me?"

"Please believe me. Please, Lyra. I love yo-"

Lyra tilts her head up to the sky, eyes closed, and shrieks loud enough to drown out the last syllable. "I hate you, you monster. How can you say that to me? With the voice you stole? Wearing the face you took? You sicken me. Now, last chance. Where. Is. Bonnie?"

The thing's tears mix with the blood flowing from the gashes on its face. "...Attic. I wrapped her up in a cocoon and put her in the attic. She'll be fine. Just give me a chance to make this right, somehow. I have to. I have to make you see that I don't

need to be like that anymore. Isn't there anything I can do to make you forgive me?"

Lyra's chest heaves as she gasps for breath, tiny sobs of relief escaping her lips at the news that Bon Bon is safe. Her wild eyes dart around the crowd of ponies staring at the pair of them in horror, and her horn flares to life. In a rage-fuelled display of power I never would have believed her capable of, the magic field wraps around a three-meter tall lamp post and rips it out of the nearby sidewalk. She drags the post over as ponies step aside to allow it to scrape past them until the heavy metal base hovers just inches above the thing's forehead. It stares up at the dirty iron, mouthing little words that I can't make out from up here. With a groan, Lyra hefts the post like a baseball bat high above her and looks down at the thing for the last time.

"You can die."

I'll give Lyra the benefit of the doubt. It's entirely possible she's just trying to scare the thing that, after all, abducted her marefriend and did who-knows-what afterwards. She might not really have it in her to be a killer. I'll never know for sure, though, because my shoulder slamming into her chest as I tackle her off the thing disrupts her magic and the lamp post lands harmlessly a few inches away from its face. It fights its way onto its hooves sobbing as Lyra struggles beneath me. "Lyra. Lyra!" I shout into her face as she tries to writhe out from under me. "This isn't what Bon Bon needs, okay? She needs you to go help her. I know how angry you must be, but you need to settle down now. For her."

Slowly, a touch of sanity returns to Lyra's eyes. "For her?"

"Go be her hero, Heartstrings," I say as I gently stroke her mane. A second later I feel her relax a bit and I get up off of her. She forces her way through the crowd, thankfully in a different direction than that thing went. Speaking of which, it's standing in the street a small ways off from the crowd, petrified with fear.

It gasps and wipes the blood out of its eyes. Then it opens its mouth to address us, to try to explain itself.

I wonder who threw the first rock. I suspect there are a lot of things I'll wonder about today for a long time. In the end, it doesn't really matter.

The rock only glances along the thing's flank, but its enough. That first stone is followed by others, and assorted trash and even wrappers as the mob grows restless. Ponies are generally peaceful, friendly creatures, but we're also a herd species. Once the avalanche has started, there's no turning it back. The thing does the only thing it reasonably can: turns tail and gallops for the edge of town in hopes of escaping the mob's wrath.

I don't chase after it like most of the other ponies do. But I don't do anything to help it, either. For now, I just need to fly away from the whole sordid mess.

---

A few hours later, after we've pulled Bon Bon out of the cocoon and she's recovering in the hospital with Lyra perched at the side of her cot, I finally return home. My house is dark and not very inviting. I can't bring myself to go in there just yet. Instead I keep walking around the block to try to sort out the events of the day. To my surprise, Azalea's lights are still on. I need to talk to somepony, and she probably does too. Even the pony who dumped her what now feels like a week ago. I walk up to her stoop and knock on the front door. For a long time there's just silence, and I'm about to walk away when I hear a voice call out from behind the door. "Who's there?"

"It's Cloud Kicker. Can I come in?"

"Why? What do you want?" Great, she must be more upset than I thought. That's partly my fault. Impeccable timing, dumping her on the day of a massive changeling attack.

"I just want to talk to you," I say. There's movement in her window and a few seconds later I hear the locks on the door being undone.

The pony who opens the door is nothing like the cute and collected mare I remember. Her eyes are red and puffy from

crying, and a subtle little tremor passes through her body as I watch. “How are you holding up?” I ask her. I lean in to give her a hug but she stumbles back in alarm.

“Don’t touch me. Just... not right now,” she whimpers. Still, she doesn’t slam the door in my face.

“Sorry, sorry. I guess after everything that happened today I thought we could both use somepony to talk to.”

“The invasion? I heard about that. Crazy, right?” she asks and lets out a mirthless little chuckle, far too high-pitched to be authentic.

“Were you at the emergency meeting? Didn’t you hear what happened with Bon Bon?” I ask. Maybe Azalea didn’t realize the significance of the bells, being new in town.

“Bon Bon? Is she alright?”

“She is now, but she’d been copied by a changeling. When that explosion happened, its disguise slipped in front of everypony.”

Azalea gasps, and her shaking gets worse. “What happened to the changeling?”

“You don’t have to worry. Lyra jumped it and beat it up, then we chased it out of town. If it tries to come back, there are plenty of ponies that looked pretty eager to finish it off for good.” Azalea has gone very still.

“Do you think... do you think that’s the right thing to do? To kill it on sight?” she asks.

“Well, if it were up to me I’d want to capture and question it first. Why? I thought you of all ponies would want it destroyed. Didn’t you say that they should all be squashed?”

She starts to pace back and forth across the room, muttering to herself. Then she looks up at me with a mad, desperate look in her eyes. “Of course. Just like I said. Kill them all for what they... for all the terrible things they...” she trails off and starts crying. She runs over to me and pulls me against her, her breath coming in raspy, heaving sobs.



I hug her back, glad that I can be here to comfort her. “It’s all going to be fine, Azalea. If there are any more of those monsters in town, we’ll flush them out before anypony gets hurt.” Something tingles at the edge of my senses. “Hey, did you change shampoos or something? You smell different.”

She snuffles, but gives a little laugh. “Wow, Cloudy. You really know how to make a mare’s day. First you dump me, then you tell me a friend of mine was a changeling, and now you’re topping it off by saying I stink. No wonder you’re so popular.” She relaxes a bit, going limp in my forelegs as I lower us both gently to the carpet without letting her go. A pang of regret courses through my mind. Maybe it’s just the shock of the day making me desperate, but my feelings for Azalea are becoming a lot clearer. The desperate, out-of-control need to love her feels like it’s been stripped away, leaving the core of something solid and lasting that I’m more comfortable with.

“Better?” I ask.

“A little. But this doesn’t solve anything, not really. Do they know how long Bon Bon has been a changeling for?”

I stiffen up, not at all pleased that I have to broach this subject now before she’s calmed down a bit more. Bon Bon wasn’t in any condition to answer all our questions, but we got a bit of information while Blossom and I flew her to the hospital. “It was the night of that party at my house. That order she took must have been a ruse to get her alone in the shop so the changeling would have an opportunity to replace her without Lyra walking in at an awkward time.”

“Does she know who placed the order?”

I shake my head. “She said it was some stallion she didn’t recognize, and if it was a changeling they could look like anypony they wanted to.”

“Sounds like a dead end, then,” says Azalea, snuggling a little closer to me.

“The order is, sure. But the changeling would have to know when Lyra was out so it could make its move. I’ve been thinking that if there are multiple changelings, one of them

could have passed a message to the others that she was out of the way. They have that whole hive mind thing going for them, after all.”

Azalea slowly nods, thinking through my logic. “So maybe look for ponies who were lingering around her store that evening?”

“Nah, too obvious. I think I know where they would be watching from, but you aren’t going to like it.”

She looks me in the eye, scared and confused. “Where then?” she asks, almost a whisper.

“I think one of the ponies at my party was a changeling.”

Azalea squeezes her eyes shut, and her sobs begin again. I can’t blame her. “I know, I know, it scares me too that we could have been talking to it all night without knowing. But at least it gives us a short list of ponies who-” I freeze. Pieces start to fall into place. “I think I know who it is.”

Azalea is absolutely bawling now. “Cloudy, please don’t say it. Just... just lay with me here for one more minute. Let me hold on for just one more minute before-”

“I think it’s Algae Bloom.”

Silence falls over the room, interrupted only by the ticking of the clock. “Algae Bloom?”

“Think about it. She swings by the party just long enough to confirm Lyra’s there, then she picks up Minuette to feed off of and leaves to go who knows where? It’s circumstantial, but it fits. Unless you can think of a better suspect.”

She shakes her head vigorously. “I think she’s definitely the pony you should focus on.” She rolls over and faces away from me. “Why are you telling me all this, Cloudy? I don’t see how I can help.”

I ponder that question for a minute. “I’m not sure, exactly. Part of it is that talking through a problem helps me solve it sometimes. Another part... something just tells me that I can trust you.”

Azalea gets up and walks across the room to where a small mirror hangs on her wall, and she studies her reflection. “You trust me? That’s still... uh... I mean, even after all the craziness that’s happened today?”

“Sure, why wouldn’t I?”

She smiles at me. “That means so much to me, Cloudy. Thank you.” She walks into her bathroom and out of sight, but leaves the door open.

“Listen, if you don’t want to be alone tonight I can stay here and crash on your couch, or you can come over to my place,” I say, raising my voice to be heard over the running water.

When Azalea emerges again, she looks a bit more put together and gives me a wry look. “Regretting what you told me this morning?” That gets a wince out of me, not that I don’t deserve it. “My answer’s no, Cloud Kicker. It isn’t that I don’t appreciate the offer, but you aren’t the only one who needs a little space at the moment. I’ve got... a lot of things jumbled up in my head right now.”

“Understandable. It’s been a rough day.” I walk over and lay a wing over her back, and she responds by nuzzling my cheek.

“I’m so sorry, Cloudy,” I hear her whisper just at the edge of hearing. I give her a little kiss on the muzzle in response. She has nothing to be sorry for. If anything I’m the one who’s acting like a fickle brat.

“I’ll check in on you tomorrow, okay? Sweet dreams.”

She watches me leave without saying something, and as I close her front door behind me the last thing I hear is her beginning to cry again. The poor thing must be terrified. I promise myself that I’m going to ferret out any more imposters that haven’t left the town yet, for her sake if nothing else.

Even though it’s late at night, an unusual number of ponies are still milling about chatting with their neighbors. I suspect a lot of ponies are in for an unquiet night. Luna will have her hooves full for the next few weeks. I, for one, am looking

forward to settling in for the night. I'm practically counting the steps as I approach my front door.

The door's ajar.

Ever so carefully, I push it open. Slowly, so the hinges don't squeak. The interior is pulled apart, it looks like somepony was in a hurry. My saddlebags are sitting on the kitchen counter, haphazardly loaded up with the food from my pantry. I can't tell if there was any rhyme or reason to what the intruder packed, or if they just scooped as much as they could into the bags.

As I creep down the hallway, the sound of running water from the bathroom catches my ear. There's dim light streaming through the crack under the door. Lowering myself onto my belly and peeking through it, I can see two hooves planted in front of the sink and hear somepony muttering under their breath.

Pressing myself against the wall by the doorknob, I consider my options. I could leave to get the guard, but they're probably running all over the place already with everything that's going on. This pony could be long gone by the time I find one and bring them back. Besides, right now I have the element of surprise, I'm probably better trained than any burglar, and I know more about the layout of my own house than he or she does. Tactical assessment complete, I take a few moments to collect my wits and slow down my pounding heart before spinning around and kicking down the door in a single blow. In the near darkness, I can make out the shape of a pegasus, her coat the same color as mine, running her green hair under the tap. An open bottle of mane dye sits beside the mirror. I flip the main light on, and the pony yanks her head out of the sink in alarm. She pushes the soaking wet mane out of her face, and in an instant my plan to quickly subdue her is shocked out of my mind. She has my face.

I just found the other changeling.

# The Cloud Kicker Has Been Doubled

## THE CLOUD KICKER HAS BEEN DOUBLED

The two of us stare at one another for an interminable moment, and then we both spring into action at exactly the same time. I lunge straight for her in the hope of ending this before it can even begin, but she anticipates me and whips her wing around, sending the bottle of dye hurtling straight towards my head. I manage to twist my face away and bring a foreleg up, and by some miracle none of the spattering dye gets into my eyes. By the time I can safely look back towards where the changeling was a second ago, she's gone.

Two hooves slam into my back, forcing me down onto the hard tile of the bathroom floor. I skid to an achy stop, and turn to see a blonde tail whipping around the doorframe. Fighting through the pain to get back onto my hooves, I dash after her.

I catch her trying desperately to tie on the saddlebags from my kitchen, and position myself between her and my front door. "Who are you? What do you want?" I demand.

The green-maned me looks up, apparently surprised that I recovered so quickly. "Cloud Kicker, please. Just step aside and we both walk away from this clean. You'll never see me again, I swear."

"Not without some answers. You're a changeling, aren't you?"

Surprisingly, she doesn't answer right away. She just hangs her head and sighs. "I don't even know anymore. I was, then there was that explosion and everything got all mixed up. I won't hurt you any more than I have to, or anypony for that matter. But I won't let you stop me, either. I need to get away from here. I... I remember your life, Cloud Kicker. Every detail of it. I don't know why, or how, but I do."

“Well then you know enough about me to know that I’m not letting you go,” I say as I crouch into a combat stance.

She examines an overripe peach that’s been sitting on my counter for a while now, turning it over in her hooves. “Never thought you would.” An instant later, it’s flying towards me.

Not this time. I fling a hoof aside to block the projectile and throw a blind kick upwards, and I luck out when I feel it sink into yielding muscle. The pony... changeling... thing... crashes into the back of my couch as she tumbles end-over-end from my blow. She turns the momentum from my strike into a stumbling retreat towards my bedroom, and I bolt after her.

She tries to slam my bedroom door into my face, but I crash through, sending splinters flying everywhere. My doppelganger is going for the wingblades fastened to the wall, and they fall to the floor as I tackle her from behind. I catch an elbow to my face for my trouble, and grab at the weapons as I roll away. We each come up with one of them, and there’s a momentary unspoken truce as we fasten them onto ourselves.

“You could really hurt somepony with one of those, Cloud Kicker,” says my double as we begin to circle one another.

Isn’t that the point? I charge. Wielding one blade is a tad awkward, but mixed in with my pummeling hooves it’ll do the job. I knock the changeling’s weapon away, and she’s helpless. I bring my edge down towards her face, nothing but her death on my mind.

Something presses into just the wrong spot on my arm, and something else on my shoulder. It’s perfectly synchronized to send my strike off target, and I miss. My blade bites into the wood of my bedframe, and a sudden impact into stomach knocks me away. I convert the momentum of the blow into a roll as I’m flung away from the pony I meant to harm.

“How?” is all I can whisper as I try to rise up from the counterattack.

Somehow, my opponent’s heard me. “Oh please, Mom taught us how to counter that by our eleventh birthday. I should know; it was on the test.”

“She’s... my mother. Not yours,” I protest.

“Not the way I remember it,” she says.

I’m not in very good shape. At some point this bitch landed a lucky hit on the face and my left eye is starting to swell up, and I mentally adjust to my compromised peripheral vision. I’m honestly not sure I’ll win in a straight-up fight, which leaves one option: Get her talking. “You aren’t a changeling anymore? Prove it.”

My opponent seems a bit taken aback by my concession, and the half-step she loses is window of opportunity enough for me to lunge at her. No luck, as she wraps a foreleg around my torso and redirects my charge into a wall. “The Mom thing wasn’t enough?”

I groan as I try to rise up from the blow. It’s harder than it should be. “Ooh, a Kicker with mommy issues. That must have really taxed your intelligence-gathering capabilities, changeling.”

“Need more proof?” she asks as I glare at her. “Remember when Star was six and you told her that there was a family of flesh-eating batponies that snuck in to roost every night at midnight? And the only way to get rid of them was to bang on the ‘magic gong’ you gave her until they flew away?”

That does stop me. Actually, both of us stop and chuckle. Auntie Gust was *not* pleased when she was woken up at three in the morning by the resulting commotion. My uncle, on the other hoof, slept through the entire thing. But soon enough I recover. “Plenty of ponies could have told you about that. I still don’t believe you.” I take a step closer, and she steps forward to meet me. “One more chance. Prove it to me, or one of us dies tonight.”

The intruder pauses. “...If that’s what it’ll take. You had a dream the night before you decided to quit the guard. I remember it.”

My jaw drops. “You’re... you’re bluffing,” I assert. I’ve never told anypony about that. Not my parents. Not Auntie Gust. Not

even Blossomforth. “I had a lot on my mind that night. Just because I dreamed of something doesn’t prove anything.”

“Oh, you want details? You’re falling. You try to recover but both of your wings are mangled, torn apart by an enemy you can’t remember. You look up, and see nopony else but Shadow Kicker diving beside you, keeping pace with your fall. You plead for her to save you, but she won’t. Then she drifts right up to you and whispers in your ear-”

Somepony starts pounding on my front door, snapping me out of my trance.

“You really are me, aren’t you?” I ask, staring directly at the panicked look on her face.

Her gaze softens, then breaks as she can’t quite look at me. “I hope to be, for what that’s worth. Right now... I’m not sure I deserve it.”

I study her a bit longer, and the pounding from my front door becomes more urgent. “Hide somewhere. Anywhere. I’ll take care of this.” I march over to my front door, and throw it open to reveal two guardponies. “Hey,” I say as casually as I can manage, “what’s up?”

“Standard patrol, Cloud,” says one of them, a stallion I recognize.

“Bulwark! Garrison! It’s been awhile. To what do I owe the pleasure? You’re inspecting everypony’s home now?”

“Your neighbors reported odd noises coming from your residence, Cloud. We’re just here to check it out. Can we come in?” asks the armored stallion.

I pause. Decision time. “Odd noises, huh? Look, what with the whole invasion of Canterlot thing going on, a lot of ponies decided they needed some immediate stress relief. Who was I to say no? Frankly, you should give me a medal for public service. But I’m afraid that my guests are in a somewhat compromising position at the moment, and they aren’t into public performances...”

The guards hesitate, which tells me that I’ve won. “What’s that stuff on on your face?” asks Bulwark.



“Lubricant,” I lie. “Want to hear how it got there?”

The two guards look at one another, then turn away to whisper between themselves as I try not to freak out too badly. When they both sigh, I feel the tension between my shoulders start to dissipate. “Only you, Cloud Kicker,” says Bulwark.

“Yep, I sure am one-of-a-kind!” I insist, praying that it isn’t too much. “Hey, we’ve got room for two more. After all, you must have had just an *awful* day. Care to join us?”

“Not interested,” says Garrison. “Just let us know if you see anything out of the ordinary.”

“You got it. Now if there’s nothing else, I think I hear somepony calling my name. Which is surprising. What with the ball gag, and all.”

The two of them leave and I close the door, letting a bit of the hidden tension ease away. I think they bought it. Trotting back to the bedroom, I don’t see the other me anywhere. I check the closet, under the bed, every hiding spot I can think of, but none of them pay off. Great, I extend a little trust to the thing and she runs off on me. “Cloud Kicker?” I call out to the empty room.

“Yes?” answers a voice directly behind me. I flap my wings and leap into the air as I spin around, snapping my leg out into a reflexive roundhouse kick that the pony behind me deflects easily. She chuckles.

“How did you do that?” I ask her, as the pounding in my ears starts to die down.

“Did you think I forgot how to be a changeling? I’ve spent my entire life learning how to hide. Er... one of my lives, anyway. Besides, that little crawl space behind the loose panel was the perfect place to stash myself away. Guards wouldn’t ever have found me.”

I thought I was the only one who knew about that spot. Guess that’s not the case anymore. “So what do we do now?”

She shrugs. “Wanna bang?”

“Heh, bet you couldn’t show me anything I haven’t seen before. We’ll get to that eventually, I’m sure. Right now, I’d rather you told me who else you replaced in town. I doubt you and Bon Bon were the only two.”

She shakes her head. “Sorry. Not going to happen. Those changelings are as much my family as Alula and Uncle Tornado. I’m not going to turn them in.”

I frown at that. “I could march right outside this instant and give you over to Bulwark and Garrison. Maybe you want to think about being more cooperative.”

“You’re a lousy bluffer, Cloud. I don’t know what we are, exactly, whether we’re sisters or clones or something else. But I do know that you won’t sell out your family, the same way I won’t sell out mine. Kickers stick together. I heard what Lyra did to Bon Bon. Are you really going to stand by and watch somepony do that to me? Because if you are then I’d rather you just slit my throat with that blade and make it quick.” She stares at me with pleading eyes. “Please don’t take this life away from me, Cloud. I’ve only really been a pony for one day, but even with everything that happened this afternoon, it’s already been the best day of my life.”

Wow. Apparently I’m *really* good at guilt tripping ponies. “What exactly are you asking for from me?”

“Just let me hide out here for a couple days. Once the initial panic blows over, I’ll throw on a disguise and catch a train for some other town. No pony ever has to know I exist.”

“You’re just going to start over? What about your friends? Heck, what about the rest of the clan? You’re okay with just cutting yourself off from all that?”

She shakes her head. “It’s not a question of what I’m okay with. Unless something changes that’s my best available option.”

I sit quietly in the dark bedroom, trying to imagine breaking contact with everypony I’ve ever known. Cloud Kicker is trying to put a brave face on it, but I know the truth. What she’s suggesting will crush her. “No.”

“What do you mean by that?” she asks, her ears perking up.

“I mean no, you aren’t running away with your tail between your legs. Stay here while things calm down, then we’ll start introducing you to the other ponies in town. You’re me. You’ll win ‘em over with that classic Cloud Kicker charm.”

She scoffs. “Love the confidence, but I don’t think you understand how badly some of them will hate me. I have decades of memories of ponies I lied to, and the times when I was found out? Never went well.”

“Cloud. Look at me,” I insist. “Look me in the eyes and tell me you honestly believe that a pony like Blossom would rather see you alone than give you a chance.”

She opens her mouth to reply. Then closes it again without saying a word.

“...Thanks, Cloud Kicker. For believing in me.”

“No problem. What can I say? It would be a tragedy for a pony as devastatingly sexy as yourself to get herself lynched. Stay here tonight, and we’ll work out the details in the morning.” She hesitantly trots over to me and let’s me give her a hug. I yawn. The next few days are going to be rough on both of us, and I doubt the fact that I’m technically harboring a fugitive would go over well if she’s discovered. She was right about one thing, though: Kickers stick together. Climbing into my bed, I pat a spot on the mattress next to me and she jumps up to join me under the covers, snuggling up against me for warmth and comfort. “You don’t still have any way to eat affection, right?”

I feel her shake her head. “Not anymore. Still feels nice to experience it, though,” she says quietly. Despite intensity of the evening, sleep overtakes her within a minute, and I’m not far behind. The last thing I wonder is just what I’ve gotten myself into.

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Sitting in the office the next day, my mind drifts away from the details of the department’s budget towards the guest who’s hiding in my basement. It was easy to promise to help her on

the spur of the moment, but now the logistics of actually doing so are staring me in the face. The other me doesn't have any money, but she still has to eat. We agreed that she can't be allowed outside unless I'm home so nopony sees us in two places at once, but knowing me she'll start getting antsy after spending a few days cooped up.

"A bit for your thoughts?" asks Blossom from across the room.

"Hmm?" I look up to see her studying me. "Oh, yeah. I guess all the stuff about the changelings that happened yesterday is on my mind today."

"You and everypony else in town. Can you imagine how weird it would be to wake up one day and discover somepony had tried to steal your entire life?"

"Vividly," I mutter. "Hey, Blossom, if it had been you instead of Lyra and me instead of Bon Bon, what would you have done?"

Blossomforth stops what she's doing and nibbles on tip of a quill as she thinks. "Probably just tried to pin it down until the guards could get some shackles onto it. Hard to say for sure."

"But you don't believe that it might have been telling the truth?"

"Cloud Kicker, it's a changeling. Lying and deception are as natural to them as breathing. Of course I wouldn't assume it was telling the truth. Let the guards sort that out later, when the danger to ponies' lives has passed."

"I guess so," I say. Not really the answer I was hoping for, but I suppose it could be worse. "Anyway, I'm going to go cover Raindrops' sector since she's still not feeling well. You good here?"

Blossom nods. "Yep. See you later."

Raindrops being out sick is an excellent excuse to get out of the office for a few hours. Physical labor is exactly what I need to take my mind off of the pony- and she is a pony, whatever the others may believe- waiting for me at home. I do a quick flyover of my house just to confirm that it hasn't been

broken into and searched by the royal guard, but everything looks to be quiet. A ways away I notice Azalea out in her front yard, her face and legs smudged with dirt as she works the little patch of land she's carved out as her garden. Come to think of it, this is the first time I've ever seen her actually doing any gardening.

"Hey Azalea," I call down to her with a wave, and I drop down to land on the sidewalk. "Feeling better this morning?"

She smiles at me. "Yeah, much better. Growing things helps a bunch, you know? Plus, I was starting to run low on merchandise to sell. Gotta get a move on or I won't have an income anymore, and that would be bad."

"Glad to hear it. You seemed really upset last night."

"Did you make any more progress figuring out who the other changeling or changelings are? Do you still think Algae Bloom was one?"

I almost forgot about that. "I'm not so sure. I do still want to talk to her, though. She certainly acts like she is. She'd be the sort of pony it would be tempting for them to replace, one with lots of friends in low places."

"Just don't go around accusing anypony of anything without proof," she says, digging a little hole in the ground and sprinkling in a few seeds. "Making an accusation like that could really mess up somepony's life, and probably the lives of their friends too. How would you like it if she accused you, just because you've had a lot of partners?"

I gulp. "Azalea, I'm not a changeling. Never have been."

"I'm not... I get that Cloudy, I really do. I'm just saying that while things are this tense you have to be responsible." She glances over and a weed catches her eye. "Look, I have to get back to work, and I'll bet you do too. Thanks for checking in on me, though. Maybe I could swing by sometime later and we could have dinner?"

"Tonight isn't good for me. Another night?" I ask. The last thing I need is anypony coming by my house and discovering my new roommate.

Azalea looks a bit hurt, but nods. “Sure, whatever works for you. Just keep me posted on how the changeling hunt is going.”

“Will do,” I say, feeling like an absolute cad as I lie to her face. I take off again, all my stress bubbling away in my gut. Divided loyalties suck. The next few hours fly by as I clear out the skies. We’re scheduled to have some fog roll through tonight from the Everfree, so the overcast afternoon is cancelled in favor of making up for the sunlight we’ll be missing out on tomorrow morning. I’ll be glad when Dash gets back tonight, even if she won’t be coming into the office for the rest of the week.

When the day’s over and I head back home, I discover that a special evening edition of the newspaper was delivered while I was out, and Cloud Kicker is sitting inside reading it with a wet towel wrapped around her mane. Looks like she at least got around to washing the dye out of her mane while I was out. A pot of something is boiling on the stovetop. She glances up as I walk in, and wordlessly hoofs over the front page. Plastered across the entire page above the fold is a massive headline:

**ELEMENTS OF HARMONY THWART SURPRISE  
CHANGELING ATTACK! EXPERIMENTAL TIME  
MAGICS CREDITED AS FORCE MULTIPLIER.  
TWILIGHT SPARKLE UNAVAILABLE FOR  
COMMENT.**

*My faithful student has had a very long day. We’ll release an official statement when we have all the facts. -Princess Celestia*

I skim the article, and something catches my eye. Princess Celestia and Luna have issued a preliminary pardon for any transformed changeling. Unless they’re witnessed changing shape or attempting to influence another pony’s mind with their powers, they won’t be immediately arrested on sight. Flipping the page, a large pie chart is dominated by one color.

**ERROR MARGIN’S FLASH POLL: “DO YOU  
BELIEVE THE FORMER CHANGELINGS SHOULD**

## **BE PROSECUTED FOR THEIR ROLE IN THE ATTACK?"**

*Yes- 78%*

*No- 11%*

*Not Sure- 10%*

"It doesn't look like we're a very popular group right now," says my double. She tries to smile at me, but it doesn't quite touch her eyes.

"It hasn't been long enough for ponies to calm down yet. I'm sure when they do most of them will change their minds. Besides, you've got the Princesses on your side, isn't that great news?" I ask. I only hope that's the truth.

"I read the article. I remember what the other changelings put all those ponies through, and it sounds like Twilight Sparkle got worse than most from what the reports are saying. Even after all that, though, she and her friends really saved us all. How can I possibly repay her for that? She probably hates us more than anypony."

"Well, maybe the two of us can arrange a thank you banging session between one of you and her."

"With Twilight? I really don't see that ever happening."

I shrug. "Yeah, probably not. So what'd you make for dinner?"

She walks over to take the pot off the stove. "Just some oatmeal. I made a grocery list, by the way. We're out of milk." I groan, which she takes notice of. "Sorry. I'd have gone out shopping this afternoon, but... you know." She scoops the oatmeal into two bowls, and sprinkles a bit of brown sugar over the top before sliding it in front of me. She flaps her wings a couple times to blow cool air over the bowl.

I make a decision. It's a risk, but one that I want to take. "I'll go shopping tomorrow. You should come with me."

Cloud Kicker's spoon freezes halfway up to her mouth. "No way. I can't face them yet. Who knows what they might try?"

"You're just another pony now, remember? The guard will be on your side if they try anything. Plus they'll have to go

through me first. I think between the two of us, we'll hold our own."

"But how does that help?" she asks. "Beating up a couple of jerks isn't going to make anypony believe I'm *less* dangerous. It'll only confirm their worst suspicions."

"Or you'll surprise them and change some minds. Come on, Cloud, you have to get out there eventually. Do you really want to spend another day hiding inside? At least this way things will be on our terms." She hesitates, and I decide not to force the issue. "Just think about it, alright?"

---

It takes a little more coaxing later that night and the following morning, but we end up walking out the door together the next morning into a town blanketed with heavy fog. I don't mind; this stuff will burn off by itself by noon and Cloud Kicker will probably appreciate the concealment. Come to think of it, we really need to come up with a better name for her if we're going to be hanging around one another in public. Otherwise, it's only a matter of time before some pony calls out 'Hey, Cloud Kicker! Wanna bang?' and accidentally finds herself in a three-way.

On the other hoof, Cloud Kicker is fine.

She sticks close to my side as we wander into town, instinctively keeping me between herself and any larger groups. "You're going to have to stop hiding sometime, Cloud," I remind her. She nods but doesn't say anything.

The mists are beginning to clear as we reach the vendors, and ponies are starting to take notice of us. Conversations die away and are replaced by furtive whispering as we go by, and ponies glance at us but then turn away when we look back at them.

When I see Lyra seated on a nearby bench running some scales on her harp, I decide to take a chance. Clearly, the right thing to do in a very delicate situation like this one is to plow ahead without heeding potential dangers. "Come on, Cloud. Let's go introduce you to Lyra."



She goes pale. “Lyra? After what she did in front of everypony the other day? Are you insane?”

“You know her and you know how to get along with her. She’s been a friend for a long time. And if everypony here sees you winning her over...”

“Oh. I get it. If the mare with the unchallengeable anti-changeling reputation thinks I’m okay, then so will they. But what if it blows up in our faces?”

“Then remember that her back-left knee is weak and take her down with extreme prejudice, obviously.” That wins me a rueful chuckle, at least. “Seriously, it’s going to work out fine. Besides, she’s already spotted you and she’s walking over here.”

Cloud’s head snaps back towards Lyra, who is indeed walking over here with her ears pinned flat against her head. “Hello, Cloud Kicker. And I guess you’re Cloud Kicker too.”

“Hey, Lyra. It’s nice to meet you... again.”

“Yeah,” says Lyra. The tension in the square is palpable, and the eyes of everypony around us is fixed on the two mares. Cloud squeezes her eyes closed, fighting every instinctive reaction her changeling memories are screaming at her to hide away. I would give anything for something to interrupt this awkward moment.

From down the street, Fluttershy’s voice rings out. “No, Mister Parrot! Come back!”

There’s a squawk and a flash of crimson, and the bird zips by our heads with Fluttershy in hot pursuit. “Bwawk! Twilight Sparkle is a lesbian! Bwawk!”

...I would give anything for a million bits to fall from the sky into my lap.

...

No? That was a one time thing? Whatever, I’ll take it. Cloud and Lyra’s gazes follow the bird and then they turn to look at one another, hostility forgotten. Lyra snickers, and a minute later the two of them are rolling on the ground laughing like

the old buddies that they are. The crowd seems to mostly accept Lyra's judgement of Cloud's character; all except one pony.

"Lyra!" shouts Bon Bon from across the street. "Why are you getting all friendly with that... that thing? You had the right idea when you were running them out of town."

Oh, horse apples. That, I wasn't expecting. "No, Bonnie, I didn't. In fact..." Lyra's happy mood vanishes as quickly as it came, "What I almost did to her... to you..."

"That was *not* me. I don't care if she managed to take some of my memories with her, she was still the thing that stuck me in a cocoon. Do you know what it's like in one of those things? The kind of nightmares they put in your head? It's easy for you to say you went overboard, but I think Cloud, the real Cloud, should have let you finish what you started."

"Hey!" I shout back at her, "I think you need to back off. How would you like it if you suddenly woke up one day and found the mare you love beating you half to death with her bare hooves?"

"She didn't love you! *I'm* the one who loves you, Lyra. Don't expect me to sympathize with some cheap copy, not after what she did."

Bon Bon takes another step towards Cloud with an aggressive look in her eyes that I don't like at all. With a flap of my wings, I place myself between them. "Back off, Bon Bon."

"No," says my double as she gently pushes me to the side. "Bon Bon is right. I wasn't the one who replaced her, but I did play a part in hurting her. So she deserves the chance to hurt me back."

"No pony is hurting anypony!" I try to insist, but Cloud ignores me.

"Do you want to hurt me, Bon Bon?" Bon Bon's only response is a feral growl. "Go ahead. I won't stop you."

Bon Bon's hoof lashes out and catches Cloud's jaw. She tumbles to the dusty ground, and Bon Bon looks down on her in horror. Then, ever so gradually, Cloud pushes herself back

up, standing tall again in the street despite a trickle of blood running from her mouth. Her eyes are clear, only showing regret and compassion.

“Do you want to hurt me again?”

The question shakes Bon Bon out of her terrified stupor. She halfheartedly shoves her in her chest, and Cloud falls back on her plot. Just as quickly, she’s right back on her hooves.

“Do you want to hurt me again?”

Bon Bon takes a step forward and raises her hoof again. Cloud doesn’t flinch. She just stares directly back into Bon Bon’s eyes as she waits for another blow.

It doesn’t ever arrive. Instead, Bon Bon breaks down into tears and is immediately rushed and wrapped up in a hug by both Lyra and Cloud. I smile as I wrap my own wing around the whole little gang. A thousand indecent comments pass through my mind, but for once I just let the moment happen.

“So, this *is* leading up to an orgy, right?” asks Cloud from the middle of the little group.

Yeah. She’s me alright.

I have to break off from the hug early. Lyra and Bon Bon promise that they’ll introduce the newest Kicker to the rest of the town while I go into work. I glance up at the now-sunny sky.

Looks like all that nasty fog burned itself away after all.

# Cracks Beneath the Surface

## CRACKS BENEATH THE SURFACE

“Hi Twilight! Hold up,” I call down to the mare walking through the street below me. I whisper a couple quick instructions to my double. She snickers and nods, then I drop down.

“Hello, Cloud Kicker,” she replies in a flat voice. I know she isn’t exactly my biggest fan, and she doesn’t love being teased, but certain opportunities are too good to pass up. She glances past me towards the library a little further down the street.

“I heard the news. I just wanted to say, thank you.”

“Huh?” she asks. Seems she was expecting me to say something else.

“I heard all about what you did in Canterlot, with the changelings and everything. I have family in the guard, and if it weren’t for you some of them would be dead right now. Plus from what I heard about the time loops, you must have gone through a lot. You’re a hero, Twilight. So I wanted to say...” I give her my very best, practiced salute, “...thank you.”

She actually grins a little at that. “You’re welcome.”

“Well I know it’s getting a little bit late and you must be eager to get home and unpack. I won’t keep you.” I give her an appreciative hoof bump and let her turn and begin to walk away. When she isn’t looking I wink up at the cloud where my partner in crime is hiding, then call out after her. “Hey Twilight?”

She turns. “Yeah, Cloud Kicker?”

“Do you think we’ll be banging later this week, or not until next week? I know how far in advance you like to schedule things.”

She groans, and pulls out a baseball bat of all things from her luggage. “Just because I like mares doesn’t mean I’m

desperate. I have a baseball bat and I know how to use it.”

She should really know better than to give me a setup like that. “I know a lot of ways to use a baseball bat too, and I bet that my ways are a lot more fun than yours.” Her face goes red, and she’s too flustered to complain as I trot over to her and wrap a foreleg around her. “Think about it, Twilight, who knows more about hitting on the mares in this town? Think about how much you’d learn if you let me take you under my wing? Or take you in any other sense of the word? I thought you liked learning. I could name four, no, five mares who would roll over for you in a heartbeat, once you learn how to ask.”

“Not interested.”

I hear somepony land behind us, right on cue. “At least let me tell you the best part before you say no.”

“Oh, hey Twilight,” comes my voice from behind us. Twilight turns her head back towards the voice.

“Oh, hey Cloud Kicker,” she says. I can barely contain my glee as she turns back to me and almost starts to say something before her eyes go wide and she freezes.

“Oh, Celestia. There are two of you now,” she says when she recovers enough to speak.

“Isn’t it great?” I ask her as I squeeze her a little tighter. “I guess I shouldn’t be surprised a changeling would borrow the shape of the most lovable pony in town. And then when you did your thing with the Elements, well...” I watch Twilight try to form words, but no sounds emerge from her mouth. “So you see? We both really owe you big. There was this really impossible decision I’ve been trying to make for months that just got way easier. Oh, and tell me to go buck myself. I have an amazing retort for that now.”

She screams and bolts for the library, opening the door with magic and not stopping until she’s inside and it’s slammed shut behind her.

Cloud Kicker walks over to where I’m standing. “That was fun,” she says, “but what was it you meant about a really

impossible decision you've been trying to make for months?"

Oh, right, I guess I figured that out after our memories diverged. "I'd been thinking about dyeing my mane, but seeing you with green hair convinced me it would be a bad idea."

"That's it?" she asks skeptically, "You made it sound like it was some massive, life altering choice you were trying to figure out. One where you stood to gain or lose everything depending on what you picked."

"Nope. Just the color of my mane."

"Drama queen," she says, giving me a friendly nudge in my side.

Before I can come up with an appropriately stinging retort, a voice from above interrupts me. "Cloud Kicker!" We both look up and see a very upset Blossomforth descending towards us. I look over to Cloud and she shrugs. Odd, I thought Blossom would have been mostly okay with this. She lands and glares daggers at both of us. "Which one of you used to be the changeling?"

Cloud slowly raises her hoof. Blossom marches towards us. "Blossom, wait. She's a pony now, just like me. Didn't you read the paper? Please try not to be angry at her."

She gets to us, and then reaches out and whacks the back of my head. Cloud's uncertainty changes to a smile as she realizes she isn't the target for once. "I'm not mad at her, I'm mad at you! You should have told me first! I had to find out about it from Cloudchaser?"

"Ow! I was going to- Ow! I was going to tell you but our shifts haven't- Ow! Our shifts haven't overlapped for the last couple of days. But you're- Ow, seriously, quit that. You're okay with it?"

In response, she turns towards Cloud and wraps her up in a big hug. "A second copy of my best friend? Of course I'm fine with it. Welcome to Ponyville, sweetie, I'm Blossomforth. But I guess you already know that."

Cloud looks to be on the verge of tears. “Thank you, Blossom. Thank you so much. You have no idea how much having you on my side means to me.”

“Of course I do. You think I don’t know how helpless Cloud Kicker would be without my help? I’ll never leave either one of you in the lurch, I promise.” She boops her nose against Cloud’s, and somehow her smile grows even wider. “I have to run, but we’re all going to have to sit down for dinner soon. I’ll make my famous casserole, I assume you like all the same foods Cloud Kicker does?”

“I think so. Technically, I’ve only really tasted food for about a week,” says Cloud.

“Good enough. Just stay out of trouble, you two. Not everypony loves the idea of having a former changeling around, and you’re the only one who’s out in the open about it right now.”

“The others will come around, I hope.”

My ears perk up at that. “So there *are* others?” I ask.

Cloud pauses, but then nods her head. “There were six of us here in Ponyville, including Bon Bon. One of us assigned to monitor each Bearer, roughly. I was supposed to keep an eye on Rainbow Dash, Bon Bon was assigned to Pinkie Pie. Although obviously we shared anything we discovered about any of them with the rest of the swarm.”

That particular revelation makes me stop and think. Who have I talked to over the last few months? Did I reveal anything to the changelings that could have put my family in danger? It isn’t a pleasant idea. At least it all worked out in the end. “See you later, Blossom. We should head home too.”

The two of us do just that, landing in our front yard a few minutes later. What’s waiting for us there isn’t a pleasant sight. Azalea is standing there, gaping, and we turn to see what she’s looking at. Somepony defaced our home, spray painting a crude figure that I think is supposed to be a changeling with a big red ‘X’ through it. The also wrote ‘*Changling go back where u came from*’ on the front door.

Azalea places a hoof on my back. "I'm sorry, Cloudy. I came by to see if you were home, and I found this." She turns to Cloud Kicker. "I guess you're the changeling?"

"Yeah," she replies cautiously. Her eyes dart between me, Azalea, and the graffiti. Some of it's still dripping, red and black droplets running down onto our stoop and front lawn. I tense up in case the two mares explode at one another.

Azalea sits there staring at my house for a minute or so before replying. "A lot of ponies out there don't believe that you're reformed. Ponies who do things like this. I'm surprised you decided to, y'know, come out as what you are."

"Didn't have much of a choice, once Cloud found me," answers Cloud Kicker, "still, there's plenty who are fine with what I was. Cloud's been great."

"Is that true, Cloud Kicker?" she asks, turning to me. "You're fine with sharing a house with her?"

I hedge my bets. Azalea told me she hates changelings, after all. She's taking this remarkably well so far, even if I was hoping to introduce these two under better circumstances. "She's family."

"And if she weren't?"

I shrug. "I can't say, for sure."

"I'm sure we'll both keep an open mind, when... if the others feel that they're ready," says Cloud Kicker, jumping in.

Azalea lets out a sad little laugh. "Yeah. That'll be the day. Wouldn't hold my breath, if I were you."

"Hey, come on Azalea. Give them a chance," I say. I walk up to her, and nuzzle her cheek. "The truth always comes out eventually, right?" She mutters something I can't hear. "What was that?"

Azalea stiffens, then instead of answering she grabs me and kisses me full on the mouth. "Cloudy, I... I..." she stammers as she pulls away.

"Shh... I understand, Azalea," I say, and kiss her back harder. My wing traces the curves of her body, and as I run the tip of a



feather over her cutie mark she gasps and shoves me away.

“I can’t, Cloudy. I can’t... be with you that way again. Not ever. It’s too much like... too much like...”

“What? Too much like being with a changeling?” I ask, confused and upset. “I don’t mind if you want time, or space, but I never took you for a bigot.”

“Hey, let’s all calm down here,” says Cloud. “Azalea... it’s fine. I completely understand.”

Azalea opens her mouth to say something, but closes it again and turns to fly away. I’m about to go after her, when Cloud Kicker plants a hoof in my back, fairly hard. “Just let her go.”

“After what she just said? For all we know she was the one who vandalized our house!”

“Come on, Cloud. You can’t possibly believe she’d do that.” I sigh. I really don’t. “Look, neither of us know exactly what she’s working through right now. I have a sneaking suspicion she needs us to be her friends now more than ever. I’ll win her over.”

I sigh. “Yeah, fine. Whatever. Let’s just get inside and get this cleaned-” my plan is interrupted by a big yawn. I’m sleepier than I thought.

Cloud Kicker smiles. “It can wait until tomorrow, I think. Come on, it’s been a busy couple of days. Let’s hit the hay.”

I go inside, and a quick shower later I’m ready to crawl under the covers for the night. I lay my head down on the pillow, but after that last fight with Azalea sleep doesn’t seem eager to come. I’ve been tossing and turning for an hour when somepony pushes my door open. “Who’s there?” I ask.

“It’s me,” says Cloud. “Can I stay in here tonight, instead of the guest room?”

I beckon her inside in the dim light. “You can’t sleep either, huh? Sure, hop in.”

There’s a pause, and I feel the mattress deform under her added weight and the extra heat from her body as she curls herself around me. Buck the haters. Actually, that might be a

legitimate persuasion tactic. I'll have to remember that in the morning. But either way I'm not about to turn on Cloud, ever. Then her hoof jabs me in the back and I reconsider. "Hey, stop kicking."

"Sorry, just trying to get comfortable." Everything goes still again.

Another jab, this one hard enough to nearly push me off the bed. "I said quit it!"

"Won't happen again, my bad," she says, flipping over so we're back to back.

"Whatever, kinky," I mutter.

There's a brief pause before she sits up. "What did you just call me?"

"Uh, Kicky. Because you kept kicking me. Why?"

"I like it. Azalea calls you 'Cloudy,' right? So I could be Kicky. Avoids confusion."

I consider it. It would help differentiate us, but... "I don't know, is it really necessary?"

'Kicky' is quiet for a bit, lost in her thoughts. "Cloud," she says at last, "I love you for giving me this second chance, and I like being you. But I'm not you, not exactly. I have all this extra knowledge and these other memories that you don't, and I can't just ignore that. I need to start figuring out for myself what that means."

"You don't want your name and your history to define you."

"I knew you would get it," she says, hugging me tightly.

"Yeah, I do. No matter what you'll always have a place here, though, if you want it."

"Thanks, Cloudy. Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Kicky."

---

The following morning, after breakfast but before I leave for work, there's a loud pounding on the door. Kicky is in the

shower, so I open the door myself.

“We need to talk, Cloud Kicker,” says Algae Bloom. She looks pissed and tries to push her way inside, but I block her way.

“I don’t have anything to say to you, Algae. Why don’t you leave now?”

She ignores my suggestion. “Have you been telling ponies I’m a changeling?”

“What? No, why?”

“Your house isn’t the only one that got spray painted yesterday. Plus somepony broke one of my windows.”

I take another look at her. She’s angry, sure, and she’s taking it out on me but there’s also an edge of desperation there. “So why come to me? Don’t have any friends you can talk to instead? I’d be surprised if you did.”

“I came over because I saw what they did to your house,” she says. A bit of her anger diffuses. “And no, not really. I thought I did, but nopony believes me when I try to tell them I’m not a changeling. I can’t believe none of them stuck by me. Your stupid friends don’t even care that you have a changeling living with you.”

Calling my friends stupid. Yeah, that’s a great way to win me over. Still, I stand back and let her inside. “I’ll admit, the thought that you might be one crossed my mind. Then I remembered that changelings pretend that they *aren’t* slimy monsters, they don’t advertise to the world how nasty they are.”

She walks into my living room. I hear the shower stop running. “By the Princesses, Cloud, would you stop being such a hypocritical bitch for five minutes so we can talk about this?” asks Algae. “I can’t believe you’re fine with having that thing live with you. For all your talk about your rules and how you’re oh-so-much better than me, you seem awfully fine with throwing them away for a changeling. Or are you just such a narcissist that having a copy of yourself to bang whenever you want is worth it?”

I snarl at her. This was probably not the best idea. “Kicky is nothing like that. She’s a good pony, and she cares more about others than you do. My rules are there so ponies don’t get hurt.”

Kicky walks in, her mane still damp. “Hey, what’s going on? What’s Algae doing here, Cloudy?”

“So you’re the changeling,” says Algae, turning to her.

“Enlighten me, how many ponies have you raped, exactly? With all those mind control tricks of yours? Tell me how you can still look down your muzzle at me and lecture me about ‘rules’ after that. At least all the ponies I’ve been with said yes.”

Kicky goes pale. “That’s enough, Algae Bloom,” I say, “you’ve made your point. I think you should leave.”

“Thirty eight,” says Kicky.

I stare at her, and under the scrutiny she backs out of the sunbeam and into the shadow besides my bookshelf. “... What?”

“Over the course of my life. I lured thirty-eight ponies into bed with me to feed from them. Some I only took a little energy from, but some... some I took a lot more. They weren’t all in great shape by the time I left the next morning.”

Algae scoffs. “See what you’re bunching me in with? She’s done far worse than I ever will.”

“I’ll tell everypony that you weren’t one of us, if that’ll help,” says Kicky. She’s studying the floor and won’t look up at me.

“It’s a start,” says Algae. “Fine, I’ll go now. You though, Cloud Kicker, need to figure out just why I seem to piss you off so much. We aren’t as different as you like to pretend we are.”

When I don’t have an answer, she walks out the door leaving me and Kicky alone. The door shuts, and I hear Kicky begin to snuffle and breath harder. I can’t quite bring myself to go comfort her. “Thirty-eight, huh?” She nods without looking up at me. “Ever kill anypony?”

“Yeah,” she says. The silence lingering after that word speaks volumes. “Right before the wedding invasion. There was a little unicorn filly who walked in on me when I was in my real shape and she saw me. The Queen ordered me to silence her before she blew our cover. So I did.” I see tears starting to land on my carpet. “She was... she couldn’t have been more than a year older than Alula. What if Alula had been the one who found me? Would you have ever forgiven me?”

I open my mouth to tell her yes, of course I could have forgiven her, but the truth comes out instead. “No. If changelings had killed any members of my family in either attack I don’t think things would have worked out the way they have. I’d probably hate your species as much as Azalea does.”

For some reason she seems to find that funny for a moment, but then her dark mood returns. “Why, then? Why did the Elements decide I deserve a second chance? What am I supposed to say if I ever meet that filly’s parents?”

“You can’t change what happened, though. I don’t know why the Elements did what they did, but all you can do is make the most of it. I have to get going, I’m already late for work. Are you going to be okay?” I ask. She finally looks up at me and does her best to smile.

“Yeah. Go ahead, I’ll manage. I’m just going to pull myself together and spend the day cleaning up outside. It’s the least I can do.”

Later that afternoon I do a quick flyby over the house just to make sure Kicky’s okay. Turns out I shouldn’t have worried. Kicky’s not alone; I can make out Azalea scrubbing the paint off the front door along with her, and the two are chatting away. I can’t make out any of the words, but Kicky grins and says something that displeases Azalea, and gets a wet sponge thrown in her face. She throws one right back, and soon the entire enterprise has devolved into a sponge fight. As much fun as it would be to pounce on the two lathered-up mares and join in on the fun, I think I’d rather let the two of them bond. I’m sure they have lots to talk about.

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The days settle into a pretty comfortable routine as they roll by. After reporting the vandalism to the Guard there haven't been any further incidents that I know of. I go off to work each day, while Kicky either helps out with the housework or goes into town to try to win over more ponies.

There are setbacks. One night I came home to discover Kicky sporting a black eye, and it took everything I had not to fly out and hunt down the bastard that jumped her. At least until she told me that he was already in the hospital with three broken ribs and showed me one of his teeth that she'd picked up off the ground after the fight. In some ways I'm glad that it happened. It reminded me that Kicky can take care of herself as well as I can. The biggest problem, though, is not one that I would have anticipated.

"I'm soooooooo boooooooooored," says Kicky. She's laying back on the couch with her legs up in the air, flailing them at nothing.

"It's kind of late, but I could see if Sea Foam wants to come over for the night. She was fun last time," I reply, not bothering to look up from the paper I'm reading.

"I don't want to stay here. I was stuck in this house all day today while you were at work. Lets go out. I haven't been to the Sun's Flank yet, and that's just a crime."

"You want to go to a dark, crowded place that serves alcohol when you know that there are ponies out there who'll attack you if they get the chance? What if that stallion from the other day has friends who decide to brain you with a bottle? Or worse, pick a fight with you somewhere there aren't any witnesses to tell the guards who threw the first punch?"

Kicky grimaces, and brings a hoof up to her swollen eye. "So what, live in fear of idiots like that for the rest of my life? No thanks."

"It's only been a couple weeks. Ponies are coming around, but you need to give them more time. I just don't want to rush into

anything that gets one or both of us hurt because we're stupid."

"Cloudy, three weeks ago I was lit on fire from the inside out and had all of my skin torn off. I don't think anything anypony can do to me would even hold a candle to that."

I'll give her that one, but I still think a night out is a bad idea. "Tell you what, I'll make you a deal. Next month Vinyl Scratch is doing a show at the Flank. Hold off until then, and we'll make it your big debut."

She huffs. "Fine. What am I supposed to do until then?"

"Well, I did pick up the ingredients for chocolate chip cookies on my way home. Why don't we make a batch together? It'll be fun."

Her ears perk up. The first thing they taught us at West Hoof was to know your opponent's weakness and ruthlessly exploit it. "Only on the condition that I get to lick the beaters."

"Done," I say as I rise up from my chair and start to pull out the flour, butter, baking soda, bowls, everything we'll need from the cabinets.

Then from behind me I hear a loud popping sound, and a brief flash of purple light casts my shadow against the backsplash of my kitchen counter. I spin around, and there's a pony standing behind me who isn't supposed to be there.

"Twilight?"

Twilight Sparkle grins at me, but the effect is somewhat spoiled by her sunken and bloodshot eyes. "Hi, Cloud Kicker. How are you doing?"

"I'm... fine..." I reply, not quite sure how to answer. "Can I, uh, help you with something?" Kicky stands frozen in the arch of the doorframe, just watching.

"Help me with something?" asks Twilight. Then she seems to realize she's in my kitchen. "Oh, right! Yes, I need some help testing a hypothesis. First though, some preliminary research." Her horn glows and a parchment and quill appear beside her. "So you have a lot of sex, correct?"

This is not the Twilight Sparkle I'm familiar with, that much is clear. "Well, yeah. It's something I enjoy. I'm not addicted or anything, I just enjoy expressing affection that way."

"It's true, we both do," adds Kicky.

"Oh! Other Cloud Kicker. I didn't notice you there," says Twilight. She looks back and forth between us. "You know, you should really come over sometime and help me with some medical experiments. I'd already have the perfect control group built right in. But that's not important right now."

I thank my lucky stars when she turns her attention away from us and writes something down. I don't think I want to find out what 'medical experiments' means to a mare who just teleported into my kitchen uninvited like it was nothing.

"Twilight, could this maybe wait until tomorrow morning? We were just about to make some cookies."

"Ooh, cookies! Fascinating! I better make a note. I can even help!" Purple light surrounds our drawers and cabinets and all sorts of utensils begin to fly through the air into a pile on the table. Then a hoofheld mixer catches her attention as it goes by. Everything stops, hovering in place while she studies it, mouthing words to herself and utterly enthralled by the device.

"Twilight? Is something wrong with the mixer?" I ask.

"Huh?" asks Twilight. Everything starts to move again like it hadn't been interrupted at all. "Oh, no, the mixer's fine. I was just remembering the time I used one of these to rip a changeling's face off. Looked painful, but the motor burned out pretty quickly so I just used the steak knives next time."

Kicky shudders.

"Are you feeling alright, Twilight?" asks Kicky ever so gently. Everything about the mare screams out 'handle with care.'

"You look a little out of it."

"Just haven't slept that well which is why... Right! That's why I'm here, actually. So, after you have sex you usually fall asleep, right? How would you characterize that state?"

"I'm not sure I understand the question," I answer, utterly lost.



“Like is it deeper than normal sleep? Would you say that you dream less than with normal sleep? Do you feel better when you wake up?” asks Twilight. She stares even more intently at me as she asks, like she *needs* the answer to this question.

“I think it probably varies from mare to mare. I’d say a little deeper though. What’s it like for you, if I can ask?”

“Insufficient data,” she replies. “The times that I’ve fallen asleep afterwards, I never woke up again. You know how it is with time loops. But good, this is great. So the hormones released by sexual exertion must diminish that sort of brain activity. So, next question, do you want to have sex with me right now, or alternatively do you know any mares who would do so on short notice? I don’t really care who.”

“You don’t... what happened to not being desperate enough to consider me?” I ask. When I made that offer to her I didn’t really expect her to take me up on it. Not that I’d say no under most circumstances, she’s pretty cute. These clearly aren’t normal circumstances, though.

She gives me a sad little smile as she pushes a strand of her frazzled, tangled mane away from her face. “I guess right now I am. Anything that’ll help me get some sleep. Please, Cloud Kicker. I’ll do whatever weird thing you usually do with the ponies you bang.”

I shake my head. “No way, Twilight. Not interested in something like that.”

Kicky walks up and puts a hoof on her shoulder. “If something’s bothering you, we can talk about it.”

Twilight’s hopeful smile falls away, turning into a nasty sneer. She pulls away from Kicky and begins to wander aimlessly around my kitchen as she rants. “Talk? *Talk?* You two are as bad as Spike. I didn’t come here because I wanted to talk about anything. If I wanted to talk what makes you think it would be to you, anyway? I came here because there’s one thing I thought you’d be good for, but you aren’t even willing to help me that way. Worthless. Everypony in this bucking town is worthless. I guess it’s up to me to figure this out alone, *again.*”

“You don’t really mean that, Twilight, come on,” I say.  
“Something’s clearly wrong, and if you think that insulting me and ranting are the solution, well, that doesn’t work.”

As I finish speaking Twilight’s eyes go wide and she starts to tremble. Before I can reach her, her horn flashes again and she vanishes as quickly as she appeared with a burst of magic in her wake.

“Yikes,” I say, still staring at the point Twilight had occupied up until a moment ago. “What do you think that was about?”

“I’m not sure,” admits Kicky, “but I think you’d better mention it to Rainbow Dash when you see her tomorrow.

I nod. She’ll probably know more about what’s going on with Twilight, and what to do about it. I move to start putting away everything Twilight took out, but then I stop. Gorging myself on cookie dough actually sounds really good right about now.

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The next morning when I walk into the weather bureau, I head straight to Rainbow Dash’s office. She’s unusually active, flying around the room pulling folders out of filing cabinets and getting papers all over the floor. Most days she’s pretty sluggish until ten in the morning or so, or until she finds an excuse to get out into the field. “Hey, Dash, I need to talk to you about-”

“Sorry, Cloud Kicker. No time right now. It’s gonna have to wait,” she says as she drops a stack onto her desk and flies back to retrieve another one.

“But it’s about-”

“Look, I can’t deal with anything right now. In fact I need you to cover for me today. Emergency interval.”

“Emergency what?” I ask. My concern for Twilight is momentarily displaced. “I can’t, we’re already shorthooved as it is. Now you’re disappearing too?”

“I wouldn’t disappear on you guys if it weren’t really important, you’re just gonna have to believe me right now. If

you need extra help, why don't you ask your clone to come in?"

"Kicky?"

"Yeah. She knows how to do the job as well as you do, right? I'll make some room in the budget to make sure she gets paid for her time. You'll figure it out, but I have to leave right now." Before I can protest again, she bolts out through an open window and I'm left alone. That isn't actually a bad idea. I'm sure Kicky will be happy to have something to do.

A quick round trip home and back and Kicky is sitting in the briefing room with the rest of the team. The walls are covered in faded posters of Wonderbolts, a natural consequence of allowing Dash to choose the decor. The diagram I've drawn on the whiteboard up at the front of the room spells out the plan for today. Breezy, with late afternoon showers. "...So, any questions?" Every pony in the room besides Kicky raises a hoof, which is worrying. Today's plan isn't anything out of the ordinary, but I suspect that's not what they have questions about. "Thunderlane?"

"Yeah. What's the deal with the changeling?" he asks. It takes all my self control not to wince or show any weakness, which is the fastest way to lose the confidence of your team.

"The deal with *Kicky* is that she's helping us out because we have a lot to do today and we don't have a full squad. She's kindly agreed to assist us. Raindrops, your question?"

"Is she going to be doing this often? Is one of us going to have to give up some of our hours to her?"

"This is just for today right now, nothing beyond that has been-"

"Would she be in the running if an assistant manager spot opens up?" interrupts Cloudchaser. "Does your experience that she remembers count if she is? I don't think it should count if it wasn't really her doing it."

I slam a hoof down onto the metal desk, and the resulting bang silences the room. "Listen to me very carefully. Kicky is here to help us, she knows how to do the job, and that is *all* that is

going on. If we decide to bring her on more often, which isn't a decision we've made, then we'll ask you for feedback or concerns just like we would before hiring anypony else. Now if there aren't any more questions about how to *do your jobs*, we're already running behind schedule. Get your flanks in gear and get moving. Dismissed."

The team mutters a little, but they do comply. This time. Hopefully, a little time working side-by-side with Kicky will take the edge off their worries. If not... I really don't want to think about it.

When Kicky and I both stumble home at the end of the day, completely exhausted, we just collapse side-by-side on the floor of the living room. It was after sunset before we finally pushed the last cloud into place and did all the prep work for tomorrow. I hope Rainbow Dash's interval was worth it, whatever it was.

I'm about to fall asleep right there when Kicky speaks up. "Cloudy? Do you think you can help me find a job? I really appreciate you putting me up, but I can't be a freeloader crashing in your guest bedroom forever. Plus, I need more going on in my life than just sitting around thinking or I'm going to go kinda nuts before too much longer."

I open my eyes up and turn towards her. "It's fine, it isn't a big deal."

"Cloudy, I remember you making your monthly budgets. Don't lie to me. You've got more money going out than coming in, and it's because of me."

Busted. I sigh. "You're worth it, but I understand. You want a spot on the weather team? You did great today, and Dash isn't the sort who especially cares about nepotism."

"Doing what, though?" Kicky props herself up on her foreleg to look at me. "There's not going to be another assistant manager position available unless you, Blossom, or Rainbow Dash leave which I don't see happening anytime soon. I'm overqualified for just day-to-day cloud pushing, and you heard what the team said. They don't want me around, and not just

because of the changeling thing. It makes sense for me, but it doesn't make sense for the department."

"Well, what do you want to do instead?" I ask her. It's true that working on the weather team was something I just sort of fell into after West Hoof didn't work out, but now I can't imagine working anywhere else.

"I'll flip through the help wanted ads starting tomorrow. Who knows? Maybe there'll be an ad there that says something like *Wanted: Former monster for unique position. Good pay, full health and dental. Must be hated and despised by entire town. Send resume and three letters of condemnation to central office for consideration.*"

She plays it off like a joke, but that doesn't hide the pain in her voice. "Don't talk that way, Kicky. Things are going to turn around for you, I promise."

"Don't make promises you can't keep, Cloudy." She gets up. "I'm going to bed. See you in the morning?"

I nod and watch her walk away, her ears drooped and her tail between her legs. I want to tell myself that she's just tired after a long day of work, but it sounds like the hollow excuse that it is. There's a place for her, somewhere, but for the life of me I don't know what it is.

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"Cloud Kicker! Hold up," I hear a voice call out to me as I walk through the marketplace. My first day off in too long, I was planning on meeting up with Azalea for lunch. When I look back in the direction of the voice, who should I see but Twilight Sparkle trotting up to me. As she gets closer she slows down and hesitates. I guess my irritation at her is obvious.

"Hi, Twilight," I say as dispassionately as possible.

She rubs the back of her head, and casts her eyes about before looking back to me. "Hey, about last week when I, you know..."

"Teleported into my kitchen, propositioned me, and then called me worthless when I turned you down?"

*“Not so loud!”* she hisses at me under her breath. “But yeah, that. I owe you an apology. It’s not an excuse for the way I acted, but I haven’t... I haven’t really been okay these last couple of weeks. I’m still not, I don’t think, but it’s something I’m working on now. And it’s something you didn’t deserve to have taken out on you. So for what it’s worth, I’m really sorry about that.”

I smile. “Apology accepted. So, now that you’re back to normal a bit, is the *offer* you made that night still on the table? Still looking to continue that experiment of yours?”

“Temporary insanity,” she says flatly.

“Well, let me know when you change your mind.”

“You mean *if* I change my mind.”

“Oh! So you admit that there’s a possibility?”

“That’s not what I... I didn’t mean... ugh!” She throws up her hooves and walks away while I laugh, then I continue down to the stall where Azalea’s waiting for me.

“What were you and Twilight talking about?” she asks as I approach.

I pause before I answer. Twilight would probably prefer to keep the details of that evening between me, Kicky, and herself. “Oh, she had kind of a rough night a while back. Said some stuff she didn’t mean and wanted to apologize to me for it.”

“Huh,” says Azalea, watching Twilight walk away. “I didn’t realize that you two were... involved.”

“We aren’t,” I say and Azalea perks up noticeably. “She just took the whole invasion and time loop thing a bit hard. I think whatever happened is still eating at her. You should hear the way she talks about killing changelings with kitchen appliances, like you or I would talk about trimming a bush.”

“I guess she must despise them, after what they put her through,” says Azalea.

“Yeah, probably,” I agree. “I wonder what it’s like, you know, in their heads. Kicky won’t ever talk about it.”

“It’s bad,” whispers Azalea. “They’re smart enough to know what’s going on and operate mostly independently, but any time they try to go against what the Queen wants she just sort of reaches in and takes control. Then they’re like prisoners inside their own body, and they just have to watch as they go ahead and do whatever she demands anyway. Most of the time it’s easier to just not fight. Whatever atrocities the hive mind wants done, they just grow numb to it. You do it willingly and tell yourself that even though you know it’s wrong you don’t really have a choice, and if the Queen has to force you there’s punishment later.” She blinks a few times and looks up at me. “Or something like that. I read some interviews they did with some of the transformed ones in Canterlot.”

I shudder. No wonder Kicky never wants to talk about it. “Sounds awful.”

“I think it probably is. But enough about that. Twilight likes mares, right?”

“According to the parrot, yeah. Why?”

“No reason. She’s probably not in any shape to start looking for a special somepony right now anyway. When she does she’ll be able to have just about any mare she wants. She’ll probably end up with some supermodel who also has four PhDs or something, not...” she trails off. It hasn’t escaped my attention that she seems to be talking more to herself than to me.

“Not what?”

“Nothing. Let’s go to lunch.”

“Not until you answer my question,” I insist. Azalea scowls at me as I slowly figure out what’s going on here, and when I do I give her a big, predatory grin. “Azalea? Somepony wouldn’t happen to have herself a little *crush*, now would she?”

The way she blanches and stammers out a non-answer is answer enough. Oh, this is going to be *fun*.

# A Night On the Town

## A NIGHT ON THE TOWN

“So, uh, I kinda quit my job today.”

I look across the dinner table at Kicky, who’s been pushing the food around on her plate for the last ten minutes. Guess that explains her lack of appetite. “You quit? Why? Was Shivers giving you a hard time?”

“No, no, she was great. She even tried to talk me out of it, but I wasn’t about to let that stupid boycott put her under. Turns out ponies who are buying lingerie don’t like being harassed by those Faust-damned protestors, and when they walk out carrying a little shopping bag they can’t really claim they were browsing for a new fridge.”

I bang a hoof down on the table in frustration, knocking my fork to the floor but I don’t care. “What the hell are they thinking? The Guard still won’t do anything about it?”

“They aren’t doing anything illegal. As for what they’re thinking, presumably they’d prefer it if I left town. Then I’d be somepony else’s problem,” she says. How is she not furious about this?

“You don’t think if you stuck with it they might get bored? It hasn’t even been a month yet.”

“They can afford to be intolerant longer than Shivers can hold out. It’s fine. I don’t think retail was ever going to be my calling. Plus, I have an open invitation to spend an evening with a unicorn who looked *very* nice in a frilly pink harness and thigh-high boots. I’ll have to introduce you to him.”

“That doesn’t make it fine, Kicky.”

“Cloudy, please?” I look over at her and take in the way her hooves are trembling as she holds her knife. “It would really help me if you would just tell me that everything is fine.”



I huff, and try to put aside my own simmering resentment for her sake. "... Yeah, everything's fine. It's actually better this way. You can get plastered at the Sun's Flank tonight and not have to worry about being hungover at work tomorrow."

"That's the spirit!" she says with a smile. "I've been looking forward to this show all week. What time are the girls picking us up?"

"Bon Bon should be closing up shop right around now, so probably in about an hour," I say after checking the nearby clock. "We should start getting ready."

We toss out the rest of the barely-touched salad which neither of us were really in the proper mood to enjoy, and I run a brush through Kicky's coat while she puts on some light mascara. While I don't usually go for makeup, she seems to like it. I've never asked, but I suspect that she finds the ability to alter her appearance comforting and familiar.

We chat about everything except the manticore in the room while we wait for the others. Blossomforth arrives first, with Azalea in tow.

"Hey, Az. Ready to discover the hottest night spot in Ponyville?" I ask.

"From what Blossom told me, it sounds like it's the *only* night spot in Ponyville," she replies.

"That's what's great about it! All the mares in town who are looking for a good time congregate in the same place. Maybe you'll get lucky and run into a particular librarian, wouldn't that be fun?"

She blushes. It's almost too easy, not that that makes it any less enjoyable to tease her. "I doubt it. She has some experiment she was-" Azalea covers her mouth with a hoof as she realizes she's just said too much.

"Interesting," says Kicky jumping in. The two of us together are an unstoppable embarrassment-causing machine. "So you were at the library today. What do you make of that little fact, Cloud?"

“A great deal,” I reply, giving Azalea a cheshire grin as her eyes go wider. “Did you talk to her?”

“Um... almost?” she says. Kicky groans and rolls her eyes. “It wasn’t that I chickened out this time! I was totally walking over to say something, and then Pinkie Pie somehow jumped out of a lamp, yelled ‘Surprise!’ and freaked her out. The moment wasn’t right.”

“The moment is always right, Azalea. What were you going to say?” I ask.

“I... hadn’t quite figured that part out yet.”

“Okay, okay, next time she’s behind her desk, walk up to her with a book. Then when she asks if you want to check out the book you say, ‘no thanks, right now I’m checking out the librarian,’” says Kicky.

Azalea’s face turns into a mask of abject horror. “I can’t introduce myself to *Twilight freaking Sparkle* that way! I’m never going to say that.”

“Seriously, Kicky. That line should be poured over a plate of nachos, because it’s pure cheese,” says Blossom. “Ignore these two, Azalea. I’m sure if you just walked up to her and said hello, she would like you.”

“Yeah, maybe,” says Azalea. “What would I even talk to her about, though? She’s this crazy super-genius who spends half her time out on globe-spanning adventures. I don’t think she wants to hear about my flower garden.”

“Look, do you want her or not?” I ask her. “If you really believe you don’t have anything to offer her, well, first of all, you’re wrong, but if you really believe it I can introduce you to somepony else tonight. No sense in pining your life away when there are ponies you could be banging.”

“I guess I *could* use a distraction...”

“Then it’s settled. Azalea, you’re waking up in somepony else’s bed tomorrow morning, even if you have to bang Blossom and Davenport to do it,” I say.

“Wait, I didn’t agree to this,” says Blossom.

“Take one for the team, Blossom,” urges Kicky.

Azalea giggles. “Thanks, girls. I never dreamed when I moved here I’d end up with the best friends I could ever imagine.”

“I hope you’re including us too when you say that,” says Lyra from the open front door. She’s put on a dark vest for the night, and Bon Bon is standing behind her in a bright evening gown.

“Of course I am! You two look fantastic, by the way,” says Azalea.

“Thanks! You don’t think it’s too much, do you?” asks Bon Bon.

“Nope. Perfect. So are we ready? Vinyl’s set is going to start soon, we should get going.”

The six of us walk into town, laughing and practicing the flirty looks we’ll be deploying at the bar tonight. We hear the music coming from our destination before we see it, the bass notes shaking the cobblestones beneath our hooves from two blocks away.

“Are we going to be able to hear ourselves think in there?” asks Azalea.

“The tables are enchanted with sound dampening spells. You’ll only get the full force of the music out on the dance floor. Best of both worlds,” says Bon Bon. It really is a clever little setup, plus the same spells provide a little bit of privacy if the conversation turns frisky.

I nod to the bouncers at the door, a massive white earth pony stallion I don’t know, plus an off-duty Garrison earning a bit of extra money. That private school he sends his daughter to is a bit of a stretch on a guard’s salary. He glares a little bit when he sees Kicky, but she’s undeterred. “So those noises from your house that night were ponies who needed ‘immediate stress relief,’ huh?”

I wince. “I’m sorry I lied to you and Bulwark. I didn’t want Kicky to go to jail, or worse.”

“I get it. No hard feelings. Just watch your backs in there tonight, I don’t want any idiots starting trouble. If they do, try not to break them too badly before we get to you and toss them out.”

“Thanks, that’s a load off my mind. We’re just here to have a fun night, not to do anything that makes your job tougher,” says Kicky.

He holds open the door for us. “Glad to hear it. Welcome to the Sun’s Flank.”

We step inside, and if we thought the music was loud outside it’s nothing compared to the cacophony waiting for us inside. Each thump of the beat makes my teeth vibrate. The usually low-key bar has been completely transformed for the night. Fog machines cover the floor in mist, the better to catch the beams of light spinning around and intermittently shining on groups of ponies dancing the night away.

The six of us slide into the padded seats around a corner booth, and as we do the spells drop the volume to a manageable background noise. Azalea sticks close to Blossom as she looks around the room. “Wow, this is really something else.”

“Isn’t it great? I used to come here all the time,” says Lyra. “Wait until you try the drinks.”

“See anything at the bar that you like?” asks Kicky.

Azalea squints in the low light. “I can’t read the bottles from here.”

“She didn’t mean the liquor, Azalea. She meant the ponies drinking it.”

“At least give the filly a chance to loosen up before you start throwing mares at her, Cloud,” says Blossom. “First round’s on me, what’s your poison?”

“Glass of chardoneigh for me, please,” says Bon Bon.

“I’ll have a cosmarepolitan,” I say.

“Ditto,” says Kicky.

“Ha! You drink like little fillies. I’ll have a double of whiskey, neat,” says Lyra.

“I think just cider for me. Somepony has to get the rest of you home,” says Azalea.

“Don’t deprive yourself on my account. I’m staying pretty sober tonight,” says Blossom.

Azalea shrinks back in her seat. “I’m not really that big of a drinker, actually.”

Lyra grins, sensing an opening. “Come on, live a little! I want to get you drunk and learn all your most embarrassing secrets.”

Something across the room catches my eye. Something I don’t like at all. “Hey, everypony?”

I’m ignored. “Come on, Lyra, if Azalea doesn’t want to get drunk, she doesn’t want to get drunk. Leave her alone,” says Kicky.

“Seriously girls, this is really weird,” I say.

“No, you come on, Kicky. Azalea is a grown up. She doesn’t need you constantly hovering around mothering her. What about her makes you so super-protective all the time?”

”*All of you shut up!*” I shout at the top of my lungs. That does the trick at last and I finally have their undivided attention.

“What’s the big deal, Cloud?” asks Bon Bon.

“The fact that I’m pretty sure that the mare who’s been staring at us since we sat down is your changeling clone.”

The other five whip their heads around to look where I’m pointing. The mare has the same creamy white coat and the same three candies for a cutie mark. The only difference is her mane is partially orange rather than partially pink. Her eyes haven’t left our table since I noticed her, her face betraying nothing.

“We should invite her over and buy her a drink,” says Lyra.

“That is exactly the opposite of what we should do. I don’t care if she’s the Kicky to my Cloudy, I don’t want to meet

her,” says Bon Bon.

The song that’s playing ends, and as it does the bar descends into total darkness, just a few slow flashes of a strobe light to the beat as the new track spins up. When the lights return and color fills the bar once more, the mare who was watching us has disappeared into the crowd.

“Okay, show of hooves, who else thinks this just got *really creepy*?” asks Blossom. Bon Bon and Azalea raise their hooves.

“I think we should just leave her alone,” says Kicky. “She’s probably more scared of us than we are of her. Come on, Blossom, I’ll help you with the drinks.”

As the two of them head towards the bar, Lyra mopes in her seat. The night isn’t off to a very good start. “So, Azalea, what was the bar scene in Trottingham like?” I ask in an effort to find a lighter subject.

She perks up a bit. “Expensive. There were a ton of amazing places I couldn’t afford to visit on a student budget while I was at university there, although there was one night after our baseball team made the playoffs junior year when we threw our budgets to the wind and managed to visit six of them in a row. Or at least that’s as many as I remember.”

“See?” says Lyra, a bit of her relentless cheer returning to her voice. “I knew there was a party mare in there somewhere.”

“No, it was stupid. My little brother was visiting me that weekend, and our pitcher got him a fake ID so he could tag along. My parents were furious when they found out.”

“I didn’t know you had a little brother. What’s he like?” asks Bon Bon.

“Coriander? Well, I say he’s my little brother since he’s two years younger than I am but he’s about twice my size. Baseball was my game of choice, but he was a hoofball colt. It wasn’t hard to persuade him to spend a night drinking with a pack of athletic mares. I think he’s actually doing a long distance thing with our third basepony who he met that night.”

“You think? Is he coy about the details?” I ask.

“It’s not that, it’s just been awhile since we’ve talked or written,” she says.

“You should invite him to Ponyville! Bonnie can ply him with sugar until he spills the dirt,” says Lyra.

“Yeah, maybe someday if it works with his class schedule. Hey, drinks!”

Blossom and Kicky return with two trays, and it looks like Kicky sprung for a second round right off the bat.

Blossomforth picked out something orange and sugary-looking for herself. Now that Azalea’s broached the topic of families, the rest of us start to tell her about our own upbringings while we nurse the first round of drinks. Once we’ve gone around the table and emptied all dozen glasses, it’s time to move on to the main event.

“Okay, Azalea. I checked out the crowd and picked out a short list of candidates to introduce you to tonight,” says Kicky. I knew she had an ulterior motive in going over to the bar with Blossomforth. “First, one question to narrow it down: Earth pony, pegasus, or unicorn?”

Azalea squeals and covers her face with her hooves. “Earth pony,” she mutters.

“Ooh, going for the extra stamina, eh? Well aren’t you ambitious,” says Lyra.

“Who were you thinking?” I ask.

“I saw Fire Brand when I put in our order, and I’m pretty sure Cornrow is here tonight too.”

I nod. I could see Azalea with either of them, at least for one night. “Need any pointers?”

“I’ve done this before, Cloudy. I know how to talk to a mare in a bar,” she replies. She takes a deep, calming breath. “Can you tell me anything about them?”

“Fire Brand’s an apprentice to the town blacksmith and farrier, although she’s been working in the shop so long she’s basically the old stallion’s business partner at this point. She might not look it, but she’s stronger than most stallions from

all that physical labor. Just be careful you don't let her toss you around when things start to get wild. Unless you're into that kind of thing."

"What was she wearing?" asks Blossom.

"Did you want to get in on this too, Blossom?" I ask, which earns me a wing to the face.

"No, Cloudy, but I happen to know that there's a ruby pendant she wears a lot of the time. It's nothing special to look at, but it's set into one of the first pieces she ever sculpted and it means a lot to her. I was thinking that Azalea might want to compliment it if she had it on," she explains.

"I didn't notice, but if you see her wearing something like that it does sound like a good idea," says Kicky.

"Okay, tell me about Cornrow," says Azalea.

"She grows corn."

"...What, is that it?"

Kicky shrugs. "Sorry. She's more of a screamer than a talker."

"Actually, one other thing," Bon Bon chimes in, "if you wanted to trade her sexual favors for a discount on corn purchases from her family, I would really owe you one."

"*BONNIE!*" shout Lyra and Azalea together.

"What? I want to start offering chocolate-dipped popcorn balls at the shop, but the margins in this business are brutal! I need every edge I can get to beat out Spiral."

"Putting aside Bon Bon's attempt to become my pimp, I think I'd like to meet Fire Brand," says Azalea.

"Then come on over with me and I'll introduce you. I'd like to check out this crowd for myself. See you girls in a little bit," I say with a wave. We walk over towards the bar and as we get further away from the table the music grows louder again. It diminishes a bit again as we squeeze past the ponies gathered around chatting and flirting with one another. I spot a shock of red mane over an orange coat. Fire Brand isn't tough to pick out of a crowd. I wave at her and manage to catch her attention



after a few seconds. She smiles at me and carries her drink over to us.

“Hi, Cloud Kicker, long time no see.” She has to shout to be heard over the music, but it’s understandable. I give her a quick hug. “Who’s your friend here?”

“Fire Brand, this is Azalea. She’s a new neighbor of mine I wanted you to meet,” I reply.

“Great to meet you, Fire Brand,” says Azalea, bumping her hoof gently enough not to jostle her drink. “That pendant you’re wearing is really pretty! Where did you find it?”

“This? Oh, I made it, actually,” replies Fire Brand with a hint of pride in her voice.

“You *made* it?” asks Azalea, seemingly amazed. She’s quite the actor. If I hadn’t been there when Blossom mentioned it I’d completely believe she was hearing about it for the first time. “That’s amazing! So are you a jeweler?”

“Just a blacksmith. Hey, do you want a drink?” And just like that Azalea’s taken the lead and I subtly back myself out of the conversation as Fire Brand places an order for her. She certainly didn’t need my help, good for her. Finding myself without any wingmare duties that need to be performed, I cast an eye out over the other ponies until I spot a lithe blue pegasus drinking alone. Let’s see if I can’t do something about that.

“Hi there. I’m Cloud Kicker,” I say as I slide into the seat next to her.

She glances over at me, lets her gaze run all the way down my body and back up to my smiling face, and gets a little twinkle in her eye. “Wind Chime. Nice to meet you.”

“Wait,” I say, trying to imitate Azalea’s surprised look, “*you’re* Wind Chime?”

“Why, should I know you?” she asks, confused.

“Do you remember the invasion last month, and all the news about how the Elements of Harmony stopped it using a time loop?”

“Of course I remember that, why?”

“Wind Chime, I’m going to level with you. The fate of the world might hang in the balance. The honest truth is this; I’m trapped in a time loop, and the only way for me to break out is for us to go back to my house and rut one another silly for the rest of the night.”

She bursts out laughing as I struggle to keep a straight face.

“Wow. Okay. That’s an original approach, I’ll give you that. And how, exactly, does that end this time loop you’re supposedly in?”

“It’s very technical,” I reply. “But trust me when I say that only an evening of wild passion with a mare as beautiful as you can save Equestria.”

“Well, I do rather like Equestria, and I would hate to see it destroyed,” she says as her smirk turns into a sinful little grin and she places her foreleg over mine. For an instant I actually think I’m going to pull this off until I hear a new, but familiar, voice from behind me.

“Hello, Cloud Kicker,” says the voice. I turn around and standing right there behind me is the other Bon Bon from earlier. She turns her head slightly towards Wind Chime. “I need to speak to Cloud Kicker. You can leave now.”

“Wait, just who the buck do you think you-”

“I said *leave*,” says Bon Bon, cutting off Wind Chime’s protest.

“Fine. Just stay away from me, psycho. Cloud, it was nice to meet you. Shame about the sort of company you keep,” she says. Gathering up her purse, Wind Chime retreats to the exit, and out of the bar entirely. For all I know, she’s ratting Bon Bon out to the bouncers right now.

“What are you doing, Bon Bon? When did you get back to Ponyville?”

“It’s Sweetie Drops these days, actually. I wanted to make sure I thanked you for the way you stopped Lyra when... well, I’m sure you remember. You saved my life.”

“You’ve got a funny way of showing gratitude, scaring away the mare I was talking to like that.”

“So? You’ll find another one, and I don’t have a ton of time. So yeah, thanks.” She gets up and starts to walk away. Not in just any direction, though, back towards the table where the other four are seated. I catch Azalea’s eye and jerk my head towards Sweetie Drops, and she hastily excuses herself from the conversation she’s having with Fire Brand to intercept us.

“Bon Bon?” she asks.

“Hello, Azalea. How’s life? Just the same old, same old, or has anything changed since these ponies tried to kill me?” asks Sweetie Drops.

“A lot’s changed. You should talk to Kicky,” she says.

“Oh, I certainly intend to.”

We reach the table and the others look up at who’s joining them, to a wide variety of reactions. Blossom’s reaction is just flat surprise, while original-flavor Bon Bon is horrified and more than a little angry. Kicky’s expression is a bit tougher to read, something like guarded optimism. The clear outlier is Lyra. “Bonnie! You came home!” she cries.

“This town isn’t my home, Lyra. And don’t pretend to be my friend,” she says. Lyra sinks back like she’s been slapped across the face.

“I would have contacted you Bon-”

“Sweetie Drops.”

“...Sweetie Drops. If I’d known where you’d gone, I would have tried to get Cloud Kicker to protect you too,” says Kicky.

“Is that what you think’s going to happen? If you martyr yourself long enough the others will eventually be free to go skipping hoof-in-hoof with the ponies who despise them? Or is that just Cloud Kicker’s way of doing things that you’re borrowing?” she asks.

“Ponies are already starting to come around. We can make a life here for ourselves, if we want to.”

“You sure as buck don’t have a place in my life,” says Bon Bon, still hunched over the table. She looks to be about three seconds from jumping Sweetie Drops before Lyra puts a comforting hoof on her back.

Sweetie just laughs. “Good! Your life *sucks*! I was an expert in subterfuge and infiltration, and then the Elements tore me apart. When they put me back together I ended up a flabby, stressed-out, miserable little candymaker who falls asleep every night wishing that things would change but too scared of losing the few parts of her life she doesn’t hate to do anything about it.”

“That isn’t true at all,” says Lyra, “Bon Bon’s never been happier, right Bon Bon?”

The ensuing silence is deafening.

“You do know that she’s settling for you, don’t you Lyra? That if she didn’t have some inexplicable fetish for unicorn musicians she would have kicked you to the curb months ago?”

“No,” says Bon Bon. “I love her.”

“Oh, I’m well aware,” says Sweetie Drops. “It was the very first thing I felt as a pony when I regained consciousness and looked up at her. Followed immediately by the feeling of her trying to beat me to death with her bare hooves. But don’t pretend you’ve never considered walking away. Sure would be nice to be in a relationship with a pony who actually wants foals as badly as you do, wouldn’t it? Instead of having to convince yourself that maybe if you’re together long enough she’ll change her mind?”

“Bonnie, is that really how you feel?” asks Lyra.

“We’ll talk about it later, Lyra. Sweetie, I think you should leave,” says Bon Bon.

The music onstage stops as Vinyl announces something about an intermission, but our group barely hears it. “Leave? This little gathering of my *very best friends in the whole world*? Why would I do that? If anything, this whole experience has taught me how hurtful it can be when friends keep secrets

from one another. Hey Cloud, remember that summer when Lyra's family took her to Prance?"

"Don't you dare. Don't you *dare*," says Bon Bon. "We promised-"

"No. *You* promised. Lyra's made it abundantly clear that we aren't the same pony, after all. Yeah, Lyra wasn't in Prance. Her family stuck her in rehab because they were finally sick of putting up with the fact that she was a drug-addicted party girl. See? Doesn't honesty feel *great*?"

"You need to go, Sweetie Drops. Good luck with your new life, but don't ever come back here again," says Kicky as Lyra starts to weep in Bon Bon's forelegs.

"Oh no, don't start presuming to give me orders, or I just might decide that my honesty policy applies to the other changelings. I didn't have a choice about being outed, why should they? I think I'll start with... hmm... how about the infiltrator who was watching the Apple family?"

Kicky goes pale. "You wouldn't. At least the others can protect themselves, you know she can't."

"I don't see why not. She has more infiltration experience than both of us put together. Which is actually really ironic, when you think about how she ended up."

"Hey babe!" says the white unicorn who slides into Sweetie's seat, lifting her into her lap as she does. It takes me a second to recognize her, but that electric-blue mane and the glasses perched on her horn are a dead giveaway.

"Wait, you're Vinyl Scratch," I say as I wish I could add something a bit more eloquent to the conversation.

"You know it!" says Vinyl. "How's my main mare enjoying the show?" In response, Sweetie Drops grabs Vinyl and forces her into a deep kiss. She struggles for a moment at first, but then starts to get into it. Sweetie opens one eye and fixes her gaze on Lyra for a moment, making sure she's watching all of this. Vinyl gasps for air as Sweetie lets her go. "Whoa! What do they put into the drinks in this place, and where can I buy a couple cases of it?"

“Vinyl, you are the sweetest, sexiest, most fantastic pony I’ve ever been with. I want everypony here to know it.”

“We were just talking about where each of us were the day changelings attacked Canterlot, actually,” says Blossomforth, glaring across the table. “Where did you say you were, Sweetie?”

“On the opposite side, fighting against the rest of you,” says Sweetie.

“Yeah, Sweetie Drops used to be a changeling,” says Vinyl. “She’s cool now though, the Princesses said so.”

“Didn’t I tell you? Honesty. Once I got to Canterlot, well, it turns out that not every town is quite as close-minded and bigoted as this one is. Maybe the rest of the changelings should consider that when they’re thinking about their futures. Hey, Vinyl? I’ll be waiting for you backstage. Don’t play too many encores.” She moves in for another kiss, but when Vinyl leans in to meet her she pulls away at the last second with a teasing wink, hopping off her lap and ever-so-slowly sashaying off.

“It was great to meet you all, but I have to get back for the next set. Stay cool,” says Vinyl as she starts to rise from her chair.

“Wait!” cries Lyra. Vinyl stops. “...Sweetie Drops gets quiet sometimes, when something’s really bothering her. If you just sit quietly with her for maybe an hour or so she’ll start to make this cute little noise out of her nose that means she’s ready to talk about it. She also loves to have her hooves rubbed. She’ll swear up and down that she can’t stand it, but once you actually start she gets that little smile that means she’s really content. More than anything else, though... her last fillyfriend hurt her really badly. Please be good to her.”

Vinyl turns back to the table, and lowers her glasses as she studies Lyra closely. “Do you know her?”

Lyra shakes her head. “I only met her once before tonight, but I know her type. Just keep that stuff in mind, and try to make her happy. She deserves it.”

Vinyl walks away for good, as Lyra watches her leave.

“I think I’m done for the night,” says Lyra, “Bonnie? We need to go home and talk about some stuff.”

“Yeah, sorry we’re ditching you, girls, but...”

“It’s fine,” I say although I know it’s anything but, “you two go ahead.” They leave, and take my prayers with them.

“So,” says Kicky, “Who feels like another round?”

Nopony does.

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## **Author’s Notes:**

Cloud Kicker is also an internationally-recognized player of [haaaaaave you met Az?](#)

# Unexpected Opportunity

## UNEXPECTED OPPORTUNITY

Walking into my house after a long day at work, I want nothing more than to collapse. We had a freak waterspout flare up over the lake that took everypony we had onhoof to contain, on top of all our normal duties and all the extra paperwork that goes with unexplained weather formation. It's always a huge pain in the flank.

Tonight, though, it doesn't look like that's going to be an option.

"Auntie Cloud!" shouts the little unicorn sitting across a Monopony board from Kicky. She leaps up at me and grabs me in a tight hug, and clambers up onto my back so she can continue to hold onto me without cutting off my air supply. This is a foal who knows her hugs.

"Hey, Dinky! How'd you get here? I didn't know you were coming over to play tonight," I say as I reach back to ruffle her mane.

"Mommy had to fly a package all the way to Manehattan, and she said I could sleep over!"

"Ditzy dropped her off an hour ago," says Kicky as she walks over, "said she was sorry for the late notice, but she couldn't find another foalsitter and only found out about the delivery this afternoon."

"She was okay leaving her with you when... you know..." It's always difficult to talk about unpleasantness around Dinky.

"I'm pretty sure she thought I was you at first. By the time I corrected her, she'd already asked. Still, if this is my chance to get her to trust me a bit more, I'm not going to question it."

"Why wouldn't she trust you? You're Auntie Cloud, aren't you?" asks Dinky. I look over at Kicky, not sure if she wants me to field this particular question.



“Come here and sit under my wing for a bit, muffin, and I’ll try to explain,” she says. Dinky rolls off my back and plops down onto the floor, a little ‘oof’ escaping her lips before she obediently trots over and rests her head against Kicky’s side. “Before I came to Ponyville and turned into Auntie Cloud, I was something called a changeling.”

“What’s that?” she asks. I shoot Kicky a warning look. If Ditzzy is starting to warm up to her, the last thing we want to do is give her daughter nightmares.

“A changeling is...” Kicky struggles to find the right words. “Well, they’re basically ponies who put on disguises and then do things that they aren’t supposed to. Naughty things.”

“So you were naughty before? That’s not nice, Auntie Cloud. You should know better.” She puts on an imitation of her mother’s stern, disapproving glare, which is less intimidating than it is adorable.

Kicky laughs. “You’re right. I was mean to a lot of ponies and now I’m trying to tell them that I’m sorry and I won’t do it again.”

Dinky considers this, then pats Kicky’s forehoof with one of hers. “It’s okay, Auntie Cloud. I used to be a changeling too.”

“*What?*” I exclaim, staring at Kicky who looks just as surprised.

Dinky gives me a cheerful nod and a happy smile, oblivious to my shock. “Yeah! On Nightmare Night! I was disguised as a bumblebee, and everypony said I was just the best one ever!” Then her smile disappears and her ears flatten out a bit. “They gave me candy, and mommy said I was only supposed to have three pieces. But after she went to bed, I snuck out to the living room and ate all of it. My tummy hurt a lot the next day.”

Kicky gives Dinky an affectionate nuzzle. “That’s a little bit different, but you get the idea. I did some things that are bad, but now I’m trying to be good again. I hope you and your mom will forgive me. I really love being your Auntie Cloud.”

Dinky looks up and studies her for a second. "Okay, but only on one condition," she says.

"And just what's that?"

"Even though you two are both my Auntie Cloud, you *each* have to get me a birthday present and a Hearth's Warming present. No splitting just 'cause you're the same. I'm super serious; this is non-negotiable," she declares. She crosses her forelegs to prove just how super serious she really is.

"The word is 'negotiable,' hon. You drive a hard bargain, but it's a deal," says Kicky, giving her a peck on the cheek to seal it. "Now why don't you go see if the lasagna is almost done? Don't touch anything in the oven though, it's hot."

"Kay!" We both watch Dinky scamper off into the kitchen. I'm not too worried that she'll hurt herself. You learn a great deal about kitchen safety when your mother's cooking tends to burst into flames on a regular basis.

"I wish they were all that easy. If I'd replaced Ditzzy instead of you I think I'd have gained about fifteen pounds just from being around that much love," says Kicky.

"If you'd replaced Ditzzy, she'd have torn her way out of that cocoon and ripped you apart before letting a changeling be alone with her girls," I point out.

"True. I'd better go help Dinky in the kitchen, that lasagna's probably done by now."

"Eggplant?"

"I thought I'd try it with zucchini instead."

Sounds good to me, and I let Kicky leave to go take a look while I wait in the foyer. It really has been helpful to have somepony helping out with the domestic side of my life. I'm starting to forget how I got by without her. My musings are interrupted by somepony rapping on the front door, and I turn back to open it.

"Oh, hey Lyra," I say as I let her in.

"Hi... Kicky? Cloudy? Sorry, I still haven't quite gotten the hang of telling you two apart," she says.

“No problem, it’s Cloudy. How are you? Haven’t seen very much of you for a few weeks, ever since that night at the Sun’s Flank.”

Lyra grimaces. “I know, I’ve kind of been neglecting you guys. I had a couple shows to play, plus I’ve been trying to spend the free time I have had trying to work things out with Bon Bon.”

“How are you two doing, by the way?” I ask. The last few times I’ve dropped into her shop she’s seemed like she’s at the end of her rope.

Lyra tries to smile at me, but she can’t quite manage to. “Could I stay here tonight?”

I grab her and immediately pull her into a hug. “Oh, Lyra. Please don’t tell me...”

She sniffles, but holds herself together. “We didn’t break up, but she says she wants a little space right now, to figure things out. Things between us aren’t so good at the moment. There are a lot of things she’s been unhappy about for a while, and I was making some of them worse without even realizing it. Maybe it’s good that Sweetie Drops got us talking like she did, but... I miss how things were.”

I let her go and look her dead in the eyes. “You two are going to make it past this. I mean, you have to. You’re *Lyra and Bon Bon*. Of course you can stay here. Dinky’s already got dibs on the pull-out couch, so you might have to share a bed with me or Kicky.”

She chuckles. “Wouldn’t be the first time. Got any wine open?” I hesitate for just a moment too long, and she picks up on it. “See this is why I never told you girls about the rehab thing. I didn’t want you to treat me differently. It wasn’t for alcohol, if that makes you feel better. Even though I didn’t want to go back then, my parents’ decision to send me there probably saved my life. You remember how I used to be.”

“I still wish you’d told me, to be honest, but it was your choice not to and I get why you didn’t,” I say. “All those nights I took you out to party, or let you hook up with some mare who was

bad news because I was busy with somepony of my own? I can't help but wonder if I should have done something different."

"The stupid choices I made back then were mine to make. Being friends with you was never one of them, okay? Now I'd rather just move past it, if you don't mind," says Lyra. "So, what's for dinner?"

"I hope you like zucchini lasagna. I'm sure we can stretch it to four portions, Kicky always makes too much."

The two of us trot into the kitchen to join the others.

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"That was almost obnoxiously delicious, Kicky," says Lyra from the couch.

"Nnnnnnngh," moans Kicky from the chair she's half-passed out in. Dinky gives off a gentle snore from my lap, deep in a food coma. Zucchini lasagna is definitely a hit.

"Now that the little muffin is asleep, do you want to talk about what's going on with Bon Bon? That stuff Sweetie Drops said must have packed a wallop, in more ways than one," I suggest, "might help to get another take on all of it."

"She's just... the biggest thing is that she wants a foal of her own, and I don't. We've always disagreed about that, but I didn't realize that me not wanting one felt like it was a reflection on her, or on our relationship together. I just... I wouldn't be such a great mother, and I don't *want* to be one, you know? It just sounds so confining," says Lyra.

"You're preaching to the choir," I say, gesturing towards Dinky. "Foals are fun, but I don't know that I could raise one of my own. I mean, look at Ditzzy. She's a great mom, but it's taken over her life and I doubt I'm ready for that. What do you think, Kicky?"

"Hmmm?" she asks.

"About having foals. I was just telling Lyra that I can't imagine raising one."

Kicky is quiet for a very long time. "I had a daughter, once."

That's more than enough to get me to sit up a lot straighter, being careful not to disturb Dinky's rest as I do. "You never told me that. Who?"

"Changelings breed too, you know. As far as I know, she's still part of the swarm. It's not like she was any more a part of my family than every other changeling, or as if I raised her in any meaningful way after she hatched, but now... I'd give anything for her to become a pony who I could meet someday."

"Kicky..." says Lyra, looking to me like she wants permission to get up and go over to her.

"It changes you, knowing there's somepony else out there who came from you. I can only imagine how intense it would actually be to bring them up yourself. I plan to find out someday, though. So I'm sorry, Cloudy, but I can't back you up on this one. I want foals too."

We sit there in silence for a little while. "Even if I were fine with being a mother, how can I justify bringing a new life into the world? Especially if I'm just doing it to salvage a relationship? That's got to be the worst possible reason to do something like that," says Lyra.

"I can't answer that for you, Lyra. But I don't believe for an instant that you wouldn't be a good parent," says Kicky. "What else is wrong between you two?"

"Bonnie doesn't feel like I pull my weight, financially. She spends hour after hour working her cute little flank off, and I play a few shows a week to bring in the bits I need. What's wrong with that? I could try to play more shows, but then I'd barely ever see her between all the traveling I would need to do. I'd rather work to live than live to work like she does. But I don't want her to feel like she has to support me either, that's not good for either of us." Lyra sighs and buries her face in her hooves. "She was planning to buy this new oven, a while back. Some fancy thing that she'd have to import from the Griffon lands and would, I don't know, make her chocolates taste better somehow. Then my harp got wrecked when one of my bags was mishandled, and she replaced it with the money

she'd saved. I didn't even ask her to, but she did because she knew how important it was to me. And even though it was her choice, she told me that a little tiny part of her resents me because she couldn't get her oven. She knows it's unfair, but she can't help it. What am I supposed to say to that? Should I apologize for her choice? It just... sometimes she makes me so upset and I don't know what to do about it."

Kicky goes over to the couch since I'm pinned down, and rubs Lyra's back as she lays there face down, stewing. "Well, I can see why you two needed some space tonight."

"What if she leaves me? What if she decides Sweetie Drops was right and she can do better? What if I'm holding her back somehow? Do you think I need to make some sort of big romantic gesture to prove to her how important she is to me?"

Kicky chuckles. "Come on, Lyra. She knows. A 'big romantic gesture' when you're upset and not thinking clearly sounds like a recipe for a disaster. Think about it, why do you think we replaced Bon Bon in the first place? Your love for one another was incredibly strong, and it still is."

Lyra sniffles, tears filling her eyes. "But... but you took Bon Bon. Was that because I love her more than she loves me?"

"Nope. It was just because it was easier to get her alone. We would have snatched you up and shoved you in the corner of a basement somewhere in a heartbeat otherwise."

"Really? You're not just saying that?"

"It's completely true. Any changeling would have been ecstatic to replace you, I swear."

Lyra smiles. "Thanks, Kicky. Hearing that makes me feel a lot better."

Well, that wasn't the most conventional pep talk I've ever heard, but it seems to have worked. I cradle Dinky in my wing and gently get to my hooves. She's heavier than I expected. Little Dinky is starting to grow up. "I'm going to get her set up on the couch in my room, then I'm going to crash myself. Are you two staying up for a little while?"

"I wouldn't mind talking a little bit more," says Lyra.

“I’ve got this, Cloudy. You have to get up for work tomorrow and I don’t. Lyra and I will sleep in my room if you’ve got Dinky in yours.”

“Thanks-” my words are cut off by a yawn. I’m practically dead on my hooves and not going to last much longer, “thanks Kicky. I’ll see you in the morning before I leave.”

They wish me a good night and start speaking to one another in low voices while I carry Dinky off to my room, where blankets and pillows have already been set out for her. I tuck her in and give her a kiss on the forehead, looking down on her sleeping face. I still can’t believe Kicky wants a foal of her own. I’ve been treating her as a perfect duplicate these last couple months, but more and more I’m starting to figure out all the ways she’s really her own pony. Despite my claim that I need to go right to bed, I pull open a drawer of my desk and examine some of the papers there, mostly bills and bank statements.

Lyra and Bon Bon aren’t the only ones worried about their finances. Last month was tight, bit-wise, and this month is even tighter. What savings I’ve managed to scrape together since moving to Ponyville are dwindling. Every time I manage to build up a little buffer, some new disaster hits the town and the repair costs knock me right back to where I started.

Assuming Kicky can’t find a source of income soon it may only be a few months before I’m desperate enough to do something horrible. Something that makes me feel unclean just thinking about it. If there were any other way, I wouldn’t resort to something like this, but there isn’t one as far as I can tell.

Kicky and I might have to borrow money from my parents.

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Dinky is an early riser, and I leave a note telling Kicky and Lyra that I decided to walk her back to Ditzzy’s place where I can pass her off to Sparkler until her mother gets home. Once I have, there’s still plenty of time to wander into town to visit with a few ponies before I head into work. In the market,

Azalea's setting up in her usual spot next to Applejack's cart. I wave to her as I go past.

"Hi Cloud! Want a flower? Just two bits each, or three for five bits."

"Sorry, Az, they're delicious but I'm a little low on cash these days. How was your date with Cornrow last night?"

"It was fine, I guess. You're right, she isn't much of a talker, but I guess things could be worse." I just shake my head. I still catch her staring wistfully towards the library sometimes, but I'll give her credit for at least trying to move on.

Applejack's ears perk up. "You lookin' to earn a couple extra bits, Cloud? Ah got an odd job you could help me with to earn some if you have a few minutes. Interested?"

"I'm listening, but I have to be at work in a little while so I'm not sure I have time," I say. Don't want to look too eager, but every bit I earn on my own is one less that I'll have to ask my mother and father for.

"Shouldn't take more than an hour," says Applejack. "Ah got a cart of apples here that need to get delivered to Fluttershy's, but ah need to get home soon as ah can. If you'd pull it out to her cottage, help her unload 'em, and drop the cart off back at the Acres ah'll pay you, hmm, how about fifteen bits?"

"Make it twenty and you've got yourself a deal," I say, spitting into my hoof. Azalea wrinkles her nose up at the gesture.

"Twenty it is then," says Applejack, doing the same. We bump our hooves together to finalize the deal, and Applejack helps me hitch myself up to the cart.

"Not that I'm complaining, but how come you or Big Mac aren't handling the delivery? You aren't usually the sort to outsource farm labor like this," I ask. Indeed, everypony in town knows the story of the time Applejack refused to relinquish any of her obligations to the farm or the town despite her brother's injury, and the multitude of disasters that followed.

"Ah'm here selling, but Apple Bloom and Bic Mac are down on the farm, carin' for Grannie. She took a bit of a bad turn a



few weeks back, not quite as spry as she used to be,” says Applejack. Her face is a neutral mask but it’s impossible to miss the little tremble in her voice.

“I’m sure she’ll be fine. Heck, she’ll probably outlive all of us, the stubborn old thing.” I make a mental note to stop in and pay my respects to the Apple family matriarch when I drop off the cart. The Cult of Shadow is big on teaching Kickers about the importance of honoring one’s elders.

“You’re probably right, and ah’m just worrying for nothing. She’s still the same old Granny Smith. Now get movin’ and tell Fluttershy hello for me when you see her, you got that?”

“Will do,” I say with a salute as I start to trot away. Geez, it’s a good thing I’ve kept up with my fitness training. Are these apples, or bricks of lead? It’s also good that Fluttershy’s place is only a mile or so outside of town. Even so, by the time I get to her cottage I’m soaked with sweat. I’ll have to go roll around on a raincloud before I head to work.

I can hear voices coming from inside the cottage as I knock on the door. It isn’t unusual for Fluttershy to be chatting with her animals, but they usually don’t talk back. “...now keep on preening your wing while I get the door. You really need to do that every day,” says Fluttershy as her voice draws closer to the door. When it opens up, I see that there’s a young orange filly who hangs around Rainbow Dash all of the time.

“Hey Fluttershy, hi Scootaloo,” I say. “Got a delivery for you from Applejack, she asked me to bring it over while she’s in town.”

“Oh, that’s so nice of you, Cloud Kicker. Um... Scootaloo, could you help us unload these? If, you know, it isn’t too much trouble?”

Scootaloo jumps eagerly to her hooves. “You got it, boss!”

I raise a questioning eyebrow to Fluttershy, who gives me a look that’s meant ‘I’ll explain later’ since we were little fillies. A pony that quiet you learn to read their tells and body language, and Fluttershy and I were pretty close back in the day, before an unpleasant incident one summer at flight camp.

We've reconnected somewhat since I moved to Ponyville, though.

With the three of us working together it doesn't take very long to restock Fluttershy's pantry to the brim with the apples. Her animal friends will be eating well for a long time. "Scootaloo, would you go out to find Angel Bunny and tell him that his snack will be ready in a few minutes? I need to talk to Cloud Kicker for a bit."

"Yes, ma'am," says Scootaloo, and trots out the door to hunt down the little hellbeast.

"What's that about?" I ask once she's out of earshot.

"A few days ago, I went out to gather some eggs and I found her asleep in my chicken coop. She didn't have a good answer for what she was doing there, but she asked me if she could earn a couple of bits doing odd jobs and helping me take care of the animals. I didn't have the heart to say no, and she's been a very eager helper since then," says Fluttershy.

"Asleep in your chicken coop, though? Weren't her parents worried?" I ask.

"Cloud, have you ever met Scootaloo's parents? I never have. I think she might not even have any, but she won't ever talk to me about it."

"Of course Scootaloo has parents! They're... um..." I trail off, trying to remember if I've ever seen Scootaloo with any of the adults in town. "Well, I'm sure Rainbow Dash must know. I mean, I *assume* she's met them at some point." It's not a very comforting thought. I can completely see Rainbow Dash failing to notice her little worshipper is an orphan. I should ask Blossom, next time I see her. She's the expert on these things.

"Well, as long as she needs a place to stay, she's welcome here. I don't want to put any pressure on her to talk to me if she isn't ready," says Fluttershy. I get a small smile. That's Fluttershy, always taking in strays.

"Well, orphan or not, I'm sure she appreciates it. You're too nice for your own good, Fluttershy," I say, giving her a little kiss on the cheek. She blushes.

“Sorry,” she says reflexively, then catches herself and giggles.

Scootaloo chooses that moment to reappear in the doorway, a little white bunny riding on her back with his aloof little nose pointed up into the air. Angel thumps his leg twice, and Scootaloo kneels down to let him off. He hops past me without acknowledgement and into the kitchen. “Is there anything else I can help you with, Miss Fluttershy?” asks Scootaloo. Geez, that filly is just the picture of childhood innocence. Hard to believe she can cause so much trouble when she gets together with her friends.

“Not today, Scootaloo. Unless... is there anything that you want to tell me? I promise I won’t be angry or upset if you do,” says Fluttershy with a hopeful expression on her face.

Scootaloo gulps, and shakes her head so hard that her unbrushed mane whips around behind her. “Nope. Nothing. Nothing at all.”

Fluttershy smile betrays just a little bit of disappointment. “Okay, then. Why don’t you come by tomorrow after school? I’m sure I’ll have more for you to do then. Just know that if you ever do decide you want to talk about something, you can come over any time you need to. Twilight is sleeping over tonight. You can even stay over with us, if you want.”

“That’s okay, Miss Fluttershy. I’m sleeping over at Sweetie’s tonight. I’m going to see if Apple Bloom can come out and play now, though. She’s been acting kinda funny since her Granny got sick,” says Scootaloo.

“Oh! That reminds me, I made some stew for her that might help. Can you bring the pot over to them?”

“I’m headed that way too. I’ll give you a ride in the cart, if you want,” I offer.

“Thanks!”

We both wave goodbye to Fluttershy and I help Scootaloo lift the heavy pot into the cart. I start pulling it in the direction of Sweet Apple Acres and Scootaloo rides along in silence for a little while.

“So, you three been doing any crusading, lately?” I finally ask for lack of anything else to ask.

“Nah, not really,” says Scootaloo, her eyes downcast. “Apple Bloom’s always too tired, since she’s having nightm-” she slaps a hoof over her mouth and her eyes go wide.

“Don’t worry, I won’t tell anypony,” I assure her.

Slowly, she nods. “I think they’re about changeling stuff. Like seeing Granny Smith getting sick and hearing about her sister being in the middle of all that stuff in Canterlot means she’s all twisted up inside, and I don’t know what I’m supposed to do.”

I glance back at her. She’s really on edge about this. “I think that just coming by and having fun with her is all that you can do.”

“But she can’t just run away and pretend it isn’t a problem. If she does that then they’ll never stop, right? You can’t just run away from stuff that scares you. You gotta face it head on! That’s what Rainbow Dash says.”

“Yeah, that does sound like her,” I say. The conversation lapses into silence again as we pass by the edge of the Whitetail Woods. The apple orchards around Sweet Apple Acres are just coming into view.

“What’s it like living with a changeling, anyway?” This time it’s Scootaloo who breaks the silence.

“A little weird,” I admit, “she has all my memories and everything, but every once in awhile she’ll go ahead and surprise me anyway. But she’s just like anypony else, and she’s a good housemate. Why?”

“Silver Spoon said that the changelings are freaks and traitors, and they shouldn’t be allowed to live in town. She thinks they should all be rounded up and put in their own town somewhere. I think her Dad told her that.”

“What do you think?”

Scootaloo shrugs. “Eh, if Silver Spoon doesn’t like them then they can’t be all bad.”

“Heh, I knew there was a reason Rainbow Dash liked you, kid,” I say.

“She said that? Rainbow Dash said that?” asks Scootaloo, her wings buzzing with excitement at the second-hoof approval.

“She sure did, I was there,” I say. I neglect to mention that the full sentence was ‘I like her, but sometimes I wish she’d stop following me around everywhere.’ Fat chance of that now, but it’s worth it to make the little filly’s day.

Before much longer we’re pulling up to the front door of the farmhouse. Our approach must have made some noise, because Big Mac is waiting for us on the front porch.

“Howdy,” he says.

“Hi Big Mac! Is Apple Bloom home?” asks Scootaloo as she hops down to the ground.

“Eeyup. Upstairs. Go ahead,” he says. She dashes inside and up the stairs two at a time, leaving the pot of stew for Big Mac and I to wrestle off the cart and into the house. I swear, Fluttershy made enough to feed a dozen ponies for a week.

We manage to get it inside and put it down on the kitchen counter. “How’s Granny Smith feeling?” I ask, finally broaching the inevitable subject.

“Not bad. She’s restin’ up in the other room. Heard your place got vandalized, ‘cause of that changeling living with you,” he says.

“Yeah, it wasn’t too big of a deal, but the two of us are definitely being extra careful these days.”

“Ain’t right,” he says.

I tense up. “What they did, or Kicky living with me?”

He thinks for a second. “Ah don’t trust her, but that doesn’t make what they did to you right. You got a problem with a pony, have the guts to tell ‘em to their face. Ain’t no excuse for bein’ cowardly and unneighborly.”

Glad he’s keeping an open mind at least. “You know...” I say as I sidle up to him, “...with such scary ponies out there planning who-knows-what, we poor, defenseless mares could

use a big, strapping stallion to watch over us. Maybe spend the night? I'm sure we could find *some* way to thank you..."

"Defenseless, huh?" he asks with a wry smirk.

"Work with me here, Mac. You'll be glad you did. Kicky picked up some crazy tricks when she was a changeling, I'm sure there are plenty of ways she and I could get you to come around."

A voice from the other room, raspy but powerful, echoes through the kitchen. "Ah'm sick, not deaf!" Big Mac's face gets even redder as I laugh.

"Glad to hear you're feeling better, Granny," I say as I walk into their living room. Granny Smith is resting comfortably on the couch with a blanket draped over her, a half-knit scarf in her forelegs. She squints at me, sizing me up. "You seducin' mah grandcolt, missy?" she asks.

"Yes'm," I reply ever so politely, aware that I've unconsciously begun to stand at attention.

"You in heat?"

"No, ma'am. Take a potion every month, just in case."

"Got any nasty diseases that he might catch?"

"No, ma'am."

She thinks that over for a minute. "Make'm bring you dinner or take ya' out first. We raised us a gentlecolt in this household," she says. It's tough to tell if Big Mac's been stunned into silence or just reverted to his default state, but Granny Smith turns to him next. "You knock one of 'em up, you better marry her. Some half-Apple half-Kicker half-changeling foal's one thing, but I ain't lettin' ya be responsible for a bastard, got me?"

"Yes ma'am," I reply. When no words are forthcoming, I jab him in the side with an elbow.

He coughs. "Eeyup."

I wish I could stick around, but I'm running behind schedule as it is. Good thing I can go straight to work without stopping

by the office first.

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Beating back a high pressure front is taxing, but in a good way. Still, between pulling that cart earlier and being out on my wings all morning, I'm beat by the time lunch rolls around. Good thing my afternoon is all paperwork. Never believed I'd feel that way.

On my way to my desk, I spot Rainbow Dash in her office and stick my head in. "Hey Dash?" I ask to get her attention. "This might seem random, but Scootaloo has parents, right?"

"That is random," she says, "but yeah, she introduced me to her father a while back. They just live way out on the edge of town, and he's not around very often. Why?"

"Fluttershy told me that she showed up in her chicken coop a few days ago, and can't figure out why."

Dash just shrugs. "Probably trying to earn an egg-hatching cutie mark or something, and didn't want to admit it. I'm sure Fluttershy can handle it, she's good with the whole nurturing thing. I'll talk to Scoots, though."

I finish the walk over to my desk. It's quiet without Blossom around, but she's in Cloudsdale picking up a fresh batch of cumulus from the central warehouse. The afternoon drags along as the contents of my inbox gradually make their way to the outbox.

Just when I think the throbbing behind my eyes is going to force them out of their sockets, I hear a familiar voice. "Hey, Cloud Kicker."

I blink and look up at the yellow earth pony in front of me, and then I grin. "Glint! To what do I owe the pleasure?"

Lieutenant Glinting Steel is the last pony I ever expected to see here in Ponyville. "Came by to collect some reinforcements before I went over to your house, actually. I need to talk to the changeling."

"Her name is Kicky, you know. Is she in some kind of trouble?"

“Nope, just want to talk to her, and what I have to say affects you both. I’d rather not have to explain it twice.”

“Why? What is it?”

“I *just* said I didn’t want to explain it twice. Can you get away and come with me to see her?”

I glance over at the clock. Four thirty, and nothing on my desk won’t keep until tomorrow. “Hey, Flitter? Have you seen Dash?” I ask my coworker.

“She left about an hour ago, I think,” replies Flitter.

Glinting Steel rolls his eyes. “Great boss you’ve got there.”

“She has her moments. Sure, let’s go.” With one final sweep through the office to make sure nothing else needs doing, we call it a night. I walk back to my home with Glinting Steel, ignoring the way his eyes keep shifting over towards me, and not in the good, tonight’s-going-to-be-lots-of-fun way. More like he’s studying me for evidence of... something. I don’t even know what.

I unlock my front door and push it open. I’m instantly assailed by the smells of something alluring and familiar from the kitchen. “Kicky? I’m home,” I call out.

“Oh, hey... Cloud...” says Kicky as she steps out into the hallway, complete with apron. It’s the one I got for grilling vegetables outdoors, and ‘Bang the Cook’ is proudly written across the chest. “Glint? What do you want?”

“Take it easy, Kicky,” he says. At least that took in his head. “You aren’t in trouble or anything, but could we talk about...” he sniffs the air. “Is that wheatloaf I smell?”

“Maybe,” says Kicky, with a cagey little smile. “I played with Cloudy’s recipe a bit, and I’ve got a good feeling about it. Want to stay for dinner?”

“I’d love to,” he says. “I think we have a lot to talk about.”

I step inside my kitchen and set an extra place while Kicky tends to the pots of steamed vegetables on the stove. Glint wanders off to examine the rest of our home, and soon we’re all sitting down to a home-cooked meal.



“So, Kicky, how’s it been settling in here as a citizen of Ponyville?”

She freezes, which everypony notices. “It’s been great! The ponies here have been... I doubt I’d be happier anywhere else,” she says.

“So you’re happy here, then?” Glint asks. “Other ponies treating you like one of them?”

“We’re working on that,” I interject. I don’t know what his game is, but I don’t like it.

“Listen, Kicky, I don’t see any reason to flit around the issue with you, so I’ll put my cards on the table. You remember Commander Tempest?”

“Beige unicorn? Still has magic surges when she gets really upset?” asks Kicky.

“That’s her. The changelings grabbed her, so now she’s got a double, too. The Princesses want her... the second her, I mean... to command a unit made up of the ex-changelings transformed into ponies who were in the Guard.”

“And that matters to me how?” Kicky asks, although I’m pretty sure we both see where he’s going with this.

“The door’s always been open for Cloudy to return to the Guard,” says Glint. His eyes flick towards me. “Still is, by the way. But we’d really like you to be part of this new division, Kicky. We’re prepared to start you out as a First Lieutenant if you’d like to come back. What do you think?”

“Well I know what I think,” I say. “The extra promotion is nice, but I’ve told you a half-dozen times that I’m not interested, right Kicky?”

“...Do you need me to make up my mind right away, or can I think about it?” she asks.

“What’s there to think about?” I demand. “We don’t want to go back into the Guard. We decided that a long time ago.”

“You decided that,” says Kicky, her voice only barely rising above a whisper. “You decided that you didn’t owe Equestria anything, and maybe you don’t. But you didn’t try to invade it,

only to find yourself a citizen deep in enemy territory. I did, and despite everything I've done everypony's been remarkably accepting. I need to pay you all back, and I remember all this training..."

"You don't have to decide anything tonight. It'll be months before we start actually calling ponies up for duty. Just consider the offer. You know how to get in touch with me," says Glint. He rises to his hooves, his food barely even touched. "Thank you for the meal. I hope I'll hear from you soon."

I restrain myself until I hear the door close behind him, then there's no holding back. "What the buck, Kicky? You're just going to rejoin the Guard because they asked you to come back? Because they guilted you into it?"

Kicky can't look at me. "I'd have a place, at least, instead of sitting around here being useless. I could prove to everypony that I deserve to be here. I could prove to Mom and Dad-"

"Since when did you decide you were going to become their puppet again?" I snarl. "You remember why we quit. Shadow said-"

"I remember. But the more I think about it, the more I wonder if you didn't just misunderstand what she said. You were *scared*, Cloudy. No pony could blame you for that, but maybe you twisted the message you got that night into something it wasn't."

I slam my hooves down on the table. "I don't want to hear it from you. I can't believe you'd do this to me."

"Oh, shove it up your plot, Cloud. This isn't about you. At all."

I get up and just walk away. "I'm going to bed," I say, despite the fact that it's barely after six in the evening. Slamming my bedroom door behind me, I flop down onto the mattress to consider the betrayal that just happened in my kitchen. After I took her in and protected her all this time? She'd turn around and do this?

Variations of that thought run through my head until I fall asleep.

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*I'm plummeting to my doom.*

*That's less worrying than it sounds, for a pegasus. We spend so much time plunging, swooping, and even in total freefall that we acclimate to it. I'll just spread my wings and...*

*My wings don't respond. Okay, starting to worry a little bit now. It's not just some cramp. I look back, and it's surprisingly difficult to even turn my head. When I eventually manage it, I can see that my wings are more or less gone. Just shredded and tattered remains of them poking out through my armor.*

*Yeah, this seems like an appropriate time to freak out. I start to flail uselessly for some ephemeral rope or lifeline that'll halt my fall, but of course there isn't one.*

*Then a shadow passes over my face.*

*I look up and see nothing, but when I look back there's a pony there. She's clad in gleaming bronzed armor, her dark coat emphasizing the whites of her eyes as she stares straight through me. She's falling just as quickly as I am, but her wings are curled into a dive and she's matching my fall by choice. I reach out to grab onto her, but she drifts just far enough away that I can't.*

*She stares at me, disappointed, and shakes her head. I try to scream at her to help me, to save me, but the roaring winds around me blast away my words. I look down. The ground is growing closer, and quickly. Too quickly. Shadow Kicker wraps herself around me, but doesn't pull us up, despite my pleading. Instead she leans in to whisper into my ear.*

*"Trust in thy nature and become what thou art, Cloud Kicker."*

*Then the ground rushes towards us and there's nothing.*

# You Can't Go Home Again

## YOU CAN'T GO HOME AGAIN

I swear to Celestia, if this train doesn't get to Canterlot soon I'm going to kill something.

It doesn't help that I already have the ideal target sitting across from me, glaring right back with just as much intensity. Kicky and I, well, in the last few days words have been exchanged. Mostly petty and unimportant ones. But that's a long way from actually talking, y'know? Apparently we're equally stubborn as well as equally bangable.

I don't know where her head's at with this whole rejoining the Guard thing, seeing how that would require talking to her about it. And talking will mean fighting. And I know me well enough to know that fighting her over a decision is just going to make her commit to it even harder out of sheer spite, so that's a non-starter. So that leaves... glaring at one another for hours on the train to Canterlot to check in with the rest of the clan. Her idea; she's been itching to find out how they'll react to her existence. My bet is 'not well.' After all, they were here during both invasions and I was off in Ponyville. Probably lost friends in the attacks. That's not something you necessarily get over quickly. Could be a very long weekend.

"You think about what you're going to say to Mom when you see her?" I ask, extending the tiniest little olive branch.

"I was thinking 'Tie some strings around my hooves and make me dance.' Wasn't that your suggestion?"

Ah. She might still be a little sore about that 'being their puppet' bit. Just a bit. Olive branch rejected, then, and it's back to riding the rails in silence. At least I can see the tip of Canterlot Mountain peeking up over the horizon. "Look, I still think you're being a stupid jerk about this."

"Have we always sucked this bad at apologies?"

*“But,”* I press on despite her little snipe, “I think we should go in there presenting a united front. At least have a plan for when the question comes up, because we both know it will.”

“I’ll be happy with anything that doesn’t get me run out of town. Or lynched. Although from what Sweetie Drops said in her last note that probably won’t be a problem.”

I raise an eyebrow at that particular revelation. “You two write? After what she pulled back at the Sun’s Flank?”

“I’m not saying I’ll be inviting her over for tea anytime soon, but yeah. I’m still in touch with a lot of former changelings who don’t want to come out as... that.”

I frown at her. “And of course you still aren’t going to tell me who they are. Have you thought about what’ll happen if your future commanding officer asks for their identities?”

She shrugs. “End up thrown into a cell for defying the order, probably. But it sounds like most of the unit is made up of ex-changelings. They’ll get it. If it makes you feel any better, I have been trying to get the others to make the choice to own up to other ponies on their own terms. Haven’t been having much luck so far, but you were the one who said to give it time.”

As wonderful as it is to learn that my double has been running what potentially amounts to a vast, shadowy intelligence-gathering network out of my home without my knowledge or permission, it somehow fails to make me feel better. “I’m surprised they’re willing to take the chance of exposing themselves, even just by writing a letter.”

“I’m not,” says Kicky. “Think about it, Cloudy, I have an entire lifetime of memories with thousands of voices filling up my mind every second of every day. It’s scary when somepony like a Queen takes advantage of that to assume control or...” she shudders, “...punish you, but other times it can be comforting too. We all know one another, even if it’s on a sort of hazy and instinctual sort of level. Don’t get me wrong, I appreciate the extra 30 or 40 IQ points becoming a pony got me, but sometimes it gets lonely up here.” She taps her

forehead for emphasis as I consider that. No wonder she's so bored being home by herself.

"Final stop, Canterlot!" calls out the conductor from the front of the car. Looks like the issue I wanted resolved before we arrived is going to have to wait a little longer. The train begins to slow as Kicky and I both rise to gather up our overnight bags from the luggage rack.

"Cloudy?" asks Kicky from behind me. I turn to find her with a wing hooked under her bag and a somber look on her face. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry if I'm being difficult. I really don't know what I want yet as far as the Guard is concerned, but I do know that I don't want it to get between us. So, truce?"

"All I needed to hear. Like I said, a united front." Maybe that olive branch wasn't such a waste after all. We both know the importance of learning to pick your battles.

"Deal." She grins, and that's a load off my mind right before the one waiting out on the train platform settles in to take its place. Steam hisses from the smokestack as the engine starts to cool, and there's no more delaying before we both step out of the train car with Kicky in the lead. Three ponies are waiting there for us, and the littlest one wastes no time before she drops off the yellow-coated mare she's balanced on and charges us.

"Cloud!" shouts Alula, leaping on Kicky and wrapping her forelegs around her in a big hug. Kicky squeezes her back, and tightly. No secret who we were both most looking forward to seeing on this trip. After a moment she looks over at me while Mom and Dad walk up. "And other-Cloud too! Umm... or is she other-Cloud and you're Cloud?"

Kicky grins. "Why don't you guess?" She looks up at... well... her parents assuming they'll have her. Right now they're studying the both of us as we stand there, side by side. Dad speaks up first.

"Tough call. I'm going to say old Cloud on the right, new one on the left."

Ha! Dad got it backwards. I'm just about to tell him so when Mom speaks up. "No. Other way around. I'm certain," she says as she regards both of us with a steady, piercing stare. "You two may look very similar, but... Kicky, I think your letter said? Kicky doesn't carry herself in quite the same fashion Cloudy does. I noticed it the moment you stepped off the train. You don't *move* the same way she does."

Kicky gulps. Thirty seconds into our visit and I already feel the suffocating pressure of being watched that Mom gives off so effortlessly, and it must be a hundred times worse for her. "Yes, Nimbus is right, Tornado. I'm... I'm the changeling."

Rather than answering right away, Mom steps over and wraps her wings around Kicky and Alula. "Mom and Dad will be just fine, if you'd like. Welcome home, Cloud."

Kicky's jaw hangs slack, but after a moment she returns the hug and squeezes Mom and Alula tight while I look on. That was... wow. I mean I figured they'd come around by the end of the weekend, but that was *way* sooner than I'd dared to hope. Not wanting to feel left out, I trot over to Dad and give him a hug of my own while Kicky's basking. "I should warn you both that Star and Storm have about a thousand questions each for you, and I think your Aunt Wind wants to chat as well. Don't want you to get feel blindsided by the interrogation."

I just grin. I'll corrupt those two cousins of mine one day, just you wait. Wouldn't mind weaselling a bit of advice for dealing with Kicky out of Aunt Wind, either. She's spent long enough getting into my head that she's bound to some insight into how I can talk her out of whole silly idea of rejoining the Guard. It's always been a choice that she's more accepting of than Mom or Dad were. We get caught up on life, and Alula regales me with the story of how she bravely stood guard over the interior of her closet during the invasion. My family spent most of the attack hunkered down in our compound preparing a counter attack before the Elements went off. I shudder to imagine what a disaster *that* would have been. Some ponies in the Guard fantasize that one day they'll go out in a blaze of glory against impossible odds, a mentality I've never really

understood. I'm all for 'going down fighting,' if it's really come to that, but I can't help but think that staying up fighting holds rather more appeal.

We get closer to our family compound, and I find myself standing just a little closer to my parents' side than I might otherwise.

The ol' homestead is just like I remember it. With the story-high walls running all around the perimeter and the thick iron gate in front of the courtyard, it's easy to imagine it as a makeshift fort. Sure, changeling drones can fly over it, but most Kickers come equipped with wings of our own and plenty of training in air-to-air combat. The walls aren't about keeping ponies out, not primarily anyway. They're about forcing them into the sky and onto our home turf. As the key turns in the lock of the gate, the front door of the main manor opens and out spills Star Kicker, followed closely by her sister. She's probably been tracking us all the way back from the train station.

"Cloud! Uh... Clouds!" she shouts. She half-runs half-flies over and gives me a hug, while Storm hugs Kicky. Once they've alternated and confirmed which one of us is which, the questions start to pour out. I step back a little bit and just let the tide roll over Kicky while I look on.

"What's being a changeling like?"

"Who else have you copied?"

"Have you copied both stallions and mares? Was that weird?"

"Is it true you're gonna' re-enlist?"

"Are there really two Commander Tempests now? And one of them's leading your new unit?"

"I had her as a guest lecturer once at West Hoof, she seemed like a total badflank."

"Oh man, can you imagine if they both took off those inhibitors and fought each other? How cool would that be?"

"Did you and Cloud fight each other? Did she win? I bet she won."



“Girls!” my mother finally interrupts. “You’ll learn a great deal more if you let her actually *answer* between questions.”

Kicky gives her a thankful glance and the rapid-fire pace of the questions slows down to something almost manageable as we walk into their house. When we get inside, I see Uncle Typhoon glance up from his newspaper, give each of us a flat grunt of acknowledgement, and go back to finishing the article he was reading. Aunt Wind, on the other hoof, swoops in from the den. “Cloudy, Kicky, welcome.”

“Thanks Aunt Wind,” I reply.

Kicky echoes that, but continues. “Thank you for seeing the, ah, friends I referred to you too. I know it’s meant a lot to them to have somepony helping them figure out how to adjust to all this.”

“Other former changelings?”

Aunt Wind frowns at me. “You know I can’t talk about what goes on in sessions, Cloud.”

I thought that Kicky wasn’t giving that kind of information out, but it’s pretty clear that satisfying my curiosity and getting ponies psychological help they might need are leagues apart in terms of importance, so I guess that’s fair enough. Kicky settles down and gives in to being the center of attention for the next hour or so. Mostly she’s going over things that I already know or details of Glint’s offer that don’t especially concern me, so I’m happy to sit back and sip at the coffee Aunt Wind’s so kindly brewed for me. If I didn’t know any better I’d say she was starting to like being in the spotlight.

“Well, it sounds like the Princesses have been very good to you, all things considered,” says Mom.

“Can’t argue with that. A lot better than if the shoe were on the other hoof and Chrysalis had pulled it off, for sure.”

“And that’s an exceptionally generous offer they’re extending regarding your reenlistment.”

Whelp, knew that was coming eventually. Surprised Mom held off for nearly a whole hour, to be honest. “It... is...” agrees

Kicky, and our glances meet from across the room. “I haven’t made any kind of final decision about it, though.”

“Of course. You should make sure you think it through,” says Mom, sipping on her tea. “I’m sure I don’t need to tell you what I think is best. You should absolutely take them up on it.”

“Mom,” I say, trying to jump in before she really gets going. “Don’t pressure her. If she doesn’t want to come back, she doesn’t want to come back.”

Kicky looks over at me and wrinkles her muzzle ever so slightly. Why is she mad at *me*? I’m the one trying to help her. “If she decides she doesn’t want to learn from your mistakes and is content with the... lifestyle you two share in Ponyville, I’ll respect that choice just like I’ve respected yours, Cloud. But if she wants to actually make something of herself I’m just suggesting she strongly consider it.”

“Nimbus,” says Dad, a subtle but adamant warning slipped in along with the name.

She holds up her hooves. “I’ve said my piece.”

“I’m sure that when *I* make *my* decision, it’ll be the right one *for me*,” says Kicky, taking care to emphasize those first-person pronouns. “In the meantime, let’s talk about something else. Anything else.”

The conversation turns to more normal family stuff. Who’s in relationships with whom, how old family friends are doing, that sort of thing. Slowly but surely, the tension from the near-argument ebbs away until Aunt Wind calls us in for dinner. Delicious, as usual, and I have to resort to threatening Storm Kicker with my fork to stake my claim on the very last sliver of cherry pie. Stuffed, yawning, and happy, Alula looks about ready to collapse as the clock strikes nine. It’s about time to bid everypony goodnight and head back to our own section of the compound. Before I can follow the other four out the front door, though, Aunt Wind calls me back. “Cloudy? A word?”

Just like her to lull me into a vulnerable state with broccoli fritters and pie before moving in for the kill. In her own way, Autumn Wind is one of the best tacticians in the Kicker clan,

and that's really saying something. I obediently proceed to the kitchen where she's washing up all the glasses and serving utensils from tonight's meal. Typhoon, Storm, and Star have made themselves scarce. Whether that was at Aunt Wind's insistence or their own accord, it's hard to say. Where Aunt Wind is involved the former and the latter tend to blur together sometimes. Still, I claim a dishrag for drying the dishes coming out of the sink and pitch in. "What's up?"

"Nothing special, I just wanted to make sure I had a chance to check in one-on-one with you. How are you holding up?"

I blink a couple times at the question. "Uh... are you sure you wanted me and not Kicky? Easy mistake to make."

"Avoiding my questions won't make me go away, Cloud," says Aunt Wind with a quiet little smile. "You should know me better than that by now."

"I'm fine. Better than fine, I'm great," I say, wiping the speckled droplets of water from the surface of a baking sheet. "Money's a bit tight since Kicky's been run out of more than a few jobs, but we're managing. It's no reason for her to run off and join the Guard, though."

"Mmm hmm." She's always been a master of that infuriatingly noncommittal tone. "It seems rather important to you that she doesn't, is that fair to say? Why do you suppose that is?"

"You're the crazy pony expert. You tell me. Maybe I just like having a permanent wingmare always on hoof." Like I really want to talk about this instead of falling into bed back in my old room.

"I don't think you're crazy, Cloud. Do you think you are? And you're the one who brought up the Guard, not me."

"Well, crazy in the *good* ways, sure. I just hated watching Mom pressure her like that earlier. I'm trying to look out for her best interests, but Mom... I don't know. Just rubs me the wrong way."

"You don't think Nimbus might say the same thing, though? That she's the one looking out for Kicky's best interest and you're the one pressuring her?" She's stopped washing to

focus her full attention on me, and runs a hoof over her forehead to put a bright pink strand of mane back in its proper place.

I scoff at the suggestion. “She just wants a second shot at getting a daughter into the Guard. If it doesn’t end up being Kicky I’m sure she’ll just go back to making sure doesn’t screw up with Alula the way she did with me.”

“Cloud.” Aunt Wind puts down the crystal serving bowl she’s been working on and leans over to wrap a wing around me. “Your mother loves you, more than anything. I know she’s not always the best at showing it, but what you think is pressure is mostly her being worried about you. She’s a mom; that’s our job.” The hug feels good, I won’t deny that. The message is one I’d like to believe, too. “I’ll get the rest of this. Run on home and we can talk more tomorrow if you want to, okay?”

You know, I might take her up on that. I don’t always come away from talking to Aunt Wind with the answers I want, but she does always manage to give me something worth mulling over. I give her a kiss goodnight and leave to walk across the courtyard. On an impulse, I stop mid-stride and with a couple beats of my wings take to the rooftop of a storage shed. I lay on my back and just stare up into the night sky. It seems wise to take a moment to appreciate it, if only as a precaution against one of the local demigoddesses getting ideas about the whole ‘eternal darkness’ thing again. Besides it’s unusually spectacular tonight, and the stars gleam a little brighter than they usually do. I wonder if there’s some special event going on at the palace? Or maybe something’s just put Princess Luna in an especially good mood, who can really say for sure? Either way, I’m just enjoying the show and letting my thoughts wander back to what Mom and Aunt Wind said. I yawn, and realize I better get inside before I end up sleeping under the stars tonight. As I roll off the roof, I decide that I’m making a conscious choice not to let anything Mom does tonight or tomorrow get to me.

Then I walk into our living room, and that self-promise dies an ignoble and untimely death.

Mom and Kicky are there, but Kicky's all dressed up. In a crimson suit of armor with our family seal proudly emblazoned on the chest. Mom is lovingly helping with the buckles and straps, testing to make sure it's not too loose anywhere. In fact, it looks like it's perfectly fitted to her, which can only mean...

"Is that the armor you gave me when I finished at West Hoof?" I ask.

"Like it?" asks Kicky, grinning at me with a smirk I want more than anything to wipe off her face. "We look damn good in uniform, right? The mares never could get enough."

"You know that's mine, right?" I ask. But of course she does.

"Well," says Mom as she gives a yank on one of the faux-leather straps, "it isn't like you were using it. It's been gathering dust in the attic for years, and when I heard that Kicky might be re-enlisting, I thought I'd bring it out and check that it still fits. Just in case we need to make any adjustments." She looks... she bucking *beams* at Kicky in her full getup. With something in her eyes that's for damn sure not there when she looks at me.

Pride.

"It really does suit you, Cloud," she says.

"Thanks, Mom," says Kicky. She can't... she's not really taken in this easily, is she? So desperate for approval that she'd do something so obviously wrong for her, just to have Mom look at her that way?

Would I be?

There's a thousand things I want to say, none of which are likely to be a good idea. Instead I just turn from the perfect little mother-daughter scene in front of me and walk away. Neither of them bother to stop me. Too busy playing dress-up, I guess.

Back on the roof of that storage shed, I decide that, why yes, I will sleep out here tonight. The cold's never really bothered me anyway. Not like there's anypony inside who'll miss me.

Unfortunately, the stars aren't quite as pretty when I'm looking at them through tears.

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It's all too easy to fade into the background the next day.

Storm, Star, Mom, even Alula. They're all just so fascinated with Kicky and the lifetime of stories she has about being a changeling. A changeling who would have gladly ripped out any of their throats a few months ago, mind, but that doesn't seem to bother any of them. I catch Aunt Wind glancing in my direction and frowning just a bit a few times over the course of the day, but if I talked to her I don't even know what I'd say.

I am so glad that we only decided to stay for a single night and that we'll be going home this evening. I originally set it up that way so Kicky would have an escape route handy if things went south. Now, though, she looks like she'd happily stay here forever. Who knows? Maybe she will.

When we do board the train for the ride home, Kicky gets long, lingering hugs from everypony. So do I, but to me it seems like little more than an afterthought. We settle in for the ride home, and Kicky gives a contented sigh as she stows her overnight bag. "I think that went really well, don't you?"

I'm pretty sure the only reason I don't jump her then and there is that getting into a fight before we even pull out of Canterlot would get me thrown off the train in front of everypony. One more way I could feather up and make Kicky look good by comparison. "So, when we were coming out here and I suggested a 'united front,' what exactly did you think I meant? Because I think we must have very different ideas about what that means."

She actually looks puzzled. "Is this about the armor last night? Mom had it laid out when we walked into the house, what was I supposed to do?"

"How about not put on a uniform that you never earned?" I snap at her. "They gave that to me, not you. Just because you *remember* West Hoof doesn't mean you were actually there."

“You didn’t want it,” she hisses right back. “If I hadn’t put it on last night, would you even have remembered it was there? You don’t want to go back and join the Guard? Fine! Just quit projecting your freakout onto me. You think it isn’t a hard enough decision for me already?”

“Oh, I think having Mom fawning over you all weekend made it a whole lot easier.”

“Cloudy...” her voice drops into a whisper, but an angry one.

“I met my Mom, my Dad, my little sister, my cousins, all of them for the very first time over the last two days. Being loved like that, genuinely, even knowing what I used to be... I’m not going to say it wasn’t nice, because it was. Maybe I got a little carried away.”

“An all-you-can-eat affection buffet, huh?” I ask, even as I know it’s a cheap shot.

She just stares at me for a solid minute, an inscrutable sort of hurt crossing her face. “You know what? I think I liked it better when you weren’t speaking to me.”

“Fine by me.”

So we go back to glaring across at one another, the only difference between this and the ride into Canterlot the direction that the train is moving.

Not the most productive trip.

# Mourning After

## MOURNING AFTER

I wake up sandwiched between two stallions, and immediately resume feeling awful about my life.

That's just wrong on every level. By all rights last night was fantastic, even by my standards. A quickie with that one mare who had been looking over at me and blushing whenever our eyes met, and then a few introductions later getting to spend the rest of the night getting hot and heavy with two of her friends? I should be absolutely glowing with satisfaction rather than becoming increasingly aware of the gaping pit in my gut that's been sucking the color out of my life for the last three days.

I extricate myself from between the two slumbering males and look around the unfamiliar bedroom, ineffectively given how dark it still is. Given the workout they put me through last night, they'll probably be out cold for a while longer. I should be too given that the sun hasn't even come up yet, but I'm having trouble sleeping these days.

I miss my bed. My sheets. My room. Haven't been back there for a couple days now, not since Canterlot. The memory of Mom and how she...

You know what? Shower first, rue the way that stupid changeling has shoved me out of my own life later. If you ever want to torture somepony, just give them exactly what they want. I wanted my family to like Kicky, the way I used to. For her to fit in and be accepted as a proper Kicker. I didn't want them to love her this much more than they love me, but I guess the universe has a sick sense of humor about these sorts of things.

I bark my shins a few times navigating the unfamiliar room in the dark of night, inventing a series of new and creative curses along the way. The relief at finally stumbling across the threshold into the apartment's bathroom is as much an



indecent amount of pride at getting there as really, *really* needing to pee.

I spend a good long while sitting there on the toilet in pitch blackness, trying and failing to pull together the shards of my mind into somepony who isn't a complete mess. I keep coming back to the same place, though. *It's not fair.*

On the rare moments when I'm being honest with myself instead of trying to drown myself in lust, sweat, and endorphins, I can't even bring myself to hate Kicky. This annoyingly rational and empathic bit of my mind just won't stop pointing out how much worse she'd had it these last few months. How many nights over the years I've spent laying awake contemplating the 'what if?' of re-joining the Guard. How many times I've decided that it would be easier to just give in to what my family expects and become a 'real' Kicker and my own satisfaction be damned before coming back to my senses.

I'm glad it's so dark in here. That way I won't accidentally catch sight of myself crying in the mirror.

All cried out, I jump into the shower and let the chill icy water distract me from the deeper pain. As I get lathered up with what I hope is body wash, I scrub extra hard with the loofah trying to pull all the filthy, petty, toxic thoughts of inadequacy and regret out through my skin, to little effect. I scrub until the hairs of my coat gleam and shine, but everything underneath that is still as messy as ever. I dry off and leave the damp towel in a heap on the floor, sneaking back into the bedroom like I have something to hide. The first pre-dawn rays are leaking in through the window, and since my eyes have had ample opportunity to adjust to the low light I can make my way back to the bed. I pause and try to decide whether or not to wake what's-his-face and what's-his-face #2, ultimately deciding I'd rather just slink away. I've been travelling light the last couple of days, just a pair of saddlebags and my winning charm to get by on. Guess that's all I've ever needed, really.

I sneak out and gasp a bit when the first blast of autumnal air hits me. It'll warm up once the sun is up, but my still-moist

coat isn't the most effective shield against the chill and it cuts right through my meager defenses. As I start to shiver I become aware of another unpleasant reality: I'm starving.

My hooves start to carry me back towards my house before I even realize it, and I freeze for reasons that have nothing to do with the cold weather. No. I'll go back there eventually, and I know I'm just putting off a confrontation in a way that's not like me. But not yet.

Instead I turn and head in the other direction, towards the kitchen of a pony I know I can mooch a half-decent meal out of and who's an early riser herself. Sure enough, three blocks later Bon Bon's home is coming into sight. The comforting glow of a working kitchen is seeping out from her window, and the smoke from her chimney confirms it. I can't imagine working as hard as she does; only the Cakes get up earlier. Three raps on her door later, and I hear the hoofsteps of an approaching pony.

"Cloud!" Bon Bon grabs me and pulls me into a hug before the door's even finished swinging open. "Nopony's seen you for days! We've been really worried. Are you alright?"

I fake a grin. "Never better, Bons. Sorry if I made you worry. Mind if I come in?"

"Of course not. I was just making breakfast." Music to my ears. I step inside and she gently closes the door behind me. "Try to keep it down. Lyra won't surface until noon."

My fake grin gets a whole lot less fake. "Wearing her out, huh? Make-up banging is pretty amazing, isn't it?"

She goes beet red, but she can't hide her delight behind embarrassment. I've known her for way too long. I've also known her in the carnal sense, enough times to know that Lyra's one lucky mare. "Yeah, we're... I don't know if we're *good* good, not about everything yet. Those days she spent at your place were some of the hardest I've had to deal with for a long time. Just..." she trails off and thinks for a moment before going on. "I don't know how we're going to come down on the foal thing, and there have been some very long conversations into the night. Kicky's..."

She cuts herself off, and I can tell she regrets bringing up the name. The way she's looking at me right now, I must not seem pleased to hear it. "It's fine, Bon Bon. I'm glad she could help you." Even as the little voice in the corner of my mind is screaming that it should have been me helping them figure this stuff out. Is Kicky taking my life from me, or am I abandoning it?

Bon Bon nods to me, and I see her reach some sort of decision. "Can you keep a secret? And I mean from absolutely everypony. Even Kicky."

I frown a bit, but Bon Bon is as serious as I've ever seen her. "Sure. What's up?"

"I've been practicing something, and I want to try it on you and see what you think. Would you mind? And again, absolutely secret. You can't tell a soul."

"You've got it, I swear."

She takes a deep breath, and closes her eyes. When she speaks up again, it's not me she's talking to, not really. "Lyra Heartstrings," she begins, eyes still closed. "You are the most obnoxious, most adorable, most frustrating, most wonderful, most annoying, most gorgeous mare I have ever had the pleasure of falling in love with. You snore; I can't imagine ever falling asleep next to anypony else. You sneak candies out of my bags and think that I don't notice; I make extras so you'll always have a treat at hoof. You treat my house like it's yours; that's what makes it our home. Nothing makes me cry as hard as I do when we fight; nothing makes me happier than when we forgive one another afterwards." She gasps, and a few tears begin to leak from her still-shut eyes. "I... I... I'm not perfect, and neither are you. We disagree about a lot of things, and we've got a lot still to figure out. But I want us to figure them out together. Today, tomorrow, and always. So... um... will you... I mean I want to... if you think I'm not a total screw up..."

I gape at her. Is she really doing what I think she is? "You're doing great, Bon Bon. Take your time."

Her eyes snap open. “Oh! Right, almost forgot the most important part.” She pulls open a drawer beneath her oven and carefully moves a few pots and pans around, trying her hardest to keep the clattering down as she does. When she comes up again she’s clutching a little velvet box. “Lyra, will you marry me?” The box opens and a the light gleams off a plain golden hoofband. “I... I wanted to get her a better one than this, but it’s all I could afford. I know she has nicer ones, I’m worried that she won’t think it’s... that I’m...”

“Bon Bon,” I say and pull her into a hug, squeezing tight. She goes quiet as I hold her. “She’ll totally say yes.”

“You think so? I mean... it’s a work in progress, and I’ve already rewritten it like eight times trying to get it right.”

“She’s going to be so floored when you ask her, it wouldn’t matter if you were proposing with a pair of sock puppets,” I reply. “When are you going to ask?”

“Oh I haven’t... not soon.” She hems and haws as she lets go of me and starts pacing across the kitchen. “I mean, I don’t know that we’re really there yet, relationship-wise, and we just had that gigantic fight, and I still have to talk to her parents, but... but...” She sighs, and looks up at me with eyes full of conviction. “She’s the one. I just... I just know she is. And I’m going to grab her up and never, ever let her go.” She pauses. “But not, y’know, in a creepy way.”

“Forget her. With a proposal like that *I* kind of want to marry you now,” I tease. It’s hard to believe some member of my little clique is even thinking about this. We’re too young!

Well... we’re not *that* young...

I shake off the thoughts. My little identity crisis doesn’t matter right now, not compared to this. “You’d come to the wedding, right?” she asks, as if she even has to.

“Just try to keep me away.”

“I figured.” She leans into a hug a little more deeply than before, and laughs. “Wow. Now that I’ve actually told somepony, it’s all hitting me. That it’s really real, I mean.”

“Real and amazing,” I reply, polishing off our hug by pecking her cheek with a little kiss. For just a second, I feel great about my life again before my other troubles intrude on my happy state of mind. “I won’t breathe a word of this, I swear. What else have you and the girls been up to these last couple days? I feel like I need to catch up.”

“Oh, mostly the usual stuff,” says Bon Bon, secreting the ring away again as she turns her attention to a bowl of pancake batter. “Azalea got dumped by Corn Row, so she’s been a little mopey too. She’s been hanging out at your place with Kicky a bunch, I think. What happened in Canterlot between you two, anyway? Blossom said that she tried to talk to Kicky about it and got stonewalled.”

“...so Azalea’s single again, huh?”

Bon Bon scoffs at my not-so-graceful dodging of her question. “Fine. Be that way. It’s not like I just shared something important about *my* life with you.”

I wince as that jab finds its mark. “It’s just stuff with my family, not really important.”

“You both seem awfully pissed off at one another for something ‘not really important.’” Bon Bon missed her true calling as an interrogator, I swear. The mare’s ruthless. “They didn’t like her or something?”

“They did. Liked her a lot, actually. More than me.”

Bon Bon pauses, a measuring cup full of batter above the hot stovetop. “Is that it? Are you *jealous* of her?” When she puts it that way it sounds really petty and stupid. Funny how that works. I don’t answer, and she just shakes her head.

“Unbelievable. Have you seriously been avoiding one another and us for the last couple days because you’re upset over the Guard stuff? You two need to talk to one another and hash this out.” She pours and the batter sizzles away on the griddle, and I can nearly taste them already.

“I’ll get around to it,” I say, noncommittal. Bon Bon obviously just doesn’t get it.

“Fine then,” she replies. “As long as you’re avoiding her. You don’t get pancakes.” She flips the ones that are cooking, taunting me with their golden brown deliciousness as my stomach growls.

“You cannot be serious,” I say, but she just shrugs and turns back to her cooking. By all appearances, she’s not making any for me. Damn, she fights *dirty*. “Bon Bon, seriously, I’m starving here.”

“Then I guess you’ll be motivated to go talk to Kicky instead of being stupid, then,” she replies. She stacks the pancakes four high on a plate and carries them over to a seat across from me at her kitchen table, pausing only to drizzle them with a glaze of sweet, delicious maple syrup. She locks eyes with me and raises a forkful to her mouth, chewing lazily. I’m pretty sure that I’m drooling by the time she swallows. “Mmm. Yummy.”

“Bonnie, I will literally give you a hundred bits for one of those pancakes right now.”

“But will you talk to Kicky?” she asks. When I don’t reply, she raises a second forkful of pancakes. What she’s doing right now should seriously be considered a war crime. “Oh, no,” she moans, mouth full. “I made *so many pancakes*. I only hope I can finish them all.”

“You are a terrible pony, Bon Bon,” I say as I glare at her. Whatever minimal intimidation I may possess is quickly undercut by my stomach growling again.

“Get your life together, Cloud,” says Bon Bon. She unfurls a newspaper and proceeds to ignore me, leaving me stewing in my hunger and foul mood. When I suspect she’s not paying attention, I slowly reach for the fruit bowl in the center of the table. “Don’t touch that.”

Busted again, I weigh my options. There’s no sign Bon Bon is kidding, and I know better than to cross her while she’s like this. Looks like I’m going hungry this morning. “If I promise to talk to Kicky later today, can I have something?”

“Sure. After you’ve talked to her,” says Bon Bon. My withering glare has no impact through her newspaper.

“Be that way, then. I have to go to work anyway.” I decide it can’t hurt to ask. “So... if I grabbed something out of your fridge for lunch...”

“Talk. To. Kicky,” is Bon Bon’s only reply. That’d be a no, then. I bid her a fond farewell anyway, though my gambit doesn’t provoke any last-second pity for a hungry pony. Heart of ice, that one. Lyra would totally have given in.

I sigh as Bon Bon’s front door closes behind me. I have a bit of time before I need to get out to clear up the overcast skies over Sweet Apple Acres, but I guess I’m getting an early start. On the flight over, I pass over Applejack pulling her cart towards the market then circle back around to say hi. And possibly try to weasel a morning snack out of her, too. “Hey Applejack.”

She looks up and notices me for the first time. For whatever reason, she’s frowning. “Oh, hey there Cloud Kicker. Sorry, had a bunch on my mind and didn’t notice you. How are ya this morning?”

“Can’t complain,” I reply trying as hard as possible not to stare at the delicious bounty of apples loaded up in the cart she’s pulling as I set down on the dirt road. “Whatcha thinking about?”

“Ah, nothing special,” says Applejack trying to wave me off with a hoof. “Just ah’m no good at playin’ matchmaker, is all. Promised Twilight ah’d find her a blind date by the end of the week, and ah’m runnin’ outta time to pick somepony.”

“You open to suggestions?” I ask, still focused like a laser on the cart’s bounty.

“Ah’m listenin’.”

“Well, don’t tell her you heard it from me, but Azalea would *kill* for a chance to go out with Twilight. Why don’t you ask her? I heard she and Corn Row split up, so I know she’s single.”

“Hmm....” Applejack taps her chin as she mulls over the suggestion, “...could do a whole lot worse than Az, ah guess. Ah’ll think about it on the walk over. Thanks.”

“No problem,” I reply. Trying to play it off casually proves impossible when my stomach gurgles again.

Applejack shoots me a knowing look. “Care for an apple? It’s on me, for helpin’ me out.”

She doesn’t need to ask twice. I swoop up over the cart and snatch the juiciest one I can, munching on it while I hover there in midair. The instant karmic payoff for helping Azalea takes the edge off of my hunger for the time being. “Thank you,” I say, spraying the ground below me with juice.

Applejack chuckles in reply, and waves as she continues off towards the middle of town. Now that I’ve eaten something, I’m ready to bury myself in weather work for the morning.

Especially if the alternative is thinking about the state my life’s in right now.

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By lunchtime, I’ve burned through that apple which was hardly a satisfying meal anyway, and I’m desperate enough to bite the bullet and go home again. If seeing Kicky again is the price of accessing my refrigerator again, it’s one I’ll just have to pay. Still, my front door is a good deal more intimidating than it usually would be as I quietly open it.

If I can get in and out without running into Kicky, that’s what I’d prefer to do. The living room is empty, so my luck’s holding so far. I’m creeping past the sofa when I hear two muffled voices coming from behind the closed door to the guest room. I go still, considering my options. One of the voices certainly belongs to Kicky, and I can’t quite place the other one although I know I’ve heard it before. I creep over to listen, even though I know the smart thing to do would be to get to the kitchen, grab lunch, and get out instead of eavesdropping.

“And you’re sure she doesn’t suspect the truth?” asks the voice that’s definitely Kicky.



“Well, she knows something’s up with me. I can tell,” replies the other voice. Its owner sounds younger. “But I’ve been keeping an eye on the agent assigned to watch her, and I don’t think she knows anything about that. I’m covering for him, well, her now, but he’s not taking the adjustment very well.”

“Yeah, drones with abilities like the ones he had are always a little funny in the head. Do you think he might try something drastic? I don’t want Fluttershy getting hurt if we can help it.”

If I had any regrets about spying on these two before, the prospect that some harm might befall Fluttershy obliterates them in the span of a single heartbeat. It’s all I can do not to kick open the door then and there as the conversation continues. “I don’t know how much longer I can keep this up, though. There’s a bunch of paperwork I need to do before the end of the school year, and it’s not like ‘Dad’ can come around anymore, not now that you’re stuck with being Cloud Kicker.”

“Well, maybe it’s time to tell the truth then. What’s the worst that could happen?”

The voice scoffs, and I can practically hear her roll her eyes. “Easy for you to say. You’re a pony who used to exist for real. I got a bunch of half-cobbled together instincts, memories and no past. Just an obnoxious case of hero worship for a mare with an ego the size of Canterlot. I know how full of herself she is, but when I’m around her I get so swept up in just... she’s *so amazing*! It’s like I can’t even control myself. At least you got to be a pony who can go around mating with them. It’s like being a hatchling all over again.”

“Well, the ponies say youth is wasted on the young right? That’s not a problem for you anymore.”

“Whatever. I gotta get going if I’m going to get back before the others notice I’m missing.” There are hoofsteps from the other side of the door and the voice draws closer. I debate hiding, but the need to know what danger Fluttershy is in wins out. The door opens, and I get a good look at the third of the six Ponyville changelings. It’s hard to say who’s more surprised to see the other standing there.

“...Scootaloo?”

“Cloudy?” asks Kicky from behind her. As it begins to dawn on both of them that I must have overheard what they were talking about, Scootaloo starts to gasp for air while Kicky just grows increasingly pissed off. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“I *live* here, in case you forgot,” I shoot back, “or did you think you could take that from me too? Where’s the real Scootaloo?”

“Don’t... don’t... I don’t...” Scootaloo stammers.

I don’t give her a chance to collect herself. “Who’s the changeling assigned to Fluttershy? Why would she be in danger? Answer me!”

I grab the filly in front of me and shake her to make her focus. “Cloud, stop that. You’re hurting her,” says Kicky.

“Answer me!” Instead of complying Scootaloo just bursts into tears.

“Cloudy!” Kicky shoves me away. I fall backwards and Kicky puts herself between me and the crying filly. “I told you I’m not going to tell you who they are. And what the buck are you doing spying on us anyway?”

“Don’t you dare try to turn this back around on me. And if Fluttershy’s in trouble that deal is off. Where do you think you’re going?” While my attention was fixed on Kicky, Scootaloo must have thought she could slip away unnoticed, but my foreleg bars her avenue of escape. “Now answer my questions. Where’s the original Scootaloo?”

“You don’t get it. There *isn’t* one.” My anger turns to confusion as Scootaloo’s words sink in. “There wasn’t a filly that we could replace and use to get close to Apple Bloom and her family. So we made one up. Kicky pretended to be my parents when she had to, but otherwise it was just me.”

“By yourself?” I ask.

“I’m a grown changeling. Just because I used the shape of a filly doesn’t mean I actually was one. I can take care of myself.” Her defiant mask slips a bit. “Well, I could then, anyway. Now...”

“Now she’s just a little kid. The Elements didn’t have any template to work off of for her past, so she doesn’t have another set of memories the way Sweetie Drops or I do. Just the basics, as far as we can tell,” finishes Kicky.

That gives me pause for a moment. “Well, you have to tell Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash, probably somepony over at City Hall too.”

As I expected, her eyes go wide with alarm at this. “No way. I’m not telling anypony.”

“You aren’t an adult who can take care of themselves like Kicky or Sweetie Drops. If you don’t tell them, I will.”

“Cloudy, come on. It’s not your place to out her like that,” says Kicky.

“The buck it isn’t. She’s a helpless foal.”

“Hey, I’ve been infiltrating pony societies for longer than you’ve been alive,” says Scootaloo, “I can take care of myself.”

“Sleeping in Fluttershy’s chicken coop is taking care of yourself, is it?”

She grows more agitated the longer I sit there looking down on her. “That’s... that was something else.”

I just glare, but she doesn’t go on. “So explain it,” I eventually prompt.

“It’s none of your business, Cloudy,” says Kicky.

“I’m making it my business. And don’t think I’m not mad at you, too. How long have you been holding these little meetings in my house?”

Kicky’s a bit taken aback by that. “It’s our house, not just yours.”

“Isn’t it? Just decided that, did you? Maybe now that you’re such a big shot with the Guard I’d rather not have you hanging around all the time, ever think of that?” It’s possible that this conversation is rapidly becoming about more than just my being worried about Scootaloo.

Kicky's jaw drops, but her shock becomes anger quickly enough. "Oh, are we doing this now? Are you sure you'd rather not run away again?"

Scootaloo looks back and forth between our two identical glaring faces, confused. "Uh, should I... should I just go?"

She's ignored. "Wasn't enough that you took my shape, and my charity, and all my memories. You want all that and to steal my family away from me too?"

"I'm not stealing anypony from anypony, Cloudy. It's not my fault that they prefer the version of you who isn't a coward."

"*What* did you just call me?"

"You two obviously have a lot to talk about," says Scootaloo, edging her way over to the door. "I'll leave you to it and go... be not here right now." She pulls the door open and takes off outside like a shot. I don't mind; it's not like she can hide what she is if I decide to reveal it, and Kicky here has my full attention.

"I think I was clear a second ago. You. Are. A. Coward. And for some reason you've gotten it into your head that it's my fault."

I growl, and shift into a fighting stance. We never did figure out that first night who would win in a fight, maybe it's time to correct that. "You've got a big mouth for a bug. Maybe once I've knocked a couple of your teeth out it'll be easier for others to tell us apart."

"You're welcome to try," says Kicky, matching my posture with her own.

"I should have tossed you out on your plot the minute I found you. I was doing just fine before you came into my life, and I'll be doing just fine again once I've thrown you out of it."

"You call this fine?" asks Kicky, gesturing to the living room around her. "You're happy with a dead-end job pushing weather around? Gonna keep doing this until your mane's gray and you're still alone? Nopony kicked you out of the clan, Cloud. You pushed them away and now you're doing exactly the same thing again with me. Frankly, it's really annoying."

She pauses to give her next sentence its full effect. “No wonder Mom’s so disappointed by you.”

Had the pounding on my door come even a single second later, I would have been in mid-tackle when I heard it and from there, who knows? But right before I jump her, we’re both distracted by a loud, incessant series of knocks that show no sign of stopping.

“You think that’s Scootaloo again, or did you invite another one of your changeling buddies over?”

Kicky shrugs, a bit of the pre-battle tension seeping away. “No idea. You want to answer it or should I?”

Rather than answer, I trot over and pull the door open. Azalea’s hoof freezes in mid-knock, and she’s grinning wide enough that I think she’s about to explode. “Cloudy!” she cries and pulls me into a powerful hug. “Cloudy Cloudy Cloudy Cloudy Cloudy!”

“Uh, yeah Azalea?”

“And Kicky!” she proclaims, sweeping into the room past me. “Kicky Kicky Kicky Kicky guess what?” She’s bouncing on her hooves with each word, much to Kicky’s bemusement. She doesn’t wait for Kicky’s guess before she answers her own question. “I. Have. *A date!* Not just any date. I’m going on a date with... with...” a fit of giggling steals the last few words away and she collapses with cackling laughter.

“I take it this is good?” asks Kicky, the earlier hostility between us momentarily postponed.

“Not just good, great! It’s with Twilight Sparkle. *Twilight Sparkle!* Applejack is setting us up this weekend.” Her smile vanishes and panic grasps her. “A dress. I have to pick out a dress. And my mane, should I braid it or wear it loose? What about makeup, do you think I should get all made up, or something a bit subtler?”

I grin. Looks like Applejack took my suggestion from earlier. “I’m sure you’ll look great whatever you decide to do, Az. Don’t worry too much.”

“Just... how is this happening? Things like this don’t *happen* to ponies like me. I think I might be dreaming but I’ve already checked three times and as far as I can tell I’m not.”

“Azalea, deep breaths, alright?” says Kicky, placing a comforting hoof on her shoulder. She gets wrapped up in another hug for her trouble.

“You too, Cloudy. Get over here.” After a moment of hesitation I comply and find myself pressed uncomfortably close to the mare I had been planning on beating the snot out of about a minute ago. “Cloudy? Kicky? Thank you.”

Now I’m really confused. “For what?”

“Just for being the two of you,” she responds. “It’s kind of embarrassing to admit, but the truth is that you two inspire me, each in different ways.” She looks me dead in the eyes, and smiles softly. “Cloudy, you are the most open-hearted pony I have ever known. From the day I met you, you’ve been going out of your way to make others welcome, even Kicky here. You don’t even think about it, it’s just who you are. I don’t think you really appreciate how wonderful that is.”

Kicky looks over and studies me for a moment. “She’s right,” she agrees. “I was ready to give up on Ponyville that first night, run off and never come back. If you hadn’t stopped me and let me stay in your house...” she hangs her head, wallowing in the same shame as I am over what we were about to do to one another. And for what?

“And as for you, Kicky,” continues Azalea, oblivious to our discomfort, “if Cloudy’s the most welcoming, you’re the bravest. Just to live out in the open with what you used to be, it’s honestly something I really admire about you. I wouldn’t have the strength to do that.”

“I’m not sure I would, either,” I add. Kicky looks over at me with a tearful expression and a smile. “Oh, and it isn’t my house. It’s ours.”

I hesitate for a moment longer, then slip a wing over her back. It’s the most genuine way for me to tell her that I’m sorry I can think of. When our eyes meet I’m certain she understands and

reciprocates. We still have some stuff to talk through, but I don't feel the urge to tear her throat out whenever I look at her, which must be progress.

The three of us stay there wrapped together in our living room for a moment longer before Kicky clears her throat. "You know, we should all bang just to make sure you're not rusty at it for your date. That's just what good friends we are."

Azalea's giggle tells me that we're all going to be okay. All three of us.

# 'Stalking' Is Such An Ugly Word

## STALKING IS SUCH AN UGLY WORD

I watch Kicky go about pouring herself a cup of tea on the other side of the kitchen table. In the two days since Azalea talked us both down from the ledge we've managed to establish a certain armistice once again. The kiss-and-make-up sessions helped.

Well, more accurately, the kiss-and-grope-and-lick-and-nibble-and-writhe-and-scream-and-make-up sessions helped. My healing process is freakin' amazing, even if it does mean all three of my spare sets of sheets are in my laundry hamper this morning. Totally worth it, though.

"So," says Kicky as she steeps the last dregs of a teabag in the boiling cup.

"So," I reply, and silence descends once more. We've tried to rip off the bandage a couple times and broach the topic that's still hanging between us. Never quite seem to manage to do it. I doubt this time is going to be any—

"I'm joining the Guard again, Cloudy."

Then again, I've been wrong about that sort of thing in the past. I force back the initial knee-jerk wave of revulsion at the idea before I reply to her. "Well, you already know what I think about that."

Seems she's not willing to let it go that easy. "I'd like to know that you were okay with the idea, at least."

"Don't know if I can give you that. Not unless you're fine with me lying to you. It just... I really think you're abandoning this new life of yours without really giving it a fair chance or thinking about what's right for you."

She wrinkles up her muzzle and opens her mouth to fire something back at me, but then closes her eyes and struggles



through a couple of deep inhales and exhales. “Mine to abandon. I just want to know that you aren’t going to freak out again.”

“I didn’t freak out.” Kicky regards me with an openly skeptical glare. “Okay, maybe I freaked out a bit. I just see you about to make a huge mistake and it breaks my heart that you’re going to throw away a good thing.”

Kicky actually chuckles at that for some reason, pouring two mugs of tea and passing one of them to me. I blow over the surface, dissipating the steam rising for the ceiling and staying quiet while I wait for her to go on. “You know who you sounded like just then? Mom.”

It’s a good thing I haven’t taken my first sip of tea yet, because otherwise I’d have spit it up all over the kitchen wall at that. Low blow, Kicky. Low blow. “No I don’t, for reasons that I’m sure will come to me later.” I sigh. “There’s nothing I can say that’ll change your mind at this point, is there?”

“Not really. Besides, I sent my acceptance letter to Glinting Steel with the rest of the mail yesterday. So unless you get Derpy to go digging through the mail to pull it out my fate is sealed. Into the Guard for at least the next couple of years once they start calling us up.”

I have half a mind to do exactly that, but Derpy would never go along with it. There are three ways to make an enemy of that mare for life: Threaten her daughters, tamper with one of her deliveries, or engage in the senseless waste of perfectly good muffins. “Well, I’ll worry about you, and it’ll be a bit weird to go back to living on my own again, but... I guess you’re going to do what you have to do. Come here.” She walks around the table and we get to share a hug. I don’t like the prospect, sure, but I’m not going to make the same mistake Mom did and love her any less. “Don’t go getting yourself killed doing something stupid. You’ll make me look bad by proxy.”

I feel her gentle chuckle rising and falling in her chest and the little puff of air that tickles my coat as she snorts. “Hey now, don’t start writing my eulogy just yet. I don’t know if you’ve

forgotten because of your cushy civvy life, but we're kind of a pair of awesome, flank-kicking whirlwinds of destruction when we want to be."

Have to roll my eyes at that. "You haven't even shown up for training and you're already talking down to civilians? My, how the worm has turned."

"Worm. Changeling. Same difference." The hug ends, and I don't know which one of us appreciated it more. "You know, if you really have gotten used to having a former changeling for a roommate..."

"Absolutely not, Kicky." Ah, yes, the *other* little spat we've been having ever since I stumbled on... okay, fine, eavesdropped on her chat with Scootaloo. "I'm not going to basically adopt a foal. Talk about cramping my style. With the stuff that I get up to with the friends I bring back here? I wouldn't make it three days before she walked in on something she shouldn't."

Kicky, infuriatingly, shrugs. "So? It's not like she doesn't know about that kind of thing. She probably knows a few tricks that not even you've tried yet."

Bad mental picture. *Bad mental picture!* "Luna's plot, Kicky! Don't say stuff like that! That's the kind of comment that gets you banned from coming within 500 feet of schools and playgrounds."

"Well she wasn't a young filly at the time. At least not usually."

That gives me a little comfort, or at least it does until the second sentence registers fully. "What do you mean, 'not usually?'" I suspect that I'm not going to like where this is going.

She shifts uncomfortably on her hooves. "Ponies with certain... socially unacceptable preferences are naturally secretive about them. And usually desperate. And easily blackmailed, if it comes to that. Do the math. Not all love is wholesome."

“Are you seriously telling me that some of you used to feed by \_\_\_”

“Cloudy.” The tone of her voice is flat and harsh as she cuts me off. “Be very, *very*, certain whether or not you really want to know the answer to that question before you ask it.” As if that wasn’t answer enough on its own.

“Are there any ponies like that here in Ponyville?” The lingering silence is deafening.

“Come on, it’s getting late. You need to get ready for work.” She turns to walk away, but with a few beats of my wings I vault over the table and land in front of her, cutting off her escape.

“Not okay, Kicky. Who?”

“Look, it’s being dealt with, alright? I don’t like the idea either, but I’m not about to go around flinging accusations about that sort of thing without any evidence to back it up. Especially not based on some vague, faded, secondhand impression I got through the old hive mind. Let’s say I tell Rainbow Dash that there’s some stallion who has a thing for Scootaloo, putting aside for the moment whether there actually is or not. You want to see a repeat of Flight Camp? Because you know she wouldn’t hear the part where I tell her that I’m not entirely sure.”

I shake my head. It all sounds good, and she’s probably right about Dash. Hell, if Kicky gave me a name right now I probably wouldn’t hesitate to bust through their front door and start asking some very pointed questions, at least. But she isn’t getting off the hook that easily. “This isn’t like keeping the names of other ex-changelings from me, Kicky. I’m not letting this one go that easily.” She stands firm, though. Did she inherit that thick-headed stubbornness from me? “Look, you said it’s ‘being dealt with.’ Can you at least tell me how and by who?”

She hems and haws for a few more seconds, but her resolve is starting to crumble. I briefly wonder how exhausting it must be to carry around so many secrets and so much baggage all of

the time. “Fine. I turned everything I know over to Princess Luna when I talked to her. Good enough?”

Wow. Hadn’t been expecting that. “You talked to Princess Luna? When was this?”

“Me and the others... it’s not always easy to sleep through the night when you start remembering. Luna showed up in the middle of a nightmare I was having about some of the bad times, and it wasn’t hard for her to put two and two together and figure out what I’d been before the Elements did their thing with me.”

My anger softens just a bit. “You didn’t tell me you were having nightmares. Is it something you want to talk about?”

“Hey, I consider myself to have gotten off lightly. Especially compared to...” Damn it. She catches herself right before she was going to let slip a name, and her rueful grin tells me she knows it. “Nice try. They’re getting better, and Luna’s helped. She’s helping all of us, I’m sure. Not sure how she makes the time to be in so many dreams at once, but that’s princess magic for you. Anyway, before the Princesses decided to let us stick around, Luna had all kinds of questions. Information about bases of operation, where the ponies we’d cocooned were hidden, that sort of thing. We weren’t exactly in a position to keep anything from her.”

Now that I think about it, the Guard *had* managed to uncover all those hidden caches and infiltration cells awfully quickly after the invasion. With everything else going on, I hadn’t really thought to question just how they’d done it so efficiently. The fact that all the untransformed drones had gone a little nuts with the loss of their Queen hadn’t hurt either. They hadn’t retreated, they’d been routed. Shoved back into the darkest corners of Equestria, the places nopony wanted to follow them into. So there had been strings attached to the offer of sanctuary, not that I could consider them to be especially objectionable ones. “I guess if the Princesses are satisfied I can’t really complain.”

“Not that you won’t anyway,” mutters Kicky. “Seriously, though. You need to go to work. Let me worry about

Scootaloo and the others, at least until I get called up for training. After that, well, we can cross that bridge when we come to it. Ask Dash if she's seen her lately; she was supposed to meet me last night but she never showed up."

"I will. And Fluttershy too, in case she's still doing odd jobs over there for room and board." I head for the door and take off like a shot as soon as I'm over the threshold. Kicky wasn't wrong about one thing; I'm going to be late. Sure enough, when I stumble into the office Blossomforth is all settled at her desk. Luckily for me, Rainbow Dash is even later. "Morning, Blossom."

She takes a sip of coffee from the beat-up, stained ceramic mug that's a permanent fixture of her desk and waves to me before turning her attention back to the forms in front of her. Dash rearranged the entire weeks weather schedule with barely any notice so that the skies would be clear tonight, coincidentally right after Applejack set up the blind date between Twilight and Azalea. I'm glad she wants their evening to be just right, but it does mean a lot of extra last minute work gets dumped on our team. "Morning, Cloud. Could you take care of the scheduling this morning? I'm up to my wings in fog reports."

"Sure." I reach for my calendar, but then I pause. Replaying the conversation with Kicky from a little while ago in my head, I find myself unable to force the idea of Scootaloo alone and fending for herself away. Experienced changeling or not, she's just a foal. Kinda surprising she'd have picked Rainbow Dash to feed off of when it was the Apples she was keeping an eye on. Unless changelings can feed on how much she loves herself, the poor thing could've starved to death waiting for Dash to notice her. "Blossom? Can I ask you a question?"

"Shoot."

I weigh a few different phrasings in my head before I settle on one that won't give too much away. "For orphans, or ponies who don't have their parents in general..." she tenses up. Still kind of a touchy subject for her, I guess, "...do you think that it makes you more independant? I mean, do you guys learn to take care of yourselves better than other foals your age?"

“Gee,” she grumbles into the forms on her desk, “I’ll have to do a poll at the next meeting of the orphan convention we all go to every year.” She sighs. “There’s not really any one answer. Everypony’s different, obviously. In general, though, I guess... you hold on to the relationships you have a lot tighter? Does that make sense? You do dumb stuff to keep those connections even if it isn’t necessarily the rational thing to do.”

I grin. “I guess that does explain why you still put up with me.”

“Must be.” She smiles back, earlier crankiness already forgotten. “I knew plenty of foals who would act tough and claim that nothing bothered them, but they all cracked every once in a while. And the longer they tried to fake being okay the worse it was when they finally did. This one filly I knew there went through four foster homes in six months and didn’t shed a single tear. Then one day she dropped her ice cream sandwich off a seesaw and she just completely broke down sobbing for ten minutes. No pony really gave her a hard time about it, though. Me, I cried all the time over normal stuff, stubbed hooves, break ups, that kind of thing. Never like that, though. Why the sudden interest anyway?”

“No specific reason, really,” I lie, “just had it kinda stuck in my head and thought I’d ask.”

Blossom shrugs and seems to believe that as she turns back to her work and I do the same. Soon enough other pegasi are showing up to get their assignments and there’s no time to dwell on it. Rainbow Dash’s office is still dark and empty. It isn’t so unusual for her to sleep in and stumble in mid-morning, but when we’re coming up on lunch time with no sign of her I start to wonder if something’s wrong.

When the office door bursts open to reveal a panting, sweaty Rainbow Dash my worries are confirmed. “Hey, have either of you two seen Scootaloo since yesterday morning?”

I hate being right sometimes.

“I haven’t,” says Blossomforth. “Why?”

“She asked me to come do some tricks over by the school during recess. Guess she wanted to make sure all the other foals appreciated how awesome I am,” says Dash. Even in a crisis, she’s still herself. “She wasn’t there and Cheerilee said she’s been absent the last two days. Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle haven’t seen her either. Know anything about it?”

I can think of one pony who might, but explaining why I need to talk to Kicky *right bucking now* would probably lead me to a road that I’m not quite ready to travel down just yet. I did promise her I’d keep my trap shut about Scootaloo, for now. That’s starting to look like one promise I won’t be able to keep. “Want me to take a quick pass around town and see if I spot her?” Not that I will if she doesn’t want to be found, but it’s almost-kinda the truth about where I’ll be going. “I’m mostly done with paperwork, most of it just needs your hoofprint and it’ll be official. Plus I can get a jump on other stuff while I’m out there.”

Rainbow looks like she’s about to tell me to buck off, but then she glances at Blossom’s worried face and the pile of documents on her desk. “...Fine. But if you find her, tell her she needs to find me or Cheerilee or... I don’t know. Just tell her she can’t disappear like that. It freaks other ponies out.” She starts pacing back and forth across the room, her wings twitching in irritation. “I mean, she knows she can talk to me about stuff if something’s bugging her, y’know? Anything. She totally knows that. Totally.”

Obviously not about anything, but dangling a lead like that in front of Dash would be like holding bloody meat in front of a tiger. And even if I were to out her like that, I’m not sure how it would help us track her down. Maybe Kicky will have some ideas. I leave the job of soothing Dash’s worries to Blossom and head for my house, only to find it empty. Bon Bon’s shop is a dead end as well. It isn’t until I show up to Azalea’s house that I finally find her.

“Oh, hi Cloud,” says Azalea when she answers the door. I’m distracted by the assortment of foil and strange protrusions sticking out from her mane, and she notices. “Just thought I’d touch myself up a bit for the big date tonight. Ooooh I’m

already getting nervous, and it's not even starting for hours! If Kicky weren't here helping me pick stuff out I might just explode."

"It's gonna be great, Az, Twilight's not going to be able to take her eyes off of you. Kicky's here, though? I'm actually looking for her."

"Come on in," she says, stepping aside. Walking into her living room, I realize that this is the first time I've been in Azalea's house since the night of the invasion, and the first time I've seen it fully decorated. A couple of things jump out at me. I hadn't ever noticed before, but all the furniture is new and very clearly store-bought. I guess she didn't load any of the furniture from her old house onto that wagon she dragged all the way from Trottingham. I can't blame her for wanting to save weight, but it's odd not to have *anything*. Even I managed to snag my favorite chair when I left Canterlot, and I didn't exactly leave on the best of terms. Before I can puzzle out the significance of that Kicky appears from the bedroom door. "Hey Cloud, what's up? Shouldn't you be at work?"

Azalea pushes past her, her mind elsewhere. "I'm still not sure about the dress. I want to try the blue one on again. If the two of you need me, I'll be in the closet."

"I'm telling you, the red one's a winner," says Kicky as Azalea disappears again, muttering to herself about ribbons and colors. "Everything alright, Cloud?"

I want to jump right into the missing former changeling, but something stops me. "Ever notice Azalea doesn't have any pictures of her family hanging anywhere? What's up with that?"

"Did you seriously skip out of work to come over and ask me that?" asks Kicky, raising a skeptical eyebrow. "Probably doesn't mean anything."

I guess she's right, and there's more important stuff to talk about. "Scootaloo's missing."

Kicky bites her lower lip. "Horseapples, I was afraid she might bolt after you... you know. I talked to her the other day,



though, and I thought I'd talked her out of it. Still, forty years of experience as a changeling is telling her 'uncovered equals get out' right now, and that's not easy to ignore."

"Any idea where she'd go?"

Kicky shrugs. "She was the highest-ranked drone on our little team. With a full day's head start she could be halfway to Fillydelphia by now, Celestia knows she's resourceful enough. Honestly, if she doesn't want to be found..." she trails off.

I'm not accepting that answer. "You want to explain that to Rainbow Dash? Because I'm sure not going to."

"I can ask around. Maybe one of the others knows something."

Kicky glance over her shoulder to the closet where Azalea's trying on outfits for tonight, probably just to make sure she's not listening in. "If she told anyone, it would be..."

"Who? Come on, Kicky, this is important."

Kicky just shakes her head. "Just keep an eye out around town." She calls back over her shoulder. "Azalea? I have to go check on something. I'll be back in time to help you with your braids, though."

Her head pops out from the closet, wearing a worried expression. "Why? Did something happen?"

"Scootaloo's missing," I explain. Azalea's face flashes with genuine surprise and... something else I can't place. "Don't worry about it, you've got a date to focus on and we've got this covered. If she does come to you, though, let somepony know."

She chuckles, but it's a nervous chuckle. "Why would she come to me? I barely know her."

"Just covering all the bases," I say. She gives me a curt nod, then disappears back into the closet.

Kicky and I walk outside, but I stop her before she can take off. "So where are you going?"

"Fluttershy's."

"I'll lead the way."

She shakes her head. “No way. I already have to figure out a way to sneak over and have a conversation without Fluttershy realizing it. You know the drill.”

“The drill is starting to hurt ponies. Dash won’t admit it, but she’s freaking out. Now you’re lying to Fluttershy, and who knows what kind of danger you’re putting Scootaloo in?”

Kicky doesn’t answer for a long moment. “Do you think I enjoy this? All the sneaking around and hiding? Because I don’t. It’s the exact opposite of what I’m trying to become, but it’s not just about me. I’m not putting my family in danger.”

“That may have been true before, but things are changing, Kicky. At some point you’re just keeping secrets for the sake of keeping them. And if that’s going to get ponies hurt it’s not something I want to be a part of.”

She shakes her head and glared, then lifts off and starts hovering above me. “It isn’t your call to make. Don’t follow me.” She puts on all the speed she’s got and streaks away towards Fluttershy’s cottage, leaving me alone and feeling useless. I sigh and head for the lake to start putting together a mid-afternoon drizzle. Maybe I can push it up a few hours so things will have a chance to dry out before Azalea’s date with Twilight.

An hour later I’m pushing a few rainclouds into position over the schoolhouse when the bell tolls, marking the beginning of recess. Fillies and colts pour out to play, and I’m about to leave the clouds for the time being and come back once they’re done. No sense raining out their playtime, after all, and Cheerilee will appreciate not having a couple hundred muddy hoofprints to clean up later. Then something catches my eye. At the rear of the pack, their shoulders slumped with melancholy as they trudge outside after their classmates, are Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle. The usually exuberant pair trots over to the swing set and just sit down there, more still than I can remember ever seeing them. Another colt comes up with a ball and asks them something, but Apple Bloom just shakes her head and he walks away disappointed. A minute later, as I watch, Sweetie Belle snuffles and wipes at her eyes.

Buck this.

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“Oh, Cloudy,” says Fluttershy as she opens her cottage door. “I didn’t know you were coming by. My goodness, I can’t remember the last time I’ve had two visitors come all the way out here on the same day just by coincidence. We’re just sitting down for tea if you’d like to join us.”

“I’d love to,” I say, flashing that winning Kicker smile as I step inside. She blushes. Nice to know I’ve still got it. I step into her living room and Kicky looks up at me from the table, her muzzle wrinkling when she processes that it’s me. “Hi Kicky. Fancy seeing you here.”

“What are the odds,” she says through gritted teeth. “Especially since you’re supposed to be at work.”

“I’m sure Rainbow Dash wouldn’t mind me taking a break to visit a friend, would she?” My plastered-on smile doesn’t waver in the face of her barely suppressed irritation, but she’s keeping it in check for now.

“Let me get you a cup and saucer, I’ll be right back.” Fluttershy disappears into her kitchen.

That’s all the opportunity Kicky needs. “What the buck are you doing here, Cloudy? I told you not to follow me.”

“Tough. If there’s information that could help us find Scootaloo here, I’m not letting you cut me out of the loop like this. And if this drone is dangerous to Fluttershy I’m not going to put up with you keeping it a secret from her.”

Kicky groans, frustrated, but I’ve made up my mind. “She’s not... look, the Elements changed us, and we ended up picking up all the social conditioning, nature, upbringing, all the stuff on how to be, well, nice from the pony lives of the ones we were copying, right?”

I nod. The details on just how that worked escape me, but I can wrap my head around the end result easily enough. “Yeah. So?”

“So not all species are as nice as ponies are. And the changeling we put here—”

“I hope that jasmine is fine,” says Fluttershy, reemerging as Kicky clams up again. She balances a cup and saucer in her hooves and slowly carries it over to where I’m seated. “I was just giving Kicky an update on some of my critter friends. She’d just asked about—”

“Wow, isn’t it scary how Scootaloo just up and disappeared like that?” interrupts Kicky, ignoring the small frown on Fluttershy’s face as she retreats behind her mane. “Fluttershy, those cookies were delicious. Are there any more?”

“Um... I can check.” Fluttershy leaves the table again, and we pick up our emphatically whispered argument right where we left off.

“So you had an animal watching her? I didn’t know you could copy those.”

Kicky shrugs. “Most of us can’t. The Queen put a specialist on it. My point is, he didn’t get pony morality from the Elements.”

Wow. That’s way worse than I thought. “So you mean there’s some kind of predator out there with drone-level intelligence and a grudge against Fluttershy? And you weren’t going to tell me? What the actual buck.”

“Would you shut up and let me explain? I’m telling you, she’s not in any—”

“I found a few more cookies, if you don’t mind splitting them.” Fluttershy returns to the table and places two big oatmeal cookies between us. “As you were saying, yes, I heard from Rainbow Dash that she was missing. I hope everything’s alright.” She hangs her head. “If only I had tried harder to get her to talk to me.”

“You’re the last pony who needs to blame herself over this, Fluttershy,” I say with what I hope is a reassuring pat on her back. Then I glare across the table. “Isn’t that right, Kicky? I can think of a few other ponies who should be feeling worse about her going missing. Any thoughts?”

Kicky abruptly stands up from the table. "...I need to use the restroom," she eventually says, walking deeper into the cottage.

"Oh my, did I say something to upset her?" asks Fluttershy.

"I'm sure she's just a little stressed out right now, it's nothing you did."

"She was sneaking around behind the cabin when I found her. I tried to get her attention, but, um, I think I may have snuck up on her. She nearly took off when I tapped her on the back."

I smile at the mental image. Only Fluttershy could out-quiet an ex-changeling by accident. "Do you know who she was looking for?"

She shakes her head. "I'm not sure."

I sit there enjoying the tea and the company until Kicky finally returns. "Sorry it took so long. Fluttershy, I noticed there's a loose board in the wall of your chicken coop. Want me to fix it while I'm here?" She gives me a pointed look. "You don't need to stick around for that, Cloudy. I know you're busy."

"That board's loose again? I hope Elizabeak hasn't been pecking at it. She's just been so much trouble lately.

I bet she has, especially if she's figured out one of the other animals has it out for her owner. "Any idea why she's doing that?"

"I think it's probably because she's upset about not being a changeling anymore," says Fluttershy. Stunned silence falls over Kicky and myself, bringing silence to the cabin as Kicky and I both gape at Fluttershy, who's sitting there quietly sipping her tea. "This needs a bit of sugar, I think. Would either of you like some as well?"

Kicky ignores the question. "Wait, you *know*?"

Fluttershy wilts a bit at her tone, and I shoot her a warning glance. "Was I not supposed to know? I'm sorry. She just started acting so oddly after I came back from Canterlot and the invasion. It wasn't hard to figure out."

The china rattles as Kicky's forehead meets the surface of the table. Repeatedly. "She doesn't know that you know."

"She doesn't?" asks Fluttershy, genuinely confused. "She's been so rude lately, I'm not sure who she thought she was fooling."

"So... you're okay with this?" I ask. "I mean a bunch of ponies were freaking out when they found out about Kicky here."

"I don't mind. Is that why you really came here, Kicky? To talk to Elizabeak?"

Kicky sighs. "Yeah, I think she might know what happened to Scootaloo, or where she is."

Fluttershy gasps, and gets a rather angry and disappointed look on her face. "And you didn't tell me right away? Kicky, I'm surprised at you. I'll go get her right now."

"Sorry Fluttershy," Kicky calls after her as she walks out the front door, leaving the two of us alone. Well, alone other than the pair of otters watching us from where they're perched on the arm of a nearby couch. "Well, so much for all the secrecy, I guess."

"So that's what you were worried about me finding out? That Fluttershy is raising an evil chicken?"

"More or less, yeah."

Huh. I'm starting to see why she didn't really feel like I needed to know. "So, when you say she's evil, what exactly does that mean?"

Before Kicky can answer, Fluttershy returns with Elizabeak on her back. "Now Elizabeak," she begins in her most authoritarian tone, which just barely raises her statement to the threshold of 'gentle suggestion,' "I'd like you to answer these ponies' questions. I know you know Kicky, and they're both good friends of mine, so please be on your best behavior."

From her perch, Elizabeak lets out a cavalcade of hoots and squawks, spreading her wings for added emphasis. Fluttershy's mouth makes a hard, thin line across her face as she frowns.

“No Elizabeak, we *do not* threaten to disembowel our friends and wear their intestines as a necklace. It’s very rude.”

Another long series of clucks. “Nice ponies don’t bathe in the blood of a thousand foals. That wouldn’t even get you clean, and it would be a waste of all that blood that ponies were nice enough to donate to the hospital.” She turns to us. “Kicky, you can go ahead and ask your question whenever you’re ready.”

“Umm...” It’s pretty obvious that this isn’t quite how Kicky had expected this to go. “Did Scootaloo tell you where she was going before she ran off? She’s missing.”

Fluttershy translates the answer for us. “She says no. Well, no and that you and the rest of the race-traitors will face judgement and destruction before the might of the reborn swarm. I think she’s a little cranky.”

Kicky sighs. “Well, this was a dead end then. Sorry for wasting your time, Fluttershy.”

She smiles. “Not at all. It was wonderful to see you both. I just wish Elizabeak and I could have been more help.” Another cluck. “Elizabeak says goodbye too. More or less.”

“Yeah I need to get back and help Azalea get ready for her date tonight, and Cloudy really should get moving on the weather.” I nod my agreement. All this worry over Scootaloo has me behind schedule.

“I can’t tell you how much Twilight’s been looking forward to that. I think she had a bit of a rough time in Canterlot, and a happy night is just what she needs right now.” Kicky and I move to leave until Fluttershy speaks up again. “Kicky.” She freezes in her tracks. “Scootaloo’s one too, isn’t she? Like you and Elizabeak. And you knew, but you didn’t tell me even though I could have helped her.”

She winces under the simple statement of fact, but there’s no point in denying in. Instead she just nods.

“I see. Once we find her and we know that she’s safe, the three of us need to sit down and have a very long talk. Understand me?”

“I was just trying to respect her privacy, Eepy,” she replies.

“We’ll talk about it later. Go help Azalea.” She waves goodbye to us, and Kicky closes the door behind us before visibly deflating. That mare has a way of sucking all the wind out from under your wings with a few well-placed words.

“So we’re back to square one, I guess,” I say. Kicky sighs, and I feel a little twinge of pity for her situation. “Hey, we’ll find her. But first we have a friend we need to get laid.”

Kicky lets out a little chortle, and a bit of her old swagger returns. “She just needs a pep talk and a helping hoof getting her mane ready. Twilight’s barely gonna know what hit her. She’s got this.”

“Yeah, probably,” I agree. A moment passes. “We are going to spy on them though, right?”

“Well, obviously.”

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And so, one lone cloud manages to find its way over the Golden Oaks library just a few minutes before Azalea’s set to arrive to pick up Twilight. The ideal platform for concealing the two of us within its fluffy depths without being noticed by anypony who might happen to look up. The surface ripples as Kicky lands on it, while I’m already wrapped up in its underside looking out a window in the bottom while I munch on some popcorn. “Am I late? Is she here?”

“Nope, right on time,” I reply as I scoot over to make room for her. “How was Az when you left?”

“Nervous, but gorgeous,” says Kicky.

“Alright, then let operation ‘Bang the Bookworm’ commence.” I pass her the popcorn and she wordlessly takes a hoofful and chomps down on it. “Any new leads on Scootaloo?”

She sighs. “I wish. There’s no sign of her around town. She’s definitely not here anymore, but I don’t know where she went. Call it a hunch, but I doubt she bolted to start over in a new city, though. Not without more planning and support.”



I think about that. “Is there somepony else she might have talked to? You said there were six, and we know about Bon Bon, you, Scootaloo, and...” I just barely suppress a snigger, “...Elizabeak. What about the other two? I’m not asking for names, but would either of them have access to money or resources to give to her?”

“Sorry, Cloudy. No hints. Privacy is important to me. Now be quiet; Azalea’s coming and I want to watch her and Twilight flirt.”

Azalea is indeed walking up the road towards the library. She must have settled on the red dress Kicky suggested, and her mane is tied up in two braids with ribbons on the end of each. She looks fantastic. If Twilight passes her up, that parrot was a dirty, dirty liar. “Wow, you weren’t kidding. You must have pulled out all the stops.”

“For Azalea’s dream date? Of course I did,” says Kicky. “I just... she deserves this. Everypony deserves at least a shot at landing their dream mare, and she’s had a rough couple months.”

I frown at that. “She has? She didn’t say anything to me about something like that.”

“Just take my word for... oh for Celestia’s sake!”

I follow her gaze down to the ground. Azalea is standing in front of the library door and hesitating. Her hoof hangs in midair, but she’s not knocking. “What’s she doing?” My question is answered a second later as she lowers her hoof to the ground and takes a slow step back from the door. She’s chickening out.

“No, Az, come on,” whispers Kicky, trying to will her to make a different decision. “She’s gonna love you, just knock on the bucking door.”

I don’t bother whispering. I’m more of a mare of action, and she’s just turning away from the library when I drop down in free fall and land next to her. The loud ‘thump’ startles her enough to look over at me. “Cloudy? What are you doing here?”

“What am *I* doing? What are *you* doing? Knock!”

She snuffles and shakes her head. “This was all a mistake. Twilight isn’t going to—”

She probably has a whole self-pitying monologue all ready to go, but rather than listen to it I just raise a hoof and rap three times on the door. She openly gapes at me, but I just grin back. “Good luck,” I say before I shoot back into the air right as I hear the latch click from the inside. I disappear from sight and just hear Spike greeting her below before I nestle myself back up in the cloud next to a stunned Kicky. “Alright, Azalea. Showtime.”

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One successful date later, Kicky and I catch up with a beaming Azalea just as she hops up and does a little midair pirouette, dancing to music only she’s hearing. Her eyes are closed, and Kicky and I swap goofy grins as we wait for her to notice us. After five full minutes of waiting we decide to hurry it along a bit. “I take it you had a good night?”

Her eyes snap open, but the smile doesn’t go anywhere. “I was ready to kill you when you knocked on that door and then disappeared like that, you know.”

I shrug. “Sometimes the best way to learn to fly is to get thrown off a cliff. You’d never have forgiven yourself if you’d bailed on her.”

“I almost did again there in the restaurant. I’m in the middle of telling her about the time my roommates at the university accidentally released a colony of salamanders into the walls of our dorm when she stops paying attention, shouts something about a fork, and starts scribbling formulas on her napkin. She’s just....”

“Look, Azalea,” says Kicky, “if you’re going to date her, you need to understand that she’s completely bonkers. Not, like, in a bad way. But she’s nuts.”

Azalea bristles at that. “She’s not crazy, she’s just smart.”

“Do you know what she was doing right after you kissed her goodnight and left?”

“What?”

“She started talking to the bush next to her front door.”

She pauses to consider that. “Okay, so maybe she’s odd. But she’s also... I mean, *wow!* After we left the restaurant and went to the park it was just... I’ve never felt like that before. Ever. Like I mattered to a pony who’s important.”

Kicky scoffs. “What are we, chopped liver?”

She goes a bit pale, and shakes her head so hard that her sole remaining braid finally gives up the ghost and comes undone. “Of course not! But I thought she’d be this impossible, unapproachable pony and she’s not. It just blew me away how *normal* she was. I mean, we went out to dinner and for a walk in the park like any couple might.” It doesn’t escape my notice that a little shiver of glee runs down her spine at the word ‘couple.’ “I can wrap my head around that. I half expected she’d take me to retrieve some ancient artifact from an underwater temple or something as our date, but she’s not like that once you get to know her.”

My grin gets wider. “Wow. You’ve got it bad for her, don’t you? You should have asked if you could come inside and spend the night.”

Azalea’s earlier glee vanishes, and with the facade of confidence stripped away all the energy and nerves she spent the night suppressing rise right to the surface. “She asked if I wanted to, actually. I turned her down.”

“You turned her down? Why?”

“I just...” she trails off.

“Some ponies don’t bang on the first date, Cloud. Lay off,” says Kicky.

Their loss. “I didn’t feel like spending the night. Maybe after a couple more dates I’ll feel ready, but not yet.”

I just shrug. While I’d assumed that she would have jumped at the chance to get Twilight between her legs based on the way she talked her up these last couple weeks, it’s her choice. “Are you two going to see one another again?”

“Yep! Do you think I should come over tomorrow and set something up?”

Kicky shakes her head. “I’d give her a few days so you don’t look desperate. Three days is a good general rule.” Then she gets a proud smile and trots over to hug Azalea. “Told you that you could do this. This is who you are now, okay? Don’t forget that.”

“I won’t,” says Azalea, returning her hug. “Thanks for everything, girls. Now if you don’t mind, I need to get home. I’m beat.”

“Of course,” says Kicky, releasing her. She starts to walk away.

“Oh, Azalea? One more thing,” I say. She turns to look back at me. “I told you that the ‘checking out the librarian’ thing was a good line.” She groans, rolls her eyes, and continues on her way leaving Kicky and I standing in the middle of the road. “Tonight was a good night.”

“Yeah, it was,” says Kicky. We turn down a side street to head back home ourselves. “Tomorrow, though? Tomorrow we have a filly to save.”

# Snap Out Of It

## SNAP OUT OF IT

The morning after Azalea's date, the pleasant fuzzy feelings of seeing her happy have faded away in the harsh light of day. It doesn't help that Rainbow Dash has summoned pretty much every pony who works for the weather team into the office, and we've had to bring in a bunch of extra chairs for the all-hooves-on-deck emergency in progress. Even Fluttershy showed up.

"Right!" says Rainbow Dash, bringing the small talk in the room to a halt. "Weather, schmeather. Today your job is to find Scootaloo, or at least any trace of where she went."

"Uh... boss?" asks Blossom, raising a tentative hoof.

She's ignored. "Alright, yesterday we covered most of the middle of town so today we're going to focus more on the outskirts. If there's even an orange feather laying out in a field somewhere I want to know about it."

"Rainbow," says Blossom with a bit more force.

Finally Dash has something else to fixate on besides her plan. She glares at Blossom with a look of aggression that does a barely passable job of concealing the worry underneath it. "What?"

Under the biting edge in her voice, Blossom's confidence withers a bit. "It's just—" she waves a vague hoof towards her own cheek, "—you've got red on you."

Several of the other pegasi snicker and turn away. No pony missed the sticky red patch, with a little purple and yellow at its edge, that's staining her coat right below her cheekbone. Rainbow Dash turns away for a moment and rubs furiously at it. "Did I get it?" Nods all around. "Thanks. I went over to Twilight's this morning and kinda got slapped in the face with a rainbow. Thought I'd gotten it all.

Oh gee. That explains everything. “So Twilight’s in on the hunt too?” I ask.

Rainbow Dash hesitates. “I kinda... didn’t mention this to her.” The room collectively groans. “Look, if we don’t have a lead by tonight I’ll bring her in on it. She’s got this whole other *thing* going on right now, even has a specialist on time spells crashing at her library while they figure it out. Real egghead stuff.”

“She’d still be helpful, though,” says Flitter.

“I know, I know,” says Dash. Then she sighs. “Thing is... I’m the one who let her down. Somehow. I don’t know why she ran off, but it’s my fault for missing the signs. Maybe it’s stupid, but it’s partly my mess and I’m going to be the one to clean it up.”

Blossom nods. “You’re right. That *is* stupid.”

I’m about to weigh in on Blossom’s side of the conversation when the office door opens up to reveal Kicky.

“Thanks for coming, Kicky. Grab a chair,” says Dash.

“Sorry I’m late. I wanted to do a quick loop around town and it took a bit longer than I thought it would.” She doesn’t come into the room, though. “Actually, could I borrow Cloud for a bit?”

Dash’s eyes go wide. “Did you find something?”

“Nothing that’s a sign of Scootaloo, sorry,” says Kicky. “Still, there’s something I want her to weigh in on.”

That grinding sound? Rainbow Dash’s teeth working out her frustration. “Fine. Cloudy, go see what clone-you found, but if it turns out to be at all related to Scoots I want to hear about it ASAP.”

I hop out of my chair, which is immediately claimed by another pegasus I don’t know very well, and follow Kicky up to the roof. “Grab your saddlebags and a cloud. We’ll need a decent hiding spot.”

Now more confused than ever, I go along with what she asks. Soon the two of us are pushing a thick tuft of cumulus out of

town, following the main road. When we're about a quarter mile from the point where the road splits off towards the Everfree Forest, Kicky slams on the brakes. "Okay, from here on out we're in stealth mode. We're just another cloud drift along in the breeze."

"You want to let me in on what all this is about?" I ask. I get that she might feel like there's stuff she doesn't want to broadcast to every pony in town with wings, but I'd also like to know what I'm getting into.

"I'm only, like, seventy percent sure about this," says Kicky as she burrows into the cloud. "For all I know, he might not even be there anymore."

"Who? Where?" I am so lost in all this, and I don't like it.

"Just keep an eye out. Blue unicorn stallion, hanging out right where the road forks. And if he is there, make sure he doesn't see you."

We dig into the cloud and with a few gentle flaps start flowing along with the breeze. At our leisurely pace it takes us a good ten minutes to cover the remaining distance. I try to wheedle more information out of Kicky, but every time I try to speak up she shushes me. Finally we're over the spot Kicky wants and I chance a peek down.

There's a pony down there, but not the one Kicky described. She's a red earth pony, and looks like she could easily be Fire Brand's cousin or even sister. Her *way hotter* cousin or sister. She's got a worried look on her face and she begins to pace back and forth, limping a bit and favoring one of her forelegs, which has a bandage wrapped at the ankle.

"She's hurt. We should help her," I say, only to get a hoof shoved into my mouth for my trouble. When Kicky pulls it away I give her an incredulous glare. "Oh, come on. Forget this stallion of yours, this is a golden opportunity. Just think of how grateful she'll be when two gorgeous young mares descend from the heavens and carry her off for some... hooves-on therapy."

“No bucking kidding,” mutters Kicky. “Remember how I said seventy percent? Make it ninety-five. Now *be quiet!*”

And so begins what may go down as the greatest tragedy of our age as I’m forced to watch the mare below me pace back and forth looking absolutely delicious while my evil twin here forbids me from doing anything to remedy that. The torture goes on for a good twenty minutes and I’m about to ask her why we’re even here in the first place when my ears perk up. Somepony’s coming down the road heading towards Ponyville. Soon enough a green unicorn stallion with a streak of black in his blue mane enters my field of vision. Judging by the way he’s trying very hard and very unsuccessfully not to stare at the mare, I’m pretty sure he’s straight. The mare waves him over and says something I can’t make out. “Did you catch that?”

“I’m sure I can figure out the gist.” Kicky switches to a falsetto. “Oh, no, I was on my way back from the nymphomaniac convention when I tripped and sprained my hoof! How can I continue my career as an erotic masseuse now?”

I grin and drop the register of my voice to play the other part. “Well, you shouldn’t irritate it any more. Climb up on me and you can ride me as long as you want.”

Kicky gives a fake gasp and clasps her hooves to her chest. “Oh goodness! Thank Celestia a big, strapping stallion came by. I hope it won’t be too long, or too hard.”

We both chuckle like we’re back in grade school while the flirtation below continues. The mare tosses her mane and a few strands of it land on his back while she locks her eyes onto his. His go wide for a second, but then a vacant grin spreads over his face. “That lucky bastard.”

“Not really,” says Kicky. I’m about to ask her why when the mare gets to her hooves suddenly and turns. Not towards Ponyville, though. Towards the Everfree. “Just like I thought. You’re hungry aren’t you, scumbag?”

Whoa. There’s a growl rumbling away in the back of Kicky’s throat. “Ex-fillyfriend of yours?” I ask, even though I’m pretty



sure I can guess the real reason she's upset.

"She's a changeling. Not a former one like me, either. Pretty bold of her to come this close to town looking for a snack."

I frown. "I thought the Elements took care of them."

"Not all of us," says Kicky. "Remember how I told you Luna picked our brains for hidden caches, outposts, that kind of thing? Well there's a cave in the Everfree we used to use as a staging area. It was empty when they checked it right after the invasion, but if there are marauding changelings looking for food around Ponyville, that's where those things will probably be."

There's a degree of barely suppressed fury in her eyes that I don't like the look of one bit. "So why did you drag me out here? Tell the Guard."

"I wanted to be sure first. A whole division of the Guard would spook them from a mile away. I'm surprised they didn't hear the two of us, frankly. You ponies can't move quietly for the life of you, not like us. I guess you've never needed to learn."

I sigh, not willing to rise to her bait. "Like we didn't have enough to worry about already."

"There's more. And it has to do with the reason I didn't want Rainbow Dash to know why I pulled you off the search." She bites her lip. "If Scootaloo went into the Everfree when she left town... the cave's where she would probably head, at least as a stopover. If she did and the others found her..." she doesn't finish the sentence. She doesn't really need to.

"Well then what the buck are we waiting for? Let's go get her back!"

Opening up a hole in the cloud with a quick swipe, I jump through to chase after the couple below. Or that's the idea, anyway, but I don't get far before I feel a set of teeth chomping down on my tail and a hoof twisting my wing. It's all I can do to stifle the yelp that would give the game away as Kicky yanks me back. "Thtop, Clow," she manages despite the mouthful of tail. When I stop struggling, she spits it out and

continues. “Not that easy. They could have dragged her somewhere else after they caught her. They’ve gotta be starving; hypnotising a stallion in broad daylight like that one just did is a desperation play. So if they have Scootaloo they’re probably...” she shudders, “...they’ll stretch her energy out until they’re sure they’ve wrung every drop they can. We have to play this smart, and we might not get another chance. That’s why I didn’t tell Rainbow. She’d be trying to beat the answers out of that drone right now, and the others would be long gone by the time she got any.”

“Fine, we’ll do this your way. What’s the plan?” I ask, taking another glance downwards. The mare’s lured the stallion along at a quick pace, and he cheerfully trots behind her like a feeble-minded puppy. In the distance, the dark forest looms.

“You’re going to follow them, *quietly*, and I’m going back for reinforcements. No matter what you see in there, don’t move on them until we meet up again. Changeling hives have plenty of back doors and we don’t know how many there are.”

“How are you going to find me in there?”

Kicky smiles and rifles through her bag, eventually pulling out a tiny pink gemstone. “I borrowed a little something from Star that’ll take care of that. Pretty much any unicorn that knows what they’re looking for should be able to hone in on this, once I’ve given them all the frequency information Star told me. Otherwise I’d follow them myself and send you to get the others. You up for this?”

“Do I have a choice?” I take the gem and fasten it under the clasp of my saddle bags. “Any tips?”

She ponders that for a moment. “She’ll be pretty focused on keeping a hold on her prey for the walk back. Just stick to the canopy and keep your distance. That stallion isn’t in any state to be moving quietly, so you should be able to follow them by sound. Oh, and try not to get eaten by anything while you’re in there. You know as well as I do there are way scarier things in that forest than a few drones.”

“Sounds like fun,” I mutter. To little avail as Kicky’s already taken to the air and started to glide back towards town, her

open wings balancing stealth and speed. Not that the changeling disguised as a mare is paying attention. Even from here I can see in the way she trots with a spring in her step how pleased she is with herself, the oblivious stallion far too deeply enthralled to question why he's being led into the one place every pony in their right mind is smart enough to avoid.

As I push my cloud along above them, the uncomfortable realization that I'm not all that different from him in that regard intrudes into my mind. But past identity issues aside, I do trust Kicky. And she certainly wasn't faking the hatred in her voice. So follow I do into the dark and foreboding woods.

It's a good thing the clumsy stallion crashes hopelessly through the underbrush. I've almost lost them before my eyes adjust to the low light, drifting between treetops and trying not to brush up against any of the vines or other flora that hangs in my path. I've heard far too many horror stories about things that live in here. The after-action reports some of the Long Patrol filed about all the nasty things a pony caught unawares could be devoured by, or worse. Or all the patrols that simply vanished in places like this without a trace.

Our slow-motion chase continues for what feels like the better part of an hour. Kicky must have picked up my trail by now and ended up somewhere behind me, but I can't hear any sign of her or the guards. If something happens, I'm on my own.

I'm so wrapped up in trying not to let my imagination get the better of me I almost miss noticing when the noise in front of me stops. Cautiously, I creep along in the last direction I heard anything from. Sure enough, half-covered by undergrowth that's been pushed aside, I find a wide crack in a rock formation leading down into yet-deeper blackness. Now there's nothing to do but wait for backup.

At least that's the original plan, before I catch the scent wafting out of the cave. It's damp and earthy as I would expect, but underneath that is something else. Something enticing. Something familiar.

I've smelled that smell before, I know I have. But for some reason I can't place it. Every time I get close, little flashes of

the figure that was the source of it before, it slides away and just leaves a sticky, oily sensation where there should be clarity. The harder I try to grab at it, the more my head begins to hurt.

It's only when a trio of voices rouse me from my fragmented memories that I realize I've stepped inside the cave. The entrance is already several paces behind me, but I don't remember deciding to walk in. Maybe if I get closer to whatever that smell is I'll be able to remember...

"You're so kind to bring me here to the hospital. I'm sure it's just a sprain, though," says a female voice from further inside the cave.

"My... my pleasure... to bring you here... here to... to the hospital. Is... are we in the right place? Wait... where are we? Who are you?" That must be the stallion, struggling to force words out through whatever the changelings are doing to him. Must be quite the mind-whammy if he thinks the inside of a cave is actually the bright and sterile waiting room of a hospital.

"Don't worry, we're in exactly the right place," says the mare. Her voice takes on a bit of a pout. "It's me, Scarlet. Don't you remember your own marefriend? Don't you remember how much you love me?"

"How much... of course I do, Scarlet. Of course I love you."

'Scarlet' lets out a long moan. "Say it again."

The dark tunnel is lit up with a flash of green light, wiping out what little progress I've made in adjusting my sight to the darkness, and a new female voice joins the two of theirs.

"Welcome to Ponyville General Hospital! Do you need some... attention?"

Before the stallion can respond to the new voice, Scarlet lets out an angry hiss. "Back off, this one's mine. You can have whatever's left over when I'm finished. And really, the naughty nurse routine? Was sexy librarian not cliché enough?"

"Cut me a break. The filly's barely keeping me going." That sends a shudder down my spine. Looks like Kicky's hunch

was on the mark after all. Now if she'd just hurry up and get here. And that smell just won't quit.

"Scarlet? What are you talking about? Maybe I should see a doctor too. My head... my head hurts so much..."

"Ignore her. I'll make you feel better. Come over here and lay down. That's it. No need to fight it. Just let all those pesky thoughts slip away and listen to the sound of my voice."

"Eww! What is this stuff? It's sticking all over my coat."

"I said lay down. You'll be safe. Just focus on your love for me. You love me, Box Spring. Just focus on how much you love me. How much you want to give that love to me until there's nothing left."

"My name's Brussel Sprout, not Box Spring."

"Whatever. Just get into the cocoon."

"Come on!" whines the 'nurse's' voice, "It's pouring out of him! Share the wealth a little."

"Go get your own if you're so hungry."

The second changeling must have given up, because I hear her retreat further into the cave. Who knows how deep it runs? I huddle up into a little alcove off the main tunnel and settle in to wait. Minutes tick by, or maybe hours. I'm having a hard time keeping track, and every time I try to focus that weird odor sends my mind twisting down dead ends. The only company I have in the darkness are the grunts and moans coming from whatever chamber lies around the bend in the tunnel. I don't know exactly how changelings extract love from their victims, but evidently they find the process fairly enjoyable. But soon enough Scarlet's been sated and even the sounds stop.

Boredom is the most dangerous enemy on a stakeout like this one, and I'm just wondering whether I should try to gather more intel on the changelings or wait outside the cave for Kicky to return when I feel the sharp point of a blade press into the small of my back.

Check that. Boredom is the *second* most dangerous enemy. “Don’t make a sound or I’ll gut you, you Faust-damned bug. Now turn around.” That’s a voice I know, although just about the last one I expected to hear inside of a changeling hive.

“Mom?” I comply with her demand to turn around, and sure enough hovering just above me with her sword at my throat is my mother of all ponies. “What are you doing here?”

“I might ask you the same question,” she replies. She pulls out a small hunk of crystal and presses it to my forehead. It flashes green. “It’s really you. Are you out here alone? Did you bring any backup?”

“I... no, it’s just me,” I reply. I’m too thrown by her showing up here and it just slips out. “Why aren’t you in Canterlot?”

Mom looks past me, checking up and down the main tunnel for anypony or anything that might be out there. “Not here. If I found you it’s just a matter of time before the changelings do too. Follow me.” She ascends with a few quiet flaps of her wings and slips into a dark hole above what I had believed to be a solid wall. At least that explains how she got the jump on me. I take off from the hard stone floor and follow her. It’s a bit of a tight squeeze, and I get the sensation that I’m descending deeper into the cave as we go, but after a hard ten minutes of wriggling along on my belly the tunnel ends in a little cubbyhole that’s large enough for us both to stand in. A glowing green crystal in the middle of the room provides enough light for us to see one another by, even as it casts odd shadows along the wall.

She puts her weapon down and starts to polish the blade. “What are you doing here, Cloud Kicker?”

All business. Why am I not surprised? “A filly went missing the other day. Orange pegasus named Scootaloo. I’m part of the search party, and I followed one of the changelings thinking she might be here.”

Mom ponders that for a moment, then nods. “She might be. They’ve been excited since yesterday, it might be because they brought back a meal.”

“And you didn’t think to, y’know, actually help her?”

“Just because I’m not rushing in without thinking like somepony I could name doesn’t mean I’m not helping her. I’ve been tracking this little cluster of drones since I left Ponyville three days ago, and reinforcements should be here in a few hours.”

“You were in Ponyville three days ago?” I ask. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

She stops working on the blade and looks up at me. “We don’t share military intelligence with civilians. You know that.”

“I’m in the reserve!” I counter, although given how quick she is to shrug that off it’s clear she doesn’t consider there to be much of a difference. “You could have stopped by just because you wanted to see me. You’ve never even seen my house there.”

“I’m sure it’s very nice. Or at least as nice as one can afford on a weather pony salary.”

“Don’t start, Mom. I don’t care what you think.”

She has no immediate answer to that, so she just goes back to her work. We sit there in silence, and she just goes on polishing even after the blade’s already so clean it gleams in the dim light from the crystal. My ears twitch as I catch just the faintest whisper of words that aren’t meant for me.

“Did you say something?”

Mom won’t look up at me. “It’s nothing.”

“You might as well tell me. Not like we have much else to do until our backup shows.”

She thinks about that for a long time, so long I figure she’s just decided not to say anything. But then she does. “You used to care.”

“Huh?” I take a whiff of the air around us. “Hey, any idea what that smell is? It’s driving me crazy trying to remember where I’ve smelled it before.”

She smiles, but her eyes are a bit bloodshot when they meet mine. “Changelings aren’t very big on hygiene. We’re both going to need showers when we’re done here. But I’m more than happy to change the subject.”

That gets my train of thought back on track. It’s more important than anything else that I get her to elaborate on what she just said. “What do you mean I used to care?”

“Just what I said. Sometimes I look at you and all I can see is the little filly who wanted to do her best for her mother. But then one day, that little filly was gone and all that was left was anger.”

I scoff. “You weren’t exactly thrilled with me either, especially when I dropped out of the Guard. I’d never seen you yell like that before.”

I expect her to turn the accusation right back at me, and we’ll go through the same motions as we have a thousand times before. But she doesn’t. “I said a lot of things, and so many of them were things I shouldn’t have. I was angry too and... and I was scared.”

“Scared? You?”

“What mother wouldn’t be when her oldest daughter just suddenly stops loving her?”

I sit there in stunned silence while that sinks in, and Mom goes back to not looking at me. “I didn’t stop loving you. You thought... You think that’s why I dropped out of the Guard? Just to spite you?”

Mom nods. “I did. It felt personal. It’s taken me some very long talks with your Aunt Wind to get past that. I didn’t see any other reason that you would throw away all that training, and for what? I gave you everything I could, growing up. I wanted you to go into the Guard. Follow in my hoofsteps.”

“I’m not you though. I quit because I realized that I needed to be who I was, not just a copy of you.”

“I didn’t want you to be a copy of me. I just wanted you to be happy. I wanted you to grow into a life that was as happy as mine was, back then. I tried to give that to you the only way I



knew how. And when you turned away from it, from me... well, I took it badly. This is a conversation we really should have had back then. If only I hadn't been..."

"A stubborn bucking idiot?" I finish for her. "Seems to run in the family." Her back shudders. "Mom? Are you... Mom, don't cry."

"I'm sorry I was such an awful mother, Cloud," she gasps between sobs. "I'm sorry I've treated you so terribly instead of respecting you as an adult. You must hate me so much."

It only takes two steps to get across the room and throw my forelegs around her, squeezing her tight. "I love you, Mom," I whisper, fighting back tears of my own. My heart is pounding and my head is swimming. Letting all that pent up anger and frustration drain away is exhausting, and I want nothing more than to lay my head in her lap and just drift away.

"I'm so glad to hear that," she whimpers, then sniffles and wipes her tears away. I back away enough to see her grinning ear to ear. "Everything's going to be different now, I promise."

It's a promise I'm going to hold her to. We can rebuild everything, make up for lost time. Everything about this moment just feels right as the happiest smile I've felt in a long time creeps across my face.

And then the tip of a spear bursts out of her chest and it all come crashing down.

I can only gape as she stares back at me, the surprise fading in slow motion into a blank and lifeless stare. The spear retracts and without the support Mom teeters for a few horrible seconds before she collapses to the floor, revealing the murderer behind her.

"Wow," says Kicky, "Aunt Wind's going to have a field day when she hears about that."

"You... you..." I can't bring my mind to accept what I've just seen, not really. "Why?" is all I manage to get out.

"You can thank me later," says Kicky. "I told you not to come in before we got here. If you hadn't had that tracking gem on

I'd never have found you. The others pulled Scootaloo out of her cocoon, now let's *WHOA!*"

Fuelled by rage, I scoop up the sword *the sword that Mom spent her last minutes in this world polishing this isn't happening this can't be happening not now not when it was all going so right* and bring it down hard, trying to cleave my treacherous clone in half. She's quick to block with her spear, but I still manage to nick her side and draw blood. "Why, Kicky? She loved you! She loved you more than me and just when I finally start to fix things you go and... and do this?"

"Cloudy, snap out of it. The air in here is totally saturated with pheromones. You must be able to smell them. You'll feel better once you get out into the fresh air. Come on."

"Why? So you can kill me too the instant I turn my back?"

Kicky's eyes dart down to the floor for an instant and then back up to mine. "Look at her. Look down at the body."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

Kicky groans. "Please, Cloudy. If you've ever trusted me at all, trust me now. I love Mom too. You know that."

Slowly, keeping my distance from Kicky as best I can in the cramped little room, I let my eyes glance downwards for just an instant. Then the image registers and I do a double take back down at the remains laying at my hooves. The perforated husk of a changeling drone, green blood still seeping from the pair of extra holes Kicky punched in it with her spear. Something clatters to the ground, and it takes me a second to register that it's my sword. I just stare until I feel a wing drape over my back. "I'm sorry, Cloud. There wasn't any other way. I wasn't going to let her shove you into a cocoon."

"But... how? She knew things. She knew about me. About our family."

"The swarm did its homework before I copied you. If we'd decided to take you out of play permanently I had to be able to play my part. Luckily you were more useful to us alive than dead and it never came to that."

I have nothing else to say to that, and grudgingly follow Kicky back to the cave's entrance. Stepping out even the low light of the Everfree is still enough to make me wince and shut my eyes until the burning pain passes by. When I'm able to see again, I notice a passed-out Scootaloo, her orange coat still tinted green with slime being checked over by a medic. Not too far away Bulwark is tying up the stallion from earlier with a length of rope.

"You don't understand," he pleads, twisting with futile efforts to escape the rope. "You have to go back. Scarlet is in there! They must still have her!"

"Sure she is, buddy," Bulwark replies, hoisting the pony up onto his back for transport.

I furrow my brow at that, if only because focusing on something other than the image of a pony who looks exactly like me running my mother through with a spear is pretty much the only way I'm staying anywhere near together right now. "Does he not get what just happened?"

"Side effect of being fed on," says Kicky, just as glad to have something new to talk about with me. "Unless the truth is shoved in the victim's face, they tend to reject the idea that somepony was actually a changeling on a subconscious level. It turns into a major blind spot for them no matter how much evidence piles up."

"Huh," I say, "that sounds awful. Glad it didn't happen to me too."

For whatever reason, Kicky just sighs and we start back towards Ponyville. A quick walking conference with the guards decides Scootaloo's immediate fate pretty quickly. She needs rest, and probably a few good meals. Fluttershy's cottage is closest but she's likely not home seeing as how she was at the weather team meeting. That leaves Sweet Apple Acres as the next best choice.

I pour all my focus and energy into double-timing it in that direction. If only because the alternative is curling up into a ball and sobbing myself hoarse.

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Big Macintosh is more than happy to carry Scootaloo, still out of it, into their guest room once we've gotten to the Acres. Kicky excuses herself to inform Cheerilee and Dash of the happy news that she's back and safe pending a few days of recovery. I choose to hang back at the farm. In theory because I'm keeping an eye on Scoots, but really just because being in the same room as Kicky makes my skin crawl ever so slightly after what I just saw her do.

"Bit for your thoughts?"

Huh. I've been so wrapped up in my own head I didn't even notice Granny Smith come into the living room and settle into what must be her regular spot in the nearby rocking chair. "Oh, just stupid drama. Wouldn't want to bother you with it."

"How thoughtful. Now suck it up and spill the beans anyway, young mare. Wouldn't have asked if ah didn't want to hear about it."

I grin. "Anypony ever tell you you're a bit obnoxious, Granny?"

"Can't say they have," she replies. "Then again, ah may have had a bit of selective hearing loss if they did. Perogative of bein' an old so-and-so, understand."

"But of course." I don't want to talk about this. I don't even know where I'd start. But then I remember something Dash mentioned about Applejack's foalhood and I see a possible angle of attack. "I heard once that, a few months before she earned her cutie mark, Applejack left the farm to go live in Manehattan. Is that true?"

Granny Smith tenses up just a bit. "She did. Must have been... oh... almost a decade ago now. But what's that got to do with the price of apples?"

I shift uncomfortably in my seat. It's not the most comfortable subject to broach, but after what I've just seen it's not going to go away unless I find *some* way to vent the pressure that's already building in my head. "I'm just curious. She kinda turned her back on her whole legacy." The way Granny

Smith's eyes narrow at that is enough to tell me I'm treading on dangerous ground. "Temporarily! Just temporarily. But what if it hadn't been? I mean, if she'd decided she was better off in Manehattan, hypothetically. Or—"

"If you've got a question, ah suggest you hurry up and get to it," says Granny Smith.

"Right, sorry. I guess what I'm asking is this: If she'd decided not to come back... would you feel like you'd failed somehow? That you'd lost her?"

"Hmm..." Granny settles back in her rocking chair, the only noise in the room being the creaking of the rockers as her chair sways back and forth. "Let me answer you with another question. What do you think it would mean, for a mother and a daughter to lose one another? 'Cause ah know you're not just asking for the fun of it. Your friend Rainbow Dash has a big mouth, and not just about mah grandfilly."

Damn it, Dash. Still, no point in hiding the rest of the story. "My mother and I don't always get along. She wanted something for me, and I wanted something different. We've never exactly gotten over that. Things between us have been kinda strained ever since."

"That right," says Granny, not even the slightest bit of surprise in her voice. "Well, if y'all ask me, the both of you are stubborn idiots."

"Listen, Granny, I don't think you understand what I'm—"

"Oh, ah understand just fine," she says. "Not so sure you do though."

This is so not what I was looking for. "You have no idea what I've been through. Or what my relationship with my mother is."

"Reckon you're right about that," admits Granny Smith.

"Before ah was a grandmother, ah was a mother, though. When Mac was born, well, ah was more than ready to hang up that particular bonnet and be a grandmother for him. Was gonna spoil that colt rotten."

I chuckle a bit at the idea of Big Mac as a plump little... well, maybe not little, but a plump Momma's colt. But when I stop laughing at the mental picture I find Granny Smith staring at me, dead serious. "But you didn't."

"Couldn't. Not after the fire." Her eyes glaze over a bit, and I get the feeling she's reliving something not especially pleasant. "My little colt. The filly ah loved like she was my own. One day they were here, smilin' and laughin' like they had all the time in the world. Next day they were gone." She glares at me, and wipes away the beginning of a single tear. "Your mama hasn't lost a daughter. Not while you're here talkin' to me. And you ain't lost her either. You want to hear about what losing a mother or father is really like? Go talk to Mac or Applejack. Tell 'em you could take a train ride and say anything to your mother or father that you care to, and how *hard* that is for you. Just don't be surprised if they lose their temper and clock you upside the head. Ah would."

"I'll pass. It's just... complicated. Between us, I mean. I want to. I want to walk up to her, curl up next to her, and just tell her everything. But it's not that easy."

"Not with you makin' it difficult, anyway. Ah promise though, you wait long enough to fix things and you'll find that eventually it's too late."

"No, I mean—"

And then the front door slams open and Rainbow Dash rushes into the kitchen. "Where is she? Where's Scootaloo?"

I look askance at Granny Smith. "Looks like I need to go. Can we pick this up later?"

"Nope. Said my piece. What you do with it is up to you."

I stare at her for a few more moments before I snap out of it and turn away to more immediate concerns. I'd almost swear she planned this out in advance. "Rainbow?" I call out.

Dash is on me in an instant. "You found Scoots, right? She's here? You were supposed to tell me! I should have been there to pull her out of that cocoon or whatever."

“Yeah! Us too!” says Sweetie Belle, running up behind her. Apple Bloom is close on her tail. Guess Cheerilee let them out early to see their friend. Probably knew they wouldn’t do very much learning once they’d heard the news that Scootaloo was back.

“Kicky had a lead on some changelings, and we stumbled on Scootaloo while we were following it up. We weren’t going to leave her there and go find you just so you could play the heroine. But let’s go see if she’s up for having visitors yet.”

We all trot down the hallway, Dash’s wings twitching with each step as she mutters under her breath. We reach Big Mac stationed as guardian outside the guest room, and he nods to us. “She’s awake. Real tired, though. Don’t plan on stayin’ too long.”

Dash nods right back. “I just need to see that she’s alright. Ten minutes, tops.” Yeah, she talks a good game. But I bet I’ll be prying her off that filly with a crowbar about nine minutes and fifty-nine seconds from now.

The door opens and Scootaloo, mane still damp from getting scrubbed clean, looks up at her four visitors. When she registers who they are, she groans and sinks deeper under her blanket.

The other three aren’t put off even a bit by her self-evident reluctance. Dash is first to close the distance, scooping her up blankets and all in a hug that’s probably tight enough to do more harm to her than the changelings ever did. Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle leap into bed to join in. “Scootaloo. Oh thank the Princesses. We didn’t even know if you were alive. I’m glad you are, though, because I’m going to *kill* you. What were you thinking, pulling a stunt like that?”

“I’m sorry, Dash. I’m so sorry for everything,” replies Scootaloo once Rainbow’s death grip has loosened enough for her to breathe a little.

“Didja really get captured by changelings?” asks Apple Bloom. “What if they’d made a copy of you? We might never have even known you were gone.”

“Well, I don’t know about that,” says Dash with a grin, “no bug could totally copy the awesomeness of the real deal. I’d give ‘em five minutes tops before they gave the game away.”

Scootaloo looks up at her, just fixes an incredulous gaze into Rainbow’s face. Then, just as Rainbow looks like she’s getting concerned enough to say something, she starts to chuckle. A low, deep chuckle that grows into a full on laugh. Apple Bloom and Sweetie glance at one another and half-heartedly try to laugh too, albeit a lot more nervously. Scootaloo’s laugh grows, and then at some point, almost imperceptibly, it takes a turn. The guffaws turn to deep and heaving sobs as she tries to push away from Dash, though she’s not about to let her go anywhere.

“Uh, sorry,” says Sweetie Belle. “We didn’t want to scare you. We’re glad you’re home now.”

“I’m not home,” moans Scootaloo.

“Well, ah know this isn’t your house, but the point is—”

“Shut up.” Apple Bloom’s jaw drops open at Scootaloo’s angry rebuke. “You don’t know anything. Just all of you shut up. I don’t want to be this way, and I don’t know how. They were supposed to take me back. Change me back into what I’m supposed to be. But they didn’t.”

“I don’t understand,” says Sweetie Belle, “change you back? Back into what?”

“By the Queen are you all dense!” shouts Scootaloo. “You want me to say it? Fine. I’m supposed to be a changeling. I always have been. Just a drone who stumbled onto some valuable intelligence when Nightmare Moon returned and stuck around. Ever wonder why we didn’t become friends until after your sisters got their Elements? I was just using you to spy on them. Everything we did together, all the Crusading, all the time hanging out together, it was all a lie. And I didn’t care! I was good at lying and I didn’t care who I hurt when I disappeared afterwards. I didn’t care until the stupid Elements did *this* to me and now I *do* care but I don’t know what to do about that. I only know how to pretend to be somepony’s friend, not how to actually be one.” The room falls silent as



Scootaloo brings herself back under control with a final snuffle. “There, now you know. Don’t worry, once I get better I’ll be out of your manes for good.”

The others have no immediate answer to that. Their grips loosen enough that Scootaloo can wriggle away and hide herself completely under the blankets. “How can that be true? I met your parents, Scoots.”

When there’s no answer forthcoming from the lump in the center of the bed, I chime in from the doorway. “That was Kicky. She covered a bunch of supporting roles to help the others keep their covers up.”

Dash’s jumbled emotions have finally found a convenient target to fixate on. I just wish it weren’t me. “Wait, you knew about this? And you didn’t tell me? What the buck, Cloud?” She gets up and stalks over to me, thrusting herself right into my face as she demands an answer. I’m in no mood to back down, though.

“Only for the last few days. I found her talking to Kicky about it.”

“You were spying on us,” says Scootaloo from under the blankets.

“Oh, like you’re one to talk. Fluttershy knows too. She figured it out yesterday while we were looking for leads on where Scootaloo had vanished to.” Scootaloo answers that revelation with a loud groan.

The other two Crusaders have fallen quiet since Scootaloo’s confession. “Everything? All of it was a lie?” asks Sweetie Belle. Apple Bloom looks too dejected to speak up at all.

“Up until a few weeks ago, yeah. That’s why I left. It’s all... it’s like it’s tainted now. Every time I try to figure out how to be a pony. I just need to go somewhere new and start over while I figure it out.”

The two fillies look at each other and ponder that for a minute or so while Dash and I look on. Then, on some unspoken signal, they both reach down and yank the blankets of the bed, exposing Scootaloo huddled up on the bare mattress. “Hey

there,” says Apple Bloom, extending a hoof. “Mah name’s Apple Bloom. Nice to meet ya.”

Scootaloo stares at the proffered hoof, confusion writ plain on her face. “What are you doing?”

“You did say you wanted to start over, right? So let’s start over. Oh, and my name’s Sweetie Belle. What’s yours?”

“...Scootaloo,” she replies, reaching cautiously for Apple Bloom’s hoof and bumping it. “But all the lies... aren’t you mad?”

“No idea what you’re talking about. We just met. You ain’t saying you’re gonna lie to us now, are you?”

“I’ll try not to.” Scootaloo sighs. “I might... sometimes I might need help figuring stuff out. A lot of this is all new to me.”

“Well, I *guess* you’ll still need a big sister then,” says Rainbow Dash, trotting over to join them.

“Really?”

“And you know, if you need somewhere to crash I’m sure Fluttershy wouldn’t mind you staying at her cottage,” I add. “Obviously we’ll have to ask her, but she’s been worried about you for a while. Plus it’s on the ground.”

“Yeah, I really should have picked a shape with bigger wings,” she groans. But then she smiles. “Thank you. Thank you so much. When the other drones took me and I realized they weren’t going to change me, I thought... I thought I’d never...” before she can burst out crying again, the other three are on top of her each trying to be the quickest with their hug.

“Reckon that’s enough excitement for now,” says Big Mac from the doorway. “Still needs her rest, and that means a couple hours nap before dinner.”

“But I’m not ti—” the yawn that cuts her off mid sentence seriously undercuts that claim. With the excitement over, I slip out before Rainbow Dash can start arguing for ‘just five more minutes’ and I get roped into dragging her away kicking and screaming. Hard to believe it’s still barely noon with all that’s

already happened today. I swing by my house to grab a bite to eat, and to give somepony an update.

Kicky, obviously having had a very similar idea to mine, is rummaging through the fridge when I walk in. The cut I gave her is already cleaned and bandaged up. It doesn't seem to be giving her much trouble, thankfully. "Hey."

She looks up, a carrot sticking out of her mouth. "Hey Cloudy. How's Scootaloo doing? Still resting?"

"Dash and the other Crusaders came by to visit. She told them everything."

Kicky tenses up. "And?"

"And she still has two best friends and a big sister," I finish, grinning at her as she relaxes again.

"Thank the Princesses. I thought she was going to turn out like Sweetie Drops did after she ran away like that. Want a sandwich?"

"Sure." I stare at the back of her head for a second as she starts working at the counter, then speak up again. "Everypony should be lucky enough to have a big sister."

"Yeah, I guess," agrees Kicky, listening only halfheartedly.

"I mean it," I continue. "Somepony with more experience to look out for them. Especially when they do something stupid and get themselves in over their heads. I guess I kinda got that shoved in my face pretty hard earlier today. My point is—" I step up behind her, wrap a foreleg over her shoulder, and nuzzle the back of her neck, "—thank you. And sorry about the 'tried to kill you' thing."

"Water under the bridge. You'd have done the same for me."

"You wouldn't have fallen for it in the first place." She doesn't confirm or deny that either way. "I thought she was really Mom, Kicky. I thought... I thought she was..."

Kicky turns and leans in to return the hug properly, and there's no need for me to go on. She gently lowers me to the floor and holds me as everything catches up with me and I break down

sobbing there for the rest of my lunch hour, sandwiches forgotten.

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Things gradually return to normal over the next few days, until one evening I find myself in the unusual situation of having nothing to do. Blossom's off at a weather conference, Lyra and Bon Bon are having a romantic night alone that I'm not about to intrude on, and Rainbow Dash took off with the rest of the Elements yesterday for Canterlot, something about meeting Twilight when she got back from somewhere. Azalea followed after them this morning to play the good filly friend.

As for Kicky, well, as I relax there on my couch trying to focus on the book I'm reading I keep mentally replaying the conversation she had with me before she left this afternoon.

*"You're sure you don't want to come?"*

*"Yeah, have a good time."*

*"Look, I'll be busy with Guard stuff but you could just come and enjoy the city. Catch up with anypony you felt like seeing."*

*"You mean Mom."*

*"No duh I mean Mom. Look, I left what happened to you in the changeling hive out of the official debriefing, but I have to—"*

*"Don't you dare tell Mom about that."*

*"Not Mom, but I am going to tell Aunt Wind. She might have some advice."*

*"I'm fine, Kicky. Say hi to Glint for me."*

So it's quite the surprise when somepony starts knocking on the door. They really want to come inside, because the pounding intensifies before I'm even halfway across the floor. "Anypony home?" slurs Azalea's voice from the other side of the door. That gets me to pick up my pace. Even through the door, she sounds really off. I canter over and pull the door open, and there she is. She's swaying unsteadily on her hooves there on my stoop, and when she looks up at me with her glazed eyes I can see the unmistakable dark lines that her tears

have left on her face. “Kicky?” she whimpers, “I don’t wanna be a pony anymore.”

“I’m not—” I begin before she stumbles forward, headbutting me right in the muzzle and cutting me off. “What happened to you?”

She stares at me for a second, her eyes blinking out of sync with one another. “Did you know?” she asks me.

Wow, she just reeks of alcohol, along with a few other scents that I neither can nor want to place. “Know what?”

“About the trains. It turns out.... turns out if you ask super nice they’ll give you these little tiny bottles of vodka for the ride. But they aren’t... they aren’t very big, so you need to drink two or three. Or eight. They’re only about thiiiiiiiis big.” She squints and holds her shaking hooves close together to try to show me how big the bottles are. Without the support, she slowly lists to the side and, before I realize what’s about to happen, she topples over. “Ow.”

I place a gentle hoof on her shoulder to discourage her from getting up. She tries a few times to sit up before giving in. “Do you feel okay? Do you need me to get you a glass of water? Or a bucket?”

“No,” she replies. “Not... not okay. Don’ wanna bucket. Don’ want water. I want...” she trails off. Geez, what happened to her? “Why does it hurt so much, Kicky?”

“Well, you might have twisted your wing when you landed, but I don’t think it’s broken or anything.”

“No, I mean...” she smacks her lips together. Maybe I should get her some water, whatever she says. “I’m a monster. I had... it was all going *right*, so of course I screwed it up. She needed me. I need her. I told her I loved her.”

“You really do have a problem with saying that too soon, don’t you?” I ask. I try to force out a chuckle, but she’s just laying there, miserable and silent. Still, a bad breakup explains a lot. “You’ll be okay, though. If she broke up with you because of that...”

“She didn’t. I think... I think I broke up with her. Because... because I’m awful and... she needed me. She’s so strong. I only had to... I didn’t even have to see what she did, I just had to shut up and hug her, and I couldn’t even do that.”

Okay, now I’m lost. “Not making a lot of sense, Az. Go back to the beginning.”

“She went to do some sort of... time... thingie,” says Azalea. She belches and her stomach gurgles in a way that makes me think I’ll be cleaning vomit out of my carpet before sunup.

“She went... another world, or universe, or whatever, only it was one where everything was wrong. She was like you-know-who while she was there. She was like her and... and she did such awful things. To ponies she loves. Loved.”

Azalea breaks down into heaving sobs, and I rock back and forth hugging her.

“It’s fine. I’m sure she wouldn’t ever do those things for real, you know that.”

“That’s just it!” She sits up and pushes me away, though all that accomplishes is making her fall over onto her back again.

“She said she could. That if things were ever really, truly awful and she’d never escaped from the loop, she’d have ended up that way. It’s inside her, to be... *that*. And I... I don’t know if she really knows just how awful that would be. I imagined... Kicky, I imagined that it was you-know-who again, inside my head, making me do everything all over again. Except it was Twilight. My Twilight, and she was... she was *revelling* in it, in all the awfulness. I don’t... I can’t go back to that, I *can’t*. And I can’t even tell her why I can’t, so I just...” she stops again. “I ran away. I ran away from her. I feel like that’s all I ever do anymore. Run away. Hide. Lie to yourself until you’re convinced that you’re going to be okay.”

“It is going to be okay, though,” I whisper to her, nuzzling the cheek that isn’t pressed down into the carpet like she can burrow into it if she just pushes hard enough. “Maybe you can talk to her and just explain. She’ll understand.”

Azalea scoffs. “Yeah, that’ll be a fun conversation. ‘Sorry about my freakout, Twilight. It’s just that I was the changeling

who spent a month stalking you so your story hit a little close to home.’ I’m sure she’ll feel much better knowing that.”

My blood runs cold. “What?”

“Yeah, that’s probably what she’d say,” says Azalea, too drunk to pick up on the change in my tone. I take a deep breath and a lot of things start to make a lot more sense. No wonder she and Kicky are always slipping away to talk to one another out of earshot.

“Maybe it’s time to stop hiding, then,” I say. It suddenly sinks in what a precarious position my little accidental lie of omission puts me in. Buck you too, karma.

“We’ve talked about this, Kicky. I’m not telling anypony what I used to be. I don’t want to end up like Sweetie Drops.”

“I bet Cloudy would be okay with it. She’s your friend.” I want her to be okay with me knowing this. Everything I told her, all the times I ‘agreed’ that changelings were disgusting monsters, I’ve been ripping her apart without ever realizing it. Oh, Azalea, please let me explain how sorry I am. Just trust me like I trust you.

She shakes her head, making me feel just that much more awful. “No she wouldn’t. She’s only even my friend at all because I mucked with her head.”

A creeping sense of dread starts to crawl up my spine.

“Mucked with it how?”

“To make her trust me. I don’t think it ever wore off, otherwise she’d have... picked up on...” Azalea stops in her tracks as she looks up at my face. Something in my expression is obviously giving me away, but then controlling my impulses hasn’t ever been my strongest suit. “No,” she whispers.

“Please, no. Kicky? Please tell me that you’re Kicky. Please... just tell me I’m really drunk and being crazy right now.” I don’t say anything, and I get to watch the desperate hope in her eyes disappear. I finally remember where I smelled that odor from the changeling hive before. It was on her.

“I’m Cloudy.” The two of us stare at one another for a few seconds as both of our lies are uncovered. “You bitch.”

Azalea's tears start up again. "No. No, no, no this... this isn't happening. Not you too. I'm not... I'm not trying to hurt everypony. I love you, Cloudy. You're my friend."

"Yeah, and you were mine," I reply. "Made sure of that, didn't you? Between snacks, anyway."

She just slumps down even lower, lacking even the strength to pull herself off the floor. "Yes. Yes, I did. I was hungry, and you were a useful source of information to boot."

I stay quiet to let her go on, but she falls silent. "What, that's it? I was just convenient, so you decided you had the right to mess with my thoughts? With my mind?" My volume is rising, but all she does is lay there taking it. "Answer me!"

"What do you want from me, Cloudy?" The words barely rise above a whisper. "I wish I hadn't, and I'd turn it off or reverse it if I knew how to, but that's all that mattered to me back then. You think I like not knowing if my best friend only cares about me at all because I forced her to?" She lets out a sad little laugh. "Well that's not really true. I know that you wouldn't. Nopony did, even back in Trottingham. I never mattered to anypony, not really. Never fell in love, never went on any exciting adventures or changed the world, just... sold flowers."

"Get out." I say, walking towards the door and opening it. I don't know if I ever want to see her again, but I know that right now I want her gone. "Get out of my house. Right now."

She slowly rises to her hooves and starts to walk across the room. She's halfway out the door when she stops. "No."

"I *said* get out," I remind her, more than a bit testy.

"And I—" she backs up into my living room and glares at me. After a few deep breaths, her eyes seem a bit clearer and her focus tighter than it was a minute ago "—said no. I walked away from one pony who matters to me. Not... I'm not going to make that mistake again."

"Azalea, you have no right to—"

"I know I don't," she interrupts. "I have no right to anything. The ponies I love would be disgusted by some of the things I



did. I've killed. I've whispered a million little lies to ponies who only wanted to love the pony they thought I was, until I used them up and threw them away. Nearly did the same thing to you. You want to hate me? Fine. It is nothing, *nothing*, to how much I hate myself as I fall asleep at night." She pauses to let that register, her angry glare somewhat undermined by the way her knees are shaking. "It doesn't matter that Chrysalis was forcing me to do it. I went along because it was the easier choice. Because after long enough, what did one more layer of filth on my soul really matter? I was never going to be good. But then you know what happened?"

Well, that's a pile of self-serving bullshit she just spewed out of her mouth, but my morbid curiosity gets the better of me. "What happened?"

"Well, the Elements, obviously, but more importantly *you* happened. I was laying there on my living room floor waiting for the pain of transforming into a pony to pass, but it was only getting worse. All that guilt and shame that I'd pushed down as a changeling, and now getting to relive it with a pony's conscience? It was unbearable. I... I almost didn't make it. Not all of us did, you know. Ask Kicky. Ask her about the ones that saw everything they'd done and took the cowardly way out. And then the second miracle of the night happened for me. You knocked on my door, gave me a hug, and made me believe everything just might turn out alright. Even when the whole world's been against me, you and Kicky have saved me in a million little ways you don't even realize. So you know what? You don't scare me," she insists, even as her voice quakes with fear. "You don't scare me compared to losing your friendship. Because just for a little while, I got to matter. I matter to you. I matter... mattered... to Twilight. And I'm tired of being so scared of what *might* happen that I run away from the things that can hurt me. So if you want me gone, throw me out yourself. But don't expect me to go quietly."

I stalk over to her, and get right up in her face, glaring at her. I could throw her out, with as much damage, permanent or temporary, as I feel like. But she's not backing down. "Nice speech. Didn't hear an 'I'm sorry' in there, though."

She blinks. “I’m sorry.”

And with that I wrap her up in a hug, squeezing her against my chest. Maybe I’m only forgiving her so easily because of some sort of changling mind-screwery. But honestly, if that’s why I’m not losing somepony I care about tonight then I’m pretty okay with that. “Wasn’t that easier?”

Her own forelegs come up around me, returning the hug. It takes her a few seconds before she notices something. “Um... C-Cloudy? You’re hugging a little... tight...”

“Just because I’m forgiving you doesn’t mean I’m not still really, *really* mad at you. You stupid, wonderful bitch.”

“I’m sorry,” she whispers again. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m so... I’m...” she stops and an awkward belch comes up as I pat her on the back. “I think I’m gonna throw up.”

Working together, we just barely make it to the bathroom in time. I hold her mane out of her face as she purges all the awful stuff from her system.

After all, what are friends for?

# Azalea Vs Karma

## AZALEA VS. KARMA

There are quite a few ways I enjoy being woken up.

Gentle kisses to the neck? All for 'em. Nibbling my ears? Absolutely. Long, lingering strokes of a hoof against the feathers of my wings? Yes, please.

Ear-piercing scream inches from my face and a punch to the gut at three in the morning? Not so much.

While I can't call it a pleasant way to be awoken, it certainly does the job. I grunt and roll away from my assailant, sheets tangled around my hind legs as I plunge over the side of my mattress and hit the ground hard. Laying there dazed while the screaming goes on, the likely context comes back to me. After Azalea finished emptying the contents of her stomach into the toilet, I helped her brush her teeth (because I was *not* spending the night with those fumes being breathed into my face) and cuddled up with her in my bed, half-listening to her drunken apologies for the better part of an hour before she drifted off. The same bed that, as I get up, I find her thrashing about in when I turn on the lamp sitting on my nightstand.

"Azalea? Wake up." She doesn't. Because of course that would have been too easy. I raise a hoof to slap her awake, but then stop. Everything she poured out to me last night before we settled down comes back to me, and I just can't bring myself to do it. Instead I pull her flailing, thrashing body against mine, trying to ignore the elbow she just threw into my ribs. Once I've pinned her down, I begin gently but firmly to shake her by the shoulder blade. "Come on Az, wakey wakey."

Mercifully, she eventually does. "Nooo... who... what..."

"You're safe, Azalea," I say as she settles down. "It's Cloudy. You were just having a night *OOMP!*" She sits bolt upright with surprising force and I topple to the floor for the second time in as many minutes.

“Where am I? What *oooh Celestia my head*.” I could say I feel bad about her having what must be a truly wicked hangover, but being punched in the gut hasn’t exactly made me any less mad at her than I already was.

“Yeah, eight mini-bottles of vodka will do that. That glass of water on the nightstand is for you, by the way.”

As she reaches over and chugs it down in a single long pull, her eyes go wide and start to dart about as she recognizes where she is. “Oh no,” she whispers. “I remember drinking on the train and... please tell me I didn’t just cheat on Twi—” She abruptly stops, and slumps down on the spot. “Oh. Right. I guess... I guess we aren’t actually... what have I done?”

“Relax, Azalea. We just slept together,” I say, climbing back into bed and sliding a hoof under her wing. She lets out a little sob as I leave her twisting in the wind a bit processing that. Nice? Not really. But being the better pony only goes so far. “And by that I mean actually slept. Nothing else. You were smashed, and I wouldn’t do that to you.”

“Did I do anything else I don’t want to know about?”

“No, but you did say a few things.”

She goes rigid under my touch. “What did I say?”

“It was pretty rambly. You had a long tirade about how Lyra’s new composition isn’t nearly as good as she thinks it is.”

“Please don’t tell her I think that,” moans Azalea. “Was there anything else?”

“Not really.” She starts to relax. “Except for the whole thing about how you used to be a changeling and spent the first month we knew each other systematically violating my body and mind. You might have mentioned that in passing.”

Azalea lets out a high pitched, panicked squeak that she tries to cover up with a bout of forced laughter. “Wow, I must really have gone overboard if I made up such a ridiculous—” She’s cut off when I grab her muzzle and yank her head around to face mine. I hope it hurts. Judging from the tears that start to flow as I glare into her eyes, I suspect it does on a lot of levels. “...Sorry. Force of habit. It’s true. Oh Cloudy, I’m so sorry.”

“Listen to me very carefully,” I begin, “I am right at the end of my rope as far as you’re concerned. I have exactly zero reasons to trust anything you’ve ever told me, and every reason in the world not to. If you lie to me, and I mean about *anything*, not only will I never speak to you again but I’m also going to tell every single pony you call a friend exactly why they shouldn’t either. If Kicky doesn’t like that, well, too bucking bad. There are no more chances for you after this one. Am I being *in any way* unclear about that?”

“No. No, I understand. Cloudy, I’m really sor—”

“And you can stop saying that. It’s getting repetitive.” I have to take a deep breath before I can go any further. “Now, do you want to talk about that nightmare you were just having? It sounded pretty bad.” Instead of answering, she curls up as tight as she can under one of my wings and squeezes herself against me. “Was it clowns? For me it’s usually clowns.”

“It was the morning I died,” she answers. “It was my ribs snapping under the wheels of the runaway cart that killed the original Azalea months ago. It was the agonizing pain she was in as she bled out in the middle of the street in front of her entire family’s eyes, and all she wanted to do was tell them one more time that she loved them but she couldn’t. It just stretches out forever until she fades away and I wake up screaming for them.”

“...So *not* clowns, then.” That earns me a little snort of laughter from Azalea, the burst of air tickling at my coat. “Seriously though, I’m so sorry. I didn’t know you remembered that.”

“I remember everything from both of my pasts. And I don’t especially like either of them. But it’s the same thing almost every night. Sometimes Luna shows up and manages to ward it away, but I don’t think she can handle every pony every night. This last week she hasn’t shown up at all. I don’t think she’s helped me since around the time you and Kicky went to see your family in Canterlot, actually.”

“I’m sure she’s just busy with something important and she’ll be back to protecting you soon.”

“I hope so. They’re getting worse,” says Azalea. “I even skipped spending the night with Twilight after our date because I didn’t want her to know.” Reminding herself of Twilight brings her right back to the verge of tears again. “I had a chance to be with her and I ran away. And now I never will. I’m so stupid. Stupid, stupid, STUPID!” She screams into my chest, sending her misery vibrating all along my ribs. “You know, the physical pain isn’t even the worst part.”

“Seriously? It sounds like it’s pretty bad.”

“It is, don’t get me wrong, but the worst part is all of her regrets.”

“Regrets?”

“Yeah. She’s... I’m laying there and looking back on the past and it’s all just so... nothing. If there’d been just one thing she could point at and say ‘I did this, and Equestria is a better, richer place for it’ then it might not have been so bad. But no matter how hard I look for one, all I can find are opportunities she passed up, or chances she didn’t take, never anything she actually did or accomplished.”

I remember something she said the night before, in the middle of that drunken confession she made to me. “You didn’t matter.”

Whatever self-restraint she was using to hold back the full-on flood of tears up until now is overwhelmed at last, and she completely breaks down. “I don’t. I didn’t back then, I don’t now, and I never will. I’ll never matter, I just know it. I’m going to live the rest of my life hiding and running away and making excuses for why I do, and some day years from now or, who knows, maybe even today I’ll die again and it won’t be a nightmare this time. I’ll be gone and nopony will even care.”

I hold onto her and stroke her back until the flood has died down to a trickle and her sobs evened out. It takes a good long while, but she grows still at last. “Yeah they will, Azalea. They’ll care more than you know. Because you already do matter a lot more than you think you do.”

No reaction. When she doesn't answer for a bit longer I raise my wing to check on her, only to find her fast asleep at my side. Poor thing must be exhausted. I try to drift off and join her, but discover I can't get back to sleep. After two hours of trying I throw in the towel and get up far earlier than I usually would. I can't stick around here without risking reawakening Azalea, who clearly needs the rest. I'm not hungry yet, either. Maybe an early flight around town will change that. It's been a long while since I was up early enough to watch a sunrise.

With no particular destination in mind, and nopony else having surfaced this early, I end up taking a long, loopy path around the outskirts of town. I test myself with a few sprints here and there, just like they used to put us through at West Hoof, but the exercise isn't really the point and my heart isn't in it. Half an hour into it I've got a light sweat building as I pass over the road leading out to Fluttershy's cottage. I frown a bit when I discover that it's just bright enough to make out a small plume of smoke from that direction, and having nothing better to do swoop down to check it out.

The smoke is, thankfully, coming from the chimney. Peering through the front window, I discover nopony other than Scootaloo sitting at her table digging into an ice cream sundae that's absolutely drenched in fudge and walnuts, whipped cream smeared all around around her mouth. I tap on the window a few times and she snaps her head up, nearly losing her spoon in the process. She trots over to the door and opens it up a crack. "Fluttershy isn't here. She's supposed to get back from Canterlot this afternoon."

I raise a skeptical eyebrow. "So it's just you here all alone?"

"I can handle it. Besides, somepony has to take care of all the chores. It took a while, but I convinced her to let me stay while she was gone."

"Uh huh. And you convinced her that ice cream was an appropriate breakfast for a young filly too?"

She hesitates. "Please don't tell her."

I sigh, remembering the trouble I got into the first time I was allowed to stay home and be in charge all by myself. "Alright,

your secret's safe with me. You're up early, though."

"Hmph. I once went five days straight without sleep waiting for a shift rotation in a minotaur guard contingent that would let me get in close enough to snatch one of their generals. This is nothing." Then she yawns.

"Growing ponies need sleep, Scootaloo," I say, trying hard but probably not hard enough to contain my amusement. "Still, as long as you're awake I wouldn't mind asking you a couple of questions.

She narrows her eyes at me. "I don't answer questions. Especially not from ponies who are members of the Guard. Why should I?"

"Because I know about Azalea."

She stares me down for quite a while, probably hoping to see some sign that I'm bluffing. She doesn't. "Fine. Come on in." The door opens wider. "Want some coffee?"

The part of me that wants to nag her about drinking coffee with that body goes down in quick and brutal defeat to the part that really, *really* wants coffee. "Sure." I step inside and there's a loud *sqwawwwwwk!* from above me. I look up just in time to see a cloud of white feathers and talons descend on me from the ceiling and start flailing.

"Elizabeak!" shouts Scootaloo. The furious chicken doesn't stop, but can't do much more than scratch at my face as I push her back with one hoof. "Stop that right now!"

"Squawk!"

"No, we are *not* luring her into a cunning ambush. Get it through your skull! Kicky vouches for her, and I trust her too."

"You speak chicken?" I ask, finally getting Elizabeak pinned to the floor and wincing as she makes a last ditch assault on my hoof, pecking at it furiously.

"Along with about fourteen other languages. You never know when an infiltration might turn on whether or not you speak enough conversational goat to get by without suspicion," says Scootaloo. "I'll be right back with the coffee."



Elizabeak struggles out from under my hoof, and rather than continuing her assault follows Scootaloo into the kitchen.

“Squawk?”

“No, I’m not putting arsenic into hers.”

“Squawk!”

“Well, because she’d be able to taste it if I did, for one thing.”

“Squawk?”

“Yes, I’m sure they can taste arsenic. You’re thinking of griffins.”

“Squawk.”

“Oh, please. I’ve forgotten ten times as much about poisons as you’ve ever known. Your idea of subtle is turning into a bear and mauling one of them to death.”

“Squawk!”

“Being able to eat the body afterwards doesn’t make it subtle!”

“Squawk?”

“If I wanted her dead? Well, there’s a perfectly serviceable patch of foxglove on the edge of the Everfree, I’d probably use that. But even if I did I wouldn’t do it in one dose.”

“Squawk?”

“Because a healthy adult pegasus falling out of the air when her heart stops is the kind of thing that gets ponies asking questions. Hang on, I think she might be wondering what’s taking so long.” Scootaloo leans her head out from the kitchen entrance. “Hey, the water isn’t hot yet. It’ll just be one more minute.”

“Uh... take your time?” I reply.

“Two shakes of a lamb’s tail, don’t worry,” says Scootaloo before disappearing again. “Look, I’m not killing her, and that’s final.”

“Squawk!”

“You think everypony knows too much.”

“Squawk.”

“Oh really? Even Fluttershy’s gardener? Or the mailmare?”

“Squawk!”

“Of course she knows where I live. That’s how she delivers the mail. I was there when Fluttershy filled out the form at the post office.”

“Squawk.”

“Because she’s not our enemy. None of them are. If anything the other changelings are the real enemies now.”

“SQUAWWWWWK!”

“Oh yeah? Well here’s a little more blasphemy for you to swallow. Chrysalis is dead and she’s not coming back. Ever. So get over it and move on.”

“Squawk.”

“Yeah, being reduced to a cloud of ash is a *bit* more than ‘a minor setback.’”

“Squawk.”

“Well, eventually yes. But it’ll be months before any of the other underqueens gather enough personal power to ascend into the real deal.” My ears perk up. “Besides, what good will it do us? We aren’t changelings anymore. Not to mention that the Princesses will probably be ready to make their move on them before the hive builds up anywhere near the power it used to have. And I’m glad to finally be on the winning side for once.”

“Squawk!”

“Yes, I’m totally sure that someday you’ll, what was it? Tear out my eyes out and gargle the fluids from within them? Nope, not being sarcastic at all. Don’t you see me trembling?”

“Squawk.”

“Tell you what, why don’t I go wake up Angel Bunny and see what he thinks of your plan?”

For a long time, there’s only dead silence from the kitchen.

“What’s the matter? Sure, he’s cranky when you don’t let him sleep in but I’m sure once he hears about your plan to murder the pony Fluttershy used to be in love with he’ll be *very* interested.”

More silence.

“That’s what I thought. Now get out of my sight before you have to come up with some way to explain to the rest of the coop why I didn’t feed them before I had to go to school.”

Elizabeak scampers out from the doorway to the kitchen and past me to rooms unknown. I’ve never actually gotten the full tour of this cottage, though now that I think about it Eepy has offered to show me around a couple times. I resolve not to pass up the next invitation. Scootaloo reappears with two steaming mugs of coffee and offers me one of them.

Understandably hesitant after the conversation I just overheard, I eventually give and accept it, taking a long sip. It’s surprisingly tasty. When I lower the cup Scootaloo’s grinning up at me. “Good, right? It’s the poison that gives it that extra kick.”

She finds my subsequent hacking, choking coughs to be absolutely hysterical.

When she calms down from rolling around on the floor laughing at my reaction, she speaks up again. “Relax, I’m just messing with you. I figured you overheard my little chat back there.”

I swallow the heavy lump in my throat and glare at her. “You’re one sick little filly, you know that?”

Before she can answer, the chime of a kitchen timer rings out behind her. “Looks like it’s time for the sunrise, wanna come watch it with me?”

I can hardly protest seeing as how that was more or less my plan in the first place, to the extent I came out this morning with any plan at all. We sit side-by-side on a little hill behind the cottage just as the first light of day starts to break over us, and I’m a bit surprised to see her little face all scrunched up with rage. “You okay there?”

“It’s a complicated story,” she growls. Then she lets out a long breath and smiles up at me. “Back... before... this was a special little ritual Chrysalis had for us. We’d watch the sun rise and as we did she’d—” she shudders at the memory “—she’d just pour all this anger and hate into our minds. She wanted to make sure we all remembered who was responsible for raising it, and how we were supposed to treat them. The Queen’s gone now, but old habits die harder for some of us than for others. You’ve seen Elizabeak, and last I heard Sweetie Drops has driven away at least three marefriends since she moved to Canterlot. Each one she does just makes her that much more bitter. So every day since you brought me out of the Everfree, I get up early, come out here and remind myself of all the ponies who I don’t hate. And every day it gets a little bit easier to do.” She leans over and rests her head as high up on my shoulder as she can manage. “You helped save my life, Cloudy. Of all the ponies who’ve been good to me, you’re one of the ones who I don’t hate the most.”

“Heh. Thanks, squirt. Don’t think you’re getting out of answering my questions about Azalea that easily, though.”

“Drat. And the adorable, cuddly filly routine usually works so well,” she replies. She pauses to think for a moment. “Alright, fine. Against my better judgement I’ll tell you what you want to know. Just don’t expect me to name any names; Kicky and I are on the same page in that particular regard. And some of this stuff isn’t so pleasant, so I’ll warn you in advance I’m not going to sugarcoat it for you.”

Fair enough. I think for a moment trying to figure out where to begin, and decide to start broad and work my way inward, depending on what she says. I close my eyes and let the sun’s rays wash over my face. Scootaloo might not be the only one who has some baggage she needs to let go of. “Is she the only changeling who was feeding off me?”

Scootaloo lets out a sharp bark of laughter. “Seriously? Not even close. She’s the only one who focused on you exclusively in the runup to our second try at Canterlot, but some of us have been here for way longer. Kicky alone started using your shape over a year ago, among others.”

She has to be lying, right? “I think somepony would have noticed if there had been two of me wandering around for that long.”

“Well, she wasn’t *always* you. But you have to admit, Cloud, you have a certain reputation for getting around. A well earned one, even if none of us had ever gone near you at all. Once we figured out which ponies wouldn’t think anything of waking up in bed with you after a one night stand, it was almost too easy.” She reminisces for a moment, then chuckles. “Oh, this one time? I think it was during a Harvest Festival and the Apple family was selling cider at ten bits a mug for all you can drink? We had four extra copies of you running around, and none of them woke up hungry the next morning. And come on. Think back to how many times you’ve ‘lucked out’ and run into stunningly attractive identical twins who happen to be really into you at the Sun’s Flank.”

I groan. It hurts to hear that what you previously believed to be evidence of your devastating charm was based on a lie. “And nopony ever said anything?”

“Well, after we’ve eaten we have a few tricks to blur the details in ponies’ heads. A little confusion and a hangover go a long way. Sometimes we’re gone before they even wake up and they barely realize anything happened at all.”

I’m torn between being impressed with myself and miffed that this has been going on for so long. “So any changeling passing through hears that if they need a snack, I’m the town bicycle. Fantastic. You couldn’t have sent them to Algae Bloom or somepony else instead?”

“We’ve actually tried her out a few times, but she’s not really the sort of pony we’re looking for.”

I grin at that. “I knew she wasn’t half as good in bed as me.”

Scootaloo pauses. “Actually? She’s, uh, better.” My eyes snap open at that. Telling me that I’ve been a psychic buffet for a race of parasites is one thing, but worse at banging than Algae Bloom? That’s going too far. Fortunately Scootaloo hurries onward with her explanation. “Mechanically, at least. Believe me, I’ve bedded both of you myself.” Well that’s a pair of

mental images concerning Scootaloo I never needed. “Problem is, underneath the lust it’s just kinda hollow. There’s nothing substantial for us to feed on, whether we’re using her form on others or other forms on her. You, though, throw off all sorts of tasty emotions. More than enough to go around without having to dig in deeply enough to hurt the pony we’re feeding from. It’s a victimless crime.” She squints into the sun, a bit wistful. “That’s not what Azalea did, though.”

“What *did* she do?”

Scootaloo picks at the grass under her hooves, stalling as her nerves get the better of her and her wings twitch. “She hit you fast and hard, right from the first day you met her. Twilight was technically the main objective, but it wasn’t easy to get close without tipping off her or Spike, and if either of them even suspected anything all the preparation we’d done would have meant nothing. So the plan adapted. We had most of the intel on the city defenses we needed, and you knew enough of the rest for our purposes. Your family’s been guarding Canterlot for, what, nine-hundred years now? You know more about old hidden passages into and out of the Palace and your compound than you even realize. So she waited until you were post-coital and then started digging. She’d insert the questions, and you’d sleep-talk the answers. She’s very good at what she did, and you were an excellent unwitting source. She wasn’t even looking for the information she got from you about the train five of the Bearers were going to be on.”

“Why would she care about our compound?” I ask, despite the growing, horrible certainty I already know the answer.

“Once the palace fell, the idea was that your compound would probably become one of the holdouts for any remaining resistance. Plus there’s all sorts of nasty rumors about what you keep in that family vault of yours. You knew the plans to hunker down there in a crisis, which means we knew it too. And you knew about the secret door in the pantry that leads down an escape tunnel into the sewers. We could have bypassed the defenders and—”

“Stop. Just... just stop.” I beg.

She doesn't. "No survivors. That was the Queen's order. And then once we had the compound Azalea would come knocking on your door here in Ponyville sporting some fake tears and begging you not to make her sleep alone that night, not with all those mean ol' changelings somewhere out there. Then one thing leads to another, you pass out in her embrace, and she's free to go digging as deep as she needs to in order to figure out how to get the vault open. You'd either have woken up in a cocoon or never woken up at all," she finishes. "Told you I wasn't going to sugar coat it."

Funny how much of that Kicky never mentioned, but then I guess she couldn't without outing Azalea. Still, I'm getting really bucking sick of finding out this kind of thing from other ponies.

Unaware of my thoughts, Scootaloo finishes her coffee. I can already hear her teeth chattering a bit as the caffeine hits her bloodstream, and I say a quick prayer to Shadow for the sake of Cheerilee's sanity in the day to come. "I know it's not easy to hear, but I promise you that it's worse for her to have to look at you every day and remember what she was going to do. Give her some time, a bit of distance, and just be there for her. She has things she needs help letting go of as much as the rest of us. Now I really have to get moving if I'm gonna finish all my chores and get to school on time. Ugh, I wish I didn't have a social studies test today."

"Mind if I come back later if I have any more questions?" I'm quite sure that I will after another chat with Azalea and Kicky.

"Sure. Anytime. I'm sure Fluttershy wouldn't have a problem with it." She waves goodbye to my as I take off and head back for town, this time with an actual goal in mind. With the sun up, ponies are starting to come out to begin their day in earnest, but I'm headed back home in the hopes I'll catch Azalea before she leaves. By the time I get there, the only signs she spent the night are some rumpled and tear-stained sheets, a freshly rinsed glass jar in my recycling, and a note that reads *IOU One jar of pickles* on my kitchen counter.

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“Pinkie Pie? Why are you inside my shower?”

It was not a question I’d anticipated asking when I left work for the day. I haven’t had any visitors since the morning two days ago after Azalea stayed over, and I hadn’t been anticipating any. It took discovering that I was very nearly instrumental in the murder of my entire extended family, but it turns out there actually *is* something that can put a damper on my libido.

Not enough of a damper that I don’t briefly note that if Pinkie is going to pop up in my shower at all it would have been nice of her to be soaking wet, covered in strategically placed soap bubbles and bearing an invitation to join her in helping to scrub them off. I’ve thought about the Element of Laughter in some dirty, dirty ways in the past, but I’ve always considered pursuing her to be a coin flip. Either it’d be the best night of my life, or they’d have to seal me up for good in a lunatic asylum the morning after. Or possibly both.

“Hiya, Cloud Kicker! You know, you should really degROUT your tub. Mildew isn’t funny. I mean, it thinks it is, but it just has no appreciation for subtler comedy.”

“I’ll, uh, keep that in mind.” My brain is already starting to fall into the usual pattern of nonresistance that serves as the best defense against encountering Pinkie Pie in places like this.

“Can I help you with something?”

“Yep-a-rooney!” She nods so vigorously that a tube of body wash sitting up on the tub’s rim shakes enough to come dangerously close to toppling over. “It’s about the PoProPanaParty I’m throwing for Twilight tonight. There’s something that’s super-duper important I need you to do.” I hesitate to answer her until she adds the final detail. “It’s about Azalea.”

“Azalea?”

“Wow! Your shower’s super echoey! But yeah, it’s Azalea. See, she’s my friend too, and I know she’s probably really sad about what happened with Twilight at the hospital.”



Figures that kind of thing wouldn't escape her notice. I can't imagine she knows about all the other stuff that has Azalea upset, but who knows? Maybe she does and just doesn't see what the problem is. With her it could really go either way. "She hasn't been at the market, and if she's home she isn't answering when I knock on the door. Do you want me to see if she can come to the party?"

Pinkie's eye twitches, which makes me instinctually step back away from her. "She... nnnngh..." Gritting her teeth, she forces herself to go on. "Azalea... isn't... nnnngh... Azalea isn't invited to the party!" One final neck spasm, then her chest heaves as she pants for air before going on. "Wow! Not inviting ponies to a party is *hard*! But it's a party for Twilight and making her happy again. She's been a real gloomy green-broke, so I have to concentrate it totally on her. I'm like a giant magnifying glass. I'm gonna focus warmth and energy onto Twilight until she can't take it anymore and she just bursts into smiles."

"And that means not being around Azalea right now, is what you're saying," I conclude. Yeah, I can see how that could be a volatile combination.

"Exactly. It'd be a party to cheer both of them up, but then when they saw each other and remembered what just happened they'd get sad. And then they'd be sad again, so I'd have to throw them a PoProPanaParty to make it better, and then they'd see each other and be sad again, so I'd have to throw a —" She slaps a hoof over her mouth and her eyes go wide. "Oh no, I'm cursing in subtext again! Twilight *hates* that! "Now I'm gonna have to throw her a party to fix *that* and I'll have to decide whether or not to invite Azalea and when I'm trying to decide I'll get stuck subtext-cursing again and Twilight will hate that so I'll have to throw a party to—"

"It's okay, Pinkie. I understand." Blatant lie. "Just tell me what you're hoping I'll be able to do."

"Right," she says with a nod, earlier troubles forgotten in an instant, "so at first I was gonna throw her a separate party at the same time, but you know what ponies say: Mo' PoProPanaParties, mo' PoProPanaProblems."

“Ponies say that?”

“Well duh, of course they do. I’m a pony and I just said it, like, three seconds ago. But since I can’t throw her a party tonight and I have to focus on Twilight, could you, um...” This is a look I’m not used to seeing on Pinkie. Bashful isn’t a big part of her usual repertoire. “...could you make sure she’s alright? Just make sure somepony is taking care of her, even if that’s just her taking care of herself? Because I think maybe nopony is right now.”

An easy enough request. “Sure thing, Pinkie. I’ll head over there in a bit and check in.”

Her usual smile returns. “Great! Thanks, Cloud. Oh, and tell the three-headed monkey behind you that he isn’t invited to Twilight’s party either.”

The what? I look back, but there’s nothing back there except a sink and a mirrored medicine cabinet. And when I turn back to ask about it, Pinkie is gone too.

Seriously. How does she *do* that?

No point dwelling on it. I won’t figure it out, and I’d be more worried about my grip on reality if I did. I take a quick shower and let my mane air-dry as I open my front door. I’m taken by surprise at how chilly the late summer afternoon has turned; autumn’s sort of crept up on me with everything else that’s been going on. I grab an old scarf, once bright orange but faded over the years to a far paler hue, and throw it around my neck for the flight over to Azalea’s.

The first thing I notice when I land in her front yard is the flower garden. It’s not overgrown or anything, but there are definitely a few weeds starting to encroach on it. More than there should be. I knock on the front door and call out to her, but no answer. The door’s locked too, but today that isn’t going to be a deterrent.

Downstairs windows? Also locked. But it looks like she missed one on the second floor, and there’s my way in. It deposits me into a dark hallway a few paces from the top of her stairs. “Azalea?” I call out. Not that I really expect an

answer, but it seems wise to announce myself before heading any deeper into her lair.

Would I have thought of it as a lair before I learned what I know now? And now that I have, will I ever think of it as anything else?

I call out to her again as I descend the stairs, and a groan from the dark living room replies.

“Go away.”

Target acquired. I trot in and turn on the nearest lamp to get my first good look at Azalea in over two days. It’s not a pretty sight. She’s flopped out along the length of her couch, snotty tissues overflowing from a nearby wastebasket. Bloodshot eyes stare back at me, slack eyelids too tired to put any real force into her glare. After a second, she gives up on the contest and brings an unpreened green wing up to block me out. “How long have you been laying there?” I ask.

“Depends,” she replies, hunkering down deeper into the cushions, “what day is it?”

“The day you get up and start pulling yourself together. Come on, chop chop.” I grab one of her primary feathers between my teeth and give a little tug as an extra incentive.

“No. Go away.”

“Come on, Az. You can’t just lay there forever,” I say through clenched teeth.

“Sounds like a plan to me.”

I release the feather; pull much harder and I risk actually yanking it out. Seems I need a different approach. “Have you gotten any sleep the last couple nights?”

Her tired shrug tells the entire story. “Luna helped a bit last night. I only woke up three times.” She groans as I yank the blinds open and some of the light slips through her feathers. Squeezing her eyes closed, she rolls off the cushions and shoves her entire head under the coffee table.

Her upraised flanks are far too tempting a target. In my extensive experience, a quick slap to the cutie mark will

almost always get a reaction. It doesn't fail me now.

The sharp smack of hoof against flesh is quickly followed by a crash as the table flips over onto its back. Good thing the woodworker built it sturdy. I anticipate her kicking back at me, so that's dodged easily as well. "Cloudy!" Her face is hovering between shock and rage, but I'll take angry energy over no energy any day.

"I told you, no more moping. Now if I start straightening up in here, can I trust you to go clean yourself up without supervision?"

"I'm not some helpless foal."

"I'll take that as a yes. Now go on, shoo!" She grumbles, but she goes. When I hear the water start up in her bathroom I turn my attention to the task before me. There's plenty to do and not very much time, so prioritizing is key. Things like dusting and washing the linens clearly need to be done, but I can get a lot more mileage from things like clean silverware and tossing the pile of trash that's starting to attract flies. I put my scarf aside after a few quick folds and get started.

I've at least managed to get the slimiest and most putrid parts of the job done when the water stops and a few minutes later Azalea emerges. While the worst of her accumulated grime is gone, her wings and mane are still in a pitiful and disheveled state. I can't help but walk over to her for a hug, which she's more than happy to accept. "You're gonna be okay, Az. I promise."

"I guess," she mumbles. She hardly sounds convinced, and from the way she slumps over my shoulder she's not ready to stand on her own four hooves. Fortunately, there's one thing anypony can fall back on when they're low.

"I have an idea. Let's go do some work in your garden. Get some dirt on those hooves."

"You *just* told me to take a shower!" she moans.

I shrug. "Well somepony has to clear out those weeds, and if I try to do it myself I'll take out half your flowers at the same time. You're the one with the special talent in it."

She looks down and away. “It isn’t even really my talent.”

“Hey, if you can’t get rid of the bad memories you might as well take advantage of the good ones you got too. They’re both a part of you now.”

She finds nothing in my observation that she can rebut, or at least nothing she can muster up the energy to. This isn’t the first time I’ve inflicted my help on a mopey mare. From my experience, as long as it’s less of a hassle to go along with what I’m telling her to do than to argue I can push her into making better choices. She leads me out to a small shed around the side of her house. I’m a little ashamed to admit that just as she opens the door a part of me wonders if there’s a fresh cocoon waiting inside, but instead there’s just a perfectly innocent collection of dirt-covered tools. I grab a trawl and lead Azalea out to the yard. It’s just a matter of providing a bit of encouragement and quiet company until she slips into the habits learned from decades of tending to her flowers. Or at least the memories of them. Once she’s in her groove, something slips onto her face. Something that I’m not sure I’ve ever actually seen there in all the time I’ve known her.

Serenity.

I mostly just fiddle around in one out-of-the-way corner, awkwardly copying her motions as best I can. She’s the one with the green hoof. Actually trying to help would probably do more harm than good, but I can still just be there for her. As the sun vanishes below the horizon, she’s a far muddier pony as well as a far happier one.

“Pretty good haul,” I say, the first words we’ve shared since she got into the zone. Her ears perk up and she’s a bit startled by my voice. Bet she forgot I was even there at all. As she sinks back into reality, a little bit of that peace I was reading off her slips away. But not all of it. I gesture a hoof towards the pile of azaleas she’s pulled from the earth. “You’ll have something to sell at market tomorrow, at least.”

A bit more of that hard-earned peace of mind gone. “I don’t know, Cloudy. I was thinking maybe I’d hold off for a few more days.”

“You mean go back to moping. No way.” The night is upon us, and I don’t bother stifling a yawn. It comes with an instant guilt trip. Of the two of us, there’s no way I’m the more exhausted one. “Is there anything I can get you for tonight? I can stay over if it would help.”

She shakes her head though. “Not much you could do. I’m used to it, and there’s no reason for both of us to become insomniacs.”

“Okay.” One more goodbye hug. We’re both dirty again, but I think ordering her to take another shower would come across as condescending rather than helpful this time. “I’ll make a flyby over the market tomorrow morning to check in. You’d better be there, okay?”

“I will be. Thanks, Cloudy. For everything.” With that she collects her tools and trots, head held a bit higher than before, back to her shed.

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The next morning I’m as good as my word, landing next to an alert and smiling Azalea just as she’s wrapping up an order for an earth pony mare and her colt. I wouldn’t go so far as to call her bright eyed or bushy tailed, but she looks like she’s on the right track. “Hey there! Sleep okay?”

She shrugs. “Nothing a few pots of coffee couldn’t fix. Hey, are you missing a scarf? I found one laying around last night that doesn’t belong to me.”

Shoot, I completely forget to grab that before I left her house last night. “Yeah, I think that might be mine.”

“Well, swing by any time if you need it. Or I’ll just bring it along next time I know I’m seeing you.”

“No hurry. I can’t stay, but I just wanted to come and see that you made it out today. I’ll let you get back to your customers.” A hug would be a bit intimate for the middle of the market, so I just pat her back with my wing and watch as her smile gets just a bit more genuine. She turns to the orange pegasus beside me, and I trot away past the purple unicorn stallion who’s

making a beeline for Azalea's cart. A few stalls down I stop to wonder if I should pick up some fresh turnips while I'm here.

I'm still close enough to hear Azalea address her new customer. "Good morning, sir."

"Good morning, you nasty, selfish cunt."

Whoa. Whoa whoa whoa. What did he say? I wasn't the only one who heard it, and the usual din of the market quiets as other ponies turn to see what the commotion is. Azalea's smile has turned stiff and fake. "I'm sorry, sir. I think maybe I misheard what you just said."

"Did you? Then we can add 'hard of hearing' to the long list of your many deficiencies as a marefriend and as a pony in general," says the purple unicorn stallion from before. I try to think of whether I've seen a cutie mark of three shooting stars arranged in a circle, but I come up blank. "Tell me one thing: did you ever care about her at all? Or did you just see somepony who was beautiful and strong and decide it would be fun to smash her heart into a million pieces? Just so she'd be almost as pathetic as you are, I'd imagine."

Azalea starts to tremble, and it only grows worse as more ponies turn to watch the exchange. "What... Who do—"

"Twilight Sparkle! Obviously! Do you know what she almost did to protect this world from that monster? What she was willing to endure if it had come to that? And you have the bucking nerve to sit at the side of her hospital bed and treat her like dirt?" The stallion kicks out a hoof, spraying dust up into her face and chest.

When she stops coughing, Azalea tries to speak again. "It wasn't like that. I was scared."

He scoffs. "Oh, you were scared. Well you just threw away your shot with the greatest mare you'll ever meet, you weak and stupid coward. And I'm actually glad you did, because she's better off without a pony like you in her life."

"Please," says Azalea, beginning to cry. Frankly I'm surprised she lasted this long. "I know that what I did was wrong, and I'm sorry. But the idea that she could become that—"

“Should only make the fact that she’s as good and wonderful as she is that much more special. What about her scares you? That once she’s set her mind on some goal she’ll do whatever it takes to achieve it? That she’ll consider options other ponies wouldn’t? That she’d beat herself against an obstacle a thousand times until she’s bloody and bruised, and still give try number one-thousand-one her all anyway? Yeah, I’ll grant you that sometimes she needs somepony to rein her in a bit. But I’ll tell you from personal experience that the kind of mare who has that sort of passion for what they love, and that much force of will, and yes that kind of darkness inside them? They’re worth holding onto even if there’s a chance of them turning into a monster someday. If only because I can tell you from personal experience that sort of mare is awesome in the sack.” His anger softens a bit, almost wistful for a blink-and-you’ll-miss-it moment. But then it’s back and stronger than ever. “That sort of mare deserves the best, and you’re not it. Stars and stones, you’re about as far from deserving her as a pony can be. You should be ashamed to even show your face in this town. If I were you, and thank the Princesses I’ve never been cursed with *that* particular affliction, I’d pick a direction, start flying, and not stop until I fell out of the sky somewhere I’d never impose my worthless, feeble-minded plot upon another unsuspecting pony. You’d be doing us all a favor.”

With that he turns and starts to walk away, leaving Azalea staring off into the distance with a blank stare and a slack jaw. Too late I realize that I’ve been frozen in place during the entire tirade. While my first instinct is to fly after that stallion and wring his scrawny little neck, Azalea needs me more. I rush back over to her and try to snap her out of the fugue she’s in.

What happens next is exactly the perfect way to make this worse. Somepony in the crowd starts to laugh.

I do my best to cover her ears against it, but I’m not quick enough to block out Algae Bloom’s laughter or what she says next. “Did you see that? She just got *wrecked*! That was amazing!” She might be the only one laughing, but it’s more than enough. Azalea wriggles away from me and takes off straight up to the clouds overhead.



I'm quick to give chase expecting to find her bawling, but she's not. When I get there, she's just laying spread eagle on her back, eyes looking up into nothing. "Sorry about that. I don't know who he was but next time I see him I'll—"

"Don't worry about it. It's not worth making a big deal over." The words are reassuring, but her vacant, hollow tone isn't. "This is all just a big misunderstanding. I'll finish selling for the day, then this afternoon I'll go talk to Twilight. Twilight will know how to make this right. I just have to explain why I left, and she'll tell me exactly what I should do and I'll do it and it will all be right again."

"You... uh..." I can't say I think this is the best idea, but it's up to her. "You might want to leave a couple details out."

"You have to go to work, right? Don't worry about me. Once I talk to Twilight she'll make this all better." She gets up and walks to the edge of the cloud.

I'm not letting her go quite that easily. "Promise you'll check in with me tomorrow, then."

"Of course. I promise," she replies, distant and dreamy. "Tomorrow it is."

With that she drops down to the road below and rejoins her cart. A few of the other salesponies come up to her to check in, some even bearing free samples or other tokens of comfort. She smiles and insists that she's fine. She's an excellent actress, but I guess that shouldn't surprise me anymore.

I wish I could fillysit her for the rest of the day, but I have other obligations to fulfill. I just hope if she does see Twilight, the conversation goes well.

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*"Twilight haaaaaaaates meeeee!"*

It could have gone better.

"I'm sure she doesn't hate you, Azalea," says Lyra. When I got home from work to find Azalea on my doorstep in tears once again, which is becoming an unpleasant pattern, it took me an hour to pry out enough information to determine just how

catastrophic yesterday's conversation actually was. At that point it became clear I was in over my head here and I needed to call in some backup. "Here, have another candied blackberry."

From beside the nearby table, Blossomforth takes her cue to pass the bowl across the little three pony circle we've been sitting in for over two hours now, arranged around Azalea to provide comfort from every angle. Momentarily distracted from her heartbreak by the treats under her nose, she snuffles. "These are really good," she says in a miserable little whisper before she pops a few more of them into her mouth. Half the bowl is gone, but at least Azalea is mostly coherent at this point. "She said... she said I don't even know her, and I don't get her at all. And she doesn't trust me because she thinks I'll leave her again."

"I know, Az. I know it hurts to hear that. She shouldn't have said those things to you," I say. Laying a supportive hoof on her shoulder, I meet her gaze and smile. My hopes of provoking her to return it with one of her own go unrewarded.

"Why shouldn't she? They're probably true. I promised her I'd do my best, but she doesn't think my best is good enough. Who am I to tell her she's wrong?"

Before any of us can come up with a response, we hear the front door open and close followed by the thump of saddlebags hitting the floor. "Lyra? I'm home."

"We're all in here, Bon Bon," Blossomforth calls back.

Bon Bon trots into the living room, looking tired from a long day running her shop. "Oh, hey, the gang's all here. I didn't realize you were—" She freezes mid sentence and her eyes lock onto the bowl in front of Azalea. "Are those the blackberries from my work fridge?"

Lyra scampers up onto her hooves in a single frantic burst. "Bonnie, can I talk to you in the kitchen for a minute?" Her magic lifts Bon Bon up and spins her a quick one-hundred-eighty degrees before putting her down again. They both hurry away, leaving the echoes of a frantic, whispered argument in their wake.

Blossom is quick to fill the silence. "Twilight doesn't know what she's missing. In fact, I'll bet she's just as unhappy as you are right now."

"No she's not," insists Azalea. "She's already moved on. She has a date tonight. I missed my chance. This new mare is going to show up looking radiant and she'll be smarter and nicer and prettier than me and she'll always know the right thing to say and when Twilight asks *her* to come inside with her at the end of the night she'll say yes and then their next date will be even better somehow and they'll fall in love and everything will be wonderful and on their first anniversary Twilight will propose and she'll say yes and they'll get married and have a little filly and a little colt and be a perfect family and one day they'll be walking down the street and the colt will look over and ask 'Who lives in that house, mommy?' and Twilight will tell him 'Oh, nopony important, just crazy old maid Azalea who's alone forever because *no pony could ever love some pony like her!*'" She bursts into a fresh round of sobs as Blossom and I exchange horrified looks.

"I think you might be getting a liiiiiiittle bit ahead of yourself there," I say.

Bon Bon and Lyra return from the kitchen, temporary truce secured. With one last wistful look at the mostly empty bowl, Bon Bon joins the circle and leans in give Azalea a big hug. "It'll be okay. Things will work out."

"No they won't," she mumbles. "Twilight's gone forever and I'll never find a fillyfriend half as good as her."

"Well, not with *that* attitude you won't," declares Lyra. "Hasn't anypony told you that there are plenty of fish in the sea? You'll just have to fish up another one. Just be patient, keep your eyes open, and when you see one that you want you reach out and grab it with both forelegs and hold on as tight as you can."

Blossom raises an eyebrow. "You've never actually seen anypony fishing in real life, have you?"

Lyra scoffs. "Well, it's obviously a metaphor. It's not like she's going to literally jump into some pond and come out of it with

her soulmate. That would be ridiculous.”

“But I don’t want a fish. I want Twilight.” She lowers herself onto her belly and covers her head with her wings. “I only want Twilight.”

“Look, Az, crushes suck. Especially the unrequited ones. But you’ll get over it, maybe even end up being just friends somewhere down the line. Just look at me and Blossom. She used to have a crush on me, but she got past it. Now we’re best friends and she’s with Davenport. Right Blossom? Maybe you can give Azalea some tips on what helped for you,” I say, hopeful that we can start to move this little pity party in a more positive direction.

Rather than pick up my obvious prompt, Blossom gives me a look I don’t entirely understand. Surprise and... something else. “You sure you really want to go there, Cloud?”

Huh? “Well sure. It’s been at least a year now. I thought it was ancient history at this point. Why wouldn’t I?”

She screws up her muzzle. What am I saying wrong? “I would think you would know exactly why. But sure, why not? Yes, Azalea, I did have a crush on Cloudy here. Then one night about a year ago, I was hanging out at the Sun’s Flank for a drink after work. It was just me since Cloud was away at a conference on hailstorms in Vanhoofer, or so I thought. So I look up just as nopony else but her walks in the front door and I flag her down.”

“What?” I ask.

“Don’t interrupt. So the two of us start to catch up, it’s actually great that she got out of the conference a day early so she can catch up on personal stuff around town before she has to go back into the office. Anyway, we’re having a good time and I don’t think anything of it until I glance up and catch her looking at me. Looking at me in a way I’d wanted her to look at me for a long time. Then she reached over and took my hoof. For once she wasn’t kidding. She was open and sincere and just...” she blushes hard and takes some time to compose herself. “We went back to my place. And that night was amazing.”

“Blossom—” I’m cut off by her hoof before I get any further.

“I *said* don’t interrupt. I fell asleep feeling like something had really changed between us, but when I woke up the next morning you were long gone. The bed wasn’t even warm.”

“Cloud!” says Bon Bon. Seems she’s joined team Not Me and from the look on Lyra’s face she’s about to be recruited as well. “I can’t believe you’d do that. I mean maybe to some one night stand, but to Blossom?”

“Why are we only hearing about this for the first time now?” asks Lyra before I get a chance to defend myself.

Blossom can’t even look at me, and Azalea’s gone quiet as well. “Well, I figured that was the beginning of a new phase of our relationship. But next time I saw you it was like nothing had changed at all. I kept waiting for you to mention it or acknowledge it somehow, but you never did. And the longer that went on the harder it felt to say anything myself.

Whenever I even thought about the prospect of talking about it with anypony I’d get these awful headaches, I guess from the stress. Eventually I just sort of realized that, well, you are the pony you are. You weren’t going to change or settle down just for me. Or even worse, maybe I was just that forgettable. Either way it wasn’t going to happen.”

“You aren’t forgettable, Blossom,” I say. “Not at all.”

“Well it’s how that night made me feel,” she counters, “and then at one of your parties a month later you introduced me to Davenport. I got the message loud and clear: we weren’t going to happen, so move on. It wasn’t easy, but I did. Look, like you said, it’s ancient history. You don’t owe me an apology or anything.”

“The buck she doesn’t,” says Bon Bon. “So do you have anything to say about all this, Cloud?”

Like I haven’t been trying to chime in this entire time.

“Blossom, we’ve never slept together.” The room goes silent, and Blossom finally manages to meet my eyes. She’s pissed.

“Not that I’m calling you a liar or anything, but I remember that conference. I didn’t get back a day early. I actually had to

stay later than I expected to.” From the look on her face I can tell she doesn’t believe me. “Look, you know what sticklers the department higher-ups are about certifications and conference attendance. Pull out the old documentation and it’ll corroborate what I’m saying. Maybe you slept with somepony that... looked like...”

I’m going to kill her. Granted, I’m not entirely sure who ‘her’ is or if she’s even still a her at all, but remembering what Scootaloo told me the other day makes the truth all too clear. My eyes lock onto Azalea’s as the guilty party’s most convenient available proxy, and she shrinks back. “I want to believe you, Cloud,” says Blossomforth, oblivious to what I’m realizing, “it just seems really far-fetched for me to take it on your word. I’ll pull the papers, but if you’re lying to me about this...”

“They’ll back me up, I’m sure of it.” Something else occurs to me. “Wait, you thought I did all this to you and you’ve still been my friend the entire time? Uh... why?”

“I’d like to know that too,” says Bon Bon, only to be punched in the shoulder by her marefriend and glared at until she closes her mouth again.

“Because you’re still the pony I’ve been friends with this whole time. I’m not giving that up just because I thought you could be something other than yourself. You mean too much to me.”

I bet she’d keep going if I didn’t tackle her right then and there with a leaping hug. “I don’t deserve you,” I mutter into her shoulder. “Even though I didn’t do what you think I did. There’s nothing I could ever do to deserve a friend as good as you.”

After the initial shock passes, she returns the hug with just as much force. “Sure you do. I’ll always be your friend.” She pulls back from me. “This doesn’t change anything. I’m not settling for Davenport because I thought I couldn’t have you. I love him, and whatever spark there might have been between us... it’s out now. I don’t think it’s coming back, and I don’t really want it to.”

Azalea yawns. The others buy it. I've seen her pretending too often not to notice the little signs that it isn't the real deal. "I feel better now, and I'm sorry I dragged all that stuff up for you, Blossom. I didn't mean to."

She shrugs. "You couldn't have known."

"It's been a long day. Want me to walk you home?" I offer.

"Could I... would you mind if I stick around? I'd like somepony to talk to. Somepony who... well... isn't Cloudy. Sorry Cloud," says Blossom, looking to me for forgiveness. Like she's the one who needs any of it from me.

"You're welcome to stay. I hope you don't mind if dinner is a little sparse. I was going to make Lyra's favorite buffalo broccoli bites, but *somepony* gave away my candy and I need to make a new batch," says Bon Bon.

We all bid one another goodnight as Azalea and I reach the end of their walkway and start heading towards her place. We've gone two blocks in silence before Azalea says anything. "It wasn't me."

"I don't know what you're—"

"Oh, come off it. If I'm not allowed to lie to you, I'd appreciate it if you at least returned the favor. A changeling slept with Blossomforth, borrowed your shape to do it, and you're pissed. Did I miss anything?"

With it all laid out that way I feel my anger rising all over again. "Do you know who did?"

"Probably some drone passing through. If Blossomforth was crushing on you that hard we'd have smelled it a mile off. Slip in, spend the night, plant a few mental blocks, slip away again. Textbook feeding technique." When I don't reply, she goes on. "Look, the stronger the feelings the food... sorry, the pony has for the disguise, the less we have to force and the less long-term damage there is. From a changeling's point of view, this was a—"

"I swear to Celestia, Az," I growl, "if the next words out of your mouth are 'victimless crime' the two of us are going to have a serious problem."

“We all have to eat. At least in this case everything worked out for the best.”

What if it hadn't? What if Blossom and I had drifted away from one another and I never knew why? What if I'd confronted her, she'd told me what happened, and I'd accused her of lying to me? All the possibilities spiral out in my mind's eye, far too many to vocalize. So I swallow that bitter little pill. But only for now. “Fine. It happened. If you say you weren't involved... well, I can't prove you were.” Her ears droop a bit as we pass a crooked streetlight, moths and lightning bugs swarming around the lamp. “Either way, you and I are doing something nice for her. What's your schedule like this weekend?”

“Not so good, actually. I'll be in Baltimore this weekend.”

“What for? Convention?”

She shakes her head. “There's another former changeling living there I've been pen pals with for a while now. In one of her letters she mentioned she was looking at this townhouse, but couldn't afford the rent by herself. She was having some trouble finding a roommate.”

“What does that have to do with you?” I ask. No answer. “Az? I asked—”

“Yeah, I heard you,” she says. “You know, that stallion in the marketplace yesterday... he wasn't exactly wrong, was he? You girls are great, but I don't want to live somewhere everypony knows me as ‘that mare who broke Twilight Sparkle's heart.’ And it's not like I had any reason for moving here in the first place, or at least not one that matters anymore. Maybe a fresh start and a clean slate would help. You could always come visit.”

I pause right there in the middle of the sidewalk. I don't think she's kidding. “Az, no offense, but you're not really in the right state of mind to make any major life decisions right now.”

“This is my street. Your house is that way,” she says, jabbing her hoof down a side street. “Goodnight, Cloudy.”



“Azalea? *Azalea!*” I shout after her as she walks away. She doesn’t respond, and I can’t do much but watch as she gets further and further away. Shaking my head and sighing, I turn to make for home.

It’s not until I’m walking up to my own house that I realize that, once again, I forgot that my scarf was at Azalea’s. I groan at the prospect of going back for it, but a chilly breeze that kicks up changes my mind. There’s a cold front we’re moving in over the next few days and I’m better off having it on me. Plus I know she’s still awake. Most importantly, though, it’s a really convenient excuse.

I turn back and canter back towards Azalea’s, wondering if there’s anything I can say to her that’ll make a difference to her weekend plans. Why Baltimore, of all places? But it’s clear enough that this isn’t about where she’d be living. It’s about where she *wouldn’t* be living.

I’m about to round the last corner when I hear her voice out there in the darkness. “Um... I’m not really sure how I’m supposed to do this. I feel a bit silly doing it at all. Still, back when I was a changeling there was always someone else with me listening to what I was thinking, even if it was only the other drones. Do ponies have something like that too?”

Puzzled, I peer around the side of her house to see who she’s speaking to. She’s sitting in the middle of her flower garden looking up at the night sky. Whoever she’s talking to it’s nopony I can see. “I know for sure I’m not supposed to pray to the Princesses. They aren’t really in the prayer-answering business, and Queen Chrysalis proved that they aren’t exactly invincible or omniscient. That doesn’t leave me with a lot of other options. When I was a changeling the Queen didn’t want us believing in anything greater than her, and I’ll die before I ask a single favor from that monster. But Azalea, the old one I mean, as far as I can tell she didn’t believe in much beyond just sort of passively assuming that if she just did what she was supposed to and never rocked the boat, she’d eventually sell enough flowers and... I don’t know. Somepony would just show up one day, congratulate her on being finished with the boring part of life and hoof over whatever her ‘happily ever

after' was supposed to be. Maybe not exactly in those terms, but it's the way she acted.

"So that sort of puts me in a bind, because I can't believe in either of those things. Not anymore. The only thing I can think of to replace them, though, is whatever that magic was that came down on me out of nowhere during our invasion and lit me on fire right there in the middle of my living room. Were you trying to burn away all my bad parts? Because you missed a lot of them. Just look at what I've done ever since. I'm not better, and I still hurt ponies I care about. I'm probably a major disappointment after you went through all that trouble getting me this way. That's why I'm pretty sure you aren't listening to me right now. I don't blame you; I wouldn't listen to me either. I'm not the one you gave a magic crown or those necklaces to. I guess they're kind of like a hotline to you? I'm not exactly sure how it works, but it's not for me to know. They're for the special ponies.

She smiles, even with her voice catching in her throat as she continues. "Speaking of the special ponies, I hope if you're not listening to me you're focused on Twilight right now. She's got a date tonight, you know. What am I saying, of course you know. Whatever you screwed up that led you to send her out with me before, I hope you've ironed out the mistakes this time. She was a bit of a goof on ours, so please make sure the pony she's with isn't thrown by that. Just give her the pony who's special enough to make her happy. Frankly, you owe it to her.

"But... if even you're too busy to listen to me, who's left? I feel like I'm just so alone right now, and that's selfish of me because you've set me up with some really good friends down here. Still, sometimes it feels like there's something empty inside me and the only thing I have to fill it with is nightmares. It doesn't have to be a lot, but I need *something*. I don't even know what it is, but it has to be something I can believe in. Something that's good and right and *deserves* to be believed in. And don't give me any of that vague 'all part of the plan' stuff either. It's gotta be something I can hold in my hooves. Because if I don't get something to hold onto, and soon, I'm

scared that I might start slipping away altogether. So yeah. Get on that. I mean, if it isn't too much trouble."

I don't step out of the shadows; I don't want her to realize I just saw something that obviously wasn't meant for me. I don't even move while she keeps just sitting there and staring upwards, waiting. I don't have a watch on me, but it's a good fifteen or twenty minutes later when her head abruptly droops to the ground. She gets up and dusts off her coat with a few beats of her wings before turning to go inside. "What did I expect?" she mutters as she walks away. It's not until the front door closes and I hear the lock being set that I'm willing to back away. My scarf can wait after all. There's got to be something I can do for Azalea, but no new ideas are coming to me on the flight home. When I land in my front yard I catch a new sound in the air, faint but distinct.

Somewhere behind me, just at the edge of my hearing, somepony is pounding their hoof against a wooden door.

# Everypony's Fine

## EVERYPONY'S FINE

I give up.

It's not really a phrase that enters my mind all that that often. Sure, I know when to cut my losses and move on if it's appropriate, but the things that really matter to me? Those are different. No matter what certain mothers who will remain unnamed might think, quitting on something I care about really sticks in my craw. But sometimes there's just not much else you can do.

I turn over in bed with a sigh and glance at my clock, its face glimmering in a moonbeam that snuck through my curtains. Well after midnight, and the thoughts running circles through my mind have chased away my chances of sleep. It's a cold comfort that Azalea's night is probably going way worse than mine is. Those things she said out in her garden when she thought I wasn't listening. They've been playing back for me all evening. Should I have left her alone afterwards? Should I have done something differently over the last couple days to help her get over Twilight? I've tried everything I can think of, and maybe I've snapped at her a couple times but it seems fair given all that she did to me.

Oh goody, here comes the anger. Every time I stumble onto *that* particular bundle of memories my blood pumps a little harder and I'm so, so tired of trying to pretend it doesn't for other ponies' sake. Luckily, the pillow I use to muffle my frustrated scream is the nonjudgmental sort. Good thing too. That pillow's seen some crazy stuff go down in this bedroom.

I wonder how many times it was with a changeling?

Not helping, brain. Not helping at all.

My entire family. They were going to paint the walls of Alula's bedroom with her blood, and they were going to use information they got from me to do it. And here I am trying to

help the pony who took it from me piece her life back together instead of beating her face into a bloody pulp. Because I don't quit. I'm not a quitter.

I'm not. But I don't know what I'm doing anymore.

Thank Celestia that Kicky's getting back tomorrow. Maybe she'll know what the right thing to say to Azalea that will make her change her mind about Baltimore. Because she's the one who always has all the answers no, no, *no*, you're past this, Cloud. None of this is Kicky's fault, it's... I don't know. The changelings, Mom, it's somepony else's fault you're feeling this way. Besides, Azalea's her friend too so it's completely reasonable that she'd want to help shoulder the burden of helping her. But if that doesn't work...

By the time I finally drift off it's well after two in the morning, and if anything I'm even more lost than before. The last thing I remember wondering is if, maybe just this once, I could catch a break.

---

"Wow, you look awful."

I stop in the middle of the street when I hear the voice above me. "There's this thing called tact, Dash. You should look into it," I reply. Still, it's not like she's wrong. I hope that Kicky's up to carrying her own bags back from the train station; the ones under my eyes are more than heavy enough for me.

Rainbow Dash lands next to me and leans in uncomfortably close to get a better look at my face. "No, seriously though. You getting enough sleep?"

I plaster on a grin. "What can I say? Lots of ponies to bang, and they all expect my A-game. Wears a mare down."

I'm rewarded by a little shiver running down Dash's spine. She's so easy to fluster. "Ugh. I don't wanna hear about that stuff. New subject, please."

"Alright, fine." Fun to tease or not, antagonizing one's boss is rarely a great career move, even if Rainbow cuts me a lot more slack than most would. Plus I have to save some material for

later, right? “I heard Twilight had a date last night. Any idea who it was with?”

She shrugs as she begins walking alongside me through the marketplace towards the train station. I don’t mind taking it slow. Pretty sure I have a couple extra minutes to kill before Kicky’s train arrives. “Some earth pony mare. Algae something.”

Good thing I don’t need to be making good time since hearing that name brings me to a very sudden stop. “Algae Bloom? You set Twilight up with *Algae Bloom*?”

Dash might hear the words, but there’s no way she actually understands them. “She asked, and Twilight said yes. I mean, I wouldn’t necessarily have. She can’t be any worse than Azure or what’s-her-face who treated her like crap. Good riddance, y’know?”

“It’s Azalea. And you have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Rainbow scoffs. “I know she walked away from a pony who was all hurt and needed her and stuff. That’s pretty bucking low. If you’d seen Twilight at the party the other night you wouldn’t be so quick to defend her.” Her wings start to twitch and, of course, I’ve gone and given her a full head of steam just as we’re getting close to Az’s cart. A detail that doesn’t go unnoticed by Rainbow. “I heard about what Star Swirl said to her the other day. I’ve got half a mind to go over there right now and put on a repeat performance.”

So that’d be a ‘no’ on the ‘can I catch a break’ thing, I guess.

“You’ve got half a mind, all right.” I pin her tail down with a hoof as a preventative measure. Things have, against all odds and certainly all reason, just gotten much worse. “She’s in a really bad place right now, Dash. The last thing she needs is for you to throw this in her face.” Privately, I wonder if just hearing that the mare Twilight traded her in for is Algae Bloom will be that one last touch that pushes her over the edge for good.

Dash, however, is unmoved. “Yeah right. Just look at her.” She gestures in Azalea’s direction, and I have to admit I can kinda see what’s got Dash all riled up. Chatting with a customer, she’s grinning ear to ear with a happy shine in her eye. Even knowing how good she is at faking that, it’s hard not to be impressed by how well she pretends to be happy. She bundles up a few of her flowers in a paper cone, and when she trots over to slip it into the stallion’s saddle bags I notice that something about her gait is ever so slightly off. Can’t put my hoof on it before Rainbow continues. “Somepony should go wipe that dumb smirk off her face.”

“Leave her alone.” My plea falls on deaf ears as she knocks my hoof aside and bolts towards Azalea, with me close behind.

She stops in front of the cart, but before she can launch into whatever she’s about to say Azalea spots me and rushes past her. “H-hey! Come back here so I can yell at you!”

If she even hears what Dash just said, she doesn’t reply. Instead she just grabs me in a hug and buries her face in my mane. I knew she had to be faking. “It’s okay, Azalea,” I say, rubbing her back with a comforting hoof. The death glare I’m throwing Rainbow Dash over her shoulder is, for the moment, keeping her at bay. “I know things are hard right now, but you’ll make it. You don’t have to move to Baltimore.”

“To where now?” Huh. That’s not the reaction I expected. I also notice that there’s a distinct lack of sobbing and, when she pulls back and looks at me with genuine confusion, no tears either. “Oh, that. I forgot about it, actually. I’m not going anywhere.” That grin comes back, and I’m not nearly as sure as I was a moment ago that it’s a fake. “From now on, I run *towards* things, not away. Not anymore.”

“Well... that’s great!” Her grin is infectious, and soon I’m sporting one too. Albeit one with more confusion backing it up. “It’s just last night you seemed really down. I figured another night of bad dreams wouldn’t help.”

A certain contentment drifts across her face as she gives me a mischievous, I-know-something-you-don’t-know look. “I

didn't have any bad dreams last night. I think... I think I found something that keeps them away." Her smile, if anything, grows even feistier. "Or I should say somepony who keeps them away."

"Um, hello? Angry best friend of your ex here, remember?" asks Rainbow Dash. Princesses forbid somepony not pay attention to her for three seconds.

"Not my ex," says Azalea, sparing Dash a quick glance before returning to me. "After you walked me home last, well, you remember how I was. I even..." she trails off. She doesn't have to share what I know she's recalling right now if she doesn't want to. "Anyway," she begins again, "Twilight came by. I guess her date didn't go so well and she... we... we went up to the lake."

"You two kissed and made up?" I asked, throwing in a suggestively raised eyebrow for good measure.

"It was more than that. She... and I... I can't even find the words right now. But it was exactly what I needed exactly when I needed it. I've never felt like this, Cloudy. Like I can do anything. Like I'm finally ready to start my life, and nopony's going to hold me back. Especially not myself." I look, really look, at her face. Sure, I've seen her happy before, but now there's more to it than that. Something new and different. Whatever it is, it suits her.

"Well, it must have gone well if you spent the night with her." Her blush and faraway look make me realize exactly why she was walking funny earlier. "Well, you can't stop there! What happened next? Don't spare the details."

Azalea blushes harder. "Well, after we talked for awhile she told me she wanted to show me something. Then she teleported us both to the roof of this building where there was... oh, I just realized I don't even know who lives there, I hope we didn't wake them up."

"You banged her on the roof?" I guess that's not too crazy, just a little odd. Sounds uncomfortable.

"Ew," says Rainbow Dash from back by the cart.



Azalea lets out a happy little giggle. “It wasn’t that it was the roof. There was this weather vane...”

“Wait,” I say as she lets that linger in the air. “Are you saying that Twilight knows about the thing with the weather vanes? We are talking about Twilight *Sparkle*, right? Bookish little shut-in?”

“Oh, she *definitely* knows,” says Azalea.

“You lucky *bitch*! It’s going to be two days before you’re walking straight again. Three if it was a copper one.” I never would have pegged Twilight as somepony who’d have experience with that kind of thing, especially with how uncomfortable the entire topic of sex always makes her. “Boy, it’s always the quiet ones.”

“Uh... what’s so special about weather vanes?” asks Rainbow Dash, completely lost.

A conspiratorial look passes from Azalea to me and back. This is going to be fun. “You mean you don’t know?” I ask.

“You’re missing out. Here, lean in and I’ll whisper it to you.” She hesitates, but I know this mare. She’s not going to chicken out now. She perks up her ears and starts to listen.

Fifteen seconds into my explanation, her jaw drops and she pulls away. “Ew! You... and then another... with an... *EW!*”

I can’t help laughing out loud. “Hey, don’t knock it ‘til you’ve tried it. I wasn’t even up to the good part yet. Don’t you want to hear what happens next?”

“No. So much no.”

“Your loss, ya big prude,” I say with a shrug. “I just wish I knew exactly why it felt so good.”

“Oh, I might be able to explain that.” Right on cue, Azalea chimes in much to my delight and Rainbow’s despair.

“Twilight was explaining some of the science behind it to me this morning. Apparently when the ‘E’ makes contact with—”

Dash’s response is to clamp her hooves over her ears as Azalea continues and try to drown her out. “Nope nope nope nope nope nope nope.”

“—is when I accidentally bit down on her tail, but she seemed to like it so we—”

*“La la la la la la la! La! La la la la la la!”*

“—and the electromagnetic field it generates sets off the nerve endings all through your body, which is why you get that building tingle right before—”

*“I’m not listening! I’m nooooooooooot liiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiistening! You might as well stop talking because nopony wants to hear this stuff and I’M NOT LISTENING!”*

“—and we would have gone for a fourth time, but Twilight said we had to stop or it would overheat,” finishes Azalea.

“Yeah, that’s not somewhere you want to get burned.” I shudder. “Believe me.”

It seems Azalea’s new attitude about not running away from things isn’t shared by Rainbow Dash. Her hooves still over her ears, she flaps her wings and shoots into the air. It only takes a few more before she’s behind a nearby roof and out of earshot, leaving Azalea and I leaning against one another and laughing. As our laughter quiets, it’s easy to transition it into another hug. “Cloudy? Thank you.”

“Eh, I didn’t do much of anything.”

“You believed in me.” She leans in a little closer so she can switch to a whisper. “Even with what I used to be. A changeling and... and a coward.”

“Hey there,” I say, nuzzling her cheek. “You’re not a coward.”

She picks a flower off of her cart and offers it to me. “Well, for now at least take a bite to eat.” Never one to turn down a free snack, I pop it into my mouth and close my eyes to better savor the taste as I chew. When I open them again, Azalea’s giving me a funny look.

“What? Is there pollen on my cheek or something?”

She shakes her head. “I’m going to pay you back.”

“For what? Being your friend? You don’t have to do that.”

“Yes I do.”

“You really—”

“Cloud!” The iron in her voice gives me pause. Guess she’s more serious about this than I realized. “I don’t know how yet, but someday I’m going to find something I can do for you or give you that has as big an impact on your life as you’ve had on mine.”

I flash her a grin. “Tell you what, talk Twilight into sharing you with me for a night and we’ll call it even. Now I’m dying to find out what other tricks she knows.”

Shaking her head, she sighs. “You don’t believe me. That’s fine. Just wait and see.” A little knowing smile crosses her face as she grabs another flower. “Here, for Kicky when she gets back.”

The mention of Kicky abruptly shunts away any speculation on my part about just what she might be up to and I notice that thanks to this little stop I’m now running late to pick her up. I accept the to-go treat and bid Azalea farewell. Even though I’m late, I stop just before I turn the corner to look back. Azalea’s moved on to the next pony, haggling over a dozen flowers. Even deep in concentration, that smile of hers hasn’t gone away. I suspect it’s going to be a long time before it does. Like I said, I don’t quit. And that’s why.

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“Anyway,” says Kicky as she drops her duffel bag on the floor of our living room, “I’ve rambled about drills and training for long enough. Anything interesting happen here while I was gone?”

I stare at her, not really sure where to start. Plus she’s gotten a new mane cut that’s still throwing me. It’s not immediately obvious that it’s shorter now unless we’re standing next to one another, but it’s still a difference between us. Shouldn’t be a big deal, but for some reason it keeps bothering me. Makes her look older, somehow. “Well, let’s see. Azalea and Twilight broke up, then she got drunk, thought I was you, and confessed all about how she used to be a changeling. Then I talked to Scootaloo who, after a detailed discussion with

Elizabeak over the many ways she could murder me, told me that you and the rest of the hive have been using me to feed for like a year now, including once on Blossomforth. So I'm not exactly having the greatest week."

Kicky blinks a few times in surprise. "They broke up?"

"*That's* the part about all of this you're going to be surprised by? Really?"

She shrugs. "Well, the other stuff I knew already. Most of it."

"It was a long couple of days, but the other girls and I pulled her back together and the two of them reconnected last night."

Just the act of laying it out like that makes me feel every minute of all the good night sleeps I haven't been getting recently. "So everypony's fine. Just great. All hunky-dory."

Kicky's been watching me with an odd expression. "What?"

"Seems like as good a time as any to give you something Aunt Wind wanted me to pass on." She pulls the zipper of the duffel bag open with her teeth and rummages around for a few second before she comes up with an envelope between her teeth, one bearing the official seal of the Royal Guard and everything. "Now remember, I'm just the messenger here."

Well that doesn't bode well at all. I break the wax seal and pull out the crisply folded sheet of paper within. They look like official orders. I skim through the boilerplate about my duty to the Reserve until I get to the only part that matters.

*Pvt. Kicker*

*You are hereby ordered to report to Canterlot for full psychological assessment and evaluation no later than thirty days hence.*

*Col. Wind*

"Kicky..."

"Remember, just the messenger here," she says again, inching away even as she does. "You knew I was going to tell Aunt Wind about what happened in that hive. When I told her you didn't think you needed to talk to anypony about it she made

up her mind.” I just hold my glare on her, so she continues. “If it makes you feel any better, you’re officially only being asked... well, okay, ordered, but on paper it’s because the new ex-changeling unit I’m part of is only a few weeks from officially forming and integrating into the rest of the command structure. Your evaluation is supposed to help them figure out how other ponies will adapt to serving with them seeing as how we’ve already been living together and everything. A little flimsy, maybe, but it’ll hold water.”

“Gee,” I mutter, “I’d think the rest of the clan would jump at the chance to have their black sheep declared officially crazy.”

“Don’t be like that, Cloudy. She’s just worried about you.” I watch her weighing her next words very carefully before she says them. “Mom asked about you.”

“I explicitly told you not to tell her—”

“I didn’t,” she interrupts before I can get going. A little spark of anger from last night tries to bubble up, but it’s a half hearted one and I quash it before it can really start building. I’m getting awfully good at that. “She just wanted to know how you were. I told her you were fine, if that helps.”

“*I am* fine. Why would you tell her anything else?” She won’t meet my eyes. Instead she just drags her bag to her bedroom and leaves me to relax on the couch. Foreleg draped over my face, I could almost drift off for a nap. I spend about ten minutes trying, without luck. Too annoyed that I’m going to have to drag myself all the way to Canterlot just so Aunt Wind can meddle in my life.

“Um, hey Cloud?”

I sit up and look at Kicky, standing in the hallway watching me. “Yeah?”

“Look, as long as I’m telling you things that are going to upset you, I’ve got one more for the pile.”

I stifle a low groan. This day was going so well just an hour ago, too. “Alright. Spill it.”

It takes her a few minutes to work up the nerve to keep going, and I can tell she already regrets letting me know something’s

coming. “You know how there was a changeling who impersonated you to get to Blossom?”

I nod. “Yeah. Azalea said it was probably some drone just passing through.”

“That’s not an unreasonable assumption.” For a moment I think that she’s just going to leave it at that, but she proves me wrong. “But... it wasn’t. Not in this case. It was just... well, I got hungry.”

When I connect the dots and realize what she’s saying, I expect a fresh surge of rage. I guess I really have gotten good at keeping it in check with everything that’s been happening, because this time nothing comes at all. It’s almost a little disappointing that it doesn’t, like I’m being stood up by an old friend. Instead I just lie back down on the couch. “Oh. Thanks for telling me. I won’t say anything. After all, what’s one more secret to keep from my friends? I’ve had plenty of practice.”

“I sort of thought you’d be more upset when you found out,” says Kicky. I would think she’d be happy, but she doesn’t sound any less worried than she was a moment ago.

“What’s the point?” I ask. “Do you really want to go through the whole ‘I’m mad, you’re mad, we yell and threaten one another, almost come to blows only, surprise, sudden interruption stops us, cooler heads prevail, realize we’re being dumb, hug and make up’ thing? Because we’ve already done that, what, at least three times now. I don’t really feel like going another round at the moment.”

With my eyes closed, the ensuing silence leads me to believe that Kicky’s left to do... whatever she’s up to today. At least until I hear her voice right above my head and nearly leap out of my skin.

“Kicky! Geeze, make a little more noise before you do that kind of thing.” When my breathing is back to something vaguely resembling normal, I go on. “You were saying?”

“I asked if you felt like going out to the Sun’s Flank tonight, just you and me. Middle of the weekend, I bet there’ll be plenty of ponies looking for a good time. I’ll be your

wingmare. You just seem like you could use a fun night to recharge a bit.”

That does sound pretty appealing, actually. “You must need it too, after a week of training. Sounds like they worked you pretty hard.”

“Nah, it wasn’t that intense. Just putting us through our paces and trying to get a sense of who would be doing what. We had plenty of time off in the evenings. Glint and some of his friends took me to hit a couple of our old haunts and swap stories.”

My ears perk up a bit at that. “Glinting Steel wasn’t a changeling, was he? I didn’t think he had a double.”

She shakes her head a bit too quickly. “Nope, he’s the same pony we went to West Hoof with. He’s been great, though. Totally fine with the whole former changeling thing.” She bites her lip. “Cloudy, do you ever wish you’d done stuff differently back then?”

“How so?”

“With Glint. I mean I remember how much fun we always had, but you knew he kinda... you know...”

“Spit it out, filly.”

“Deep down he wanted a special somepony, not just to get laid. Not that he minded that part, obviously.”

I think back. Glint had been a regular part of my rotation since we’d hit it off early in second year right up until... well, for as long as I’d been enrolled. While I’d laid out my rules right from the start, and he’d accepted them, I definitely know what Kicky’s talking about. “He’s a good pony, but we’re not really wired for monogamy. Think about how much we’d have missed out on if we’d let him tie us down like that. Hey, that’s half the reason to join the Guard in the first place, right? Travel Equestria, meet interesting ponies, and bang them.”

“I guess so. It was just on my mind this week and I wanted to ask.” Then she grins. “Anyway, speaking of fun you need to have a little of it tonight. So rest up this afternoon and run

whatever errands you need to get done. I'll cook, then we're hitting the town."

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With the first breath of the hot, smoky air that permeates the packed-solid Sun's Flank I can already feel the stress that's built up in my head over the last week start to lessen. I turn back to look at Kicky, who's watching me with an expectant grin, and step over the threshold to start trying to force my way towards the bar. I really owe her one for suggesting this in the first place. Who would have thought that a pony with all of my memories and my personality would end up knowing me pretty well?

It's hard to hear much of the music over the din of a hundred conversations. The stallion onstage with an acoustic guitar crooning into the microphone about his fillyfriend or dog or something doesn't stand a chance, but then again I'm not here to dance or listen to a set. I'm on the hunt.

The hunt is briefly postponed, though, while I try to get the bartender's attention and order a pair of ciders. It takes longer than it should, but twenty minutes later I'm balancing two mugs on my back as I hover over the crowd towards where Kicky is flagging me down from a little table against the wall. When I get close enough she grabs them from me before my rhythm can slip and my flapping wings tip either of them over. Hard to be suave when you're soaked and smell like an orchard growing in a distillery. Not impossible, though; 'do you want to go somewhere quiet and help me suck it out' has worked for me before, although in that case I'd already been talking to him before somepony's stray elbow knocked over my glass. But I digress.

"There she is," says Kicky, "you know this is the first time I've seen you smiling all day?"

"What? That can't be right. You must not have been paying close enough attention."

"Well, either way. So—" she gestures with a wing over towards the ponies at the bar, "—who's on the menu tonight?"



I wince. “Word choice, Kicky.”

Her smile slips a bit. “I’d argue that phrase works just as well for you as it does for any changeling. Besides, you know what I meant.”

I scan the crowd. Plenty of strangers, some ponies who I know casually, and a few who I know a lot better than casually. While most nights I wouldn’t mind making a new friend, tonight isn’t most nights. Honestly, the prospect of hitting on thirty new ponies to find one who’s interested sounds a lot more exhausting than exhilarating. When did *that* happen? “Yeah, I guess I do. Keep an eye out for any of our regulars.” Just have to turn on the charm and find some low-hanging fruit that’s getting plucked tonight.

In the meantime, just sharing a drink with Kicky and getting caught up on the latest family gossip is plenty nice in and of itself. I’m just laughing at her retelling of Star’s repeated attempts to beg her way into going out with her and Glint for a night of debauchery when she stops mid-sentence. “Easy good time on your five o’clock.”

I turn my head just enough to look without looking like I’m looking. I only catch a glimpse out of the corner of my eye, but that coat and mane tend to stand out. “Fire Brand? You think so?”

“If you’re up for it. You do kinda owe her after you introduced her to a friend who went and blew her off a minute later.”

“Extenuating circumstances,” I mutter into my drink, but in my head I’m turning the suggestion over. She’s a mare I know and like, and always a good time when I don’t mind having a few bruises the next morning. She does have a tendency to forget her own strength in the heat of the moment. “You know what? Hold my cider and watch the master at work.”

Kicky rolls her eyes and gamely lets me go. We both know I don’t need her help in this particular case, so I’ll free her up to go after somepony else while I talk to Fire Brand.

She spots me on my approach, and her friendly wave is a good sign that she’s feeling receptive tonight. That does make things

easier. “Cloudy! Here to save me?” Make that a lot easier.

“Absolutely,” I reply, “from what, exactly?”

Fire Brand nods ever so slightly to bring my attention to another mare at the bar who’s staring at her rear so intensely you’d think she was trying to read something off of it. “Five times in a row now. Every time I introduce myself to a cute pony, they think they’re the first to come up with something like ‘Fire Brand, huh? No wonder you’re so hot.’ It used to be cute, but now it’s just annoying.” She registers my grin.

“Don’t you dare.”

“Don’t worry, I’m not one to go around burning my bridges.” She groans, but I’m not even close to done. “Not when things are warming up between us. I understand why you might be worried; after all, usually where there’s smoke there’s fire. And... something something going into heat.”

Despite herself, she does laugh at the last one. “Okay, I brought that on myself. You’re still an awful pony, though.”

“You think if I buy you a drink I might be able to claw my way back up to half-decent?”

Her grin gets a little more sultry. “Maybe. Or maybe you’ll have to find some other way to make it up to me.”

Sure, I could probably convince her to go straight back to my place after a comment like that, but I don’t. She’s not some sex object. Well, okay, with those taut muscles she’s earned swinging a hammer all day that flow along her chest and legs under that silky red coat she totally is, but she’s not *just* a sex object. So I pay for a new drink for both of us and we take a half an hour to catch up. I share some weather team gossip and she tells me about the crazy new business that opened up down the street from hers. Who thought crossbows and bowling balls would be a good combination? As much as I hate to see anypony’s livelihood fail, hopefully whatever replaces it will make a bit more sense.

When a slightly tipsy Fire Brand leans over and her hoof drifts downwards to stroke at my thigh, I know it’s time to move onto the main event. I make a quick detour over to where

Kicky's making eyes at the unicorn stallion chatting her up, and I don't even mind that she finished my cider while I was away. After letting her know I'm heading out, I meet Fire Brand again by the door and we spill out into the cool evening air, laughing together at a joke that wasn't even that funny to begin with.

The 'your place or mine' conversation goes in her favor, so it looks like Kicky will have the house to herself tonight. While she's fiddling with getting the front door open, I surprise her with a little nip right over the cutie mark and she yelps out loud. She's already breathing a little harder, and we're barely over the threshold before she hooks a foreleg under my barrel and effortlessly swings me up onto her back. Then she makes straight for the bedroom, and I'm just along for the ride.

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"Mmmm... you've picked up a few new tricks since last time we did this," says Fire Brand, resting her head on my shoulder. A brief time-out between rounds one and two.

"I'm full of surprises," I reply. The pleasant haze of an endorphin rush is exactly what I needed after today. Fire Brand shifts her weight a bit and plants a hoof firmly on my chest, pinning me down as she moves to straddle. We didn't bother with any of the bedroom lights when we came in here, preoccupied as we were with other things, and the only illumination is what creeps in from the hallway. With her mane blocking any of it from falling over her face as she looms over me, something funny happens. A conspiracy of shadows makes it look, just for a single fleeting moment, like she has a horn on her forehead. Which is ridiculous; Fire Brand is an earth pony, not a unicorn. Where have I seen a unicorn who looks like her, though?

It hits me a few seconds later. The changeling that I followed back to their hive looked like a unicorn version of Fire Brand. I try to sit up, but she's more than strong enough to hold me where I am, trapped and helpless. My efforts don't even budge her.

If she told me right this second that she were a changeling, I wouldn't be able to do a single thing about it. She opens her mouth, and for a second I imagine she's going to say exactly that. "Wow, Cloud," she says instead, "that must have been more of a workout than I thought. Your heart's pounding."

"Get off." I squeeze my eyes shut, which does exactly nothing against the mental images racing through my head.

"Oh, I fully intend to."

"No, Fire Brand, get off of me."

Her weight vanishes off of my chest, and I feel her settle beside me. "Sorry. Don't know my own strength sometimes."

I open my eyes again, and the image of that unicorn mare is gone. It's just Fire Brand beside me again. My friend, not some monster. This time, anyway. I smile at her, but she's frowning back. I lean in and give her a kiss on the cheek before I roll over and climb out of the bed. "Sorry, I'm really tired tonight. This was fun, but I think I'll sleep better in my own bed."

A quick trip to her bathroom to splash some water on my face, and when I return she's still wrapped in the sheets and watching me. "You're leaving already? Cloud, are you okay?"

Why do ponies keep asking me that today? "I'm fine. Like I said, just a little bit run down. I'll make it up to you next time, promise."

She doesn't look all that convinced, but she doesn't stop me as I turn and go. I exhale a deep breath I didn't realize I was holding when I'm finally out of her house, and take a moment on the sidewalk to collect myself. It's after sundown, and the only light are a few streetlamps pushing back against the darkness. The shock of going from pressed against a warm body out into the cold chases away my earlier euphoria, leaving only a dull, aching weariness in its place.

I'm not sure if I'll be able to sleep any better tonight than I did last night. But I plod my way home wanting nothing more than to try.

# Sometimes You Just Have to Punch a Pony in the Face

## SOMETIMES YOU JUST HAVE TO PUNCH A PONY IN THE FACE

By the Princesses do I bucking love a strong cup of coffee.

I've certainly been going through enough of it these last couple days, despite Kicky's suggestions that I cut down a bit. She's got a point, all that caffeine isn't helping the rapidly developing case of insomnia I've been battling. Still, whatever it takes to get me through the day.

"What's that, your third cup today? You're gonna finish the whole pot on your own at the rate you're going," says Blossomforth from her desk. Guess I'm busted. "Hey, did you want to go over the schedule and figure out how many shifts you'll be gone for while you're in Canterlot?"

"Sorry, you wanted some?" Least I can do is share with my partner in crime,

She shrugs. "Nah. Feeling a bit queasy this morning, don't think that'd help. Anyway, we only have the shifts blocked out for the next two weeks. It sounds like Rainbow Dash is going to be headed into Canterlot *again* sometime in the near future anyway for Element of Harmony stuff. I swear, she's out of the office more days than she's in."

"We should ask the department if they'll pay us for all the work of hers, am I right?" Not my most elegant attempt to change the subject, and Blossom knows me too well to let me get away with it.

"Kicky made it sound like you needed to go to Canterlot sometime in the next week or so. She said it was important."

"Not that important. I've got a month, and it's just a couple hours by train. I'm not in a rush, and I've got better things to do." Yeah, because I've been so busy these last few days. Like

last night when I found myself preoccupied with dusting the same pieces of furniture three times in a row. But speaking of things I need to do one chore stands out, and unlike the interrogation waiting for me in Canterlot it's not something I'm willing to put off. I gather up the papers I'll need and walk them over to Blossom's desk, who looks up from what she's writing. "By the way, I pulled the travel receipts. You know, the one from the conference I was at when you..."

Wordlessly, she takes the papers from me and studies them carefully. My smile gets a bit more forced as she pulls out an old calendar and starts cross-referencing dates. I would have preferred if she'd just taken my word on this, but no dice. The facts are on my side, though, and she eventually comes to the same conclusion. "Huh. I guess you weren't lying. That really wasn't you." She sighs, closes her eyes, and presses a hoof into her forehead just between them. Despite her best efforts, a single tear manages to slip out. She wipes it away and snuffles before opening her eyes again. "I feel like such an idiot."

I drape a wing over her shoulder and nuzzle her cheek. "Hey, don't be like that. It wasn't your fault."

She nods and returns my smile, though it takes some effort. "I know. In some ways it's actually better this way, really. This way it's some dumb bug I'm upset with instead of my best friend."

I have to look away so she doesn't notice the little twitch in my cheek. I did promise Kicky I wouldn't tell anypony, after all. I should be angry at her for putting me in this position, but I'm just not for whatever reason. All the more reason to delay the Canterlot trip; Aunt Wind will just want to dwell on that, and probably everything else dealing with changelings. That's the official reason I'm being ordered there, right? "I just hate seeing you upset at all. Do you want to talk about it? I'm here for you if you do."

"Nah, I hashed it out pretty well with Bon Bon and Lyra the other night. Thanks for the offer, though," she replies. Moment over, she starts to shift her attention back towards the work on her desk.

“I guess that’s good.” Am I trying to convince her or myself? After everything that’s happened these last couple weeks, I should be relieved that I’m not getting bounced around from friend to friend as a shoulder to cry on. But for some reason, the idea that all of them are happy and well adjusted, at least for the short term, makes me more anxious than anything. All that coffee has left my wings a bit twitchy, and all of a sudden sitting behind a desk is just about the least appealing prospect in the world. I grab a piece of paper off my desk and give a quick once-over to the plans for the rest of the week. “Hey, I’m going to bump this afternoon’s shower into an overnight thing.”

Blossom looks up at me. “Any particular reason? Thunderlane’s already out getting it set up.”

“Figure that’ll give it more time to sink into the ground before the sun gets to it. Don’t want to overstress the reservoir.” Sure, that sounds vaguely plausible.

Obviously Blossom reaches a similar conclusion, and shrugs. “I think water levels are probably in good shape, but I don’t see any reason not to reschedule if you want to call an audible.”

“Great, I better go let Thunderlane know,” I say as I head for the door. Stepping outside, it feels good to stretch them out and take off again.

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Thunderlane doesn’t fight me or argue against my last-second change, just heads off to take care of other things. Errand completed, I consider heading straight back to the office, but the feeling of wind beneath my wings convinces me otherwise. There are plenty of other weather team ponies who I can drop in on for a surprise check-up. Dash is pretty lax in the discipline department as long as the work gets done, and while I guess there’s something to be said for that sort of attitude a little bit of paranoia can go a long way. But I don’t manage to bust anypony slacking off too badly, and right when I’m about to resign myself to going back to the paperwork waiting for me at the office a few errant notes of music reach my ears and

stop me right there in midair. Down below, Lyra's sitting on a park bench in that bizarre pose of hers, strumming her harp and pausing every few moments to make little tweaks to the scroll of music she's making notes on.

I guess a few more minutes of procrastination wouldn't hurt.

"Morning, Heartstrings," I say as I touch down a respectful distance away. "New piece? Sounds like it's really coming along."

She looks up and smiles, letting the last couple chords fade away unresolved. "Hey, Cloudy. Yeah, brand new song. I have a performance coming up in Canterlot a few weeks from now, and I'm going to need to put in a lot of time to get ready. My parents will be there and Bon Bon said she'd come see me play too."

That gets my attention. Bon Bon wouldn't leave her store for a road trip unless it was a special occasion. "Finally talked her into coming to watch you in your element, huh? What did you have to promise her for that?"

Lyra shrugs. "That's the weird thing, she just volunteered to come with me out of the blue. I actually tried to talk her out of it; I'm going to be incredibly busy and she'll probably end up stuck talking to Mom and Dad most of the time. Hope they have enough conversation material to last the weekend. Still, it's sweet of her to offer."

"Sounds like things are good these days," I prompt. When that doesn't get me anything more than a nod before Lyra tries to slip back into the zone and go on practicing, I continue. "By the way, I haven't really had the chance to thank you properly. You and Bonnie really stepped up for Blossom last week, and I wanted to be sure you knew how much I appreciate that."

"She wasn't mad at you. It was just a lot for her to take in, and I don't think keeping it bottled up for that long did her any favors. Besides, you had your hooves full with all the Azalea stuff."

"Yeah, I guess. Still, I'm sure you were a better pony for her to talk to about the changeling stuff anyway since... you



know..." Lyra's music slows down and she frowns at me "... the Sweetie Drops stuff."

Both of us wince as Lyra's magic slips and her harp strikes a discordant note, but she recovers like a real champ. "Oh, I suppose." Crap, why did I go and bring that up?

"If you want to talk about it..."

"I don't," she says, with an air of finality. But then she smiles up at me. "It's not how I would have wanted to have the truth about that summer come out, but what's done is done. Besides, I'm a big filly. You don't have to listen to me whinge and feel sorry for myself if you don't want to."

"I don't mind, if you think it would help," I offer, draping a wing over her shoulder.

She accepts the wing hug, but then shakes her head. "It wouldn't, but thank you anyway. Now I really do have to practice, so if there isn't anything else..."

Sensing that I've been politely dismissed, I wave goodbye and start back towards the office. Halfway there, I get a better idea, and turn down a little side street. Something Lyra just said is sticking in my mind, and now's the perfect time to follow up on my suspicions. I pull up short in front of a little artisanal candy shop, the display in the front window decked out with a hoof-painted cherry with a happy smile plastered onto it, advertising a two for one special on chocolates filled with sweet drops of cherry liqueur for the more adult pony looking to indulge their sweet tooth. It's a bit early and the sign on the door is still flipped to 'CLOSED,' but knowing Bon Bon she's already here getting ready for the day. I try the knob, and sure enough it's unlocked.

I step inside and let the door close behind me. "We're not open!" calls Bon Bon's voice from the kitchen in the back, a bit shrill.

"I would think that a mare who works around candy all day would have some of that sweetness rub off on them, but I guess not," I call right back. There's a bit of clattering from the kitchen and Bon Bon's head sticks out from the door

frame. The white chef's hat she's wearing over her mane is stained brown with dark chocolate.

"Oh, hi Cloud. I didn't realize it was you. Did you need something?"

"I'll take a couple of those chocolate-dipped strawberries if they're ready, then I really need to get back to work." With a curt nod, she disappears back into the kitchen, which is perfect since I don't want her to see the sly smile I'm sporting. "Just talked to Lyra a minute ago, she said you're going to Canterlot with her for her next performance? I thought you hated closing up the shop."

"Yeah, I usually do," she calls back from the kitchen, "thought it would be a nice change of pace."

"Uh huh. So no ulterior motive whatsoever?"

"Like what?"

"Oh, I don't know..." I trail off for a moment until Bon Bon reappears, watching me with a suspicious glare. "It's just that she mentioned that you'll be spending an awful lot of time with her parents, so it made me wonder if maybe Lyra wasn't the real reason you wanted to go. At least not directly." She's still watching me with poorly disguised apprehension. "Like maybe there was something you wanted to talk to them privately about. Maybe to ask permission for something? Like, oh, I don't know, permission to marry their daughter? How'm I doing?"

Bon Bon stares at me blankly for a long moment, then bites her bottom lip. "Do you think they'll say yes?"

"I *knew* it!"

"Shhhhh! Not so loud!" She stomps over to me and grabs the scruff of my neck before dragging me back into the kitchen. Pots and double-boilers are all cooking away full of assorted delicious concoctions, but for the moment Bon Bon's forgotten all about them. "You promised you wouldn't say anything, Cloudy."

I smile as wide as I can manage. "Did you give any more thought to my sock puppet suggestion?"

“Cloudy, I’m dead serious here. Tell me you didn’t say anything to Lyra.”

“Of course not, geeze. Give me a little credit. I just swung by to tease.” She goes back to her last minute preparation of the day’s wares as another question occurs to me. “So I guess that means you two sorted everything out. How’d you finally get Lyra to come around on the whole foals thing?”

Bon Bon goes very quiet for a long time, lost in her own little world. I think I just screwed up. Finally she speaks up again, with a false start to clear the lump out of her throat. “I didn’t. She had a pretty good point; I’m busy enough already with things as they are. I can’t have a foal and then burden her with all the responsibility of raising it. And it’s a deal breaker for her... well, I’d be a pretty stupid mare if I threw away something this good. If I can’t have it all, then so be it.”

It’s my turn to sit there for a moment in silent contemplation. I know how much foals mean to her, how much it must hurt her to give up on them. Even if I didn’t, the way her eyes are just a bit too wide and her forehoof is scratching at the tile floor would tell me everything anyway. “Do you... is it something you want to talk about?”

Bon Bon looks up at me with her best skeptical, appraising glance. “With you? No.”

“What? Why not?”

“Look, no offense,” she says, turning her back on me to box up the strawberries I asked her for. They suddenly seem a good deal less appetizing. “Grownup life decisions aren’t really your strongest suit. If I’m ever looking to spice stuff up in the bedroom, I’ll give you a call.” She tries to pass me the box, but I don’t move to take it. “What? Too blunt?”

“No. Maybe a little. Look, I thought maybe I could help. I just don’t like to see other ponies hurting, you know?”

“Guess you haven’t been near any reflective surfaces lately, then,” she mutters. What’s that supposed to mean? “Listen, it’s a sore subject, okay? Here, the strawberries are on the house. Although you owe me one.”

I take them because, hey, angry or not Bon Bon makes a damn good chocolate-dipped strawberry. “Bonnie, I’m... you know? I think you’d have been an amazing Mom.”

The anger dissipates, just for a second, then comes surging back in full force. But it passes again just as quickly. “I need to get back to work. Don’t you have a job you’re supposed to be at too?” She turns back to the neglected creations on the stovetop. “Thank you, though. Really. I wish I’d ever have the chance to find out for sure, but we play the hoof we’re dealt.”

My hoof reaches out, hovering unsure and uncomfortable just over her back. “Are you sure you don’t—”

“Exactly what part of ‘leave’ do you not understand?”

I think maybe I just ripped off a bandage I shouldn’t have. Hanging my head, all I can do is take my treat and go. I was just trying to help her. And Lyra. And Blossomforth. By the Princesses, am I the only pony in this entire bucking town who *doesn’t* need a helping hoof?

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Just trying to help. Just trying to be a good friend. That’s so wrong? Feels wrong. Why? Shouldn’t, but does. Why? why does everything feel so awful these days? Maybe... maybe the problem isn’t other ponies. The problem is—

And then somepony knocks on the door, and I have something new to focus on.

“You’re closer,” says Kicky from over on the couch. So I rouse myself and walk over to open it. When I do, I see two familiar faces looking back at me.

“Azalea, Twilight, hi. I didn’t know you were coming by.” Azalea steps inside and gives me a friendly hug in greeting, but Twilight seems content to just glare at me. Great, did I piss off somepony else without even realizing it?

“Hi Cloudy. We were just hoping to talk to you and Kicky if you have a moment. Is she home?” asks Azalea.

“Yeah, come on in,” I say, stepping back to allow them inside and leading them towards the living room. Did Azalea tell

Twilight about her past? Is that why she seems so upset? I almost verbalize the question before I think better of it.

Kicky looking up from her newspaper and smiling saves me from making a big mistake. “I like where this is going,” she says with a playful grin.

Azalea just chuckles in response, although if Twilight turns any redder she might actually explode. Wouldn’t be the first time, from what I hear. “Not a social call, Kicky. At least not like that.”

Twilight furrows her brow and looks back and forth between the two of us. “So one of you goes by Cloudy and the other one’s Kicky? How’d you guys decide to start doing that?”

I grin unseen behind her. The truth is a little bit too boring, so why not spice it up a bit? “Well, it turns out Kicky has this one spot where if you put a hoof on her inner thigh her back leg starts to—”

“Please stop explaining now.”

“Twilight, tell them about your date with Algae Bloom the other night,” prompts Azalea. That knocks the grin right off of my face. At least I know it had a happy ending for Azalea, but the last thing I need right now is to hear about Algae pulling some stunt. Still, if it’s important to the two of them...

I take a seat next to Kicky and settle in, with Twilight looking awfully uncomfortable on the other side of the room. With another nudge from Azalea, she finally finds her voice. “I don’t know what Azalea’s told you already, but the other day the two of us had kind of a...” she trails off until Azalea slides a comforting hoof over her shoulder, a comfort Twilight’s more than grateful for. “...I was such an idiot.”

“We both were,” says Azalea.

“There was a fight. Things were said. Mistakes were made.”

“Hey, we’ve all been there,” says Kicky, echoing my own thoughts.

“It’s just, you know, me and changelings are never a good combination.” Twilight’s wrapped up enough in her own

memories that she doesn't notice Azalea tense up. "Still, even with everything that I did, and that she did, and all the other timeline stuff that me-but-not-me did, I was kinda mixed up for a while."

"Uh..." I'm no longer entirely sure what this conversation is actually about. "What does any of this have to do with Algae Bloom, exactly?"

"Oh, right," says Twilight, shaking her head and moving on to her point, "she asked me out, and I decided to give her a chance. We went to a bar and she bought me a drink, even though I hadn't asked her for it. I wasn't in a drinking mood, really, but she kept insisting I try something and pushing me to drink more, and she tried to buy me another one even after I told her no. Look, maybe I'm just being dumb about this, but she just made me really uncomfortable."

I sigh. "Yeah, that sounds like her."

"I kinda... uh... I sort of ended up throwing the drink in her face and threatening to kill her," says Twilight. Wow, I would have paid to see that. "The idea of her pushing that on somepony else has been bugging me ever since. I don't want to get her in trouble or anything..."

"So I was wondering if you could let your regulars know that she's out there. It would mean a lot to me," says Azalea, bringing it home for her clearly uncomfortable fillyfriend.

Kicky and I exchange a look, neither one of us particularly surprised to hear that Algae would try something like that. Still, I'll give her one thing: trying a stunt like that on an Element Bearer is a bold, if completely retarded, decision. "Yeah, we'll take care of it. In fact I think we'll have a very frank discussion with Ms. Bloom about respect and consent. Besides, if Twilight wanted a drunken rebound fling I have dibs," I say. Heh, Twilight obviously remembers that night a while back when she quite literally popped into my kitchen for a booty call.

Azalea knows me well enough to just laugh it off. Obviously I'm kidding. Unless the two of them are up for it, in which

case I meant every word. “Thanks Cloudy,” says Azalea, before bumping my hoof and leaning in for a hug.

Whoa, Twilight does *not* like that. At all. She leaps up from her spot on the couch and starts glaring daggers at me until I back off, nostrils flaring until I release Azalea. She looks like she’s biting back some sort of retort, and it takes her a few tries to find her voice. “Would you mind if I went and grabbed a glass of water from your kitchen?” she eventually asks.

With a shrug, Kicky gestures towards the door. “Go ahead, Twilight. It’s just through there.” Twilight hesitates for a second, then stalks away. Kicky slides off the couch as she leaves. “I better see if she’s okay.”

“Probably a good idea,” I say as she walks away. Then I turn my attention to Azalea, who’s frowning. “So, you told her about what you used to be? I can see how that would lead to a bit of a dust-up between you two.”

“Uh... not exactly,” she admits, squirming about in her seat.

“What, seriously?”

“Look, we just had that whole big blow up, but things between us are finally good again. I don’t want to screw that up.”

I sigh. “So all that stuff about not hiding and being afraid anymore was just talk? The longer you wait the worse it’ll be when she finds out.”

“Maybe she doesn’t have to find out?” Her hopeful smile wilts under my unyielding gaze. “Look, I promise I’ll tell her eventually. The time isn’t right just yet.”

“And why is that, exactly?”

She squirms again, refusing to meet my eyes. “I kind of told her we used to be an item. It just slipped out while we were talking about Algae and old relationships. I... uh... I did leave a couple of points out, though.”

“Yeah, I figured,” I mutter. I’m trying to think of what to say next when I hear a glass shatter in the kitchen. “Everything alright in there?”

“We’re fine,” Twilight calls back, “your double here just doesn’t have any self-control.”

“I know, isn’t she great?” I ask before I turn back to regard Azalea. “Fine, I’ll play along for now. But you’re setting yourself up for a disaster.” She doesn’t have a chance to dispute the point before Twilight returns, which obviously puts the kibosh on that particular topic of conversation. Still, whatever Kicky said to her in there seems to have lifted her spirits a bit, or at least she doesn’t look like she’s about to tear my throat out anymore. She gives Azalea a warm smile, gets a genuine one in return, and they walk out together just as they start talking about lunch plans.

“They’re good together, don’t you think?” asks Kicky as she watches them leave.

“I hope so. We’ll have to see whether they hold together when the other shoe drops, but I’d give better than even odds that they’ll make it.”

“I hope so,” she replies. Then she clears her throat. “So I was thinking that since I don’t really have too much going on this afternoon I could run down to the train station and pick up a ticket to Canterlot for you. Maybe for tomorrow?”

“What are you talking about? We just promised Twilight we’d talk to Algae Bloom.”

Kicky shrugs. “She’ll still be a scumbag when you get back. Besides, maybe it would be better for me to handle that myself. You really need to get in to see Aunt Wind. The reserves don’t joke around with ponies who don’t show up when they’re ordered to.” She gives me a sad smile. “Please, Cloud? For me?”

Yikes. She’s really laying on the weapons-grade guilt trip with that one. “Fine.” She brightens up. “After I deal with the Algae Bloom thing.”

She sighs, but clearly realizes it’s the best outcome she’s going to get. “Why don’t you just leave that to me? You know she has a way of getting under your skin, and you’ve been kind of off these last couple of days.”



“I have no idea what you’re talking about. I think I’m being remarkably calm about everything.”

“There’s a world of difference between ‘calm’ and ‘completely numb.’”

I’m so calm, I’m not even going to dignify that accusation with a response, I just stick out my tongue and blow a raspberry at Kicky’s stern glare. “Don’t believe me? I’ll prove it.”

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“Hello, Algae.”

What Kicky doesn’t know won’t hurt her, so I may have forgotten to let her know I was coming here to take care of the favor for Twilight and Azalea all by myself. I can control myself. I’m not going to get mad. I’m not mad at anypony. I’m not mad that Azalea’s keeping secrets from Twilight. I’m not mad that Kicky slept with Blossom back when she was a changeling. I’m not mad that Aunt Wind demands a command performance just because I’ve had a rough couple of weeks. I’m not mad about any of it, no matter what anypony else thinks. So I’m in fine shape to confront Algae Bloom about this, here on her own home turf where the whole incident went down. This particular bar’s in a bit of a seedier part of Ponyville, to the extent any part of Ponyville is the least bit seedy at all. It’s no Sun’s Flank, but it’s cheap.

“What do you want, Cloud?” she asks before turning back to scanning the bar. “Come to pick up a few pointers? I was just about to buy that filly over there a drink, and I really don’t need you horning in on my turf.”

“That’s kind of what I wanted to talk to you about, actually. I had a very interesting conversation with Twilight Sparkle earlier.”

Algae scoffs at the name. “Whatever. That mare’s nuts, not to mention a huge bitch.”

“Really?” I ask, eyebrow raised. “Twilight Sparkle? Personal student of Princess Celestia? Saved all of Equestria like a half-dozen times now? *That* Twilight Sparkle is a ‘huge bitch?’”

She shrugs and tries to flag the bartender down, but this place isn't exactly known for the great service. "You don't have to take my word for it. I bought her a drink and she turned around, started ranting at me about bacteria or something, and ended up throwing it in my face. I was just trying to get her to loosen up before I took her back to my place."

"The way she tells it, she said she wasn't interested."

"What of it? I bet if I'd managed to get a couple into her that no would have turned into a yes. Don't have to tell you that there are plenty of tricks to get a reluctant mare to spread her legs by the end of the night. I promise I'm worth the hangover."

I have to roll my eyes at that. "When somepony tells you no, it means you leave them alone. Not keep pestering them to do something they don't want to. That's like the most basic rule there is."

"Rules schmules. There's nothing wrong with a little persistence. For example..." she trails off and looks out over the mostly empty tables, and finally locks on to a somewhat homely and drunk-looking stallion in a booth near the back of the room. "Take that stallion for example, doesn't he look like he might be fun? I'll show you what I mean. You can even take notes if you like." She motions for two mugs of cider and takes them on the long walk across the room, a little sway of her hips enough to get him to look her way. She locks eyes with his, blinking a little unsteadily as Algae draws closer. "Well, hey there cutie. You look like you could use another round."

"Are you... you a waitress?" he asks. From the slur in his speech he must be a lot further along than I originally thought. I grab a seat at another nearby table to keep an eye on this as Algae Bloom slides in beside him, pushing his back closer to the wall. His horn lights up and shaky magic takes one of the mugs from her.

"Not a waitress, no. My name's Algae Bloom, what's yours?"

It takes a few extra seconds for him to register the question, which he covers by taking a long gulp from the mug.

“Bevelled Edge.” I frown. That name’s familiar for some reason, but I can’t place it.

“Well, Edge,” continues Algae Bloom, “you look like you have an awful lot on your mind. Anything you feel like getting...” she leans in and plants a gentle but firm hoof onto his shoulder, slowly dragging it lower, “...off your chest?”

“It’s... s’not fair, you know? She was supposed to make dinner tonight, but she gets home from work and it’s all ‘I had a long day, I’m too tired, you make something,’ like I haven’t had a long day too. So she takes that stupid nagging tone that I hate and... and I don’t really know what happened after that. I think I’m gonna have to sleep on the couch tonight.”

“Well, that’s hardly fair,” continues Algae, “this is your fillyfriend?”

He shakes his head. “My wife, Spring Breeze.” Now I know where I know the name from; he’s married to one of the mares on the weather squad. Quiet thing, doesn’t talk much. It’s hard to imagine her getting into a screaming match with anypony.

“Sounds like she doesn’t treat you with the respect you deserve.” Algae leans further into him, breathing a little heavily. “Isn’t that what you deserve?”

“I... I guess,” Bevelled Edge appears to just have noticed that there’s a strange mare pressed against his body. I’ll give Algae one thing; she doesn’t have the worst body in the world.

Obviously Bevel’s rapidly coming to the same conclusion.

“Uh. Miss Bloom? I, uh, I’m flattered but also, y’know, married. I’m not sure we should really *oooooooooooooooooh*.” Before he can finish his objection, Algae’s lips wrap over the tip of his horn and the complaint fades into a moan.

Algae opens her mouth with a loud pop, and she lets out a bubbly little giggle. “I’m sorry, were you saying something?”

“I just don’t think this is really the best *yipe!*” The hoof on his chest has drifted lower, disappearing under the table. I think I have a pretty good idea where it went and what it’s doing now, though.

“Why not? Doesn’t this feel good?” She leans in to get muzzle to muzzle, a ruddy blush starting to peek through the stallion’s yellow coat. “Why don’t we get out of here?”

And that’s my breaking point, standing up quickly enough to knock over the chair I’d been sitting in. “Algae, you need to quit this. Let him go.”

“I told you. A couple drinks and anypony’s putty in my hooves,” says Algae without looking away.

“Really? Bevelled Edge was it? You really want to throw your marriage away on a drunken fling like this?” He blinks a few times as the reality of his situation penetrates the drunken haze and he pushes Algae away from him.

“I need to go,” he says. Algae Bloom makes no move to get up, leaving him trapped against the wall. “Please get up and let me out.”

“Are you positive? Let me buy you another drink and I bet I can change your mind.”

“Algae, if you aren’t out of that seat in the next three seconds I’ll drag you out of it by your mane,” I say. I mean it, too, and she can tell. Slowly but surely, she gets up from the booth. No sooner has she done so than Bevelled Edge slides his way out past her and stumbles for the door. “What the buck was that?”

She scoffs and rolls her eyes. “Well it would have been a fun evening for both of us, but *somepony* decided to stick her nose into other ponies’ business where it doesn’t belong.”

“Are you seriously trying to make me think I’m the bad pony in this situation?” My voice is starting to rise, and other conversations across the bar go quiet so they can watch the erupting show. “He was smashed! Not to mention married.”

“What do I care? He was totally getting into it. Like I told you before, a little persistence can pay off big time.”

I just stare at her. There’s no regret or shame on her face, just mild annoyance. “You’re unbelievable, you know that?”

“Because I buy attractive ponies drinks and flirt with them? I thought you of all ponies would get it.”

“I am *nothing* like you, Algae Bloom!” I seem to be raising my voice just a little. Not because I’m angry, though. Totally not angry at all. “Fine, yes, I like a good romp between the sheets more than a lot of ponies, but unlike you I’m not treating them like slime and ruining their lives in the process. Do you even have any idea how messed up you even are? What the hell even happened to you that screwed you up this badly?”

To my surprise, she doesn’t have a snappy retort to that, she just goes quiet for a minute. “Like you’d even care. Buck off, Cloud.”

Wait, what? My glare softens, and I lower my voice a bit. “Wait, Algae... *did* something happen? Do you want to talk about it?”

“Why, so you have something to throw back in my face later on?” Something Scootaloo mentioned earlier comes back to me, about how they didn’t feed off of Algae Bloom because she never gave off any love. Or received any.

“Algae, listen. We don’t have to turn this into a big screaming match. How about we grab a couple glasses of water, a table in the corner, and just chat mare to mare. No accusations, and no judgement. How’s that sound?”

“I...” she looks down and away from me, “...I don’t know if anypony’s ever offered that to me before. No catch?”

I grin. This is the first time I’ve been able to look at Algae Bloom without a feeling of revulsion running up my spine. “No catch. We can talk about whatever’s on your mind.”

Five minutes later, the chatter of the bar’s other patrons has come back in full force. It makes for a pleasant enough backdrop for a private conversation. Algae Bloom’s still having trouble meeting my eyes, preferring to watch her reflection in the glass that’s half full of water and clutched in her hooves. I just wait, and finally she speaks. “Did you know that I used to have a pet corgi when I was younger?”

“I didn’t,” I answer, “they’re good dogs.”

“Yeah.” She goes quiet again. “His name was Buster, and he was just the sweetest little guy. For a long time it was just the three of us against the world.”

“Sorry, the three of you?”

“Buster, me, and Mom,” she explains. “Dad wasn’t really in the picture very often and when he was... well, like I said, just the three of us against the world. But that changed when Windy Sails came into the picture. Mom fell for him pretty hard, I guess this was when I was eight or nine. By my tenth birthday he was officially my step-father.”

“Oh yeah?” I ask, not exactly sure where she’s going with this, but I figure my best bet is just to let her do all the talking.

“You guys got along?”

“More or less. He liked sailing, knew all kinds of things about the ocean. I actually got this when we were studying fish one afternoon,” she says, gesturing to her cutie mark. “He was really proud of me when I got it. Said it meant I was all grown up, and could start doing everything a grown mare could. I... at the time I thought that was a good thing.”

“It wasn’t?”

Algae goes quiet again, and for a few minutes I start to worry that she’s clammed up for good. “It was around then that he started asking me about stuff. About what sort of colts and mares I liked, if I’d ever kissed one before, if I ever thought about them and wanting to touch them. If I ever... touched myself.”

Oh no. Oh no, no, no please don’t let the picture I’m forming in my head be real. Sitting there across the table from me, Algae Bloom looks nothing like the arrogant, selfish mare I know her as. “Did he ever...”

“Yes,” she says, lifeless eyes lost in her memory. “The first time was when I was twelve. He said he’d show me how to do it right. After that it was basically whenever he wanted.”

“Algae, listen to me. It wasn’t your fault. No pony deserves that. By the Princesses, wasn’t there some pony you could have told?” My own glass of water forgotten, I circle the table to get

close enough to lay a wing over her back and she smiles up at me.

“There was a teacher I almost told, Miss Marigold. But the night before I could, Windy came up to me and... I don’t know what tipped him off, but he had Buster’s collar and it was ripped apart. And he said Buster was gone and it was because I didn’t train him to behave like a good dog but I did, he was a *great* dog, and he told me that animals that don’t behave are punished and have to be put down. So I never told anyone, and the day I turned sixteen I left home and I never even looked back.”

“I’m so sorry, Algae. I’m so, so sorry,” I say, hugging her tight. She’s trembling in my forelegs, her face hidden under the hooves pressed up to her head.

“Cloud, there’s one thing I still don’t understand, though.”

“What’s that?”

Abruptly, she stops trembling, but then the shaking starts to come back. But she’s not crying, at least I don’t think so. Is she... laughing? “I just don’t understand how you could actually be thick enough to believe any of that bullshit.” Her snickering continues to grow as my mind completely refuses to process what she just said.

“You... I don’t understand. You made that all up? Why would you make that up?”

“To mess with your head, obviously,” she replies with a nasty grin. “My Dad’s an accountant in Baltimore, not some kind of creepy molester. I can’t believe you fell for that. I was sure the dead puppy thing was so over the top you’d never buy it, but you did! Because of course I’d have to have some dark and terrible tragedy in my past to have turned out like this, right? You’d like that, wouldn’t you? Then you wouldn’t have to face the fact that I choose to act this way because I enjoy it, you arrogant, judgemental cunt.”

Something’s welling up in me. No, on second thought it’s already been there for a while, I just didn’t recognize it. “I was just trying to help you.”

“Because I obviously need it, right? I need you to hand down all those answers you have for everypony else’s life down from on high, oh magnanimous patron saint of whores. You’ve got it all figured out, with your rules and codes that you cling to because you think it makes you better than a pony like me. Well guess what? They don’t. But I guess meddling in other ponies’ lives is easier than cleaning up your own mess.”

“Just shut the buck up, Algae.” I’m starting to see red, both my wings tensing up with weeks of accumulated anger that finally has no place else to go.

“I think the saddest thing is that you think you’re the one who’s got me figured out, when actually it’s the other way around. You think I picked bad parents for my story by accident? Not a chance. There’s just one detail I’m unclear on; was it Mommy or Daddy who never loved you?”

I don’t actually remember throwing the punch, which is kind of unfair when you really think about it. Just one second I’m staring at Algae Bloom feeling more furious than I ever have before in my life, and the next I’m pinned under a bouncer on the floor, a trickle of blood dribbling from her muzzle. The massive stallion wastes no time calling in backup and hauling me to the door before unceremoniously flinging me out onto the street. I spin around to get right back into the fight, but I’m a bit wobbly from the landing and the two stallions waiting in the door for me to make my move look like they’re in no mood to be gentle. I scream into the night sky and throw another punch, this time at the lamp post of a streetlight.

Not the wisest thing I’ve ever done. Now I’m still furious but my hoof also hurts.

Taking off into the air, I streak towards home. It’s late, but I don’t care right now. Too pissed off. The whole door frame rattles as I throw open the door and head for Kicky’s room. “Get out here! Now!”

A very confused Kicky appears a moment later. “Cloudy? Is something wrong? What happened to your hoof?”

“Went to talk to Algae Bloom.”



“Without me? We agreed we were going to do that together,” she says.

“Doesn’t really matter now. Ended up punching her.”

“*What?*”

“I said that doesn’t matter!” I say, stamping a hoof for emphasis. “You slept with her. You bucking slept with her, nearly broke her heart, and let me take the blame.”

“I slept with... we’re not talking about Algae Bloom any more, right? I’m a little lost.”

“Blossomforth! We’re talking about Blossomforth,” I shout into her face. “Ever since you showed up it’s been secrets on top of secrets and a lot of ponies are getting hurt because of it. You need to come clean to her, and if you don’t then I will.”

Kicky sucks in a sharp breath through her teeth. “I really don’t think she’d take it very well. Maybe in a couple weeks? I can break it to her a bit more gently.”

“No. Tonight. We’re telling her the truth tonight and I’m not taking no for an answer.” I turn to leave again, pausing in the doorway. “Let me put it this way. I’m flying straight to Blossom’s place right now and telling her the truth. You want to tag along and come clean, you’re welcome to.” And with that I walk out the door and take off once again, Kicky calling after me to stop and talk to her about this. But I’m done talking.

When I reach Blossom’s house, I manage to get in a few good pounds on the front door before I’m tackled for the second time tonight, this time by Kicky. Too little, too late though, and the door is opened, although by a stallion rather than the mare I was expecting.

“Oh, hi Davenport,” I say as casually as I can manage with Kicky trying to drag me away. “Kicky here has something to tell Blossom.”

Though he’s befuddled, Davenport recovers his wits and manners reasonably quickly. “Is it important? We’re kind of in the middle of dinner. We weren’t exactly expecting company.”

“Not important, we’ll just be going then,” says Kicky.

Like that’s going to work. “It actually is important. Mind if we come in?”

“Honey? Who’s at the door? Oh!” says Blossom, appearing behind her coltfriend in a rather flattering red evening gown. “Is something wrong?”

“Kicky was the changeling,” I blurt out before anypony else can get in a word edgewise. “Who pretended to be me the night you thought that we... you know. When we went home together.”

A long and uncomfortable silence descends over the four of us other there on Blossom’s front yard. Slowly but surely, Blossomforth turns to Kicky. “Is it true?”

Kicky twists up her face and groans. But she can’t wriggle out of it now. “Yeah, it is. I’m really sorry, Blossom, I—”

“And this is how you decide I needed to find out?” she interrupts, “just swing by, wreck my date, and drop that on me?”

Uh oh. “It was my idea, I only found out a couple days ago when Kicky got back from Canterlot and admitted it to me.”

“So let me see if I’m understanding this right,” says Blossom, something tight catching in her throat. “You’ve been a pony for months now. I understand that you wouldn’t have told me before you transformed, but what about after? Have I ever judged you for what you used to be? Ever treated you like you were less than my very best friend?”

“I... no, Blossom, you’ve been great, but—”

“How did I taste?”

Davenport gently lays a hoof on her shoulder, but her focus is locked on Kicky. “Blossom, don’t.”

“I asked you a question, Kicky. How. Did. I. Taste? Were my feelings for Cloud strong enough for you? Did they make a good snack?”

“...Yeah,” says Kicky when it becomes clear that Blossom expects an answer. “They were very strong.”

“And you were hanging around town for all the time afterwards too, right? So how did I taste to you then? How did I taste when I woke up alone that morning? Or when I thought Cloud had decided to pretend that nothing had happened between us?” Tears are starting to run down her cheeks now. All that red hot anger that’s kept me barrelling ahead without thinking is starting to cool. The void it leaves feels awfully hollow.

“You were pretty sad, as I recall,” says Kicky.

“You recall wrong. I wasn’t sad. I was devastated. Do you have any idea how many nights I spent laying awake in bed trying to figure out what was *wrong* with me? Playing that night over and over in my head trying to figure out if I made some sort of mistake? Never knowing if I’d said something I shouldn’t have and too scared to ask Cloud, because I was afraid she’d just end up confirming that something about me wasn’t good enough for her? Cloud didn’t know, but you did! You knew!” She jabs an angry hoof into Kicky’s chest, knocking her onto her plot in the process. “All you would have had to do was take me aside some time during those first couple days and explain. I would have forgiven you! Heck, it would have been a huge relief to know for sure, but did you do that? Or did you wait until this all got dredged up again for me because you’re a bucking coward?”

“Um... better late than never?” suggest Kicky, wincing even as she says it. It’s the wrong thing, and Blossom takes two angry steps forward, lifts a foreleg and slaps her clean across the face. The sound of the blow goes echoing out into the night.

“Get off my lawn,” she growls. “Get out of my sight. In fact, I never want to see you again.”

“Come on, Blossom, please don’t say that. I...” Kicky’s head droops, ears flat. “...I need my best friend.”

“Sorry. I already have one of those,” says Blossom. A sob escapes her lips, and she turns and dashes back into the house

with as much dignity as she can salvage, shutting the door behind her with a dreadful finality. Kicky stares at it like Blossom might change her mind and come back, but the door stays closed.

Slowly, Kicky turns to look at me, her eyes dim and hollow. She slowly trots away, pausing for a moment to stare me down before silently walking past. I... think I may have just made a huge mistake, but I'm not the one paying the price. And the worst part of it all is that, deep inside, that anger and stress over everything that's happened lately is back again, slowly but surely creeping into my mind and poisoning my judgement.

I think I need to talk to Aunt Wind.

# Just A Friendly Chat

## JUST A FRIENDLY CHAT

With its beige carpeting, inoffensive abstract paintings adorning the wall, and the gentle white noise of the bustling city streets outside flowing in from the nearby open window, I have the sneaking suspicion that the waiting room of Aunt Wind's office was decorated with a certain sort of less-than-stable ponies in mind. And apparently, I'm one of them now. I fidget in my seat as the clock on the far wall ticks down the last few minutes until the late afternoon evaluation, deliberately scheduled as the last appointment of the afternoon I'm sure, which I've been ordered to undergo is set to begin. Kicky finally got me in here. I hope she's happy.

Given that she never came back home after our little blow-up on Blossom's front yard and I haven't seen hide nor hair of her for the last two days, I'm inclined to believe she probably isn't.

"Hi Cloud. Why don't you come on in?" suggests Aunt Wind, emerging from her office while I'm lost in thought and walking over to offer me a gentle hug. I follow after her into her inner sanctum, the wooden desk in the corner mostly bare except for a few files stacked off to one side and two picture frames displaying younger versions of Star and Storm, a little faded around the corners. "Are you doing well these days?"

I raise an eyebrow as I settle onto the overstuffed couch against one wall, the one next to the window with a great view of the palace a little ways off in the distance. "Would I be here if I was?"

"You're here because I ordered you here," she replies. "More to the point, you're here because Kicky was concerned about you the last time we spoke. And based on some of the things she told me, so am I. All we're doing here today is trying to see if there's something that you might want to address, as well as give you a few new tools that you might find useful."

Nopony is going to have you committed because you're carrying around a bit of unresolved stress." She reaches into a drawer for a notepad and quill, giving its tip a quick dip in a nearby inkwell before she settles onto a chair across from me, poised to begin writing. "Now, why do you think Kicky would be concerned about you?"

"You said she told you already."

"I'd really prefer to hear it from you, if you don't mind."

"Well..." where to even begin? "...it's probably because she had a front-row seat to all the changeling stuff."

Aunt Wind's quill starts to dance across the pad. She's an old hoof at this, and doesn't even have to look away from me to see what she's writing. "Go on."

"It was really my own fault. I was out on my own and got a faceful of those pheromones that mess with your head. You'd think I'd have built up some kind of tolerance by now."

"Oh? And why would that be?" asks Aunt Wind.

I lean back on the couch and let out a long sigh. "Honestly, after everything that's happened these last couple of months I'm starting to think I'm some kind of magnet for them or something. I mean Kicky was just the tip of the iceberg. I finally get into a serious relationship with a mare for the first time in Celestia knows how long, or I think I do, and it turns out she was just using me for information the entire time. Big stuff, too. Stuff that could have gotten you and the rest of the family massacred if Twilight Sparkle hadn't stopped the invasion like she did. Oh, and the punchline of all this is that now Azalea, that's her name by the way, now Azalea and Twilight are hooves over heels for one another. And I don't blame Twilight for that, Az is a great pony now that she's reformed. But obviously some ponies aren't meant to dip a hoof into the dating pool. More trouble than it's worth, really. Sorry, I guess we're going kind of off topic."

"That's fine," says Aunt Wind, still writing away. What could she possibly be scribbling down over there? Her grocery list?

“Anyway, so going back to that day in the changeling hive,” I say. My ears perk up as I register a rapid series of taps, and it isn’t until I glance down that I notice one of my hooves is twitching and the edge of it is filling the room with that distracting noise. I offer Aunt Wind an apologetic smile and cross it over the other leg to make it stop. “There were a couple of drones there, and the one I’d followed wouldn’t share its prisoner with the other one. I tried to stay hidden, but one of them must have spotted me from another tunnel.” I bring my story to an abrupt halt. Thinking about the next part makes me feel like an idiot, pheromones or no.

“Cloud? Are you alright?”

“Yeah. Just thinking. How do you think the drone knew that turning into Mom would work?”

“Well,” says Aunt Wind, “from what we know, changelings are quite perceptive. Taking the shape of a family member to feed isn’t exactly unusual.”

“I think about that a lot, actually,” I admit, frowning. “And no matter how hard I try, I can never really wrap my head around what made me decide I should follow it deeper into the cave. I guess it could have just been the pheromones.”

“But you don’t think that’s the whole story.”

I shake my head. “I guess I was just being an idiot. Looking back, it should have been really, *really* obvious that the real Mom wouldn’t just show up there out of the blue. And the stuff it said when it was trying to feed off of me didn’t sound anything like what Mom would actually say. It was just telling me what I wanted to hear, I get that.” I scoff. Looking back on just how incredibly thick I’d been to believe that act is giving me a headache.

“It’s awfully foolhardy to let your guard down in a life-or-death situation. I’m sure you know that.”

“Oh, absolutely,” I say with a nod. “Well aware of it. I could have ended up cocooned or worse if I hadn’t killed her.” The scratching of Aunt Wind’s quill ceases, just for a fraction of a second, before it starts up again with a renewed intensity.

“Sorry, I’m not sure I quite caught that,” says Aunt Wind, “would you mind repeating the last part?”

“I was just saying I know it could have gotten really bad for me if Kicky hadn’t killed it when she did.” Aunt Wind goes quiet for a moment, still writing while I occupy myself staring out the window, trying to think of what else she might need to know.

“And so just to bring this back around to where we began, this is why you think Kicky’s worried?”

I shrug. “That would be my best guess. Although it’s not like there hasn’t been enough other drama piled on top of it.” I grin as it occurs to me how to make this session a little bit less of a downer. “You remember Lyra Heartstrings, right? Well, can you keep a secret? I’ve been dying to tell somepony, and if I tell you something here you aren’t allowed to repeat it, right?”

“Essentially, yes.” She leans in a bit and I do the same. Not that I think there’s likely to be anypony listening in, but it feels like the right thing to do.

“Her fillyfriend Bon Bon is planning to propose to her. She showed me the ring and everything.”

Aunt Wind smiles. “That sounds like wonderful news. It will be quite the exciting change for the two of them, I’d think.”

“Well, I don’t know how much it will actually change anything. They’re already pretty much inseparable.” And there goes the quill writing away again. “I just mean that at the end of the day they’re still the same Lyra and Bon Bon they are now.”

“And you don’t think that whether or not they choose to marry will have a sizable impact on their priorities?”

“They’re both pretty established in their careers, and they’ve already decided not to try for foals. Although I don’t think Bon Bon is really happy about that.” Aunt Wind just scribbles away on her notepad, the clock on her wall ticking the seconds away. “Did you want to hear more about them? You wouldn’t believe what Ditzzy said about—”



“You’re drifting, Cloud,” says Aunt Wind. “We’re here to talk about you, remember?”

“I know, I know.” All grumbling aside, she probably has a point. I didn’t haul my flank all the way to Canterlot to discuss wedding plans. “Beyond that, I don’t really know why Kicky would worry about me. It’s not like I can ask her.”

“Why can’t you ask her?”

Whoops, hadn’t really meant to bring that bit up. “I haven’t seen her in a couple of days. I think she’s avoiding me. I sort of spilled one of her secrets to somepony she cares about, and they got in a huge fight over it.”

Aunt Wind sighs and flips her notes to a fresh sheet of paper. “Why don’t you tell me about that. Start from the beginning.”

“Well, my friend Blossomforth used to have a crush on me a while back. Well, I guess she... was Kicky’s friend too after she sort of inherited the relationship with the whole permanent transformation thing. But back before that, when Kicky was still a changeling, she took advantage of that to feed off of her by impersonating me. I think a lot of changelings used my shape like that, actually. I mean, it probably wouldn’t exactly be an Equestria-shattering revelation that I’m a fan of sex.”

“No, it wouldn’t,” says Aunt Wind. “To be entirely honest, there was a time when I half-wondered if you met the diagnostic criteria of nymphomania. But I was under the impression that it wasn’t a compulsion that was having an outsized negative impact on your day-to-day life.”

I grin and settle back onto the couch, feeling a lot more comfortable now that I’m back in safe and familiar territory. “If anything, my day-to-day life is having a negative impact on my sexual compulsions.” I chuckle. She doesn’t.

“How do you mean?”

This territory is suddenly feeling a whole lot less familiar and safe. Why’d I have to open my big mouth? “I was mostly kidding. I mean, I guess I’ve been under some extra stress these last few weeks. I’ve been feeling more... I don’t know. Distracted, I guess. And then when I do manage to hit it off

with somepony and take them to bed, I still can't get away from the whole changeling thing."

"Go on."

"Nah, it's stupid."

"Unless you've managed to get a degree in psychology without mentioning it to me, maybe you should tell me and let me decide if it might be important or not, hmmm?"

I glance up to give her a 'drop it' look, but it doesn't exactly have the intended effect as she returns it with just as much intensity. "I was in bed with this other mare, having a good time, and... I don't know if it was a trick of the light or what, but just for, like, a split second I thought she looked like somepony who I knew she wasn't." That damned quill is scratching away again, and it's really starting to grate on my nerves. Like this isn't stressful enough for me without her taking notes on me like I'm nothing more than some lab rat? I feel the heat starting to rise in my cheeks and my heart beating a little faster in my chest. "Do you have to write that down? I didn't think she'd actually turned into another pony or anything."

"Could you identify the pony you thought you saw?" she asks.

"Yeah. Well, not by name or anything. It was the shape the changelings used to lure the stallion that I followed back to their hive."

"So you were in bed with a mare, and for a moment you thought she was a changeling. Would that be accurate?"

"No!" The intensity of my denial surprises me, and I have to take a second to calm down. "I knew it wasn't real."

Aunt Wind studies me for another moment before, blessedly, putting down her notepad. "Hallucinations can feel genuine even when we know they aren't really true."

"Whoa! Hold on. Back up. It wasn't a hallucination. You're blowing this way out of proportion."

"Did it feel real?" When I clam up rather than answer her right away, she continues. "How did you react to what you thought

you'd seen?"

"Well, it killed the mood stone dead. That's for sure. I ended up leaving a few minutes after that and just going home for the night. I was obviously tired if my mind was going to play tricks on me like that."

"So you knew it wasn't real, but it did provoke a reaction from you."

I scoff. "Now you're twisting my words. Why don't we just drop this? Wasn't I supposed to be telling you about Kicky?"

"I'd like to come back to this later on, but sure." She takes a look at what she's written down, which I'm becoming more and more certain is going to turn out to just be 'Yep, she's nuts' over and over again, and scans upwards by a few lines. "So Kicky, while she was a changeling, fed on your friend Blossom. How exactly did that lead to their fight?"

"Well..." I gulp to try to force down the lump settled in my throat, "...I kind of spilled the beans to Blossom after Kicky told me the truth. She was pretty upset."

"Did you feel like it was your place to share that information with her?"

"I mean... no, not really. But what she did wasn't okay, even if she was just a changeling when she did it. She hurt Blossom really badly, and Blossom deserved an explanation for why she'd gone through all of that pain."

Before she replies, Aunt Wind passes me a box of tissues. I guess she noticed that my eyes are getting a little bit misty, judging by the feel of them. "Did you try to explain your feelings to Kicky before you told Blossom?"

"Well, sort of."

"What exactly does 'sort of' mean?"

"When I told her that I was going to go over to Blossom's, I wasn't exactly in the best frame of mind. Especially since..."

I fall silent, and a few seconds later Wind's quill finally stills itself. "Since what?"

“You’re going to act like it’s a way bigger deal than it is.”

“Well,” she says, leaning forward in her chair. “If it’s important enough that you’ll assume I’ll fixate on it, it’s something I want to hear.”

“That’s.... It’s.... You’re cheating!” I manage to stammer.

“First off,” says Aunt Wind, “this isn’t some competition or fight. I’m not trying to ‘win’ here, I’m trying to help you. And if I can do so more effectively by cheating all sneaky like...”

That does make me chuckle, if only for a moment. Soon enough, though, the gravity of the situation drags my spirits right back down. “I hit somepony. But she deserved it.”

Aunt Wind doesn’t miss a single beat. I get the feeling I could confess to slitting a foal’s throat in cold blood and all she’d do would be asking me to elaborate. Maybe that’s a typical Wednesday for her.

“Cloud?”

By Celestia, that’s the sort of pony she deals with day in and day out. And now here I am, in her office. I’m one of them. A psychopath. Kicky just wanted a chance to explain things on her own terms. Did I let her?

“Cloud!”

Of course I didn’t. Because why would I give anypony the benefit of the doubt? They’re probably all liars anyway. Everything Algae said was a lie. Everypony lies, that’s why it’d be so wonderful to feel the bones in her forelegs snap under my—

**“CLOUD!”**

Wow. Aunt Wind can scream loud when she wants to.

“What?” I ask.

“You’re hyperventilating,” she says. Which is clearly ridiculous. Although now that she mentions it, there is a kind of tightness in my chest that doesn’t seem all that eager to go away. And I can’t suck down oxygen fast enough. And why is my heart pounding like I just sprinted a marathon? “You’re somewhere safe, do you understand that?”

“Well, duh.” I reply. Whatever hit me back there is already fading fast. But there’s still so much anger throbbing at the corner of my vision. “So I was telling you about how I hit Algae Bloom, right? Pretty sure that’s where we were.”

“If you need a break it’s—”

That stupid quill is still making notes on the bucking notepad. That perpetual scratching just won’t *stop* why can’t she just *stop* and why can’t they all just—

I come to pinned against the floor with Aunt Wind’s knee digging into the base of my spine. “If you understand what I’m saying to you, I want you to take a deep breath and hold it for fifteen seconds. Can you do that for me?”

I obediently inhale as deeply as I can, and hold it. “What... I didn’t—”

“Cloud, I want you take another deep breath and try to remember what just happened. Do you remember us having a conversation?”

“Of course I do!” I say. How could I not. “Isn’t that why you dragged me in here? To talk?”

Her grip on my wrists doesn’t relent. “Before I let you up, I want you to answer a question for me. Looking back over the last several weeks, are there any gaps you can identify? Periods where you did things you can’t explain or acted in ways you otherwise wouldn’t have?”

“....She lied. About such awful things, like you wouldn’t believe.”

The pressure on my back lessens just a bit. “Try me.”

Bad time for something to catch in my throat. “She said she’d been abused, and that was why she was so messed up. But she wasn’t abused. She just wanted me to... I don’t remember deciding to hit her, I swear. I just.... I was so *angry* afterwards. I was so sick of ponies who used me or slept with somepony they shouldn’t have and it wasn’t something fun or good. It’s supposed to just be a way you feel closer to somepony, y’know? But Algae and the changelings just... they twist it

into something it isn't supposed to be. Why am I supposed to be okay with that?"

The room went silent for quite a while, the pressure on my back staying constant. Occasionally I had to gasp as Aunt Wind shifted her weight, "Can I trust you not to try to hurt me if I let you up?"

"Yeah, I'm just fine," I mutter as Aunt Wind gets off my back and I scramble back up onto my hooves, rubbing the spot she pinned me down under. That's gonna be a sore spot for the next couple weeks, but catching Aunt Wind's stoic expression I get the feeling I'm not due a lot of sympathy. "I didn't... hurt you or anything?"

"You tried to," says Aunt Wind, "Luckily you aren't exactly the most threatening soldier I've ever subdued."

"I am so sorry. It won't happen again."

"Oh yes it will," says Aunt Wind. She walks out of the room, leaving me to contemplate all of the many, many ways I'm deficient. When she returns from her office, she tosses a faux-leather bound notebook into my hooves. "Meet your new best friend. That journal goes with you to work, to lunches, to the bar when you're looking for a weekend conquest, *everywhere*. You feel something, you write it down. Hungry? Put it in the journal. Tired? Journal. Angry?" Her eyes lock onto mine for several rather uncomfortable seconds. "You will write about it in excruciating detail."

"I really don't think—"

"And if this were a gentle suggestion I'm sure I'd care what you thought." Princesses above, I've never seen Aunt Wind like this. No hint on her face that this is any kind of joke or prank on her part. "I expect you to have filled at least half of that book when I see you again on the first of next month."

"I might have to work that day...?"

Aunt Wind's face presses up against mine, and she scowls. I really don't mean to gulp, but it's hard to help it. "Nine AM, first of next month. You'll be in my office and I'll be helping

you overcome what you've been through. Or you won't show up, and I'll see to it that you live to regret it."

Oh, geeze. It must be worse than I thought. "I knew it. I'm feathered up beyond recognition," I say, barely able to meet Aunt Wind's glare. "I don't... I can't... will I ever get better? Seriously, should I just go ahead and slit my wrists now?" My half-hearted chuckle dies in my throat as Wind marches up to me, stance rigid, and locks her eyes onto mine.

"Do you want to kill yourself?"

The sheer bluntness of the question sends me reeling. "I... what? No. No! I want to get better, but—"

"Stop," she says, pressing a hoof against my mouth. "Say that again, except for the 'but' part. And mean it."

"What, that I want to get better?"

"Again."

I scoff. I can't help it. But it's a mistake, and that's emphasized as Aunt Wind's hoof lashes and slaps my cheek. It hurts, but I get the impression she could hit a whole lot harder when she wants to. "I want to get better."

"Pardon me?" she asks, cocking her ear for emphasis. "Pretty sure I didn't tell you to whisper."

"I WANT TO GET BETTER."

Aunt Wind just rolls her eyes. "Not very much if that's the hardest you're going to try."

**"I! *WILL!* GET! BETTER!"** Where did that come from? Guard training never really works its way out of your system, I guess, and as I'm contemplating this I find myself wrapped up in a hug from my taskmaster.

"You bet your flank you will," says Wind as she squeezes me just a bit tighter, then releases her grip. "Now, let's discuss your homework." I appreciate that she ignores my groaning as she says the word. "I want you to feel."

"...Feel what, exactly?" I ask.

“Everything,” she replies, “That journal is eighty blank pages right now. Next time I see you I want timestamps telling me when you were bloated, when you were tired, and more than anything else when you were angry. I want the good and the bad written down. And if you ever feel like you lose control again, I want every single detail of the before and after scratched down in black and white. Understood?”

“I guess,” I say with a shrug.

Obviously not good enough. “*ARE MY ORDERS UNDERSTOOD?*”

“Ma’am! Yes ma’am!” I reply.

Aunt Wind rewards my reflexive salute with a true and genuine smile. “Happy to hear it. Now go home, soldier. Guest room’s all made up and ready for you.” I turn and fly away before I even realize I’m doing it. A quiet, anonymous night before I head back to Ponyville sounds pretty much perfect right now.

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The sight of my family compound is more than welcome. After everything I’ve talked about with Aunt Wind, I’ve had more than enough for one day. Technically, I should probably check in at the front gate and take the more conventional route through the Main Hall. But I know lots of other ways in. Why else would a swarm of shapeshifting insects have decided—

Okay, stop. Aunt Wind said to acknowledge when I’m going off on a tear like this. So I pause, take a deep breath, and rather than try to sneak past the mostly-ceremonial senties mounted on the walls I actually fly up to the main gates. It’s only a brief annoyance, given that they recognize me as one of the ponies who’s come and gone through the compound for pretty much my entire life. I still head straight for the guest room window of my family’s house, though. I’d rather not deal with any more of them than I have to, at least not at this hour.

I unlatch the shutters and slip inside easily enough. The bed and the warm, puffy sheets draped over it are calling to me in



the moonlight. Nothing more to do tonight but collapse and enjoy the sweet embrace of—

“Hello, Cloud.”

I bolt from the floor even before I fully register the words. I know that voice all too well. The pony in the shadows steps forward from where she’s been waiting, auburn mane obscuring my view of her eyes.

“Hi Mom.” We regard each other for some time before I grudgingly speak up again. “So much for Aunt Wind keeping my visit a secret.”

“Is that why you’re here in Canterlot? To see her?”

“Don’t pretend you didn’t know.”

She shrugs. “I’m not pretending.”

“Then how... did Kicky say something?”

“No, not exactly,” says Mom, “Although given her history of infiltrating pony society, I presume she inherited the inability to effectively lie to her mother from you. I saw that the guest room was being made up and I took a chance.”

I scoff. “Glad to see that I’m still the very first thing that comes to your mind when you think about failure. Just like old times.” I sigh, and lift a hoof to my forehead. “If you have some speech or something, can we skip it? I’m pretty tired. Why don’t you just pat me on the head, tell me you’re proud of me, then leave so I can get some sleep?”

Rather than follow my suggestion, Mom returns to her seat. “I don’t think so. I’ll leave when I choose to, you’re a bit old for pats on the head, and I’m certainly not going to begin this conversation by lying to you.”

That gets me bristling pretty quickly. “What do you want?”

She’s quiet for a good while before she answers. “Is it really so hard for you to believe that I just want to be able to talk to you? Without any theatrics?”

“Yeah, it is.” She lowers her head, and for a moment I almost want to let my guard down. “How’s Alula?” I ask. It’s the

longest olive branch I'm willing to extend.

"She's doing well. A few more months and she'll be ready to start training with her wing blades. And she misses you."

I shift my weight from hoof to hoof, which Mom notices and undoubtedly disapproves of. Being in my mother's presence is practically the antithesis of being comfortable in my own skin, and I'm finding it harder and harder to remember a time when she didn't have that effect on me. "I miss her too."

"Well, you're welcome to stay longer if you—"

"No."

My mother never has liked my interrupting her. "Because you have so many pressing engagements back in Ponyville."

"Maybe I do."

"Maybe." The room grows quiet as neither of us are quite sure what to say for some time. Eventually Mom breaks the silence. "So what have you accomplished there since we last spoke?"

I shrug. "Made assistant manager of the local weather team. Found my own place, and I've been supporting myself without needing to come begging the clan for money."

She cocks an eyebrow. "Same as last time. So, no actual developments or progress in months."

"I'm fine."

The first warning that my mother is about to explode is the way her nose crinkles up before an outburst. It's enough that I'm ready to brace myself for it, although it doesn't seem that the eruption is coming just yet. "Would you like me to explain why I'm proud of your sister and not of you?"

"Because she managed to squeeze one last use out of those changeling powers of hers and morph herself into a copy of you?"

"No." We're both openly glaring at one another at this point. "It's because she's chosen a path, committed herself to it, and given her all in the pursuit of it. Can you say the same?"

“I haven’t changed my mind about the Guard, if that’s what you’re asking.” I finally let my saddlebags slump from my shoulders and leave them laying in the middle of the floor while I trot away and feign interest in the knick-knacks spread out on the nightstand.

“That wasn’t what I was asking,” says Mom. Years of experience tell me that keeping my back to her like this gets to her, though she’d never admit it. Princesses forbend she ever be less than perfect, after all. “Have I ever told you about my courtship of your father?”

“Only about a thousand times.”

“I was a few years younger than you are now,” she begins. Because why should anything I say make a difference? I settle in for the parable I’ve heard so many times before. “Your grandmother and grandfather were horrified. Frankly, they’d been horrified by everything I did from the moment I joined the Guard. They kept trying to use their influence to railroad me into safe, dead-end careers. But I loved being in the Guard, Cloud. I loved it and I love your father. I gave both of them my all, every single day, and it paid dividends.”

“I hear that works for raising fillies too. Might be worth trying some time.”

Mom is pretty close to her tipping point, judging by the way she’s taking slightly deeper breaths than before. “My point is,” she begins, “that if there were something you cared about that deeply, something or even somepony who you would give yourself to as wholly and as thoroughly as I gave myself to the Guard, maybe you could actually make something of yourself.”

“I told you, I’m fine.”

*“FINE IS NOT GOOD ENOUGH!”* As per usual, Mom’s eruption is as abrupt as it is terrifying. She takes a moment to seethe, then buries her rage somewhere deep, deep down. It doesn’t surprise me that the soldiers under her command have always found that steady, level tone of hers to be scarier than the anger. Still, I catch my heart beating a little bit quicker than it had been earlier. “Fine is a starting point. You should be

excelling. You should have a dream that you're trying to achieve, and I don't mean expanding the collection of notches on your bedpost. If it isn't the Guard, that's entirely alright." I tense up as her hoof presses against my shoulder blade, just above the joint of my right wing. "I'll support your doing anything. But what I won't support is your doing nothing."

"For a certain definition of 'anything,' obviously."

"So this is the life you want?" Mom asks. "You're just going to wallow in your own mediocrity to spite me? See just how deeply you can manage to disappoint me?" I whip my head around to face her at that, feeling something hot and hard welling up and tightening in my chest. "You can be more than what you are. Kicky is living proof of that, if nothing else. I've tried to give you what opportunities I could, but at some point the drive has to come from inside you. Otherwise you'll never —"

"SHUT UP!" Now it's my turn for my rage to boil over. "I don't care what you think! I don't care what you say! It's my life, Mom! Mine! And why the buck would I spend any of it trying to impress you, of all ponies, huh? It's not like I'd ever be good enough. So take your 'you can do anything' spiel and shove it up your plot. After all, it's just a way for you to find all sorts of new and exciting ways I'm letting you down." I have to stop and catch my breath, and maybe if I squeeze my eye shut tight enough Mom won't see me crying. "I just... you don't... it's not supposed to be this hard."

"That's what life is, Cloud," says Mom. Is... is she crying too? "Maybe I prepared you well enough, or maybe I didn't. Either way, where you go from here is out of my hooves." She turns away from me.

All that and now she's leaving? "Where are you going?" I call after her, but she doesn't break stride. "What, you're just going to walk away? Like a coward?" I thought for sure that would at least make her pause. "Mom!" Shouting at the back of her head doesn't work any better. "What am I supposed to do now, huh? What do you even *want* from me?"

Finally, just as she's about to step out of my bedroom door, she freezes. "What do I want from you?" She tilts her head and glances back at where I'm crumpled up on the floor. "I want you to direct exactly that question at yourself. And I want you to find your own answer to it." Then she steps out of the room and shuts my door behind her, leaving me alone to grope for answers in the deep and dark void she leaves in her wake. I somehow doubt I'll have much trouble filling up that journal for Aunt Wind.

# Beyond Repair

## BEYOND REPAIR

It's taken four cups of coffee, but as the sun rises on the other side of the front window of the diner I've been parked in for the last hour I feel like something resembling a living pony again. After that blow up with Mom, sleep was out of the question. Sometime around five in the morning I gave up on it entirely and just left.

I'm sort of wishing I could just get on the train home and go, but before I came into the city I made the mistake of planning to meet some West Hoof buddies for breakfast, and I don't want to stand them up. It would be nice if at least one pony somewhere in Canterlot didn't see me as an unreliable screw up. If my parking myself here and picking at the pile of egg, cold cheese, and red peppers that once vaguely resembled an omelette is annoying the lone waitress on duty, she isn't saying so. And she keeps the coffee coming, which has her on my short list of 'Favorite Ponies in Equestria' all by itself. I made a few half-hearted attempts to flirt with her when I first sat down, but I'm pretty off my game at the moment.

Finally, the pair of stallions I'm waiting on walk through the door. Glinting Steel, who's the one who suggested we meet in the first place, and Flanking Maneuver, a unicorn with a blue coat and a perpetual unconscious smirk. With a name like that, he'd needed it to shrug off the merciless combined ribbing an entire class of military cadets could dish out, but from what I remember he'd always given as good as he got in that particular regard. "Original-flavor Cloud! Long time no see," he says as he trots up and offers me a hoof to bump. "How's Ponyville treating you these days?"

"A bit rougher than usual, but nothing I can't handle." I hope.

"I seem to recall that you rather enjoyed things a bit rough at times."

"Guilty as charged. Hey Glint. How's it going?"

Glinting Steel gives me a nod of acknowledgement, content to be the more serious half of their little duo. “Can’t complain. Glad I got transferred back here after the invasion, but I swear this city is built on paperwork.” He glances down at my plate and frowns. “You already eat?”

“Nah, just got here early and ordered ahead. I’m not in a rush. Here, come on and sit down. The coffee’s good.” The two of them slide into the other side of the booth across the table from me, and the waitress appears an instant later with her coffee pot and a pair of additional mugs. Once I’ve given them a chance to get appropriately caffeinated over a few minutes of polite inquiries about families, a little bit of the loneliness I’ve been feeling over the last few days has already started to fade. “By the way, Glint,” I begin after our waitress has had a chance to take their orders, “I just wanted to say thanks for all the support you’ve given Kicky since she reenlisted. It’s not something I was all that crazy about at first, but I know it’s meant a lot to her.”

Before Glint can respond, Flanking Maneuver snickers into his coffee. “Well, don’t go giving him too much credit, Cloud. It’s not like it was all out of the goodness of his heart. Right Glint? You’ve been giving her a whole lot more than support.”

He grimaces. “Shut up, Flank.”

“Don’t spare the details on my account,” I say as the allegiances shift and I hop in to join the teasing. “She wouldn’t be a very good copy of me if you didn’t have a spot on her list of ponies to bed now that she’s back. All that training, I’m sure she’s had a lot of steam to blow off.”

“Oh, he didn’t just get a spot on the list. He is the list.”

“Seriously you two, come on.”

I look back forth between the two of them, feeling like I’m missing something. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Glancing up at me for just a second before returning his uncharacteristically bashful eyes back to his coffee, Glint takes a moment to reply. “Did she really not tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

“Cloud, the last time Kicky was here for training we ended up talking about a lot of things. She and I are an item these days. Exclusively. Not a fling or a one night stand. I thought we both wanted to build something a bit more serious together. If she hasn’t even said anything about it to you, maybe I’m wrong.”

“I knew it was too good to be true,” says Flank. “I don’t care what tricks you’re packing between the sheets; none can truly tame the legendary loins of a wild Cloud Kicker.” He pats Glint of the back as he gets a perturbed glance back. “Better luck next time, I guess.”

Thankfully the arrival of a waffle and a short stack of boysenberry pancakes saves me from needing to respond to that immediately, and also gives me a chance to think back a bit. “...She did say something, actually,” I begin, trying to recall just what Kicky had actually been telling me in light of this particular piece of new information. “She asked me if I ever wished the two of us had gotten more serious back at West Hoof.”

“Oh?” His ears perk up again as he takes a bite of a pancake. “Can I ask what you told her?”

“The same thing I told you back then, that I doubt it would have worked. I just don’t think I’m wired to live like that.” I hurry on as I catch his expression darkening ever so slightly. “Only because I thought it was a hypothetical. If she says she’s serious about you I’m inclined to believe her.” I also give myself a mental kick for not noticing on my own. All those nights she went out to the Sun’s Flank with me as a wingmare I’d just assumed she ended up hooking up with somepony else afterwards. And I haven’t been feeling all that frisky since the whole Fire Brand incident; I guess the topic hasn’t been on my mind quite as much as usual.

Glint sighs. “No, I get it. It’s one of the things Kicky and I talked about. Her instincts are to conceal information, and being one of the first revealed ‘lings who tried to integrate probably just reinforced that. She’s got a lot of regrets about what she used to do for her hive. Still, just as she was leaving last time to head back to Ponyville she promised me she’d



make an effort, even with the unpleasant stuff. You sure she didn't tell you anything like that?"

My heart leaps for my throat like it's making a full-on escape attempt. "Actually, I think she did that too," I begin with caution. "About a friend of mine she fed on using my shape."

"Geeze, that is a doozy," says Flank, digging into the second half of his waffle with no sign of slowing down. My appetite, on the other hoof, seems to have just vanished.

"Well, her letter last week didn't mention it. So I guess it went pretty well between you when she told you."

"It... could have gone better. Actually, a lot better."

Glint's pancakes are forgotten as his eyes go wide with alarm. "What did you do?"

"Oh, right, you just assume that whatever happened is my fault. Like she doesn't deserve any of the blame for hiding it in the first place."

"Damn it, Cloud," says Glint as he presses his hooves into his temples. "So what happened?"

"I spilled the truth to my friend," I say. I can't bear to glance up at him, but I can imagine the furious look on his face anyway.

"Why would you do that?"

"I'm..." All these weeks pretending to be fine are proving a tougher rut to shake myself out of than I thought it would be. I almost did it again just out of habit. "Kicky's not the only one who has stuff she's dealing with."

"Is that really the excuse you're going with?"

"Guys, guys, whoa," says Flank, leaning in and stretching a precautionary foreleg between us. Just like that, he's all business. "We're all friends here, so calm down and act like it. I'm sure Cloud had her reasons, even if they were probably really stupid ones." Thanks for the vote of confidence, buddy.

"Look, I'm going to fix this. I know I feathered up pretty badly back there, but if I can just sit the two of them down

together and get them talking they can smooth this over.” I probably sound a whole lot more confident in that idea than is actually warranted; I’ve never seen Blossom so enraged that she’d outright slap somepony like that. I guess the fact that I dropped that particular bombshell in the middle of the date she and Davenport were on, or whatever it was they dressed up for, probably didn’t help any.

“See, Glint? Your fillyfriend’s going to be just fine. Cloud knows herself, doesn’t she?” After my chat with Aunt Wind I’m not as sure as I used to be of whether that’s true, but I don’t contradict him.

“Fine. See to it that you do,” says Glint. The food is mostly gone, and the greasy-faced clock hanging above the griddle in the corner of the diner announces the top of the hour. I have a train to catch. Leaving money for my own food along with a generous tip, I bid goodbye to Glint and Flank and turn to go. But I don’t get far. “Cloud?”

I turn back to the table. “Yeah, Glint?”

“I still think you were wrong about us back then. I think when you told me you were wired to play the field you were selling yourself short. Yeah, you have a big heart, but that doesn’t mean there’s nothing out there that’s big enough to fill it.”

For the first time in as long as I can remember, I’m actually struck dumb. My mouth works uselessly trying to formulate a coherent response, but luckily Flanking Maneuver comes to my rescue. “Dude, give it up. Your dick isn’t *that* big.”

I burst out laughing as Glint rolls his eyes with a sigh. “Shut up, Flank,” I say between giggles. “I’ll catch you guys next time I’m in town, okay? My Aunt wants me back a couple of weeks from now; let’s do this again then.” And with that I’m off, breaking into an eager trot as I head towards the train station and home.

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I do manage to snag a nap during the first part of the ride home, thank Celestia. Should get me through the rest of the afternoon at least. When I wake up and find myself with some

more time to kill before we're due to arrive in Ponyville, however, I pull out the journal Aunt Wind gave me for a closer look. It's pretty nondescript, with no particular design nor a title adorning its wrinkled brown cover. I suppose that's a good thing; if Aunt Wind is seriously expecting me to pull this out at a minute's notice at a bar or in the office better that it's something that doesn't scream 'everyone look at the crazy pony!' when I do. Does she really expect me to fill half of this thing before I see her again, though? Suppose I should get started.

*Dear Diary or however you're supposed to start these things. I wouldn't know. When I was younger and Mom or Dad handed me quills and parchment it was because they wanted an essay on clan history, or maybe for me to sketch out a battle plan to besiege a well-fortified couch fort. I seriously doubt any pony has ever saved a kingdom by writing in a diary, after all, but I'm willing to give this a try anyway. Mostly because I don't want to find out what you'll do to me if I don't.*

*So, right, feelings and stuff. Well, you can definitely put 'Guilt' somewhere pretty high up on the list after my breakfast this morning. Glinting Steel made it all the more obvious why Kicky has been avoiding me since I stabbed her in the back.*

*Okay, I'm back. I had to take a couple minutes out after I wrote that last part to calm myself down. I think I'm starting to see why part of my homework was to notice when I feel stuff rather than deny that it's building up. If I start to get angry like I did back in office it's better to catch it early and nip it in the bud, right? Makes sense. Speaking of angry, I got mad enough to start yelling again last night. I'm sure my mother has already given you her side of the story, which no doubt contains the phrase 'worthless, ungrateful brat' in more than a few places. I so didn't need to deal with her after I'd just come from talking to you. I did manage to push her from zero to furious in near-record time, though. I may not be able to make her feel much for me, but I can definitely make her feel that.*

*If I don't change the subject soon this entire diary is just going to end up being the words 'my mother' copied across every page. It's more productive to think about how I'm going to fix*

*things between Kicky and Blossom. I guess that given their history taking them both out on the town and maneuvering them into waking up in bed together is right out. You can't fight banging with banging. I don't think so, anyway. Although it sounds like something I'd be open to trying sometime. But Kicky's apparently decided that it's all aboard the monogamy train all of a sudden, which totally blew my mind to find out. Just another reason she's 'the good one,' I guess. Me, I'm still not seeing the appeal of artificially limiting yourself to one partner. Really, I don't see why you'd limit yourself like that in any aspect of your life. Something better could come along any day, and do you want to end up passing on something great because you're tied down to something that's just pretty good?*

I guess I could keep going, but the conductor picks that moment to come through and announce that we're getting close to Ponyville, so back into my bag the diary goes. Not too bad of a start, if I do say so myself. This psychology stuff is easier than Aunt Wind makes it sound.

I disembark from the train with renewed resolve. I have the whole afternoon in front of me and a clear goal to attack as I head back to my house. Walking in, it sounds like somepony is rummaging through the closet around the corner. So at least I don't have to draw her out of her bedroom. Peeking around the corner, I confirm the blonde tail and the copy of my cutie mark just to be sure. "Kicky? I'm home."

The rummaging noises stop for a moment, but then start up again without a word from her.

"I know that how I treated you the other day wasn't right, and I'm really sorry. You deserved to at least decide how Blossom found out. You were right about Aunt Wind too; I put off talking to her for too long, and you paid the price."

She emerges from the closet's depths with a dusty old scabbard that probably hasn't seen the light of day in years. Her eyes pass right over me like I'm invisible as she walks over to the chest of drawers where we keep all sorts of odds and ends, pulling open one of the junk drawers.

My confidence starts to slip, but I decide to try another angle. “Glint told me that you two are an honest-to-goodness couple now. Any gossip? I’m all ears.”

She pulls an old rag and a little half-empty jar of metal polish from the drawer, and shifts the scabbard up onto her shoulder. Without a word to me she walks away, heading straight for her bedroom.

“I had a really nasty fight with Mom, too. I hate to admit that she got to me, but she did. It’s kinda knocked me for a loop, to be honest. You have no idea how much it would help if you’d stop for a second and just—”

Her bedroom door slams shut hard enough to rattle the frame, and I hear the lock click behind her.

“—talk to me.”

This may turn out to be harder than I thought.

With my afternoon plan entirely upended, I decide the next best thing I can do is check in on the other half of this ongoing disaster. I head for the weather offices hoping Blossom will be there when I arrive, but instead the place is empty except for Rainbow Dash’s office. She’s actually doing paperwork for once, too, which is a pretty unusual sight. But I guess with me out of the office for the last few days and her own trip to Canterlot on Element business there’s probably a backlog. “Hey Dash, Blossom around?”

“Lunch. Should be back pretty soon. Pull up a seat; you can help me with these expense reports while you wait.”

“Lucky me.” Still, if I’m going to be making somewhat regular trips to Canterlot to see Aunt Wind it couldn’t hurt to do some extra pitching in. “So did I miss anything while I was gone?”

“Eh, nothing too major. Biggest thing was that Flitter spotted some more changeling drones lurking around the Everfree. They’re pretty persistent.”

In rushes a spike of anxiety at the twin mentions of changelings and their Everfree lair. That’s a mental note to add

to the journal when I'm done here. "What happened with them?"

Dash lets out a cocky scoff. "What do you think? I totally swooped in to save the day. Gave them a smack down they won't be forgetting anytime soon. Oh, and Twilight helped too I guess."

"Not the worst pony to bring along for backup," I say, stamping my signature into the paperwork three sheets deep on the desk. I seriously have no idea how she can so easily pull out exactly the next page she needs in an instant from the morass.

"Backup? Nah, I didn't really need any backup from her. Or the other guards who tagged along to watch the master at work, either. It's just that we haven't even been back from saving time and stuff for more than a couple of days and she's already launching herself into this whole other new thing. What better way to get her to hang around for a while than to put on a bit of a show for her?"

Before I can ask for clarification on what exactly 'saving time and stuff' constitutes, Blossom returns from her lunch break. "Hey Blossom. Good lunch?"

"Yeah, I was starving," she says, hanging her saddlebags beside her desk. "How was Canterlot?"

"Kinda stressful," I admit, which is at least a shadow of the truth. "Got some good advice on how to maybe avoid making mistakes like the one I pulled showing up on your lawn with Kicky the way I did."

Her mouth becomes a hard line at the mention of that name, and the hoof she's rested on the desk digs just a bit deeper into the grain of the wood. "What mistake? She was lying to me for months, and I'm glad the truth came out. I don't have to waste any more time on her now, which is fine by me."

"Whoa, Blossom," says Rainbow Dash, "don't you think that's kinda harsh? I thought it was awesome that you stuck by her right from the beginning, before you'd even gotten to know her."

“Well now that I’ve gotten to know her I have nothing to say to her.”

“Yeah, there’s a lot of that going around,” I mutter.

Blossom shrugs. “I just don’t need that kind of toxic drama in my life. Especially not right now. I mean, you get it, right? You were telling me about how she was with your family and everything. She might not be a changeling anymore, but that doesn’t mean she’s not still a parasite.”

It’s true that I might have given a rather biased and one-sided account of that first trip to Canterlot where Kicky met the family. At the time it was just something I needed to vent, but now I’m wishing I hadn’t. “She’s your friend.”

“No, you’re my friend,” says Blossom. “She nearly managed to ruin that, too. She broke my heart for a snack and didn’t even have the decency to apologize afterwards.”

“Maybe if you—”

“She’s leaving soon, right?” interrupts Blossom. “For good this time?”

I can only gape at her for a second before my mind catches up. “Yeah, back to Canterlot. After that wherever they deploy her.” I try to lay a wing over her back for comfort, but her own wings twitch and push them away as she turns right back around and marches towards the exit.

“Well, I won’t miss her when she’s gone. You can tell her that if you want to. I’m heading back out. I’m sure there’s a cloud somewhere that needs to be smacked around. Other than the one living with you, that is.”

Rainbow Dash, quick as ever, bolts over her and stands between her and the doorway. “Actually there’s some paperwork I could really use a hoof with. Why don’t you pull up a chair and just chill here for a little while?”

Blossom shoves her aside, and Dash is too surprised to react in time to keep her from plopping down onto her plot. “Or maybe you could do your own bucking job for a change instead of dumping it on us. I’m out of here.” With that Blossom spreads her wings before she’s even through the door, forcing her to

twist a bit awkwardly to clear the frame, and takes off for parts unknown as soon as she has empty sky over her head.

Dash and I watch her through the window as she disappears behind some buildings to the south. “Look, don’t worry about it,” says Dash. “She’s just been kind of moody these last few days. It’ll blow over.”

I don’t reply. I’m not all that sure that it will, but I think I was mostly right before. This is absolutely going to be a lot tougher to fix than I thought it was.



# Two Steps Forward

## TWO STEPS FORWARD

Right, so where was I?

The corner of the final page of Aunt Wind's journal is more or less pitch black with the ink I've let drip from the tip of my quill, which is patiently waiting for me to make up my mind as to what to write next. It doesn't really make sense that this page would be different than any other page, especially with the other, currently blank journal that arrived from Canterlot the other day waiting for me in a nearby drawer. Aunt Wind's doing as well, I'd assume. It would be nice if I could end the book with some variation on *...and then I realized that I'd actually made some itty little bit of progress towards not completely bucking up my life at every possible turn*. Go out on a high note.

That rules out writing about Kicky, I suppose. Those pages mostly end with *...and then she slammed the door in my face and continued giving me the silent treatment*. The first couple times she pulled that I spent a couple pages ranting about how unfair she was being. The more I think about it, though, the more I'm starting to think it hurts so much more because she's not actually being unfair at all.

There's work, but that's pretty blah. Blossom's been scarce, which hasn't really helped me on attacking the problems between her and Kicky from that end. I don't think Aunt Wind needs to read about me doing paperwork. Whatever my big breakthrough is supposed to be, I don't think it takes the form of *...and then, having attained a transcendental understanding of airborne particulate limits vis a vis residential-zoned breeze formation and the notarized forms certifying Ponyville's conformance to acceptable parameters, I found inner peace*.

I could write about my mother. Those pages don't really have endings, because to get to the point where I'd need one I'd have to know where to start first.

The quill ends up dropped back into my inkwell and the cover of my journal snaps shut without making any real progress on any of it. Transcendental or not, I actually do need to review the Weather Bureau's guidelines on particulate limits before tomorrow's windstorm we'll be blowing in from the west. With my luck, the Mayor ends up looking just the wrong way at just the wrong time, and demands that I be personally called to account for the grain of sand that ends up in her eye. It's been that kind of week.

Before I can, though, I need to undo a particular quirk of Rainbow Dash's filing system. Specifically, how any pile of papers with a binding occasionally end up routed to the bookiest place she can think of; Twilight Sparkle's library. Our guidance manual disappeared three days ago, which means it's probably been card catalogued to within an inch of its life by now. So it's a detour I'm not really in the mood to take of what's in theory one of my days off, but I also can't think of anything better to do this afternoon so away I go. At least having a leisurely glide through town on the way goes by pleasantly enough that it can't be a total waste of a trip.

The pony leaning against the far wall of the library idly tossing a softball to herself as I walk in isn't the mare I expect to see. "Azalea?"

"Cloudy?" She looks just as surprised to run into me.

After the initial surprise fades, I figure out pretty quickly that she's got a more obvious reason to be here than I do. "I'm not interrupting anything special between you and Twilight right now, am I?"

She lets out a long, weary sigh that sounds like it's been building for a while. "Nope. I wish you were."

"Hey, I enjoy a good show as much as the next pony, but I didn't realize you two were into the voyeurism thing."

"Not like that," she says. She catches her ball one last time and plants it firmly on a corner of the oaken floor. "I came by thinking she might like to go out to the park and toss a ball around, blow off some steam since she's finally done with all the magic work she and that that Star Twirl guy were working

on. Maybe dust off that baseball bat up on her wall while we're at it."

"Sounds like a nice afternoon."

"I thought so. She said she'd be up in five minutes."

I shrug. "Doesn't sound too bad."

Azalea shakes her head. "That was an hour and a half ago."

"So... where is she?"

She gestures over towards an out-of-the-way door and starts trotting over to it. "It would probably faster to just show you." Curiosity piqued, I follow her over to the door and down the flight of stairs behind it. I had no idea the town library even had a basement, much what looks like some sort of crazy mad science lab, with extra mad. Several countertops, each one partially obscured by stacks of paper along with what I can only assume are some sort of odd magical experiments at various stages of completion. "I have to say, Az," I say as I pause to study a diagram that could just as plausibly chart the migratory patterns of some local honey bees or give instructions for reattaching severed limbs to an unconscious animal depending on how I squint at it, "your fillyfriend is more than a little bit creeee...." The sound catches in my throat as my eyes continue down to another part of the room, initially obscured by some papers that weren't actually caught in a random crossbreeze but rather suspended in a field of unicorn magic, where a familiar purple figure is hunched over a desk scratching her quill away at the paper in front of her. "Creeeeeee.....aaaaaaaative?"

"Don't worry," says Azalea, wings ruffling with irritation as Twilight continues to write... whatever it is she's writing. "Hi hon, are you about ready? It's been more than five minutes."

"Uh huh. Which wouldn't make any sense, even given the sophistication of their design. You'd still be constrained by the base metal's capacity to channel that sort of energy. The only way the math would work is if it's a new alloy entirely, but Luna never mentioned... using..."

When she's gone a few more seconds after trailing off into silence, I glance over at Azalea. "Did I miss something?"

Instead of answering me, Azalea's eyes harden into a glare. "Cloud Kicker is here."

"Mmhmm. No pony credible would ever publish these in this state. If Star Swirl was seeing effects of these magnitudes the p-values at this sample size should have been way better than zero-point-thirty-eight. Where did I put that page... with..." An unseen drawer springs open and her magic swaps some of the papers on the desk with others from inside before it shuts again just as quickly.

"I thought maybe I'd take her upstairs and have sex with her on your bed."

"That's nice. Did I miss something in the geometry of the gem carvings? If I'm postulating an interaction with dimensionally shifted leylines there's got to be some... not having a focus wouldn't..."

"Unbelievable," says Azalea, stomping a hoof and turning back towards the stairs.

"If it helps, I'm absolutely a hundred percent onboard with the Twilight's bed thing."

"It doesn't help." She lets out a very long sigh. "The sad thing is that I knew this was what I was getting into. She pulled a stunt like this on our first date."

"Does it happen a lot?" I shuffle forward a bit so I can glance over Twilight's shoulder at what she's writing. I can't make heads or tails of any of it, and if Twilight notices my presence she doesn't even flick an ear in acknowledgement. "I'm not a relationship expert, but that seems like it should be a warning sign for... well, something."

"I don't know what to think about it," Azalea sits on the floor next to a wastebasket full of discarded rags and crumpled pieces of paper, her shoulders slumped. "Spike told me once that if you leave plates of food and pitchers of coffee near her, she can stay like this for entire days at a time."

I study the back of Twilight's head for a moment, while she crumples up one page of notes into another ball and flings it behind her without so much as a glance back. I only just pull my face away in time as it whips past me and drops perfectly into the basket Azalea's seated next to. "And you're okay with this?"

"Do you think I shouldn't be? She's passionate about things. Some of those things are pretty out there, I'll admit, but..." she sighs again, but this time a dreamy smile spreads over her face afterwards. "It's not like it's coming from a selfish place. If I shook her out of it right now and told her she's been blowing me off, she'd be more upset about it than I am. And sometimes she's thinking this hard about me and how we can be happy together. That feels really good after, well, everything."

I raise an eyebrow at the word choice. "Does she know about everything?"

Instead of answering, Azalea bites her lip. She glances around the basement just to confirm there's not anypony else down here other than the three of us, though I guess the third is debatable.

"Twilight used to be a changeling and only moved here to spy on you." She winces and squeezes her eyes shut, bracing for whatever comes next.

"Okay. So then how does the crown enter into it? It still seems reasonable to assume some sort of control mechanism, but it would have to be capable of receiving... which implies a degree of hierarchy..."

Slowly but surely, one of Azalea's eyes begins to reopen. When Twilight lapses back into silence, the other follows suit. "Well, glad that's done." She turns and breaks into a full gallop towards the stairs before finding enough restraint to slow to a quick canter.

"Az, that doesn't count," I call after her. Since she shows no sign of stopping all I can do is follow her back up to the library's main room. When I do catch up to her she's sitting

near one of the bookcases, staring at nothing and trembling all over. "You have to tell her for real."

"I know," she says, "maybe in a couple of days. You saw how busy she is; it'll keep."

"Sure. Right up until it won't." That doesn't sway her, or even get her to look at me. "My gut tells me that nothing's going to go wrong when she finds out."

"You don't know that." She spins around and presses herself right up against my chest, wings flared and face so close I can feel bits of her spittle hitting my cheek. "You don't. You can't. After what you did to Kicky and Blossom maybe you shouldn't be so quick to decide what's the right way to tell somepony about this sort of thing, don't you think? This is all scary for me and I try to do it anyway because of course I know she deserves the truth, but I have to do it right. Things have to be right when I tell her. Because if I get this wrong... I can't even think about what that would mean." Once that's out there between us Azalea shrinks back away from me, diminished. Her eyes occasionally dart away to focus on nothing in particular, chasing figments of her imagination. "You know what? Let's take a walk. I was going to spend this afternoon with Twilight, but that's clearly not going to happen. So let's go meet some other friends instead."

She doesn't wait for my answer before she's marching away again for the front door. I glance back at the basement wondering if it's worth calling down to Twilight that we're leaving, but I'm not even sure she knows we were here in the first place. "Wait up!" A few flaps of my wings give me enough speed to land right by her side and match her pace, which is quicker than usual as the library fades into the distance. It's only when we turn a corner a few streets away that she slows down to a more reasonable pace. "So who are we meeting?" I ask, proving that Azalea isn't the only pony here with a sore spot she doesn't want to talk about.

"Scootaloo's having lunch over at Reuben's," she begins, "she's meeting with... well, there's somepony who showed up a couple of days ago at my doorstep and needed a place to stay. I know things didn't end that well the last time you saw

her, but cut her a bit of extra slack, okay? She's had a harder transition than most of us..." she trails off as two stallions pass us, chatting to one another, "...you know."

It doesn't take me all that long to run down the list of possible ponies she might be talking about. "Wait, Bon Bon? Other Bon Bon?"

"Sweetie Drops. Do *not* call her Bon Bon."

I slow for a couple paces, letting Azalea get a bit ahead of me. From what I remember of that night at the bar, Sweetie Drops didn't have anything against me in particular. That doesn't excuse the way she treated everypony else that night, though. Not by a long shot. "Twilight's okay with you shacking up with another mare?"

"We aren't 'shacking up,' she's using my guest room. But I haven't told Twilight. That conversation would lead into... other things I haven't told Twilight. So when I've been seeing her, it's mostly at the library."

"And you don't think she's going to notice that?" Even as I ask, I'm flashing right back to the mare in the basement we just left. "Nevermind."

"Yeah, I think I'm probably in the clear. It's a risk, but it's one that's worth taking." We round the corner and spot the back of Scootaloo's head. Azalea stops short. "This was supposed to be a nice lunch, and she brings her?"

I assume that she means that other mare at the table next to Scootaloo, giggling at some comment the young filly must have just made. We restart our walk over to the table and I study her, trying to place where I know her from. When she glances over in our direction, a little spark of excitement and recognition appears in her eyes too. She shifts her head and lets her orange, rail-straight bangs obscure her view for a few paces, but then tosses them back and returns my look with full force. And what a promising look it is! That's a look that could lead to all kinds of fun and exciting places, if I can just remember this mare's name. It's driving me to distraction.

An awful lot of distraction considering I completely miss noticing the chicken seated across the table until it starts squawking it's head off.

The mare glances over to Scootaloo, who turns around and waves when she sees us. "Yes, I know it isn't," she says to Elizabeak as we approach close enough to hear.

"Buck buck bu-squawk!"

"No. Look, even if she were trying to pass as Kicky, I don't think it would be to sow mistrust between us and engineering a chain of murderous betrayals to slowly eliminate us one by one, only revealing her grand plan as she strikes the coup de grace on the last survivor."

"Bwawk?"

"No plan. You're just projecting."

"Squawk!"

"Maybe she has a point, Scoots," says the other mare, "I'd say Cloudy's earned a turn being the replacer instead of the replaced." The mare gets up from her seat, showing off the same cream-white coat as Bon Bon has and even the same triplet of wrapped candies for a cutie mark. That's right about where the similarities end, though. That mane must have taken an entire apothecary's worth of products to wrangle its natural bounciness under control. Bon Bon's always had a little bit of extra pudge on her, a professional hazard of spending so much of her time within easy reach of sugary treats. Whatever physique she may have inherited, I certainly can't say Sweetie Drops still has that same padding. It's all been melted away, and going by the way I can count her ribs when she turns her side to face me she didn't stop there. "Didn't think you were going to make it, Azalea. Great to see you again, Cloudy."

"Twilight's busy. Hope you don't mind being plan B." She gives Elizabeak another glance. "I thought it was just going to be two of you."

"I figured as long as I'm here, the more the merrier, right?" Sweetie Drops takes a sip of her iced tea. "And now that you and Cloud are here, it's practically like we've got the whole



crew back together again. Heck, Azalea's even reporting in on Twilight's whereabouts! Just like old times. Speaking of, how is our sixth holding up these days? Is he still keeping a low profile?"

The corner of Scootaloo's eye twitches, just a hint of a snarl appearing on her face. "That pony is doing just fine, because nopony who lives here is careless enough to go around dropping potentially identifying personal details."

If her anger is meant to make Sweetie Drops feel chided or ashamed, it doesn't work. "What, because I said 'he' in front of somepony who's not in on the details? Cloud's basically inner circle as far as I'm concerned; we all owe her one as far as I'm concerned."

That makes me blink a couple of times. "Me? Why would I be 'inner circle?'"

Sweetie Drops nudges her chair over towards me, close enough to lean in and drape a foreleg over my shoulder. "Don't be modest. You've gone above and beyond to save the lives of every pony at this table, and we're all grateful for it. Some of us are very grateful."

"Squawk!"

A flash of irritation appears on Sweetie Drops face as she leans away from me to glare at Elizabeak. "I did say every pony, didn't I? If you're going to be obnoxious about it, maybe I should consider her not going out of her way to save your life another point in her favor anyway."

"Play nice, both of you," says Scootaloo. I'm sure she's doing her best to give a withering stare at both of them, but it doesn't have the full effect coming from a grade-school filly. she drops it anyway as a waiter appears to take Azalea and my orders, going quiet until he's out of earshot again.

"So last I heard you were in Canterlot, right?" I ask. "What brings you back to Ponyville?"

Sweetie Drops wraps a foreleg across her chest to idly rub her other shoulder. "Canterlot didn't work out. Neither did Las Pegasus, actually. So I'm passing through on my way to

Baltimore. There's a cooking school there looking for somepony to teach confectionaries. The Bureau set me up with a provisional position there for the next semester."

The other ponies are nodding along, so I guess I have to be the one to ask. "Sorry, who set it up for you?"

Azalea chuckles at my confusion. "I guess we did kind of forget that you weren't Kicky for a second there. After the invasion attempt, Canterlot threw together a bunch of ponies from different parts of the government to come up with a way to fold us into society. Presto, the Bug Betterment Bureau was born."

"Bug Betterment... that's what they called it?" I ask.

Scootaloo shakes her head. "I think the official name is something like the Committee for Integration of... wait, was it integration or immigration?"

"I thought it was 'Development Opportunity' something," says Sweetie Drops.

"That's later. After the 'Growth and Renewal' part," interjects Azalea

"Anyway," says Scootaloo, "the point is that what they came up with was dumb, so the nickname stuck instead. Ponies in a nutshell: great at mercy, terrible at naming stuff."

Sweetie Drops scoffs, though quietly enough that I don't think it's for any of our benefit. "Some of them aren't all that great at mercy, either."

"Squawk."

"You're just mad that you don't qualify for any of the benefits."

"Wait, hold on," I say, holding up a hoof to forestall whatever bickering is about to develop between Scootaloo and Elizabeak, "how have I never heard of this? They must have done some kind of outreach if you girls all found out about it."

"Oh, they did," says Scootaloo, "or rather she did. Kind of a one-mare effort."

“Huh?”

“Luna,” say Azalea and Sweetie Drops in tandem. After a glance at Sweetie Drops and a nod in return, Azalea continues. “The nightmares right after were bad. I was right in the middle of one of them where everypony in town had just found out what I used to be.” She shudders. “Long story short, they’d just cornered me in a dead end, and there she was. One sweep of her wings and they all poofed away, and it was just us while she told me what kind of services I’d be eligible for, and what would be expected of me in return.”

“Me too, same nightmare even,” says Sweetie Drops. “She must have some way to key into exactly that scenario. Maybe she’s even the one giving it to us in the first place.”

“Right,” says Azalea, with sarcasm dripping from her voice. The waiter reappears with our meals. Interesting as this all is, it’s not enough to completely distract me from the prospect of sugar beets and bell peppers slathered in stone-ground mustard on a fresh bun. Sweetie Drops gets an even more immense sandwich than mine, which is already big enough that I’m not sure I can manage it in one sitting, and she doesn’t wait for the waiter to put down the little bowl of corn kernels in front of Elizabeak before she starts ripping into it with gusto. “The Princess must have put that into all our heads, because it isn’t something we were already worrying about.”

Sweetie Drops holds up a hoof to buy enough time to swallow a mouthful before responding. “Just saying, it’s an awfully convenient carrot-and-stick setup for her pitch. Nice new pony body you’ve got there, what a shame it’d be if it were horribly murdered.”

“Well, I told her to go buck herself,” says Scootaloo, who’s ordered some sort of soy nugget meal off the foal’s menu. “No consequences as far as I can tell. Not even any snide comments when I eventually did go to them after I accepted that there wasn’t any way back into the hive.”

“Squawk!”

“Sure, Liz,” says Scootaloo, “I’m sure the only reason she didn’t show up for you is because she was quivering in that

royal jewelry of hers that you'd be too terrible an opponent for her to manage. The chicken thing had nothing to do with it."

"Okay, so they help you out here and there, I get that," I say. "What did you say Luna wanted in return, though?"

"Not a lot," says Sweetie Drops, wiping away a bit of sauce from her chin. "Basically the same laws everypony else follows. No special oath of fealty to the crown or anything. A few ponies who we absolutely can't keep our pasts from, and a couple of questions about what we knew about things like changeling outposts near pony towns. Mostly out of date by now, but I know at least some of them got pushed back."

I try not to look over at Azalea, but fail resoundingly. "What sort of ponies did they make you promise to tell?"

She looks right back. "Not the one you're wondering about. If I were married to her it would be different, but the Princesses aren't interested in meddling in my dating life."

Scootaloo catches the looks passing between us. "Still haven't told Twilight then?"

Azalea sighs, scrunching up her face for a second before releasing the tension with a long exhale. "No, I haven't told her."

"Good," says Sweetie Drops. "Don't."

"What do you mean, don't?" I ask.

"Which part of it do you not understand? Azalea has a good thing going, and you just want her to throw it away? The guilt will fade, trust me."

"I told you it's not that simple," says Azalea. I gulp down another bit of sandwich, with the growing feeling that this isn't the beginning of this argument between the two of them. "For the sake of argument, let's say I could even get away with it without Twilight Sparkle, probably the smartest and most voraciously inquisitive pony I've ever met, figuring it out. What about my old friends? What about my family? They don't even know I'm alive. I want to see them again."

Sweetie Drops shakes her head. “You might think you do, but you don’t. What you have with Twilight here is real and what you think you’ll have with your family is a figment of your imagination. Want to know what happens if you ever see them again? You get to watch them look at you and wonder what this cheap copy of their real daughter is, and what it’s doing here talking to them. They’ll even twist the knife and be polite about it, and of course they’ll never actually say anything, but they’ll know you aren’t the one they want and you’ll know that they know. And if you throw away Twilight for that you’ll know what it feels like to be really, truly alone.”

Azalea listens with a look of utter terror spreading over her face as Sweetie Drops speaks. “Even if they did, I won’t feel right unless I try.”

“Because they’re a part of you, right?” ask Sweetie Drops. She waits for Azalea to nod in confirmation. “Well then that part of you isn’t compatible with the life you want, and it has to go. You aren’t hanging on to the important parts of your other past, so you know you can pick and choose. Just cut it off.” Azalea’s mouth moves like she wants to respond, but instead of speaking words all she can do is tremble.

“Okay, I think this little chat has gone far enough,” says Scootaloo, both hooves planted on the table.

“Well gee, sorry I actually care enough about Azalea to warn her that her pipe dream could blow up in her face. Maybe the reason she’s scared is that a part of her knows that I’m right, and it’s trying to keep her from making the biggest—”

“*ENOUGH!*” Scootaloo’s bellow silences not only Sweetie Drops mid-sentence, but a number of the other tables around us too. Even Elizabeak shies away from her glare. “You’ve made your point. If Twilight flips out and lights half the town on fire when she finds out, you’ll have earned the right to work an ‘I told her so’ into the eulogy. Satisfied? Anypony else feel the need to weigh in on how Azalea should handle her fillyfriend?”

“...squawk.”

A smile twitches at the corner of Scootaloo's mouth, and a bit of the angry tension flows out of her posture as she leans back into her chair. "I don't think killing her is going to help, much less desecrating her corpse that way afterwards. Besides, I think Azalea's more than satisfied getting to do that to the living Twilight on a more or less nightly basis."

We return to our meals in silence for the next few minutes. After everypony's had a chance to cool off, there are a couple of half-hearted stabs at making small talk. It's tough to know just how much berth to give to the subject of Twilight, though, and they mostly fizzle out. It turns out to be Scootaloo's description of a recent trip into the Everfree she took with Fluttershy that fills the rest of our time. The filly sounds outright enchanted with the place, if a little too eager to describe the effects of some of the more dangerous toxic plants while we're trying to eat.

Begging off on paying for her meal on the grounds that pretty much all the bits she had left are already committed to her new place in Baltimore, Sweetie Drops mooches her meal off of Azalea and I before the three of us leave together. Wandering without much direction in the opposite direction, Sweetie Drops is the first one who addresses the tension between the three of us. "So I think I got a little bit carried away back there."

"Really? You think?" snaps Azalea, not looking at her.

Sweetie Drops ears flop down against the top of her head. "I'm sorry. I just don't want you to get hurt too, and I think you're setting yourself up for a lot more pain than you realize. I'll drop it for good, though, if you've made your decision." Azalea turns to look at her, opens her mouth to say something, but then closes it with a shake of her head and keeps walking. "Listen, maybe I'm wrong. Maybe Twilight will be fine with it. I mean, she's basically perfect, right?"

"No."

Sweetie Drops' ears perk up. "No what?"

"She isn't perfect," says Azalea, still not looking at either of us. "I get how she looks like she is from far away, and I fell for

it too. Savior of Equestria and all that. I don't mean just the eccentricities, either, though she's certainly not lacking in that department. There are scars and some real darkness in her, so much of it that the first time I got even a glimpse of it I ran screaming."

"And then came back later," I say, trying to keep Az from slipping away into her memories of that episode entirely. I can't see that improving anything.

"Because she's worth it. And I know Scootaloo's being facetious when she says she'd burn down half the town, but that potential is in her. She'd do that and a thousand times worse if you pushed her hard enough. Granted, 'hard enough' is beyond anything I can even conceive of, but still. And I think it's starting to dawn on me that she's giving me power over that. Me! I knew she could kill me a dozen different ways with her magic. Better than most ponies considering that it was just about a year ago when Chrysalis shoved a complete threat assessment on her straight into my mind. Then we started dating, and when we broke up I found out she didn't need magic to destroy me at all. A couple nasty remarks about how easily she could replace me could work just as well. And what if that's reciprocal? She cares about me, seems to think I'm actually pretty great. It took me a while to actually believe that, but now that I do it's all gotten scarier in some ways."

"Really," says Sweetie Drops. I think she's actually trying not to come across as skeptical or sarcastic, she's just bad at it.

"When I tell her, and I am going to tell her, it has to be the right way. I've been on the other side of what it can feel like to hurt somepony with something like that, and I won't be the kind of pony who's careless enough to let that happen. If for some reason I actually did want to hurt her, I can't imagine a much better way than just dumping that information on her and not being able to explain it in some way that answers all the questions she's going to have."

"That's true," I say, jumping into her developing monologue. "So don't start with telling her. Get some practice first so you'll know what to say."

Azalea scoffs. "Practice on who? You're going to pretend to be Twilight?"

"Cloudy roleplaying as Twilight, huh?" says Sweetie Drops. She tilts her head to the side for a moment, goofy grin on her face. "That could be kinda hot, actually."

"See? Ringing endorsement from Sweetie Drops, so it must be a good idea."

Azalea looks back and forth between the two of us on either side of her. "Maybe... maybe if I tell another pony who isn't Twilight, that would work too? That might be easier to manage."

"Whoa now, I don't think—" Sweetie Drops' objection is cut short when she catches the glare I'm giving her over Azalea's back. "Who were you thinking of telling?"

"Probably Blossomforth, she reacted pretty well to Kicky." Sweetie Drops just scoffs. "I mean at first, before all the other baggage came up. And I'd probably tell... um..."

She goes silent, and something passes between her and Sweetie Drops. "...Oh. Them."

"Yeah. If you're okay with that. Are you?"

Sweetie Drops throws her head back and laughs like that's the funniest question she's ever heard. "Why would I care what you tell Lyra or Bon Bon? I'm just sorry I won't be there to see the look on their faces. I'll be busy with... I'm going to be pretty busy."

"I'll take care of everything," I say as Sweetie Drops flounders. Fortunately, Azalea doesn't seem interested in pressing the question of just what's so important that she won't be able to be there. "We can invite everypony over at my place and tell them there. Come on over early and we'll set things up however you want to."

Azalea smiles. "Thanks, Cloudy, I think I can do that." She glances up from the conversation, spending a moment getting her bearings. "I think I'm going to go back to the library, actually. Maybe if Twilight's ready to come up for air we can



still have a nice afternoon together after all, and I think having a plan for telling her eventually will take a load off my mind.”

“Or you could tell her now and skip all those other steps.”

Azalea shakes her head. “Nope. Plan’s good. Twilight would want me to stick to it if she knew. Wouldn’t want to let a good plan go to waste. Want to come over with me? Come to think of it, what were you even coming over for in the first place?”

I smack a hoof into my forehead. I completely forgot that I was going to grab that weather manual we’re going to need. The responsible thing to do would be to pick it up so that Rainbow or Blossom don’t have to.

“If you’re heading back towards your place instead,” says Sweetie Drops, tossing a sheet of her mane over her shoulder and cocking her head a bit as she winks, “I’m heading back to Az’s house myself. Wouldn’t mind having somepony walking me there since it’s on the way.” The responsible thing looks a whole lot less enticing in comparison.

“It’s not really on the... way...” Azalea trails off, looking from Sweetie Drops to me for a moment, then back again before she lets out a long, exasperated sigh. “Nevermind. If I do end up spending the night at the library I might not see you before I head to market tomorrow morning. Just don’t forget that you promised to do some cleaning up while you’re staying here. I don’t need to get stuck cleaning up your messes. Any of them.”

“Reading you loud and clear. Cloud, shall we?” She turns around with a little extra vigor and flick of her tail, looking back expectantly.

“Have fun with Twilight,” I say as the two of us trot off together.

Nothing really needs to be said, but Sweetie Drops speaks up anyway. “I’m glad Azalea has you here looking out for her. I know we don’t see eye to eye on the Twilight thing, but at least you’re the sort of mare who gets it.”

“Gets what?” I ask. I guess we can hold off on the flirty banter for a few more minutes, although that’s one of my favorite

parts of this. Actually, most parts of it can qualify as my favorite part. I'm just a true connoisseur in that regard.

"The whole 'family and old friends' thing she's working through," says Sweetie Drops. "I've been there. You feel like you have to care about what they think. Like you owe it to them, or you expect that they owe it back to you. Even the Bureau buys into it. They have pamphlets with tips on how to reintroduce yourself to other ponies and everything. Then when it all goes south it's somehow your fault. She deserves better than to have to go through all that, she just doesn't realize what she's in for."

I frown. It's a pretty dark way of looking at things, but then again I don't have a major changeling complex like she does. Okay, I don't have the same kind of changeling complex as she does, at least. "Help me out here, because I still don't see what it is that I 'get' that everypony else doesn't."

"It's not obvious? You get that you don't have to care about anypony you don't want to. No pony has the power to reach into your head and make you. For example, I'm sure some ponies get judgy about your reputation as being kind of loose, but you don't let that slow you down, do you?"

"No, of course not, but that's just talk. It's not like it means anything."

"Exactly," says Sweetie Drops with a triumphant nod, "I think for some ponies, sleeping with somepony else comes with all sorts of expectations that don't actually make sense. That's why you have rules, isn't it? Because ponies get attached when they shouldn't, and from there it's only a matter of time before they get hurt. That's what Azalea's doing; she's getting attached when she shouldn't." She shakes her head. "They're so quick to decide that one pony has to care about another one. I don't think that's a decision they get to make, no matter what the circumstances."

I take a moment to process that. "You've seen Bon Bon's family? When you were talking about what Azalea could expect from hers—"

“I don’t owe them anything,” says Sweetie Drops, cutting me off mid-sentence. “Everypony at the Bureau talks about it like ‘oh, how could you not care about them when you have so many memories of growing up with them,’ but there’s no reason for it to work that way just because those memories are there. At least I’m honest about it. I’m not some mare who’s telling a pony she’s the love of her life one day and trying to cave her skull in with a streetlamp the next.” She huffs, then snuffles a bit and wipes at her eyes. “Just like you and your family. I only know what Bon Bon knew and a couple details that Kicky’s shared, but you didn’t let them dictate anything to you. They tried to tell you how you should feel about the Guard, and you were smart enough to realize that you didn’t have to care just because they did. So obviously on some level you get where I’m coming from.”

I don’t respond for a couple of blocks, and Azalea’s house is coming up fast. It’s hard to articulate why she’s wrong, exactly, if she even is. Maybe I just want her to be. And when I open my mouth to try and formulate my objection, she takes the opportunity to press her own mouth onto it. Discussion time is clearly over.

Her tongue slips past mine and she reaches up to wrap her foreleg with my mane, refusing to break the kiss as she pulls and stumbles the rest of the way to Azalea’s front door. She gasps as her back smacks into it and I fumble for the doorknob. I keep trying to push it open, but she’s so eager to pull my hoof back down to her flanks it’s a constant battle. On my fourth try the latch catches. Sweetie Drops’ weight against the door flings it open and sends us both spilling into the house. Sweetie Drops comes out of the two-pony scrum on top, and pauses to savor the moment as her back legs kicks out to shut the door behind us. “I told you earlier that I appreciated everything you’ve done for us, didn’t I?” She shifts her weight and lifts me just far enough off the floor for my pinned wings to open up and wrap around her. “You’re about to find out just how appreciative I can be.”

As afternoon shifts into evening, and from there to sundown and even later into the night, I discover that she’s very appreciative indeed.

# The Big Reveal

## THE BIG REVEAL

If we're going to do Azalea's confession somewhere, my house seems like pretty good place to do it. Not perfect, granted, especially given that Kicky technically still lives here. Although you'd never know it with so much of her stuff packed up, and when she is around I'm still on the receiving end of the silent treatment. I did make a point of telling her the plan I've managed to talk Azalea into, as well as that Blossomforth will be a part of the little group Az was willing to approve. I'm pretty sure Lyra won't have any problem with the changeling thing, and I'm counting on her to bring Bon Bon around if it comes to that. Blossom's a wild card; she took Kicky's revelation pretty well, but given what's come to light since then who knows if she's changed her tune?"

Azalea paces back and forth in the living room, driving me to distraction as I make a last-minute pass over the drinks and veggie platter I've set out. I'm banking on ponies with full mouths being less likely to start flinging accusations at an inopportune moment, knock on wood. "Are you sure this is a good idea?" asks Azalea. "Maybe we should tell them next weekend instead of today."

"Come on, Az. No chickening out now," I reply.

"It's just..." she stops pacing long enough to bite down on her bottom lip, "...I'd really feel better with both you and Kicky here. Moral support."

"Blossom and Kicky in the same room when we're talking about changeling stuff is a recipe for disaster right now. We talked about this." I don't mention that *me* and Kicky in the same room together would be just as big a problem. In a lot of ways it's going to be a relief when she finally heads to Canterlot for good. She and Mom deserve one another. "Just stick to the plan and I really think everything going to work

out. This'll be a good practice run for when you *finally* come clean to Twilight after she gets back."

"I almost did that one time!" she insists. "It was just bad timing with those drones. Then she got all sucked up in her new research, and you saw how she was. She hardly needed the distraction."

"Okay," I say, noncommittally as possible. I'm pretty sure that if she really wanted Twilight to know she would have found a way to make it happen by now. There's been a whole lot of shuffling around and finding convenient obstacles where she's concerned. But before I can get myself into trouble by saying so there's a knock on the door and I trot over to it.

"Remember," I say with a hoof resting on the doorknob, "just stick to the plan and nothing is going to go wrong." With that I swing the door open.

Boy, whoever the pony was who first came up with that phrase about how no plan survives first contact with the enemy really knew his stuff.

"Hi Blossom. Hi Davenport." Technically, I never told Blossom she couldn't bring her coltfriend, but I had certainly assumed she wouldn't. But there's the happy couple at my threshold, both of them looking surprisingly tense for two ponies attending an informal gathering of a few friends. I guess Blossom's dreading the possibility of running into Kicky while she's here, and brought along some backup.

"Good to see you again, Cloud," says Davenport, bumping a hoof against mine.

"You too. You're a brave stallion to subject yourself to this much mare talk. I'd have invited a few more guys if I'd known you were coming."

He chuckles. "Oh, I'm sure I'll have something to talk about. Don't worry too much about me." The corner of both their mouths twitch with the tiniest hint of a suppressed smile. Okay, now I'm downright suspicious.

I let them in anyway. I can hardly turn Davenport away with Blossom right there. Azalea greets both of them warmly and

waits for them to turn their backs to inspect the snacks on offer. Then, the moment they're looking away, her head whips around and I see her eyes screaming for me to abort this whole thing. All I can do is shrug. We'll roll with the punches as best we can. The four of us mingle for another quarter-hour before Lyra and Bon Bon arrive, and the extra time gives Azalea's moment of panic a chance to pass by. Once the two of them have added a small plate of cookies to my veggies and poured themselves some cider, she's doing a pretty passable imitation of 'relaxed.' Probably the best I can hope for, and I wrangle everypony to the ring of seats for the big event they don't even know they're about to see.

I catch Azalea's eye, and raise an eyebrow. Moment of no return for her. And I'm so proud when she gives me the curt nod that means she wants to go ahead and do this, just like we planned.

"Excuse me," I say, raising my voice above the casual chatter. It quickly dies down. "Thanks for coming over today, girls. And Davenport." I get a little chuckle at that. Just gotta keep this light and breezy, nothing to worry about. No Equestria-shattering revelations, just a mare who wants to come clean to the ponies who care about her. "I'll be brief. There's somepony here today who has something to tell you all. I'll let her have the floor." With that, I take my place back on the couch.

Only for Azalea and Blossomforth to both stand up at the same time.

When they each notice the other, it's hard to say who's more surprised. "Um, Blossom? She meant me."

"Oh, I, uh, I thought maybe Davenport had pulled Cloud aside and asked her to... geez, I'm sorry," says Blossom. "I do have something I wanted to tell you all, though, and I just figured that while we're all together like this would be a good time."

"I guess you weren't the only one," says Bon Bon.

Next to her, Lyra's grinning from ear to ear. "Come on, you two. Don't keep us waiting. What's the big news?"

“Az, I promise I didn’t mean to steal your spotlight like this. I really didn’t know. But... can your thing wait? It’s obviously something important, and I don’t want to have my thing overshadow yours.”

Shifting her weight from hoof to hoof, Azalea weighs her options. Needless to say, we never rehearsed for this particular possibility. “Sort of doubt that my thing would be the one that got overshadowed.”

“Trust me, it would.”

“Trust me, it wouldn’t.”

Stalemate, and Azalea’s already shaky confidence is starting to crumble. “It really is something pretty big, Blossom,” I interject to try to salvage this.

“Well...” Blossom looks back at Davenport, who seems just as lost for words as she is. “I guess ours can wait for another day.”

“What? No! You can’t tease something like that and then not tell us!” says Lyra. I’d be lying if I said there wasn’t a curious part of me that completely agrees. “Inquiring ponies demand to know!”

“I mean, if I say my thing now we’ll probably end up talking about it for a while. We might not even get to yours before somepony needs to leave,” says Azalea.

“Okay, but if we do my thing first, then that’ll be what we spend all our time—”

A hoof banging down on the coffee table cuts Blossom off and nearly spills my drink. “For crying out loud,” says Bon Bon, glaring at both Blossom and Azalea in turn. “Here’s what we’re going to do. I’m going to start counting, and on three both of you stop beating around the bush like this and spill the beans. One.”

“But that doesn’t—”

“Two.”

“No, wait, I’m not as ready as I thought I—”

“Three!”

“I’m a changeling,” says Azalea.

“I’m pregnant,” says Blossomforth.

“*You’re what?*” says every single pony in the room at roughly the same time. We all plunge into silence, but only briefly before a shrill scream rips through it. I had expected that one of the girls might scream or act out when they found out about Azalea’s history. What I hadn’t expected was for Azalea to be the one doing the screaming.

“You’re pregnant?” She leaps over the table with a single beat of her wings and grabs Blossom in a hug. That’s enough to break the spell over the rest of us. “Oh my gosh Blossom, that’s amazing! Is it a filly or a colt? Do you know yet? When did you find out? When are you due? It’s Davenport’s, right?”

“Hey!” says Davenport with a glare.

“No, no, no, I didn’t mean it like that,” says Azalea, unhooking one foreleg to wave away the inadvertent accusation. “I meant... I don’t know what I meant, but it wasn’t that. I just... I can’t believe... Blossom, you’re pregnant!”

Blossom responds with a hesitant, nervous nod. “And... you’re a changeling?”

“Was. I was a changeling, before the invasion and the Elements and everything did the same thing to me it did to most of the others. I was...” her enthusiasm wanes a bit. “I was scared that you’d all find out and not want me to be your friend. But I promise, I’m the Azalea you’ve known ever since that day. All of that was true, I swear. I don’t know what I would have done if I hadn’t had each and every one of you.”

Lyra slips in to where she can join in on the hug and rest a hoof on Azalea’s shoulder. “Well, I’m glad you feel like you could tell us now. I think I speak for all of us when I say that it’s wonderful that you’re finally comfortable trusting us with this.” She runs her hoof through her mane a few times while she gathers her thoughts. “Even so, what exactly did you—”



“You’re right, it wasn’t easy to come out and tell you about this,” interrupts Azalea. “I told Cloudy by accident, but you, Bonnie, and Blossom are the first three ponies I’ve ever actually chosen to trust. Even Twilight doesn’t know. Really, if you hadn’t been okay with it, I think I might have just about died. But hey, why are we even talking about this when right this second a tiny baby foal is growing right here in Blossom’s tummy?” She caresses Blossom’s stomach as she says it. “I can already feel the extra pudge!”

Blossom looks down at her. “The doctor said we should be able to feel the bump from outside around a month from now.”

“Which... is... why it’s so hard to believe that you’re really pregnant when you’re still so slim!”

Not the smoothest save on Az’s part. Meanwhile Bon Bon, rather than trying to squeeze through the other two to get to Blossom, canters over to Davenport and wraps him in a hug of his own. “Congratulations. Both of you.”

Alright, that’s more than enough sitting on the sidelines. I trot over to Blossom and wait for her to look up, catching her eye at last. She gently extricates herself from Azalea’s embrace and lets me move in to take her spot. “I love you, Blossom. This is fantastic.”

“I love you too, Cloud.”

“Wait, is *that* why you quit drinking coffee?”

She grins. “Doctor’s orders. I have to cut down on the caffeine. Not much wine in my future either.”

I let out an exaggerated groan. “Looks like I’m really going to have to step up my game to keep you from turning all boring on me. Oh, and I call dibs on being the cool aunt.”

Blossom’s snigger is music to my ears. “I can’t imagine it any other way.”

“So, what’s next for you two?” asks Lyra. “I assume you’re going to be moving in together, at the least.”

Davenport nods. “Yeah, we’ve started looking at places big enough for three. Most of the homes in our price range are

cloud-based, but we need something groundside. Especially if she doesn't end up inheriting her mother's wings."

"Her mother's wings," I repeat, smiling even wider. It's hard to wrap my head around the idea of that sentence referring to Blossom, but I guess I'd better get used to it. "Big step."

"Not the only one, actually," says Blossom. Her eyes dart over to Davenport again and then back to me once she's found whatever signal she was looking for. "If I'm bringing a foal into this world, there's going to be a family waiting for it. A stable one, with two parents who are as fully committed to one another as they will be to him. What I'm trying to say is that I'm not willing to have a foal out of wedlock."

I sit there trying to force that statement to its logical conclusion. I know exactly what she's saying, but that doesn't mean I understand. Azalea, on the other hoof, doesn't seem to be having the same problem. In fact, it's only Lyra's quick thinking in throwing a hoof over Azalea's mouth that saves Blossom's eardrum from being entirely obliterated by her squeal of unrestrained joy. "You're getting married?" I ask.

"Congratulations again!" says Lyra, giving Blossom an extra squeeze.

Davenport reaches over to grab Blossom's shoulder, seeing as she's weighed down by quite a few mares at this point. "We don't have the budget or the time to plan anything really ornate. Probably just something intimate at the local courthouse, maybe a small reception afterwards. You're all invited once we've picked a date, naturally."

"I... I mean..." I stammer.

Blossom's smile starts to slip. "You will be there, right? You're the one who introduced the two of us to one another, for goodness sake."

"Of course I will. I'm just having trouble taking all of this in at once. It's all happening so fast."

"Trust me, I know the feeling." Blossom looks more reassured than I feel. "Azalea? Are you okay?"

Azalea finally manages to push Lyra's foreleg away from her face, revealing the titanic grin it had been concealing. "Do you have a dress? I can ask Twilight to get you an appointment with Rarity. And have you started thinking about vows? Do you have a gift registry set up yet? Can..."

I'll admit, there's only so much wedding stuff I can endure at one time. I tune it out a bit and just relish the feel of Blossom's embrace. How is she possibly going to be the first one of our little gang down the aisle? I mean, it was hard to see Lyra and Bon Bon as anything but inevitable, but...

Wait, where *is* Bon Bon?

In all the excitement, I think I lost track of her. At some point the headcount in here went from six to five. Weird time to go to the bathroom. Azalea shows no sign of slowing down with her interrogation, and since it doesn't look like I'll be getting a chance to contribute to the discussion I slip out from under Blossom's slack foreleg and trot down the hallway that leads towards Kicky's bedroom. The bathroom door is ajar, and nopony seems to be inside of it. Where would she—

And then a loud, mucousy snuffle derails my train of thought.

I follow it to the door of my bedroom, and silently push it open. None of the lights are on, but there's just enough ambient light to make out a figure and the bit of her pink and blue tail that's laying in the little sliver of light that's slipping through the closed curtains.

"Bonnie?"

She sits bolt upright as one of her forelegs snaps to her face and starts rubbing. "Oh. Hi Cloud." That is not the confident and willful tone of the mare I'm used to.

"Everything okay?"

"I just needed a minute," she says as she manages to steady her voice. "Thought it would be better if I got this out of my system in private. Today isn't about me, y'know? It's about her, and she deserves it."

I trot over to take a seat alongside her, draping a wing over her back. "Something on your mind?"

She lets out a hacking and rueful chuckle, her heaving shoulders sending a few tears spattering against my chest. "I'm fine."

"That wasn't a no."

She finally lifts her face high enough that she can see me, although the shadows in here are so deep I can't read the expression on her face. "Funny, isn't it?" she begins. "A year from now, where are each of us going to be? Blossom... I don't remember ever hearing her say this was something she wanted. But by this time next year there's going to be a brand new life that didn't exist before. And it's going to need her. Everything from the milk it drinks, to the warmth it snuggles up against as it falls asleep, to the love and safety it gets to bask in during every bucking moment, all from her and Davenport. Want to guess where I'll be? I'll tell you. I'll be one year closer to being permanently barren. The other details don't really matter, and I don't want to talk about them. So does that answer your question?"

"Sort of," I say. "I take it that's what you want too? What Blossom's going to have?"

She stares at me for a long while, but then turns away. A hoof thrusting into my chest knocks most of the wind out of me as she shoves me away from her. "Cloud, I know that you're trying to help me. I know everything you're saying is coming from a place of love. But the last time we talked about this... it hurt. You said something that hurt me. Badly. And I don't want to do that again."

I manage to sit up, despite the coughing fits and tightness in my chest. "I hurt you?" I ask between coughs. She turns away from me. She can't believe I would ever do something like that intentionally, could she? "All I remember saying last time we talked one on one was that you'd be a good mother."

Something catches in Bon Bon's throat, and it takes her quite a while to recover. But when she does she glares up at me with a degree of outright hate I'd never think she was capable of. "Of course I would be."

"So what exactly is the—"

“Actually? Scratch that. I’d have been a phenomenal mother,” says Bon Bon. “I would have rocked my little foal to sleep every night if that’s what it took. Sat up with him as long as he needed me when he had a fever. Been firm with her when she wouldn’t eat her watercress because she thought it was just too yucky. Never let a day go by where I didn’t find a chance to say ‘I love you, Wintergreen’ no matter how busy I got. You’re right; I would have been amazing. But I never will be. I’ll never do any of those things. Apparently we don’t want them.”

Doesn’t take me very long to puzzle out what she means. “Because of Lyra.”

Bon Bon looms over me, apparently having managed to get far closer than I realized until just now, and smiles. She leans into me and we both sink a bit deeper into the shag carpeting that covers my bedroom floor. “Of course because of her. She doesn’t want that. Any of it. Couldn’t tell you why, but that’s how she feels.”

“Okay, so you made it work,” I say. “You compromised.”

“Compromised?” she repeats as she pulls away from me.

“Well, didn’t you?”

“Compromised.” Boy does she seem to be fixated on that word. “Do you think there was some sort of agreement I reached with her? Some kind of *quid pro quo*? ‘Hey Lyra, could you try to pay a little more attention to the dirty dishes building up in the sink? In exchange, I’ll agree to never raise a family with you.’ Something like that?” It’s still dark in here, and Bon Bon’s face is still cloaked in shadows. But I can tell she’s glaring at me though all of that. I’ll need to count my lucky stars I’m not getting the brunt of it in a better-lit room.

“So what then?”

“Let me clue you in to how we ponies here in grownup land handle love, Cloud,” she says. “No, this wasn’t a compromise. It was a sacrifice. Because sometimes that’s what love takes. Because that’s what I had to give up to be with her. Because she knows what she wants and it isn’t some version of me that’s toting a foal everywhere. Yeah, it hurts, but so what?”

She's worth it. Compared to not being with her, it's a bucking pleasure cruise."

"Bonnie," I say, "That isn't something you should have to accept if it isn't what you want."

She just scoffs. "You don't get it. She's what I want. What I need. I need her more than I need my next breath, and I'll give up some of myself if that's what I have to do to be with her. But I don't need somepony pointing it out. If somepony came up to me tomorrow and told me I had to choose between losing Lyra or chopping off one of my legs, I wouldn't think twice before I asked them to pass me the hatchet. But now that I've hacked it off, why in Celestia's name do you imagine that having somepony trot by me as I'm bleeding out on the street, patting me on the head as I stared down at the piece of myself I'd just murdered, and telling me that 'Gosh, I bet you would have been a great distance runner' would make me feel better at all?

"You picked out a name?"

I had a brilliant and devastating retort all planned out, really, but it's lost when both of us are frozen by the appearance of a new voice. Bon Bon finds her response first, although for the moment she's too terrified by the voice's source to turn and face it head-on. "Lyra?"

We both eventually manage to turn towards the unicorn sitting in the doorway, her silhouette more rigid than I've ever seen it. Bon Bon's breathing quickens just a bit as that voice pierces the blackness once again. "Our foal's name is Wintergreen?"

"No, I just... it was this stupid thought I had. I figured if our coats blended together that the hue might work decently with that name. Doesn't matter now."

"Why wouldn't it matter?" asks Lyra.

I finally get sick of sitting here in the dark, trot over to the window, and throw the curtains open. Bon Bon squints against the sudden burst of light, and it reveals the deep tracks her teardrops have left as they've run down her cheeks. "You said foals are a dealbreaker," says Bon Bon.

“Yeah, becoming a mother is kinda a terrifying idea. But.... cutting your own leg off? Really?” asks Lyra, trotting into the bedroom to take a spot by Bon Bon’s side. “How could you think I’d let you do that? I mean, you don’t mess with perfection.”

Bon Bon lets a half-hearted chuckle escape her lips. “What would I possibly need perfection for? I have you.”

The two of them are quiet for quite a long time before Lyra speaks up again. “Cloud? Could you head back into the other room? Azalea’s going to run out of things to talk about eventually, and I’d like there to be somepony else there when she does.”

“Sure.” With a glance back at the couple embracing on floor, which doesn’t show much beyond Lyra whispering promises into Bon Bon’s ear that really aren’t for me to know, I head back to my living room.

“And I think you want to go with stripes over spots for the nursery wallpaper, and... oh, Cloud! I didn’t realize you’d left,” says Azalea. Blossom and Davenport have a somewhat dazed expression on their face, either from Azalea’s verbal assault or the dawning realization of just how different things are going to be for them now. I’m okay with either possibility.

“Az, give them a chance to breathe, will you? The point of transforming you was that you *wouldn’t* latch on to loving couples anymore.” As she realizes I’m here to offer salvation, the thankful look on Blossom’s face goes a long way towards easing my mind over any worries I had over disappearing for a few minutes like that.

“I’m not...” to Azalea’s credit, the realization settles over her pretty quickly.”Oh gosh, I promise I wasn’t thinking about how I used to want to feed on you or anything! I mean, yeah, a pregnant mother-to-be would have been quite the delicacy back then. Baby-filled devotion is some of the best stuff out there, but...” She trails off as she notice the abject horror Blossom and Davenport are looking at her with. “Maybe I’ve talked enough for the time being.”

“Not like you’d have been the only one who snacked on me back then,” Blossom grumbles. Lyra and Bon Bon, looking like she’s pulled herself together again, trot back into the room. She looks different than back in the bedroom a moment ago, too. Not so much sad as dazed by something. “Where did you two vanish to?”

“Oh, nowhere important,” says Lyra. She leans over to give Bon Bon a kiss on the cheek, which she’s still too stunned to even acknowledge. “We were just talking about whether or not I’d date Bon Bon if she only had three legs.”

“Um... oooooooooookaaaaaay,” says Blossom, struggling to wrap her head around that which I can hardly blame her for, “Did you decide that you would?”

“You know, I don’t think I could,” says Lyra, a serene and knowing smile across her face. She winks at me. “I think I just have to have the whole package. But we’ll talk more about that later, okay hon?”

“Sure,” says Bon Bon. Her voice is distant until she blinks a few times and clears her throat. “Sorry. But come on, don’t hold back the details. Even if it’s going to be on the low-key side, there must be *something* we can do for your wedding to make it special.”

It turns out there are a few things. Actually, several hours worth of ideas once the group brainstorming session really gets up to speed. Bon Bon has the most to contribute, though I wonder if she’s giving the game away to Lyra with how much she’s clearly had weddings on the brain for a while now if she’s gathered all this information. Davenport is the first to bow out when the combined estrogen flowing through the room finally becomes too much. Azalea disappears soon after with only the most cursory of goodbyes. Not pressing her luck on how much longer she has before the others raise more changeling-related questions, I imagine.

It’s nearly sundown by the time Lyra and Bon Bon finally throw in the towel and leave together, tails flicking against one another’s flanks as they walk out the door. The minute I shut it



behind them, Blossom flops down on the couch and lays a foreleg over her face. “That was exhausting.”

I grin, trot over to the couch and give her an extra-gentle poke in the belly, which makes her spasm and flinch enough for me to claim a spot up there as well. “It wasn’t that bad, was it? We just want to get in on the excitement.”

She sighs. “I guess it was a good warm-up run for when I have to run the gauntlet with Davenport’s family. I’ve never really done the big family gathering thing before.”

“No, I guess you wouldn’t have.” The conversation lapses into a silence that’s bordering on uncomfortable, so I decide a change of subject is in order. “When exactly did you find out?”

“Remember that night you and Kicky showed up on our lawn while Davenport and I were having dinner?”

I tense up, which she has to have noticed but it doesn’t change the dead-eyed way she’s looking at me. “Sure.”

“Well, three guesses what we were celebrating that evening.”

“Oh,” I reply. I mentally try out half a dozen things to say after that, each one seeming dumber than the last. Then, totally out of nowhere, a completely inappropriate notion pops into my head and I fail to suppress a little snort.

Blossom shifts when the little gust of air blows against her side, just enough to square up and look at me properly. “Please don’t tell me there’s something about that night you think is amusing.”

“No, it’s not that,” I’m quick to assure her, “it was something else. Life’s weird, you know?”

“How do you mean?”

“Just, everything that’s happening for you and Davenport now, and I know that it wasn’t necessarily easy to get there, or that it’s going to be easy from here on out. But it is amazing. I mean, you’re getting *married*, Blossom! And you’re going to be a mom! There’s so much great stuff ahead for you, but when I think about everything that had to happen to get here,

like, exactly here instead of somewhere else, it kind of boggles my mind. Look... I don't know how much sense I'm making, exactly, but isn't it good that the bad stuff happened like it did if it leads to good stuff now?" I stop for a second, in the hopes that Blossom will somehow sift out a really insightful point that may or may not actually be anywhere in there.

Nope, she just looks more confused. "What are you talking about?"

"Well..." buck it, time to go for broke. "What if Kicky, still-a-changeling Kicky I mean, what if she'd never pretended to be me? What if she'd never, you know..."

"Ground my heart into paste because she was feeling peckish?"

I wince. Is this even a risk worth taking? I don't really have a satisfactory answer to that question before I open my mouth again. "Yeah, that. Because what if she hadn't? Would you still be into me? Because I honestly don't think you would be, by now, because back-then me wasn't necessarily the best mare at dealing with that kind of thing."

"Yes, it's clear from the direction this is going that you've really come a long way in being sensitive to my feelings. Truly a spectacular, bang-up job you're doing at that right this second," says Blossom. Which I know sounds bad, but if we somehow keep this at 'dry sarcasm' levels of anger instead of escalating it into a screaming match I'm calling that a win.

"Coming out of it, though. Big picture, it was always going to hurt. I was always going to hurt you." I think my saying that stings me more than it does her, and just for a second the building anger behind Blossom's glare is tempered with a bit of sympathy. "If Kicky hadn't done what she did when she did it, though, you might have missed Davenport completely. And who knows where you'd be now, and how okay we'd be as friends at all. But things could be a lot worse. I think..."

"You think I'm better off in the long run because of what Kicky did," finishes Blossom. She looks like she's actually thinking about it. Or at least thinking about where she should

punch me to get me to shut my big stupid mouth the quickest. Could go either way.

“I mean, at the very least I think you can blame her once the morning sickness starts.”

So remember how the entire point of that digression in the first place was to make the silence between us *less* uncomfortable? Not exactly a rousing success. A few minutes tick by, and I’m close enough to Blossom that I can still feel that her heartbeat’s picked up in pace.

At last she starts to speak to me again, which I’m acutely aware wasn’t necessarily a guarantee when I brought this topic up. “She lied to me.”

“She was a changeling. She lied to everyone. Azalea lied too, and for longer. You didn’t jump down her throat when you found that out.”

Blossom raises an eyebrow. “So because I didn’t punch Azalea in the face at any point this afternoon I’m some kind of hypocrite? That really makes me wonder why you invited me to her confession party in the first place if you actually don’t see a difference. Azalea told me the truth when she didn’t have to. You saw how scared she was today. And sure, she jumped on my being pregnant and engaged so she didn’t have to face up to it all at once, but I’m not going to begrudge her for that. She still made the effort. Kicky didn’t. Ever. Be honest with me; would Kicky ever have told me the truth if you hadn’t spilled the beans?”

I bite my lip. “She’s trying to be open with other ponies about this stuff. She didn’t have to tell me what I told you. I think there’s a lot she’s working through, and I think some of it’s really, really bad. And yeah, she could have handled it way better than she did. She was getting there, though.”

“So you don’t know, basically,” says Blossom. “Let me tell you what I think she would have done. I think she’d have just kept cruising along like nothing was wrong and she’d try very, *very* hard to pretend there wasn’t actually any sort of problem at all. And I think everything would have been fun and games

on the surface, and once she was off to Canterlot to enlist she'd breathe a sigh of relief that she got away with it."

That draws a frown from me. "That's a little pessimistic, isn't it? I don't think you're giving the ponies who used to be changelings a fair shake. They aren't like that."

"Oh, I don't think that's what she'd do because she was a changeling," says Blossom. She winces and turns her gaze away from mine. "I think that's the pattern of behavior she inherited from you."

"I... oh. Oh." I have that to think on for a couple extra seconds, all while Blossom still won't look at me. "Blossom, that's not... I mean, I'm not... I wouldn't... look, this is about Kicky, not... I'm..."

"Look, it's fine," mumbles Blossom.

"It's *not* fine," I say, maybe a little bit louder than I really mean to. "And if it is... you really think I would let you just hurt like that?"

Before Blossom answers, she wraps her wings around me in a hug. Somehow that manages to make me feel even worse.

"You have flaws, Cloud, and that's a part of who you are. A couple of them are actually kind of charming sometimes. Princesses know I have plenty of my own, by the way. How would it be fair to expect you to act like you're perfect?"

"That doesn't make it 'fine' that you end up getting hurt."

I feel Blossom shrug, resigned. "It is what it is. And I say that it's fine." I don't respond right away. I don't really know if I could, with the pounding in my head just now. It's all just a bit too familiar. "Cloud?"

"*FINE IS NOT GOOD ENOUGH!*" I wriggle away from Blossom and out of her grip, but it doesn't help relieve that tightness gripping my chest. Pacing the room should help me catch my breath, but it doesn't, and all it's doing is making Blossom progress from concerned to full-on scared. "It's not good enough, Blossom! You think I'm going to get up at your wedding to toast you two and say 'yeah, they're *fine*,' and everypony's going to stomp and applaud for that? I'm just

supposed to be okay with you and Kicky hating each other because of me? Just because, oh, she's leaving to enlist soon so it's *fine*. You're *fine*, I'm *fine*, everypony's *fine*, so who cares that it's... that it could be..." The head of steam I'd built up peters out, and all I have to show for it is a splitting headache.

Then there's a wing draped over my back, nudging me back towards the couch. "Okay, not fine then," says Blossomforth, barely daring to raise her voice above a whisper. "Not fine, if that isn't what you want."

"Like it matters what I want," I mutter a bit louder than I probably should.

"Don't be ridiculous. Of course it matters," says Blossomforth. "But that said, I'm not going to let Kicky off the hook because you want me to. I'm just not."

Once she's gotten me lying on the couch again, Blossom strokes a hoof along my back which feels absolutely heavenly. I take a moment to bask in that, and I'm pretty sure I could pass out right here if I let myself. All the problems with Blossom and Kicky seem gloriously distant, and it's barely even bothering me that I'm not on the same page as Blossomforth when it comes to whether Kicky deserves to be forgiven for what she did. I can just close my eyes and everything...

Everything will be pretty much fine. Fine and no better.

"I don't get to decide." Well, what actually emerges from the couch cushions pressed into my face is just a series of unintelligible gibberish, but Blossom stops rubbing my back and lets me pick myself back up a bit. Just the absence of her touch is almost enough to abandon this plan all by itself, but I press on. "Somepony told me something the other night that I've been thinking about. She said that no pony gets to decide how you feel about somepony else. It stuck."

Blossom smiles and nods at me, too happy to agree. Probably better that she doesn't know what the context of that quote was or I doubt she'd be quite as eager. "That sounds pretty wise."

“I thought so too. At the same time, though, I felt like there was something about it I was missing. Like it was too easy. And I think I’ve figured out why.”

“Want to share?”

“Yeah.” I screw up my energy for this next part. It wouldn’t be easy anyway and I’m just so tired of all of this. “I can’t just decide whether or not you’ll care about Kicky anymore after what she did to you.”

Blossom nods. “Glad to hear you admit it. That’s very mature of you.”

“Neither can you.”

Her nod slows until she stops with her head slack and her brow furrowed. “You lost me.”

“You can’t decide whether or not to care about Kicky. Well, you can make a decision but it won’t have any more of an impact than mine will. Don’t get me wrong, you can decide that it doesn’t make sense to care about her. Or that she doesn’t deserve to be cared about after what she did to you. It just doesn’t make a difference.” Blossom’s pulled away from me and crossed her forelegs over her chest. In the face of her skepticism all I can do is plow onward. “See, that’s what was too easy. You hear ‘no pony gets to decide’ and you actually think that means ‘no pony except for me,’ but it doesn’t. Do you have any idea how much I wish it did? Because if I could just decide once and for all that I didn’t care whether some pony in particular liked me, or respected me, or was... or was proud of what I’ve actually accomplished with my life, I think I’d be a lot happier. And I also think maybe it’s the same for you.”

Blossom’s not willing to give up that easily. “Well, maybe I cracked the code and figured out something you missed. I washed my hooves of Kicky just fine.”

“Yeah, you’ve said that a lot,” I snap back, “and I have to wonder why it is that ponies who don’t care spend so much energy shouting from the rooftops about how little they do. You’re angry, Blossom, and everypony else can see it. You’re

really, *really* angry at Kicky for what she did. I'm not going to try to convince you that you shouldn't be. But don't lie to yourself about how you're taking it."

Blossom huffs. "Okay, you win. I'm upset. Glad we cleared that up. Gosh, look at the time."

I grab at her shoulder and manage to preempt her trying to turn and make for the door. "Do you like feeling this way? You don't look like you do. Sit down."

"I need to get home and get dinner started before Davenport —"

"Sit. Down." I think if it really came to it I've got enough training to keep her pinned to the couch, though I can't imagine that would help with the rest of the conversation. Fortunately she's willing to put up with me for at least a bit longer, if only under duress, and she sits. "How much work do you think it'll take to plan your wedding?"

Completely thrown by the shift in topic, Blossomforth has to think about that one for a second. "What does that have to do with Kicky?"

"That's really up to you. I'm no expert, but I hear it takes a lot out of you. Do you really have the energy to spend on carrying a grudge at the same time?" I take a pause to slip my hoof lower down onto her belly and let it rest there. "Don't you think you have better things to worry about?"

"So what? You've already said that I don't get to decide not to care," says Blossom, "oh, and don't think I haven't noticed how conveniently this whole change of heart works out for you. You don't get to decide how you feel about anything, so nopony can blame you for whatever you happen to feel anyway. Great excuse not to think about the things you'd rather avoid, isn't it?"

Don't take the bait... don't take the bait... it requires some grinding of my teeth but I manage to hold back. "It's not great at all, and it doesn't mean I'm trying to avoid it. Look, if you broke your leg, you wouldn't go around telling everypony that you decided it wasn't broken anymore and you limping

everywhere was just a coincidence. You'd have to get a cast and actually do the hard stuff for it to get better. Believe it or not, I'm trying to do that too. I mean, this entire conversation is only happening because I've been thinking about my feelings. How easy do you think that's been?"

I think Blossom expected me to just snap again, because that catches her off guard. I'm a little surprised myself at just how not-angry I sound. Forceful, sure, but not as out of control as a few minutes ago. "I guess I hadn't noticed."

"You've been busy. Plus a lot of it is because of what happened with you and Kicky, and how much of that is my fault, which you didn't want to go anywhere near. But all this is beside the point right now. You're right that you shouldn't go back to being friends with her because I want you to. I haven't earned that. And even if you can't decide to just shut off your caring for her, you can decide you're better off cutting her out of your life. So I guess what I'm saying is if that's what you've decided, you should do it right. Not because it's better for her, or for me, but because it's better for you."

Blossom raises an eyebrow. "Now you think I should cut her out of my life?"

"That's... it's up to you." The words catch in my throat, and a big part of me is screaming that I have no right to give up on the two of them like this. It's not okay for them not to be friends at all. Because if she can drop Kicky like a bad habit, how much longer is it going to be until I'm the friend on the chopping block? "But you have to sit down with her first. You have to tell her how things are going to be and why. Even if she doesn't like it. I don't know if she'll scream or cry or beg or how she'll take it, but I'm pretty sure it's going to be miserable for everypony involved. But after that it'll be resolved one way or another. And maybe after a while you actually will stop caring about her, but I know that won't happen if you just let her go to Canterlot without saying anything. I mean, she's joining the Guard, and that's a really big deal. It's not all salutes and marching in parade formation, even during peacetime. They do dangerous stuff. I promise



you that if something happens to her out there you'll wish you'd sat down and talked to her while you had the chance."

"Do *not* try to guilt trip me into this, Cloud," says Blossom.

"Why not? Am I wrong? You're the one who said you don't care." I shift my weight away from her so that I'm no longer half-snuggling, half-pinning her against the couch. She shivers a bit at the warmth disappearing. "There's always the possibility that, for whatever reason, Kicky may never come back to Ponyville at all."

"That's really morbid of you, and kind of unfair."

"Doesn't mean it isn't true." With that, I'm officially out of cards to play. Nothing to do but sit back and hope. And if that doesn't break this impasse, well, at least nopony can say I didn't try. Not this time.

"...It would have to be somewhere public."

"Huh?"

"Or at least somewhere neutral," says Blossom. "If I'm going to talk to her again. And I'm bringing backup."

"Wait, you're actually open to meeting with Kicky again?" I ask.

"Believe me, I'm as surprised as you are. And you can be there too, but only if you promise to behave."

It's slowly dawning on me that I'm actually pulling this off, and that brings the biggest, most authentic grin in recent memory to my face. "Well I can't promise the impossible. If we have a really cute waitress all bets are off."

Blossom doesn't laugh, even though I'm pretty sure she wants to. "You can't take her side. I don't care how guilty you feel about your part in what happened. I can't handle both of you at once."

"Heh. That's what—"

"Don't."

"Sorry. I promise not to pile on. I mean, I'll try my best."

Blossom snuffles and rubs at her eyes. “She won’t like it. I have no idea what I’m going to say yet, but there’s a big part of me that wants to see her lying on the ground in a puddle of tears just so I’ll have the chance to kick her while she’s down. I’m not proud of that, but it’s there. And I don’t think that part of me would feel all that guilty if you got hurt in the process too.”

Maybe that confidence before was just a bit premature. “I guess that’s just where we are these days.”

“Yeah. I guess it is.” With that she stretches out and takes her time getting down from my couch, looking just about as exhausted as I must look. “I can’t think about details right now. Talk it over with Kicky and we’ll figure it out at work sometime.”

“Sounds good.” I walk Blossom to the door, but stop before I open it for her. “Thank you for this, Blossom. Oh, and congratulations again.”

She smiles and leans in to give me a peck on the cheek.

“Thanks. And I have to say, thinking about your feelings really works for you. Maybe you should do more of it.”

“Like I need more homework.” I return the kiss and bid her goodbye, shutting the door behind her. The couch is about fifty paces away and calling my name. I get half of the way there before everything catches up to me and my knees start shaking too badly to walk the rest of the way, and it all comes tumbling down from there.

The wall’s there to support my weight and make it a more gentle collapse than it could be, so I get to slide down from a sitting position to lying on my side. The prospect of trying to move would hurt just enough more than not moving, so I don’t really see myself going much of anywhere for a little while.

Was Blossom trying to hurt me? I don’t know if I want to believe she was making an effort to be cruel. Maybe she was, and she thinks I deserve it. Or maybe she just thought that if it was so obvious to her what kind of pony I am, I must already know it myself. But I wouldn’t hurt her like that, ever. Would I? But she sounded so sure that I would, and I can’t really

deny that it sounded like she was speaking from first hoof experience.

When the sobs do come, they come hard and fast. Just for a second I got to see myself the way I think maybe Blossomforth has seen me for a long time, and what I saw just makes me want to turn and run in the opposite direction. When Blossom started seeing it in Kicky too, she wanted nothing to do with it. So why do I get a pass? I don't *want* a pass. But what if the alternative is that there's no room for me in the new family she's making for herself all of a sudden? Does she want her foal to grow up around a mare she's only keeping around out of pity and force of habit? How much of an entitled brat would I have to be to want her to want that?

Questions keep flying fast and thick through my head, from the half-formed to the self-accusing, and none of them are courteous enough to bring along any of the accompanying answers. I'm not really sure how long I stay there, although it's the clock striking eight that rouses me enough to get myself to the couch at last just so I can collapse again in a slightly more comfortable position for round two. It does occur to me about a quarter of an hour later that I could have turned on the lights before I did, but sitting alone in the dark works just as well.

Somewhere beyond running out of tears but before I reach the point of passing out from exhaustion, I hear the front doorknob start to rattle. My legs protest as I work the stiffness out of them enough to wipe off my face before it opens.

"Kicky? Is that you?" I hear approaching hoof steps, but I'm still getting the brunt of the silent treatment from her. She pointedly doesn't look in my direction as she walks past the couch. "So Azalea told everypony about what she used to be. It went really well, if you care at all." Still no answer. Instead she just leaves me to wonder why I just went so far out on a limb to help a pony who's treating me like this. I hear the kitchen cabinets open and shut again, and the sound of water flowing as she turns the sink on and begins filling a glass. "Oh, and Blossom is pregnant."

No response. I know I said it loud enough for her to hear. But the water keeps flowing, and a few seconds later I hear it pattering against the sink's lining. I give her another moment before trotting in after her, and when I do I see her frozen at the sink just staring at the glass that's continuously overflowing from the water pouring into it. She doesn't acknowledge me as I step up beside her, shut off the tap, and then back away again.

"What?"

"Oh, so you can still talk. Glad to hear it." On a whim, I slip alongside her again, grab her glass, and take a long sip. It's extra satisfying, as is the little smack of my lips when I lower it again. Gotta rehydrate those tear ducts somehow. "She's also getting married to Davenport. It's been a wild afternoon."

"That's not funny," says Kicky, shaking her head in disbelief.

"I'm absolutely serious. Just thought you'd want to know." I take her glass with me as I start walking away. "There's something else about her, and it's something you're going to want to hear. So when you're ready to drop this whole 'I'm mad at Cloudy so I'll pretend she doesn't exist' thing once and for all, I'll be waiting in the other room."

I settle into a chair that faces the couch, because I've had more than enough of lying on that couch for one day thanks very much, and sip my water as I wait. It's a credit to Kicky's stubbornness that it takes her a full two minutes to follow after me, but she does. "Is she okay?"

"Yeah, she's fine. And she wants to talk to you."

That takes her even longer to process than the pregnancy news. "Cloudy that's... I can't... How? She said she never wanted to see me again, and I think she meant it."

"Hey, don't forget who you're talking to here." I probably shouldn't be enjoying this part quite as much as I am as I slap on my best cocky grin. "A few well-placed winks, maybe the promise of an unspeakably lewd sexual favor or two, what mare in or out of her right mind is gonna turn that down?" The grin slips a bit. "Look, don't go into this thinking she's looking

to forgive and forget, okay? Some of what she was saying sounded pretty final. But I think she'll at least hear you out."

"I'll take it. I'll take anything." She charges at me and nearly tips my chair over backwards tackling me into a hug. "Thank you. Thank you thank you thank you."

I bask for a moment, savoring this. "I missed you so much, Kicky. I want us to go back to being okay again. Can we do that? Please?" My voice breaks at the end, and she replies by squeezing me even tighter.

"I think that sounds like a good idea. I missed you too." She lets go of me and steps back a bit to let me breathe. "She's getting married? For real? When did this happen?"

"It's like when you aren't teetering on the edge of a complete mental breakdown every other day, you actually have time to get all kinds of stuff done."

She smirks. "Somepony really should have told us that. It could have saved us a lot of trouble."

"Mom probably did at some point, but we missed it because she decided to explain it in the most arrogant way possible," I say, rolling my eyes and going for another drink of water.

Kicky clears her throat and gives me a stern, disapproving glare. "Now Cloud, you'll never make the rank of Super-Ultra-General-Captain-Commander before your eleventh birthday unless you schedule your tantrums as perfectly as I do."

There's a spasm in my gut and I try to wave Kicky off long enough to swallow this mouthful of water, but she has no intention of showing that kind of mercy. "Have I ever told you how I was scheduling them when I began dating your father? I think you could really learn a lot about being an independent and successful mare like myself by doing exactly what I say and never deviating even a little bit from this forty-year life plan I've drawn up for you."

That does it, and the twitch in my gut turns into one of those laughs that you're still feeling the next day. The first choking cough sends little spurts out the sides of my mouth, and then the terrible, irresistible snorting begins. A bit of the water

shooting out of my nostrils hits Kicky, though not as much as she deserves, but all the rest of it pours onto my chest as I gurgle it back up. Or I should say almost all of it does, since just enough of it goes down the wrong tube to send me into a hacking, coughing fit to go with the laughter.

“That’s what you get for stealing my water, by the way.”

The coughing passes eventually, and with her lust to avenge her drink sated for the time being there’s a lot to fill her in on after everything that happened today. Mentions of Blossom still make her go quiet, though. She’d better not be this lost for words when it comes time for the two of them to actually sit down together, and being reminded that we both have that looming somewhere in the future makes things just a little bit less joyful than they could be.

“So,” says Kicky once she’s been sufficiently updated, “you and Sweetie Drops. Where did *that* come from?”

“You heard about that, huh? It was a good evening.”

Kicky lifts her hooves up to her temples and starts rubbing at them. I’ve got a headache going too, and if I were a smarter pony I probably would have called it a night about an hour ago. I’m certainly tired enough. “You’re being careful with her? Not treading too close to the line when it comes to any of your rules for this sort of thing? I’m just making sure.”

I shrug. “I saved her life, and she was grateful. Who am I to keep her from repaying that gratitude?”

She rolls her eyes. “Wow, I must have completely forgotten just how selfless you really were.”

“Glad I could remind you.” I puff a lungful of warm air onto the surface of one front hoof, and find a dry spot on my coat to start polishing it against. “You know, with all the outrageous stuff that happens around this town, words and phrases like ‘heroine’ or ‘champion of righteousness’ get thrown around a lot...”

“There was a reason I decided I should start talking to you again, right? For the life of me I can’t imagine what it was.”

“It’s a real struggle being responsible for this much bangability all of the time. But when things get hard, and believe me when I tell you they do, I get through the day by reminding myself of the public service I’m providing to the less fortunate.”

“Cloud, come on,” says Kicky. “I’m being serious here and you’re just deflecting. I remember pulling that little move way too many times before to fall for it now. If there’s any mare in Ponyville who doesn’t need any extra heartache right now it’s Sweetie Drops.”

My smile slips away. When did this stuff stop being easygoing fun? “I’ll leave it as a one-night deal if that makes you feel better. My impression was that she wasn’t going to be around that much longer anyway. I assume Azalea will want her guest room back eventually.”

When she starts to reply, whatever Kicky was about to say is cut off with a yawn. “Maybe we can worry about that tomorrow.”

That yawn? It’s highly contagious. “You’re probably right.” I rise from my spot and walk over to give Kicky another hug. “Whatever ends up happening, with Sweetie Drops or Blossom or anypony else, can we promise each other that we won’t ever let things get this bad again?”

“I would like that,” says Kicky. But then she looks away. “A lot of that is going to depend on whether you ever pull another stunt like that again, though. Was there something I did to you that was a bigger deal than I thought? Help me understand.”

“When I figure it out, you’ll be the first to know. Goodnight.” With that I leave her to do some thinking of her own, which she doesn’t need me around for, and follow the siren call of my bed. While I’d love to just pass out under my blankets and call it a night, there’s one last thing I need to do first. Right on top of my desk is the journal that’s been giving me so much trouble with its final page. A gentle nudge and the back cover falls open, still ready and waiting for me to say whatever I need to. And since there’s absolutely zero chance of my having the energy to even begin putting today into words, I can grab my quill and be unusually brief.

*My life won't always be fine.*

Crawling under the covers at long last, I think that's something  
I can live with.



