



# The Reign of Queen Twilight Sparkle

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- My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic
- Twilight Sparkle
- Princess Luna
- Main 6
- Queen Chrysalis
- Changelings
- Dark
- Sex
- Gore
- Tragedy
- Alternate Universe

## Description

In the dark alternate future of Hard Reset, Twilight never did find release from the time loop she was trapped in. Instead she decided to take matters into her own hooves, and may Celestia have mercy on her soul.

**WARNING:** This is way, way darker than anything in [Hard Reset](#), [Stitch in Time](#), or [You Can Fight Fate](#). There's some truly messed up stuff in here so unless you enjoy that sort of thing stick to the three main stories in the Time Loop Trilogy. You won't miss anything essential.

[Series TV Tropes Page](#)

[In Spanish](#) thanks to dgs1993, who also did the artwork.

Thanks!

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# Breaking My Lover

## BREAKING MY LOVER

Long live the Queen.

Control. It's what's I've been missing in my life ever since I got stuck in this time loop. Spike, Princess Celestia, my friends, even the Elements of Harmony. One by one they all failed me or turned against me when it really mattered. If you want something done right, you have to do it yourself.

Chrysalis' invasion plan was a blitzkrieg, a display of overwhelming force to sow terror and chaos through the city. So many unnecessary deaths, no wonder the Elements decided to wipe out the whole sordid mess. I can do better. Every problem has a solution, I just had to start thinking outside the box.

Granted, 'defeat the current changeling queen in single combat and supplant her as the new one' is pretty far outside of the box. The old queen was a monster, though. I refuse to turn out the same way. There's a balance, there has to be. A compromise that will let ponies live together in peace with my swarm. I'll fight for it, and if I have to impose it by force then so be it. It's for their own good.

I hope it won't come to that though. I've already sacrificed so much just to get this far. My contingent of changelings disguised as royal guards and I stop in front of the door that I hope has the answer I need behind it. We stop in front of Luna's bedroom. I hadn't anticipated how hungry I would be after my ascension, how badly my new body would crave love. Why wouldn't I go to the pony I've fallen madly in love with?

I don't know when it happened, exactly. After the Elements of Harmony failed to defeat Chrysalis this is where I ended up on the very next loop, crying into her chest and moaning about how hopeless everything seemed. She didn't understand, how

could she when she's outside the time loop I'm in? But she comforted me anyway, whispering reassurances into my ear and when she grew a little bolder nibbling around the edges of it. Loop after loop I threw myself into her bed, drowning my disappointment in hedonism and sexual experimentation, learning from the puzzled but willing demigoddess.

For her, I'm hoping that this will be the last first time she lies with me. With a little bedroom diplomacy I know I can convince her that we can have peace if we rule together, a symbol of a brand new kingdom bound together by the love between pony and changeling royalty. I've planned it all out. With a thought to my guards ordering them to remain here and keep anypony from entering, I push the door open and step into the inky darkness beyond. Even though I can't see anything my hooves know the way to her bedside. Three short steps, one longer one, and then I push off the ground in a flying leap that drops me right on top of the lump in her covers. Luna startles awake, and I feel her shift and kick under me. "Wha?"

"Don't worry Luna. It's me, Twilight," I say, burrowing my muzzle beneath the covers and searching until it pokes into her chin. I feel her let out a sleepy little yawn, and I take the opportunity to dart my own tongue past her lips. If I could see her eyes, I'm pretty sure they'd be going wide. The first tingle of love I can taste is confused and hesitant but the very fact that it's there at all makes my heart soar.

Luna coughs and pulls her head back. "Twilight, what is the meaning of this?" she asks. The lights come up a bit so we can look at each other. Luna is rubbing the crust from her eyes, and she has a serious case of bedmane. She's beautiful.

"Princess, I know this must feel sudden, but I love you. I've loved you for years and years now, and I want to be with you," I say. When I started this even thinking about a confession like that would have given me panicky fits, but I've told her that so many times now I'm numb to the fear. Knowing how she responds helps too.

"You haven't *known* me for years and years, Twilight," she says. Well, not from her perspective. "I'm most flattered, but I

need a little time to process this. Perhaps later this evening we can..." she trails off as I start laying a trail of gentle kisses down the side of her neck. I've made an extensive map in my head of all the spots where she's most sensitive, and I know that a series of coordinated strikes will have a profound effect.

"We have as long as we need, Luna," I say. I can drop her title now that we're equals in power and authority. "We have forever to talk. Before we do though, I need you. I need you right this second." Before she can protest I've slipped under the covers with her. I wrap my forelegs around her barrel and press a knee in between her hind legs, feeling the heat there and breathlessly anticipating how soaking wet it will be soon. Her own hind legs squeeze together around mine, tangling us together. I wish I could grow to my new full size instead of pretending I'm still just a little unicorn, prove that I can love her as an equal, but I need her to warm up to the idea first. My knee grinding into her is certainly warming something up, and I feel a little patch of moisture starting to seep into my coat.

"Mmmm..." says Luna, arching her back into the pleasure, "who are you and what have you done with that sexy mare whom my sister teaches?"

Something's... off. Usually I'm getting pretty excited myself at this point, and while I'm enjoying the steady stream of affection Luna's giving off it's not quite the same sort of thrill I'm used to. I push even harder, meeting her mouth with mine and gripping her head in my magic to pull it roughly into the kiss. Luna snorts at the new pressure and tries to turn her head away, but I follow her. I won't let her escape. Luna's foreleg comes up to my chest and gives me a hard shove. Despite my best efforts I'm forced to sit up on her belly. Looking down, I can see befuddlement in the way she turns her face away and regards me with just one eye. "I'm sorry, Luna," I say. I don't understand my own actions. I've never done something like that to her, but a little voice in the back of my head is whispering that I liked it. That she should like it too and if she doesn't, well, that's not important.

"This is a mistake, Twilight. I was caught up in it for a moment, but we shouldn't be doing this," says Luna. She

shifts her hips away and I'm once more adrift in an ocean of cool air, the welcoming heat of her body receding into the distance. Those few centimeters that have appeared between us feel like miles.

"No!" I cry out. "Listen, I'm sorry I got a bit forceful there, I was just excited. Let me make it up to you. I'll prove I can be gentle, and if you tell me to stop again I will." When she relaxes a little, I stroke a hoof through her mane and cuddle up against her. "I want this to be special for you. Luna. I wouldn't ever do anything to hurt you, I swear."

I let her breathing slow down a bit as I hold her. I can't screw up this time. I have to make her understand my plan before she gets up to raise the moon. It was only a stroke of good luck that let me beat Chrysalis during this loop, I can't throw it away lightly. Once Luna is a bit calmer I move up her body and kiss the tip of her horn. I feel a little guilty about what's coming next, but I can't have her panicking before I've had a chance to explain myself to her.

When Luna lets out a happy moan at what I'm doing with her horn, I take a little more of it into my mouth. She darts her own tongue out and glides it up my belly as far as she can reach. The heat and pressure running against the nap of my coat should be sending me over her moon, but while I can't say it's unpleasant it isn't really doing anything for my arousal either. I lower my mouth closer to the base, finding the little groove that spirals all the way up and down its length. I trace it with my tongue, slathering it in spittle as I go. With a little bit of extra effort, new parts of my body kick into action and add a few new chemical agents into the mix. I'm lucky Luna doesn't have the presence of mind right now to notice that my tongue is a whole lot more dexterous than anypony's should be. Once I've thoroughly soaked her, I squeeze my lips tight around her horn's base and suck as I pull my way back up it, finishing off with a little \*pop\* as Luna's eyes go wide. I stare deeply into them. "Did you like that?" I ask her.

Luna smiles back, but a moment later her expression turns to one of confusion and then to a frown. She brings a hoof up and taps her horn experimentally. "It felt good at first, but now it's

gone numb for some reason.” Oh good, I was worried the anesthetizing agent wouldn’t work.

“That’s my fault, sorry,” I say. “It’s only temporary though. I need to show you something, and I need for you not to overreact.” The poorly lit room is suddenly bright with green light cast off by the flames as I drop my disguise and grow to my full majesty, pressing Luna deeper into the mattress below me. Some detached part of my mind finds it absolutely fascinating that mass isn’t conserved between transformations, but files it away as irrelevant for the time being.

I open my mouth to explain myself to Luna, but her scream is faster. “Luna-” I try to say over her but I’m interrupted when her foreleg lashes out and hits me. Even pinned down and without leverage it knocks the wind out of me. She’s writhing about trying to escape and paying no heed to what I’m saying, but I try again anyway. “Luna, it’s still me. It’s still Twilight, and I still love you. I chose this. I did it for Equestria, and for us.”

“**Get off of me!**” Luna shouts in the Royal Canterlot Voice. She tries to channel her magic through her disabled horn, but can’t even manage a spark.

“Just stop yelling at me and let me explain!” I shout back. Why does she have to be so difficult about this? I feel my temper rising at her insolence. Doesn’t she know I gave up everything to make this work? “We can rule together now that Chrysalis and Celestia are out of the picture.”

“Celestia? What did you do to her? **What did you do?**”

“Nothing! It was the changelings, not me. I’m trying to stop this invasion from killing us all.” I try to get through to her, but I’m not having any luck. This isn’t how this was supposed to happen.

“Guards! Somepony! Anypony! Help me!” cries Luna. Luckily the soundproofing on this room is pretty strong, and the guards outside are mine rather than hers. Still, she’s wriggling out from where I’ve trapped her. I can’t let her get away or I’ll have to start a whole other loop from scratch.



“I told you to SHUT! UP!” I yell into her face. I open my mouth and bite down into the flesh at the base of her neck. As my sharp teeth penetrate her flesh I can feel her heart pounding through my jaw, and I get a little lightheaded at the brand new feeling of spurt after spurt of venom being pumped into her body through my hollow fangs. A minute later I run dry of toxins and pull back from her, looking down in horror at the ring of broken skin I’ve left behind. “Luna... Look what you made me do,” I say. Even now her struggles are slowing down as the mind-altering poison makes its way through her body.

“Oh... my head... What’s... what’s happening?” asks Luna, her voice slowly fading.

“Luna, I promise it was just this one time. Just so you’d stop screaming. I just wanted you to see how much I love you,” I say. I always knew this was a possibility, but I didn’t want it to come to this. I really didn’t.

So why is part of me so very excited that it has?

Luna screws up her face with all the hate and disgust she can muster. “I. Will *never*. Love you.” Then she settles her head down on the pillow, her eyes glazed and half closed.

“Luna? It... it doesn’t hurt does it? I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry, my queen. I feel wonderful,” says Luna, her voice oddly hollow under the venom’s influence. “Did I yell at you a moment ago? I can’t remember why, but I think that I did. Please forgive me.”

“There’s nothing to forgive. I should go,” I say, getting off the bed and preparing to retreat to the throne room. I’ll come back when the venom’s worn off and try again.

“Don’t leave me!” Luna rolls over as I try to get up and clings to my side pulling me back towards the bed. “I love you, my queen. I need you.”

I shudder as the torrent of love that’s pouring out of her, so much that it almost hurts to take all at once. I’m not gullible enough to believe any of what she’s saying is genuine, of course. I remember what it felt like being under that stuff’s

influence. Maybe, though... Maybe I could pretend to believe it. Just for a little while. The harm's already been done, and if you think about it I owe it to her to stay until it wears off.

"OK, I won't go."

She's so pathetically grateful that there are tears welling up in her eyes as I let her pull me back under the covers with her. I lay there on my back as she curls herself up into a tight little ball and rests her head on my chest, utterly content. This is so, so close to being exactly what I wanted in the first place. It must be because I'm larger than she is now or the way she's curled up, but she seems diminished and fragile as she falls back into a deep sleep. I wait a quarter of an hour until I'm sure she's out cold before I slip out of bed and gently lower her head onto a pillow. I take a few steps towards the door, but then stop and turn back.

I close my eyes and plant a gentle kiss on my beloved's cheek. I'll try again tomorrow, when her system's cleared the venom. I'll make her understand that I love her, that everything I've done has been for her and for Equestria. In the end, I'm sure she'll come to realize that I'm doing the right thing.

Leaving my guards inside the room with a command to notify me when Luna begins to stir again, I reassert my old shape and walk through the halls, alone and unnoticed. I can feel the mass of my swarm getting closer and closer to the palace pacifying and capturing ponies as they go. I can only hope that showing them mercy will buy me time to pacify the Elements. The saboteurs disguised as officers of the guard up and down the chain of command are doing a wonderful job of undermining any attempts at organizing a counter-attack. Entire units seem to be just melting away without more than a token fight, surely deserting when faced with what they have to realize is a vastly superior force.

I unseal the passage to the throne room and step inside. It's going to need some serious renovation to erase the scars of the fight I had with Chrysalis. Speak of the devil, the hateful thing herself is still chained up to the throne, still looking just like I used to. I transform back into my full glory while she watches, just to rub it in that she can't anymore. There's a little bit of

blood spattered around her, she probably coughed it up after I broke her rib. Doesn't look like enough to be dangerous though. Good, I want her to stick around for a long, long time.

"Have a good time with your new nighttime plaything, my queen?" she asks. Unbelievable. Even now she's still full of herself. It seems I couldn't quite drain away the last of her free will.

"She is not a plaything," I say. "She's a pony who happens to be very important to me. We had a little misunderstanding, but in time I know she'll come around."

"Well goodie for you. And my invasion?"

"It isn't yours anymore. Your plan was going to doom everyone, pony and changeling alike. So I fixed it and soon we'll be able to share the city between us."

"You actually believe that. Precious. Well when you understand being a changeling queen *really* means, I'll be ready to advise or assist in any way I can. You may be able to benefit from this loyal servant's unique experience."

"I doubt it," I say. Deciding there's no point discussing this with her further I reach out across the swarm looking for an update. The sacking of the train was successful, and all five of my friends were captured successfully, though not without casualties among my soldiers. I'm really upset that the girls would do that; I was trying to be merciful and they took advantage of that... weakness... to hurt me. I shake it off, though. I'm sure once they understand the situation they'll come around and agree to help me destroy the Elements of Harmony.

Putting that aside, I reach out through the city and my breath catches in my throat when I find that a pair of drones are returning from a mission I nearly forgot I had sent them out on.

Chrysalis notices. "Something the matter, Queen Sparkle?"

I nod. "My parents just got here."

# Breaking My Subjects

## BREAKING MY SUBJECTS

My parents. Was I wrong to bring them here? They must be terrified right now, for me and for the entire city. I can reassure them, at the very least, that I have everything completely under control. I do my best to pull myself together. I'm not the little filly that needs their approval anymore.

Chrysalis is watching me, amused, as I pace back and forth off to the side of the throne. "You know, I forget sometimes that you grew up here. Had I realized how much trouble you would be I would have taken them hostage," she says by way of making conversation. "I just got so used to monitoring you in Ponyville it slipped my mind."

That gets my attention. "You were monitoring me in Ponyville? For how long?"

"You and your friends, for months. How did you think I knew to have changelings coordinate the attack on the train they were riding? You should be flattered, Twilight. Half the timing for this invasion was trying to find a time when you, your friends, and your damnable brother and his wife would all be separated from one another."

"Well it was all for nothing, you still failed," I point out.

"Only because you cheated with that time spell you were babbling on about earlier. At least I know you suffered for it."

I open my mouth to reply to her when the door to the throne room opens and two changelings bring my mother and father inside. The changelings have dropped their disguises; resistance inside the palace itself must have been squelched by now.

"Twilight!" My mother calls out. I'm incredibly touched when she does. Even though I look like I do now, somehow a mother just knows her daughter when she sees her. What more proof could I need that underneath all this I'm still the pony I've

always been? My mother pulls away from the changeling that brought her here and begins running into the room.

She's not running towards me, though. She's running towards the base of my throne. Where Chrysalis is chained and wearing my face. Chrysalis realizes it at the same time as I do, and for just an instant our eyes meet. I see something I don't like at all in hers.

"Mommy!" she cries out, stretching a hoof towards her.

There's no time to shout a warning, and no time to guess what Chrysalis has planned. I just leap between the two of them, turn to my mother, and roar. My bellowing does the trick; Mom skids to a stop and cowers in front of me. I quickly revert to the shape of the daughter she's familiar with, but the damage is done. When she looks up at me again I can tell she still sees a monster. Dad trots up behind her and lays a hoof on her shoulder, glaring at me.

"I'm the real Twilight, I promise. I know I looked different, but I am. I write you a letter every other week but my last one was two days late because the post office flooded. I wouldn't go to sleep without making you check my closet for monsters until I was seven. I got Dad some awful, awful cufflinks for Father's Day two years ago."

The two of them stare at me, but then my Dad starts to smile. "They weren't that terrible," he says and I exhale a breath I hadn't realized I was holding.

"Oh, gag me," says Chrysalis with a roll of her eyes. It's a tempting proposition.

"Mom, Dad, I know she doesn't look like it but that's Chrysalis. Remember? From Shining's wedding?" I say.

"Trust me dear, we haven't forgotten," says Mom.

"You know, I never did thank you properly for hosting our rehearsal dinner," says Chrysalis, "would you like to hear about what I did to your son when we got home that night?"

My mother looks up at her wearing an unreadable mask of an expression. Calmly she pushes past me and walks up to Chrysalis, then belts her in the face with a right hook. The

force of the blow snaps her head to the side until the tension of her chain and collar brings her to an abrupt halt. Chrysalis collapses to the floor and holds a hoof up to her windpipe, hacking and coughing. Go Mom.

“Walk with me?” I say and turn to leave without waiting for a response. I hear hoofsteps behind me as my parents trot along behind me. We walk through the hallways that are now filled with changelings, no longer bothering with disguises. We own this city now. Mom and Dad huddle closer together.

“Twilight, sweetie, what’s going on?” asks my mother, pressing up against my father as a drone flies past a bit closer than she’s comfortable with.

“I know this is a lot to take in all at once but things are going to be different now. Better. I have everything under control,” I say. I can’t quite keep the pride out of my voice. I haven’t really taken a chance yet to revel in just how much I’ve accomplished, but at this point I’m probably the greatest and most important pony who has ever or will ever exist. This world will either bend to my will, or it’ll break. No time to dwell on that right now, though. “I’m the new queen of the changelings.”

“That’s impossible,” says my father. I barely suppress a scoff at how narrow-minded that statement is. Impossible is nothing.

“Just very difficult, actually,” I say. “Weren’t you two the ones who always told me I could do anything I set my mind to?”

“This wasn’t exactly what we meant.”

I wheel around to glare at the two of them, and they stop short.

“Look. The two of you can either be my allies in this or my enemies. Which is it going to be?”

“Don’t talk to your mother and me like that, Twilight. We don’t appreciate you issuing ultimatums to us.”

“I don’t think the two of you get it,” I say, “I’m in charge now. I earned it when I saved all of your lives, *again*, and I’m getting really sick of nopony appreciating it. I never want to hear ‘you can’t’ ever again, do you understand me? Not from you, not from the Princess, not even from the damned

Elements of Harmony themselves.” I stop myself when I realize that my parents are staring at me. Not with love and pride in their eyes, but fear. I take a calming breath before I go on. “Look, I can’t do this by myself. I need ponies I can trust to help me run the city. I was hoping you two would be a part of my new government.”

That catches them by surprise, but I’ve thought this through. I may have absolute control of the changelings, but the ponies of Canterlot are another story. I’ll need a regime to keep them under control, especially during the initial transition period. “I... I suppose we could try,” says Mom.

“Great!” I say, and wrap them up in a big family hug. I try to ignore the way they twitch when I touch them. They just have to get used to the new me, that’s all. “First order of business, once the damage to the city is fixed up and ponies are ready to get back to work I want all places of business to employ at least one changeling.”

“Employ changelings? Why?” asks Mom.

“Simple, I want ponies to get used to the idea of working side by side with them as quickly as possible.”

My father ponders that for a moment. “I suppose that’s reasonable...”

“Besides, that way I’ll have eyes and ears all over the city and I can look in on them any time I want to,” I continue. There will be no secrets in Canterlot Hive. Not from me.

“Twilight, you can’t-” my father stops himself as I raise an eyebrow at his choice of words. “...I mean you should consider that ponies might see that as an invasion of privacy.”

“If they aren’t doing or saying anything they shouldn’t be, they don’t have anything to be afraid of. Just start drawing it up. In the meantime, Mom, I want you to be in charge of completely overhauling the education curriculum we’ll be using when the schools start up again.”

“That kind of thing is usually up to the individual teachers to decide,” says Mom.

“Not anymore it isn’t. From now on, I want to make sure that they’re teaching foals that changelings are their friends, as well as that Luna and I are the legitimate rulers of Equestria.”

“That’s an... interesting perspective, dear. I don’t know how many teachers will be comfortable telling foals that sort of thing.”

“Then they can find new jobs,” I say. Mom doesn’t say anything, but the concern on her face is clear. “Look, I’m not asking anypony to lie, I just want to make sure they’re telling the truth the right way. Whether they like it or not this new government is going to be legitimate, and I don’t need them poisoning a bunch of young minds against me.”

I begin to state my third new policy idea, but I find that I’m growing woozy, and that words are hard to get out. What’s going on? I drop my disguise and revert to the shape of the changeling queen which helps a little, but I still don’t feel so great. “Twilight, are you feeling alright?” asks my mother. Even though she’s standing right next to me, it sounds like her voice is coming from impossibly far away. This is the first time I’ve been a changeling for more than a few hours, much less a changeling queen. Are there side effects to it that I never knew about?

“I’m fine, you two just... go do that other stuff,” I say. I start to head back towards the throne room and they move to follow me. “Leave me alone.”

They stop in the middle of the hallway and I slam the door to the throne room behind me. My head is pounding and I have these stabbing pains radiating through my abdomen. I slump down on the throne itself for the first time. It turns out it isn’t a very comfortable place to sit.

“Not feeling so well, my queen?” asks Chrysalis from the floor, wearing the grin that says she already knows the answer.

“What’s happening to me?” I ask. “I don’t understand. I fed, and I don’t think I’ve been injured.”

“I was wondering when this would happen. Let me guess, you’ve been taking command of every single changeling in the



city all on your own, haven't you?"

She's right. Buzzing in the back of my head ever since my transformation have been the thoughts and actions of each drone in the swarm, as natural and subconscious as my breathing or my heartbeat. I haven't been actively commanding every single action or anything, but clearly it's been taking a toll nonetheless. "I thought that was how it works," I moan.

"Not all the time. You'd go mad having so many thoughts in your head all the time. You need to learn to delegate," she says.

"Delegate? How?"

Chrysalis sighs. "Reach out to the swarm. There are changelings that serve as lieutenants, capable of a degree of independent thought and initiative. They can command small groups on their own, without your attention. You can still assume direct control over them, of course, but use them well and you should be able to get a little relief."

I do as she suggests, and reach out with my mind. It looks like the changelings returning with my friends will be a few days, seeing as how they were well over a hundred miles from Canterlot and are bringing back wounded and prisoners with them which is slowing them down. Turning my focus closer I search among the changelings scattered throughout the city. Most of their minds are simple little bundles of instincts and reactions, but sure enough a few seem to be capable of somewhat more. I let my instincts take over and transfer control over to them. My mind feels a little less cluttered as I do so, like I've just sorted a bunch of loose papers into a folder. I know I can find them again when I need them, but they aren't spread out all over my working surface. I quickly run out of eligible minds, and my head is still fuzzier than I'd like. Plus the cramps have gotten worse.

"It's not enough," I say.

Chrysalis frowns. "I don't have the same connection I used to, how many minds were you able to find?"

I do a quick mental tally. “Eight.”

“That’s far too few. There should be more than twice that many. No wonder your body is acting up, especially with this many potential hosts around.”

“What do you mean? How do I make more?” I need to make more. I’ve never wanted anything so badly. Anything to relieve this pressure in my head. “Can I, what’s the right word, upgrade or evolve one of the drones?”

Chrysalis shakes her head. “No, a changeling has to be born with the potential.”

“Then how?”

Chrysalis tells me. At first I’m horrified, but just the way she describes it sends spasms of excitement through my gut and my loins.

“...Fine.” I say eventually. I turn to one of the drones waiting silently in the corner for commands. “Bring me a pony.”

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The drone returns about a half hour later hauling an earth pony prisoner whose legs are bound up in a ball of thick green slime. It drops him unceremoniously in front of me. I’ve been busy in the meantime. Chrysalis has been sent away, still in chains. I don’t need to hear her snide little comments right now. I’ve also been experimenting with some... new hardware.

“I understand you killed several changeling drones,” I say to the stallion. That’s why I selected him. It makes what’s coming almost like justice.

“You mean the bugs that broke into my house and scared my family half to death? Yeah, I did. That’s what it means to protect the ponies you care about,” he says. I don’t know his name and I don’t plan to ask for it. It’s irrelevant.

“They only wanted you to surrender. Just because we’re taking over doesn’t mean we want you to die. Our two races can work together to-”

“Save me the sermon, bitch. Just do what you’re going to do and get it over with.”

A not-inconsiderable part of me screams to do just that. To leap on top of him and just plunge right in, but I fight it. I’m not a monster like Chrysalis is. I’m sure if I explain what I need from him I’ll get his consent, it’s just a question of phrasing the request the right way.”

“Er, well, yes,” I say, suddenly nervous, “the thing is, you see, well it’s kind of a funny story.”

“Spit it out!”

“Right, sorry. Well you see I need this one special kind of changeling, and unlike most drones reproduction via parthenogenesis simply doesn’t allow adequate development. It’s actually fascinating, the alleles triplicate instead of duplicating during mitosis which allows for a huge number of phenotypes to be... and you don’t care about any of this do you?” I ask. I might be babbling just a bit.

“No, I don’t,” says the stallion.

“I’ll cut to the chase. I need a host for my young, and you’re it.” I shift on the throne, spreading my hind legs. The stallion gawks at what’s there: a long, phallic ovipositor that’s emerged like a stinger from the slit at the base of my belly. It stirs as the cooler air blows around it, and the sudden shift in temperature nearly drives the self control from my mind.

“Absolutely not. Go fuck yourself,” says the stallion.

“No, I said parthenogenesis *wouldn’t* work,” I reply.

“You might not have noticed, but I’m not a mare. How would I even...”

“Well, we aren’t mammals. A womb isn’t really necessary.”

“So in a month or so, a changeling bursts out of my chest? This is something you thought I would agree to?”

“That isn’t how it would work at all. The emergence isn’t painful. In fact after the implantation you won’t even feel it,” I say. He’s still skeptical. “I’m not a tyrant. You’re free to say no.”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying.”

“Very well,” I say and turn to the drone. “Return him to his home, and bring me his wife and daughter.”

“What? No, wait, what are you doing?” he asks, struggling as the drone lifts him up and begins to carry him away. His limbs twist and bend in the confining goop, futile struggles against his bindings.

“Well if you don’t want to do this, I’ll need another pony,” I say. “I hope they’re more agreeable than you are. If I they say no I might not be able to control myself. How old is your daughter again?”

The stallion glares at me with more hate than I’ve ever seen in a pony’s face before. Like I’m the bad guy. At least I’m trying to be reasonable with him. “She just got her cutie mark last week.”

“Ah. That should be sufficiently developed for my purposes. Goodbye.” I turn my head and absently examine the holes on one of my forelegs while the stallion is dragged away.

“I’ll do it!” shouts the pony. My drones stop in an instant. “I’ll... I’ll do what you want, but only on the condition that you let my family and me go afterwards.”

How disappointing. I think his family would really be happy here once Canterlot Hive is the utopia I plan for it to become, but I won’t force them to stay. “I won’t do anything to prevent you from leaving after the hatchling is born.” I nod to the drones, who bring him back over. See? I said I would get his consent. Now what’s about to happen is OK, ethically speaking. The drones lap at the goop around the stallion’s hooves until it dissolves away, staining the red carpet a puke-green hue. I make a mental note that we’ll need to begin redecorating around the palace soon. Something with a more organic feel.

The stallion wipes the last of it off of himself and looks up at me on the throne. “So... what happens now?” he asks.

I smile. I’ve so been looking forward to this part. “It needs some stimulation to get ready. Use your mouth.”

“I don’t really swing that way, your majesty.”

“I didn’t order you to enjoy it, I ordered you to do it,” I snap. The anticipation is wearing at my patience. The stinger gives a little twitch of agreement. The stallion takes a few hesitant steps and I slide forward further on the throne, my breathing getting heavier. He stops an inch from the tip, close enough that I can feel his breath flow along its length. He examines it, taking in the way it curves upward from the point where it’s emerging from my body horizontally, running about eight inches long until it comes to a very sharp point at the other end, currently pointing straight up to the ceiling. A few dribbles of fluid have already started to leak out the tip. The stallion seems to be having second thoughts, but I glance over to one of the drones, which moves in behind him and roughly takes him by the mane and slowly but inexorably pushes his head closer to my thighs. The stallion has no choice but to open up his mouth or get it jabbed into his eye.

I moan as I feel the heat and wetness of his mouth on the smooth surface of the stinger. It’s not quite as good as the time Luna taught me all the different ways to suck on a unicorn horn, but it’s exactly what I needed. The stallion freezes up, staring straight ahead with his lips halfway down my length. “The better you do, the sooner this will be over,” I say. I’m not looking to draw this out, at least not this time. This time I just need release, fast and hard. He closes his eyes and screws up his willpower before slowly sliding forward again, this time without the drone forcing him. He builds up a slow and hesitant rhythm, and a few seconds later tries to go a bit further but he miscalculates. The tip of the stinger jabs into the roof of his mouth, breaking the skin and drawing a thin trickle of blood. The sudden pain makes him bite down reflexively and I give a yelp of pain.

“Watch the teeth!” I hiss at him. It’s good that the damn thing is armored rather than just uncovered flesh or that could have done some serious damage.

“Orry,” he says. As if to make it up to me, he remembers that he has a tongue and begins lapping away at the stinger’s

underside. A shame he's straight; he could have had a very satisfied coltfriend if things had worked out a little differently.

"That's good. Oh that's *very* good," I say to him. I lower my own hoof to the back of his head and rest it there, gently encouraging and directing him with the pressure. I feel a warmth start to rise up from my depths and I know it won't be long now. I idly wish that I'd asked the stallion what his name was. Too late for that now, though. "Thank you for being so-mmph!- so understanding about this," I say, although the building climax is making it difficult to complete sentences. "These changelings have enhanced cah, ah, cognitive functions due to accelerated synaptoooooooooh yeeeeeeesssynaptogenesis. They don't develop properly unless their formative days are spent in an environment with there! Right there! An environment with an abundance of astrocytes and neuroglia for them to feed on."

The stallion looks up in confusion and, unforgivably, stops what he's doing. It doesn't matter now, though. I'm well past the point of no return. I wrap one of my rear legs around his back to hold him steady.

"In layman's terms, I'm about to lay my egg in your brain."

The stallion furrows his brow, but an instant later comprehension dawns. It isn't soon enough to save him. With a cry of ecstasy and one last thrust of my hips I drive the stinger as hard as I can, piercing the roof of his mouth and the base of his skull beyond. His eyes roll back and his body begins to seize as blood pours from the sides of his mouth. The blood surging against the stinger in time with his pounding heart finally pushes me over the top. The stinger throbs and pumps load after load of nutrient-rich fluid into the soft tissue, and displaced cerebrospinal fluid mixes with the blood trickling out of his mouth. I groan as a thick, heavy mass forces its way up the stinger until with one last shudder it bursts out lodging the egg deep inside the center of the collection of grey mush that used to be a pony's brain.

Panting with satisfaction I fall back onto the throne, the still-rigid stinger dragging the corpse onto me like a fishhook. His body ends up slumped on his two back knees, forelegs hanging

at his side and face buried lewdly in my lap. It's just like I promised him before we started. Now that the implantation is done, he won't feel a thing.

I take a minute to compose myself, then shift my hips to extricate myself from him. My stinger slides out of his mouth covered in a mixture of blood, spit, and clumps of brain tissue as well as it's own cocktail of injected fluids. I take a small dish towel I've left nearby and rub it clean, taking a few more strokes than are strictly necessary when I discover that it's still quite sensitive. I motion one of the drones over. "Take this down to the kitchens. We'll begin converting one of the pantries into a hatchery," I command. A little shove sends the corpse toppling to the floor. It stirs a few final times, and then lies still for good as a new life begins to take root inside of it. "Then send in the next one."

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By the time I'm finished the new hatchery has filled the first pantry and the considerable overflow moved into a second. It's late at night but the pain in my abdomen is finally, gloriously satisfied. The infernal buzzing in my head is still there, threatening to drive me mad. I've sent as many changelings as I can spare into dormant states, but it will still be a long few days until the eggs I just deposited begin to hatch. Just have to hold out a bit longer.

I glance out the window at the night sky, and something occurs to me. Who raised the moon? Celestia is gone. I saw her body myself and wrapped it up in a cocoon for storage. When I have a spare hour or two conducting a dissection could advance my understanding of alicorn biology immeasurably. I certainly didn't, I'm not sure if I even can at this stage. But that would only leave...

I reach out with my mind to check on the guards I left at Luna's door. They aren't there. I jump up from my throne and with a burst of magic I teleport to her room. No sign of my guards. I push open the door, and the room is still cloaked in the unnatural darkness Luna sleeps in during the day. I step inside, trying to light the room with my horn. I feel my magic

respond as it should but I can't see any of the light it casts. I'm truly blind.

I'm wondering if changelings have any sort of echolocation ability I can use when two metal-clad hooves slam into me from the side, a heavy mass following them in a flying tackle that slams me into the wall. Spots of false light dance in front of my eyes as the hoof follows up the tackle with an uppercut that catches me in the underbelly. I turn my head hoping to dart in and bite my attacker to bring a quick end to the fight, but the hoof slams into the front of my face. I spit out something sharp and hard, and new tastes invade my mouth. There's the familiar coppery taste of blood, and a dribble of something bitter as well. I run my tongue along the front of my teeth and feel a new gap. One of my fangs is gone, and the venom is leaking into my mouth.

"Your trick will not work upon me twice," says the pony assaulting me.

I know that voice. "Luna, stop! It's Twilight!"

The punches cease for a moment, but then I feel her horn pierce the membrane at the base of my left wing and tear upwards, shredding it and leaving it useless. I scream.

"I am aware of what you are."

I fight. What choice do I have? It's clear she's not holding back. In the darkness I'm at a disadvantage, but Luna seems completely comfortable in it which I suppose makes sense. The slashes of magic I make against her go wide, and when I lift a nearby armoire and try to slam it into her I only manage to destroy a nightstand. My only saving grace is that her magic is still suffering the lingering effects of my paralytic. It's as strong as it usually is, but sluggish and easily avoided. Still, it isn't the edge that I'm going to need.

Feelings are rising up in me. All the darkness that comes with the mantle of the queen of the changelings, the darkness that I've refused to give into so far because I'm a good pony who's going to use this power for good causes. The suggestive whispers get louder with every blow I take until they're screams.



I can't fight the noises inside of me and the Princess attacking me at the same time, so instead I just let it swallow me up.

Everything is suddenly much clearer. The little currents of moving air paint a picture of the darkened room that couldn't possibly be any clearer. Plus the screaming finally stopped.

In slow motion, I sense exactly what Luna's moving to do. In twenty-three hundredths of a second she's going to smash a hoof into the shield I've thrown up, then follow that up with a flurry of lighter kicks to break it before she steps in to attack me directly. Couldn't be clearer. It's a decent gambit, but she doesn't get the chance to execute it.

An instant before her first blow would have landed, I drop my shield entirely. Expecting to strike something that isn't there, Luna's momentum overbalances her and throws her off rhythm, just enough for it to matter. It's trivial to reach out and wrap the limb up in my forelegs, and then twist.

I would have settled for dislocating her leg, but Luna makes a mistake when she tries to follow the rotation. She lands on the floor face down. In an instant I'm mounted on top of her, sitting on her back keeping her rear legs splayed on the floor while my forehooves rest between her wings.

My turn.

First is her wing. I run a hoof all along its length, appreciating how beautiful it really is. It trembles under my touch as I brush each feather with a light, teasing stroke. I get a hold on its tip and put a hoof right over the joint halfway up. There are a lot of ways wings aren't supposed to bend. I run through a few of the most painful possibilities until I've settled on one I like. With a single jerk, Luna's wing snaps.

Luna screams. I don't think I've ever heard anything scream like that before. Somehow with that single awful, wonderful sound she manages to communicate fear, helplessness, and the absolute depths of total agony. I sit back and run a hoof along her to admire the effects of my handiwork. The wing hangs limply at her side, the jagged end of a broken bone sticking out through her torn skin. "Now we're even," I say as I try to flex

my own tattered wing. With enough love it should be better in a day or two. Luna won't be nearly so lucky.

I lift my weight off of her and turn her onto her back. She doesn't try to make a break for it, so she must be coming to accept that we were meant to be together this way. I lie down on her, belly to belly, and stroke her face in the darkness. There are tears of happiness running down her cheeks. She must be as excited by that sort of rough foreplay as I am. She must like it. After all, only a terrible pony would intentionally hurt the one they love unless the other enjoyed it. Luna and I are both wonderful ponies who are so happy together. Therefore Luna likes what I'm doing to her, Q.E.D.

Luna's horn lights up and casts away the magical darkness. In the glow of her magic I get a good look at her for the first time since I came in. She's looking up at me with what is unmistakably fear and disgust. Why is she making this so hard for me? "Stop looking at me like that," I say. She doesn't. "I said stop *looking* at me like that!" I purse my lips and shift my cheeks to mix some saliva in with the blood and venom leaking from the roof of my mouth, then spew the whole mess into her face. She has to stop looking at me and squeeze her eyes shut to keep the fluid from irritating them. She whimpers as the few speckles that did get into them begin to burn.

I lean down and nuzzle her face, which makes her stiffen up. With long, slow licks I clean the spit and poison off her, leaving long and bloody streaks across the surface of her eyelids. Now that she's awake and I know what kind of things both of us like, I can spend the whole night finding out all sorts of new ways to make her scream. I reach over and put a little pressure on her broken wing, making her cry out again. "Ooh, Luna," I whisper in her ear, "was it good for you too?"

# Breaking My Friends

## BREAKING MY FRIENDS

It's a bright new day in Canterlot Hive, and on track to be a good one. Today is the day that my friends are finally going to arrive. It's not a moment too soon, either. I looked in on the Elements of Harmony and they aren't getting better despite all my efforts. They're just getting worse more slowly.

I can't understand why, when I've already done so much to promote harmony between ponies and changelings. Just think, a week ago legally recognized marriage between a pony and a changeling was considered a crazy, fringe political idea. Now it's mandatory. I'm so progressive that it hurts sometimes.

There have been a few setbacks, though. The guard hadn't been as thoroughly defeated as I thought they were in the initial invasion. My decision to be merciful is already costing me, as the soldiers I thought were surrendering have instead melted into the shadows and created the beginnings of what I now understand is a guerilla resistance. Their cowardly strikes from the darkness are taxing my patience, not to mention undermining my efforts to get my little ponies to accept their new status quo. I've converted one of the parks in the center of the city into a reeducation camp for captured prisoners. Those poor lost souls just need to be shown the light, and I do give an excellent lecture on the subject if I do say so myself. Mom and Dad have been very helpful in their new jobs with the government, putting a pony face on my plans even if they were a little reluctant at first.

Chrysalis has been moved down into a cell in the dungeon, the deepest one I could find. I don't need her trying to pull the same thing on my friends as she tried to on Mom and Dad. She'd probably snap their necks if she fooled them into a hug. I go down to the front door to wait for the five of them to arrive, I can feel the changelings guiding them here getting close.

The palace doors open and my friends are standing there in the middle of a knot of changelings, bound up in chains. “Girls!” I call out and cheerily trot up to the group. The five of them cower as I do. I wish ponies would stop doing that, it’s very off putting. “It’s me. Twilight.”

“Twilight?” says Fluttershy, peeking out from behind Rainbow Dash where she’s trying to hide herself. “What happened to you? You’re scary.”

“It’s a long story, but I’m a changeling queen now. I’ll fill you in on all the details over tea. Our work is just beginning.”

The drones unlock their chains, which fall to the ground. “Will the Princesses be joining us?” asks Rarity. “Not that we don’t believe you, of course, but it would help put my mind at ease to hear this from them. Independent corroboration, you might say.”

I think of Luna, locked up in her room with a broken wing. It’s very important I keep her from exerting herself too much while she heals, after all. It’s for her own good. “They’re not available right now,” I say. I don’t miss the look that passes between them. “Maybe a little bit later.”

I lead them inside and set them down at a table in the dining room. A drone is already waiting there with a freshly brewed pot of jasmine I took from Celestia’s secret stash of the really good stuff. I hope my friends enjoy it; my new dietary restrictions mean that while I can eat normal food and drink it doesn’t provide any satisfaction. I’m really going to miss coffee.

Over the next hour, I lay out everything that happened to me over the course of the time loop. I have to skim quite a bit to cram the decades worth of activity into such a short time frame, but it’s enough for them to get the gist.

“Was this really the only way, Twi? Doin’ what you’ve done to Canterlot? Ah barely recognize the place,” says Applejack.

“I know, isn’t it great?” I ask and give a little clap of my hooves. They don’t sound the same as they used to. Must be the holes.

“It’s... different,” says Applejack.

“It bucking sucks!” shouts Rainbow Dash. “You ponynap us out of our train and drag us here, we don’t see a single pony out on the streets that isn’t terrified for their life, and you want us to just smile and tell you that it’s wonderful? I don’t think so.”

“I’m doing the best I can, Rainbow. You don’t appreciate how hard its been for me.”

“You aren’t the victim here. Those ponies are. I get that bad stuff happened but you’ve gotta stop this. What if we use the Elements and-”

“We are *not* using the Elements,” I snap at her. “The Elements are my enemy, and you five are going to help me destroy them once and for all. You just need to give them up, and as their Bearers you’ll be able to break them. Then they won’t be able to hurt me again.”

“Silly Twilight! I can’t just give up laughter. It’s laughter!” said Pinkie.

My eyes narrow. “So you’re picking them over me. After everything I’ve done for you and for Equestria, you’d still side against me.” I say. I see how it is now. Maybe that’s why the Elements didn’t work when the six of us used them on Chrysalis. They’d rather have the Elements’ power than my friendship. Well, I’ve got more than enough power of my own now.

“Do there have to be sides?” asks Fluttershy. “Can’t we all be the good guys?”

“No. Somepony is responsible for all this and they’re going to pay, whatever it takes,” I say. “Either you’re with me, or you’re against me.”

“I am sorry, Twilight. We simply love you too much to help you do this to yourself,” says Rarity, setting down her cup.

“We won’t fight you, but we will take our leave of this... *debacle* of a city.”

I grin. It isn’t a happy grin. “Oh, the five of you aren’t going anywhere.”

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Changing my friends' minds may take a few days of creative thinking, but I know I can do it in a humane way. I still care about them, even if they don't care about me. I can afford to take my time showing them that they're wrong and I'm right.

Then the next afternoon, everything changes.

I'm minding my own business, coordinating a new tax policy that will allow ponies to make contributions of emotional energy to the swarm in lieu of bits to the treasury, when my drones becomes aware of something important. Curious, I reach out to see what they've found.

I wake up on the floor a few minutes later, without any memory of what just happened to me. All I know for sure is that whatever it is, it hurts.

I reach out for the information again, more cautiously this time. Instead of plunging straight into it, I brush up around the edges. The guerrillas. A meeting. An attack. Fire. The littlest tidbits I can manage, slowly coming together to form a coherent picture.

The rebellion attacked a meeting of the council I put together to help manage the transition. The one my parents joined only because I asked them to.

The final piece falls into place: no survivors.

I very nearly black out again. My parents. They took my parents from me. I scream, loud enough for the entire city to hear. The stained glass windows up and down the great hall crack and explode under the sonic onslaught. My drones have a prisoner. I want him in front of me. Now. It takes them less than three minutes to deliver him and throw him at my hooves, beaten but unbowed.

"What. Have. You. Done?" I demand.

"Do what you want. The rebellion will live on without me," the stallion says. He flutters his green wings, stained red with blood of ponies. I wonder if any of it is my parents'.

“They weren’t even changelings! They were ponies like you or me, working to create a better future for all of us,” I say.

“They were a bunch of treasonous quislings who sold out Luna and Celestia’s memory for power. So yeah, I guess they were like you,” he says. “Those ponies were the scum of Equestria, and I hope that they rot with you in the darkest, deepest hell that there-”

He gets no further before I tear out his throat with my teeth. Those awful, slanderous words he’s speaking, words that could never apply to my Mommy and Daddy, devolve into a stream of gurgling noises as they’re drowned out by the torrent of blood pouring down his gaping windpipe.

I spit the flesh and cartilage out on the floor in front of him. “Your little rebellion, anypony who helped you, anypony who even thinks of crossing me. They will all *burn*. And I want to make sure you know before you die that it’s all your fault.”

I don’t know if he hears me, or if he’s coherent enough to understand the words. What matters is that I say them. The Elements of Harmony certainly won’t tolerate the sort of actions I’m planning on taking. That just means that it’s more important than ever for them to go. My patience is at an end. Forget the humane way, it’s time for the expedient way.

I need the rest of the day to set things up. The bearers have been separated and confined for a few days now. Time to see Rainbow Dash.

I give the order and she’s brought before me in the throne room, struggling against the chains she’s bound up in. I rest on my throne, watching with an air of disinterest as I play with the necklace that represents the Element of Loyalty. The lightning bolt shaped ruby glows with an angry inner fire, and when it brushes against my hoof a sharp spike of pain runs down my leg. It’s clear it hates me just as much as I hate it.

“What do you want?” asks Rainbow Dash. “I told you I’m not going to help you with what you’re doing.”

“Want to bet?” I ask, not bothering to look at her as I do.

“Do your worst, Twilight.”

“No, I mean literally. Do you want to make a bet?”

“Huh?”

I finally look down at the pony in front of me, and toss the Element of Loyalty to the floor before her. “Here’s my offer. Prove that you really deserve to be Loyalty after the way you’ve betrayed me, and I’ll let you go. Otherwise, break the necklace. I wouldn’t touch it right now, though.”

Rainbow Dash ignores my warning and reaches out to take it. Well, if she wants it to hurt herself she can’t say I didn’t warn her. Oddly enough though, she picks it up without cringing. She must be a better actor than I ever gave her credit for if she can hide the pain she must be feeling from me. “How am I supposed to prove it? You know me, Twilight, the way I thought I knew you.”

I ignore the implicit little snipe. She didn’t know me as well as she thought she did if she can’t see that I’m using this chance to remake Equestria into something better. “Well if you know the others so well, this will be easy for you.” I stomp my hoof three times on the marble floor, letting the sound ring out through the hall. At the summons, two drones enter leading two Pinkie Pies into the room. One has a red bow tied to her mane, while the other wears a bow that’s similar except for it being blue. The signal wasn’t actually necessary, strictly speaking, but it did add to the effect. “One of these Pinkies is a changeling. Pick one of them. You’re free to leave with the one you choose. The other one dies.”

“WHAT?” exclaims Rainbow Dash. “Twilight, you can’t! I get that you’re mad at us, but... but it’s us! You can’t hurt her.”

“I can and I will. I don’t need to break all five of your Elements,” I say. I have no idea if that’s actually true; I plan to be quite thorough. “I guess you better choose carefully. It should be easy for you, after all. What sort of loyal friend wouldn’t be able to tell their real friend from from an imposter?”

“Hi Dashie! This’ll be easy, just pick me and we can both leave and figure out how to help the others,” says the red-bowed Pinkie.



“No, don’t pick her! I’m the real Pinkie, she’s just an icky, meany changeling,” says the blue-bowed one.

Rainbow Dash looks back and forth between them “What’s the matter, Rainbow Dash? Having some trouble? Take your time,” I say. I watch the confusion and terror slowly creep into her face. She can’t tell, just like I knew she couldn’t. My drones are very, very good at what they do.

“I’m Pinkie,” says the red-bowed one.

“Nuh uh,” says the blue-bowed one.

“Uh huh!”

“Nuh uh!”

“Uh huh!”

“Nuh huh!”

“Nuh huh!”

“Uh... oh, she’s *good*.”

“Both of you stop that, it’s confusing,” says Rainbow Dash.

“Well, if you can’t decide, I’ll just have to kill them both. A shame to lose such a talented drone,” I say.

“No! If you have to kill somepony, kill me. Pinkie didn’t do anything.”

“Sorry, you aren’t getting out of this that easily,” I say. “This is what I do to ponies who betray me and stand against me. I make them suffer. It’s your own fault for not helping me when I asked you to. A real friend would have.”

“No way, Twilight. A real friend tells you if you’re making a mistake, she doesn’t just help you make it because you asked,” says Rainbow Dash.

I narrow my eyes. There’s an annoying little twitch developing at the corner of one of them then just won’t stop. Stop it, body. I’m in control here, not you. Don’t you start to defy me too. “This isn’t a mistake, it’s the right thing to do. You’re just too weak to accept what’s necessary.” I’m tired of waiting. “Oh well, you had your chance.”

The drones begin to lead the two Pinkies away. “It’s fine, Dashie,” says the one with the red ribbon. “I forgive you, OK? Whatever happens next, I’m just glad you’re safe.” The other one just starts to cry.

Dash tugs at her bonds trying to follow after them, but she’s wrapped up tight. “Red! I pick the red one!” she cries out.

The blue-ribboned Pinkie begins to cry even harder, and falls to the floor sobbing. The red-bowed one gives an entirely un-Pinkielike smile and in a flash of green fire, transforms back into the changeling she is.

“Oops,” I say to the horrified Rainbow Dash.

“NO! NO! Help me Dashie! I don’t wanna go! Help me!” screams the sobbing Pinkie Pie. She digs her hooves into the carpet, which shifts and bunches up as the drone continues to drag her towards the door in the rear of the room.

“I’m sorry, Pinkie. I’m so, so sorry,” cries Rainbow Dash. She’s pinned down to the floor by four changelings, twisting and struggling trying to follow after them. Pinkie is led out of the throne room, and the door closes behind them with a dreadful finality.

“Break it and I’ll spare her,” I say.

“You’re really serious. You’re really going to do it to her. Kill your best friends,” says Rainbow Dash. Finally, she understands. She always was a bit slow on the uptake.

“That’s up to you now,” I say.

“...okay. You win, Twilight. You win.” Rainbow Dash looks down at the piece of jewelry laying on the ground before her. With a sigh and a snuffle she raises a hoof in the air, takes a deep breath, and brings it down hard onto the jewel in the necklace’s center. It cracks and shatters.

The effect on Rainbow Dash is instantaneous. Angry red light glows in the center of her chest, arcing between her and the broken trinket below. She looks like she’s trying to scream but no sound passes her lips. After what must feel like an eternity to her, the light fades away and her body collapses to the floor. She doesn’t stir.

I regret that happening. Mostly the fact that I didn't think to record it or take any notes of my observations. After all, I'm only going to be able to observe it four more times at best. The drone carries Rainbow Dash away, still alive apparently, and I head to the rear door Pinkie was dragged away through. I open it to find both guards and Pinkie Pie of the other side.

"Nice work," I say.

Pinkie pulls the blue ribbon from her hair and transforms back into the shape of the changeling she's been all along.

"Thank you, my queen."

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I remember a story Celestia told me once. It was a cautionary tale about the dangers of ill-advised magical research and the consequences on the reckless. A researcher she knew a few decades back, one with only the noblest of intentions, wanted to study the effects of total sensory deprivation. After all, flotation tanks and other forms of therapeutic sensory deprivation had already shown some promise as treatments for mental disorders, this was just the logical continuation of the idea. He secured a grant, and built a simple magical chamber. When the door was closed, the magics that activated immersed anything inside in a total void. Sight, sound, sensation, even a pony's sense of their own body and the passage of time are cut off from their mind, while the researchers would monitor from another room. The ultimate form of being alone with one's thoughts.

The first volunteer went mad in eleven minutes.

Celestia ordered the room destroyed and that the experiment never be repeated. But she didn't destroy the notes. It was easy enough to rebuild.

By the time I open the door to check in on her, Pinkie's been inside it for three days.

She's laying on her side in the middle of the room, trembling. As the magics break she gasps and starts touching herself all over her body with her hooves, taking stock of what she can feel again. When she looks over to the door where I'm

standing, she gives a raspy gasp as the light falls onto her face. Her pupils are dilated until they fill nearly her entire eyes, and they're clearly quite sensitive. "Hello, Pinkie," I whisper quietly as I can. She clasps her hooves over her ears and tries to scream, but only a dry croak comes out along with a few flecks of blood. She must have screamed herself raw trying to make herself hear something, anything, against the nothingness.

I wait for a minute while she readjusts to the world around her. I wouldn't want to hurt her, after all.

"Were you scared, Pinkie?" I ask eventually. I float a small glass of water over to her. She's about to start feeling the effects of three days worth of hunger and dehydration hitting her all at once. She tries to speak, but her voice is shot and no sound comes out. Instead she just nods. "Well, I guess we found a fear you can't laugh at, didn't we?"

She looks like she wants to cry, but there's no moisture left in her body for tears. I lay the Element of Laughter on the floor between us. She stares down at the balloon-shaped emblem in the center. "I want you to break this. Destroy the Element. See how useless laughter turned out to be in the end? That's what happens when you put faith in something. It lets you down when you need it the most. Don't you let me down too. I'd hate to have to lock you in here again, but I will if you don't break the necklace."

Pinkie Pie flinched at my threat to seal her back up. I wonder what oblivion is like. I wish I were ever going to find out. Celestia let me try a float tank once, and it was an interesting experience to be sure. Like I was exploring an entire universe inside my head. This is supposed to be far more intense, though, and if this is what it did to a mare as imaginative as Pinkie I probably don't want to experience it.

Pinkie lifts up the necklace. She holds it in her hooves and stares at it, then brings it up and rubs it against her cheek while she stares at some point a million miles away. Then, with a snuffle, she brings it down and hits it against the floor. She isn't as strong as Rainbow Dash, especially after what she's just been through. The gem only cracks, it doesn't break.

Pinkie has to lift it back up and slam it again and again, each time fracturing it a bit more until with a shrill, tiny cry she brings it down one final time and the jewel falls apart in a pile of shard. The room lights up, cast pink as the same light jumps between the broken Element and Pinkie. I watch the process a little more closely that I did with Rainbow Dash. What a fascinating display. Pinkie's mane goes flat and limp. She falls back to the floor and it drapes over her face. The one eye I can still see is staring out into space, unresponsive.

It looks like she still had enough moisture left for one more tear, which slides down her muzzle and drips onto the floor.

"Thank you, Pinkie. I knew you were a good friend," I say. A couple of changelings respond to my thoughts and appear in the doorway to drag her away to a nice comfy bed where she can recover. See how reasonable I can be when my friends stop being so stubborn?

I turn to follow them, but before I leave the room a thought stops me. A ridiculous notion. I had been wondering a moment ago what oblivion was like, now I'm in a chamber that could show me. But it's not worth the risk of making myself go crazy. I chuckle, trying to imagine myself going off the deep end. Who would save everypony from the Elements? And would I really want to torture myself like that?

Unbidden, the magic in my horn springs to life. I frown. I didn't want to do that. What am I doing? What's happening? Why does my head hurt so much? My magic wraps itself around the door and slams it shut.

The world falls away in an instant. Blackness deeper than I've ever seen fills my vision, and I stop hearing ambient sounds I wasn't even aware of until they become conspicuous by their absence. The same is true of little things like the sensation of my hooves against the floor, the slightly rank smell of the chamber's interior, even my own heartbeat. All stripped away from me in a second. Or an hour. My sense of the passage of time disappears as well. At least it stopped the buzzing of the changelings, I wonder what they'll do while I'm under. Still, it's actually sort of relaxing to be floating along like this, with nothing but my thoughts for company.

Pinkie went crazy from this? An imaginative pony like her? With no true vision my own imagination takes over as the next best thing, calling up the way she looked a minute ago. Laid out on the floor. Hurting. Broken, maybe irreparably.

I did that.

But I had a good reason to do it. I try to call all of those up and look at them instead. Try not to imagine a pink pony, and of course it's all you can see. Without the buzzing of the swarm it's distilled to a simple image of perfect, awful clarity. Dash didn't look much different don't think of Dash too oh no there she is. And my parents, my parents are gone. How did the rebels kill them? No, no, no don't imagine that don't show me that please no please no a distraction there's got to be a distraction but I can't see or hear or feel and there's nothing except them bleeding and burning and hurting and crying out for me to help them and I didn't and the door. Where's the door? I can magic it open if I just knew where it is. I can't feel my magic either. Am I screaming? I can't tell. Let me out. Let me out let me out let me-

Everything explodes. All my senses come rushing back in as I lay in the crater that's all that's left of the room, my horn still vibrating with the residual magic from the blast I set off. I grab at my chest. Even though I can feel the blood pounding in my inner ears I can still barely pick up my thudding heart through all the chitin plating. I glance out the impromptu window I just made in one of the castle's exterior walls, luckily not a load-bearing one it would seem. Based on the position of the sun it's mid to late afternoon. I must have been in there for hours. Fortunately it doesn't seem like the changelings went on a rampage while I was out of commission, the city looks basically like it did this morning and the numbing, distracting buzzing in my head is back. I'm done for the day. Two Elements down and I'll deal with the others tomorrow. After what I just went through in there I need a break, and to talk this out with somepony who understands. My very special somepony.

I moved her into a new room, just until she recovers. I don't want ponies to see her with a broken wing or they might get

the wrong idea about us. So even though she complained I put her on strict bedrest. I even surrounded the bed in a binding circle specially tailored to her, because sometimes tough love is a necessary part of a relationship. I hum a happy little ditty as I take the long flight of steps down into the mountain three steps at a time, past the cells in the dungeon to Luna's room. I knock a few times and push the door open. "Honey, I'm home!"

Luna shifts under the covers of the bed, and pulls them down to uncover her face. The one good eye that isn't swollen shut glares at me and her nose gives the most adorable little twitch. "What do you want?"

"Oh, sweetie, you would not *believe* the day I had at work today," I say. I trot over to the side of the bed and levitate the covers off of Luna. Hmm... I'm going to have to be more careful with her. The marks from the other night are just fading, and I'll need to make sure if I give her any more love bites to put them in places a dress will cover. "I wish I could laze around in bed all day with you!" I lean my head back to avoid the hoof she swings at me the minute I pass through the binding circle. I guess she's a little sensitive about that.

"Release me," she demands.

"Now dear, we've talked about this. Not until your wing is better," I chide.

"The wing that *you* broke."

I giggle. "I know, wasn't that hot? Mmm... just thinking about it gets me excited all over again." Luna's eye goes wide and she scootches back to the other end of the bed. "In fact, why don't you go ahead and raise the moon early today? Then we can jump straight to what we both want."

"I will not disrupt the machinations of the heavens, and especially not for that."

"Oh, come on. Wouldn't it be so *naughty*?" I ask. I crawl over to her and run my hoof over the bruises on her side. She cries out as I put a little pressure on one in particular. I'm just that good. "Really though, I'm going to have to insist. Besides, the

moon's half mine just like the swarm's half yours, after last night."

"Last night? What are you speaking of?"

"Our wedding of course!" Luna's jaw drops open. "Don't you remember? I conducted the ceremony myself. I mean, who's a higher authority than us, right? You were so adorable when I had to tell you three times to say 'I do.' I completely understand though, I've never been that nervous and excited at the same time either. I put through the paperwork today so now it's all official, isn't that great?"

"Whatever sham of a marriage you've constructed for us, that certainly does not mean I would share control of the moon with you, even if I had the mechanism to do so."

I frown. "Well, there's certainly a healthy debate to be had about the importance of marriage and its place as a social institution in modern society, but I think calling it a sham is a bit extreme. If you wanted to keep the moon for yourself you really should have asked for a prenup. As for mechanisms, of course I thought of that! That same siphoning spell that turned me into the changeling queen should work." Luna stares at me in horror. "I know it sounds scary, but it'll be over quickly. I'll even give you some venom and we'll make a sexy little game out of it if that would help."

"That would do the opposite of help, Twilight. You have made your willingness to violate me entirely evident. If I truly must choose, if you truly feel some kind of warped and horrible love for me, leave me my mind. Please, just that. You were a student and a scholar, you must appreciate that the mind is one's final unassailable refuge, one's most private of places. If you respect me and my wishes in any way, don't bite me. I would rather suffer the worst pain you can inflict for a century than spend one more minute in a condition where my thoughts are your playthings."

"Oh, Luna, of course I understand! Give me a big hug!" I open my forelegs wide, ready to prove to her just what a sensitive and caring partner I can be. She hesitates for a moment, but then screws up her courage and leans over to hug me back.



Wrapped there against one another, it's one of the most perfect moments of my life.

Then I bring my mouth down to her shoulder and bite her.

Luna starts to cry, not a sharp cry of surprise and pain but in low, heaving sobs of absolute despair. "Shh.... in a few minutes you're going to feel so much better, Luna. You don't have to be scared, I'm here for you," I say. Silly Luna. I know her better than she knows herself. It's been taking longer and longer for the venom to kick in each time, and when she's in the affected state she's been becoming more and more sluggish to respond to commands. I hope she isn't building up some sort of tolerance.

When her sobs fade away and she goes limp I lower her down onto her back and spread her hind legs. We'll make this fun for both of us. I mount her, lowering myself until our most sensitive spots are aligned just right, and then I start to grind into her. Her mound is pushed every which way as her limp hips offer no resistance, so I wrap my own hind legs around her flanks and redouble my efforts until I can feel a few sparks of arousal rising off of her. Once I feel myself start to grow moist as well, it's time to move on to the main event.

Without changing the tempo of my hips, I lower the tip of my horn to Luna's forehead, right above where she's staring up at the ceiling with wide, vacant eyes. "This is going to blow your mind," I say as I touch my horn to the base of hers. The effect is instantaneous. Magic and secrets start to flow from her mind into mine, and as our connection deepens my cries of rapture and her screams of pain grow indistinguishable.

There's some... some weird side effect that I didn't experience with Chrysalis. I can feel her thoughts. I can feel her *thoughts* and my thoughts *and they're jumbling and tangling up and running over one another and I'm looking down at Luna and I'm looking up at the monster on top of me and I'm not a monster I'm your monster and you'll never be alone again I'll keep you with me forever and ever and never let you go let me go this hurts it hurts so much it hurts so good I wish I could make it hurt more for you I would do anything I would give anything I would give you my soul you have no soul and this is*

*making me all wet I'm so wet for you Luna my cheeks are wet  
there are tears falling on them from somewhere above me  
they're mine I'm crying because I just love you so much if you  
love somepony let them go you cannot hold me I'll hold you  
tight I'll hold your body for hours and hours and it won't  
matter because I'll still be free in Elysium with my sister  
please save me a place at your side Celestia I'm coming soon  
I'm cumming soon too let's do it together that will be so  
romantic I'm so close I'm so far away yes no yes no YES!*

I scream out in ecstasy as the spell ends and I'm wreathed in power and pleasure from an orgasm I ride as far as it will take me, rubbing Luna's marehood raw to squeeze every last bit of it from her. Meanwhile she seizes and twitches under me as well. I've made her experience something so intense that the stars in her mane are going out. I fall down on top of her. For a while she doesn't move, but then I feel her take a few shallow breaths and I know that everything is going to be fine. I test out my new power, closing my eyes and reaching out for the heavens which tremble at my touch. I guide the sun to down below the horizon on a wobbly course, cursing my inexperience. I'll get better with practice. Then I raise the moon up into the sky to replace it and toss up a few stars here and there for good measure.

I'll need more of Luna's power eventually, hopefully the next session of this will be as deeply satisfying as this one was. I'd be up for doing that a few more times tonight but I decide against it. I've quite literally called it an early night, after all. I need to be rested, because tomorrow's going to be a big day. I have three more Elements to crush, and then the monsters that destroyed my dream of a perfect world are going to see what happens when I stop trying to be nice.

# Breaking My Enemies

## BREAKING MY ENEMIES

It's invigorating, being able to raise the sun all by myself. To send the first rays of light into thousands of homes and let everypony know that it's time to wake up to another glorious day.

Not that any of that light makes its way down to me here. The only thing that cuts through the gloom are the various lamps I've placed around the room. I finish raising the sun and roll out of bed, stopping to lean over and give Luna a gentle kiss on the cheek. She doesn't respond, still out of it after last night. I wish I still dreamed. I could pull her into my own fantasies and we'd never have to be apart from one another. The closest thing I have left as a changeling queen is the hazy thoughts of the swarm, still under my control even when I slip into the half-alert state that passes for rest these days. At least I'm well informed when I rise every morning. My drones routed another cell of the resistance overnight.

Over the last few days, I've been experimenting with my own biology, learning all the neat new tricks I have at my disposal. I also discovered that, properly refrigerated, my mind-control venom can be pumped and retain its potency for up to a week. That really freed up the time I had to spend being physically present at the interrogations. Seen one psychological breakdown as a pony's will is subordinated by mine, and you've seen 'em all. The horrible, slanderous lies they screamed at me right before they broke had nothing to do with it.

The infiltrators, armed with the information volunteered by those ponies who suddenly rediscover their proper loyalty to the rightful ruler of Canterlot Hive, head straight for the next hideout. I have the luxury of rotating in fresh changelings for each assault. Sometimes, after an especially successful raid with lots of prisoners, I don't even bother to send any. I just tell the envenomed troops to go kill their former friends. After

all, the stuff wears off in a few hours and then they're going to die anyway, at least this way they do some good first. They're always so happy when I give their meaningless little lives a final purpose.

When my drones are injured, I know just where to send them. They need care and compassion to heal, so each changeling feeds off of the most resilient, inexhaustible source of it that I can imagine. I push open the door to the converted infirmary, leaning to one side to avoid the dollop of mucus-like ichor that drips from the ceiling. The walls are covered in dark ooze with just a hint of the room's original sterile-white wallpaper peeking through here and there. All sorts of disinfectants and coagulants flow from the suspended pods. A drone rubs its gashed side up against one of the glands, and I feel its pain recede away as the released opiates take effect.

Chained up in one corner, unwillingly fueling this entire enterprise, is Fluttershy. Her mane is stuck out every which way, and patches of her coat are missing where they've been shed away. She looks over to me and it takes a few moments for her to register that I'm standing there.

"Hello, Fluttershy. How are you feeling today?"

She only moans in response, just barely strong enough to tilt her head towards me. A drone whose wing was reduced to tatters by a rebel's lucky strike limps in from behind me. Fluttershy notices it, and I catch just the faintest whiff of sympathy and compassion rising off of her, pity and love for the hurt creature to feed on.

"You still haven't learned?" I ask. If she hadn't been so useful these last few days I'd be really upset at how stubborn she's being. "Every time you do that, feel sorry for one of them, you get weaker. They're literally killing you with kindness, but you love them for it. Why?"

"It's not that I like... feeling this way," says Fluttershy, "but nothing... should have to hurt that much. Especially not you, Twilight. You're hurting the most. I'm sorry that I can't love you enough... to make you better."

Is that what she thinks I want from her? Her worthless pity? “You think I’m just some broken little minion who needs or wants your help? I am the Queen of this hive, and the only pony who’s broken here is you. Are you even thinking at all? When the rest of the swarm’s finished feeding off of you, and you’re dead, nopony’s going to take care of all of your animals back in Ponyville. What about them? Do you want them to suffer because you gave up your life for a bunch of changeling drones that don’t even care about you?”

“Of course not,” she whimpers. “But I can’t help the way I feel.”

“Yes you can, Fluttershy,” I say as I kneel down beside her. She winces as green flames spring up inches from her face. I take my old shape again and run a gentle, calming hoof along her back as I hold out the necklace I’ve brought along. “The Elements just don’t understand that sometimes cruelty is the greater kindness. Come on, I’ll even help you break it.”

She doesn’t reply, but she doesn’t fight me as I lift her hoof from the floor and place it on the butterfly jewel set in the necklaces center. “Twilight... I don’t know...”

“Don’t worry, I’ll do all the work. You just need to want it to break, then everything can go back to the way it was. No, better than it was. All these changelings can be your friends, and play with your animals. They can even turn into animals if you want them too. But only if you help me.”

Fluttershy shuts her eyes and tries to say something, but all that escapes her lips are her final whispered hopes. Almost imperceptibly, she gives the tiniest of nods. Not waiting to see if she’ll change her mind, I immediately yank her hoof up off the ground and slam it back down into the necklace. She looks like she trying to cry out in pain, but just can’t manage it. She tries to pull away, but I’m so much stronger than she is now. That’s why I have to help her do this.

Over and over I smash her hoof down on the gem, but it just refuses to crack. At some point the underside of her hoof splits open, and the pink butterfly is stained red with the blood dripping from it. Why won’t it work?

“You’re doing it wrong.” I have to restrain myself from screaming the words because, after all, Fluttershy is one of my closest friends.

“Twilight... you’re crying,” says Fluttershy, her voice resigned and distant.

“No I’m not,” I insist. There is something wet on my cheek though. Some of Fluttershy’s blood must have splattered onto my face. I wipe it away with a hoof and don’t bother to see what color comes away. “Just a few more hits, then it’ll be over. Stay strong, Fluttershy.”

It takes more than a few more hits, and Fluttershy’s hoof looks like it’s going to be permanently mangled before all this is over if I don’t do something. Why does she have to be so... so *Fluttershy*? If she’s even willing to forgive the changelings that are killing her, what can’t she forgive?

Well, I can think of one thing. Or more accurately, one pony.

I look down at her whimpering there. Other ponies, ponies who don’t know her as well I do, might see something weak. I know better. “Is... is it over?” she asks, her eyes still squeezed shut as she weakly tries to pull her bloody hoof away from me.

“Never,” I reply. “Fluttershy, do you think I like this? That I enjoy doing this to you?”

“Of course not, Twilight. I know you don’t. I know you wouldn’t do this if you didn’t have to.”

She looks up at me, and I plaster a sick smile on my face even as doing so makes my stomach twist. “You’re wrong. I do like it, Fluttershy. I’m enjoying this right now.”

Her eyes snap open. “What? But... Twilight, why? We’re friends.”

“We were. A long time ago, we used to be. Then this loop happened and I taught myself to hate you. All five of you.”

“We didn’t do anything, though,” she whispers. Then, infuriatingly, she smiles. “I see now. This is all just a misunderstanding. I knew it. You just made a silly little mistake, now we can help you make things—”

***“THIS ISN’T A MISTAKE!”*** I bellow at her. “Mistakes are what happen when you don’t know any better. I know exactly what I’m doing to you, and I’m choosing to do it anyway. Because I’ll never forgive you. So if this isn’t enough to break you, then next loop I’ll think of something worse and then I’ll do that. And then something worse than that. And then something even worse than all of those put together. And the entire time, I’ll smile.”

She looks up at me like she doesn’t even recognize me anymore, which is exactly what I was hoping for. “Why?”

“Because I hate you,” I say. “In every single loop you’re there, you’re always too damn stubborn to change. To realize that everything’s different now, and that hope is supposed to be gone. You’ll never just give up. You lie to me, every time I wake up you lie and you tell me there’s hope. That if I do things differently this time things might change and I shouldn’t let myself quit no matter how many loops its been. You lie to me and lie to me and lie to me until I almost start to believe you. I believe you and I start to hope that you’re right, but you *never are* and nothing changes and it all starts all over again. I hate you. I hate you I hate you I hate you I HATE YOU!”

Fluttershy just stares up at me. “Twilight... what are you even talking about?”

“Never mind,” I say, shaking my head. I might have gone off on a bit of a tangent there. “I didn’t expect you to understand. My point is that you can forgive me if you want to, but you’re only making it worse for yourself next time. It was either learn to like watching myself do this to you, or go mad. I made my choice, and I’m not sorry. So are you a good enough pony to forgive me for all of that? All the times I ripped you apart and laughed while I was doing it? Are you willing to forgive me for everything I’ve already done and everything I’m going to do, knowing that I’ve never for a single second felt the tiniest bit of remorse, or thought about showing mercy when you begged me to stop?”

“I’m sure if we talk about it and you make me understand why you did it, I’ll—”

“That wasn’t my question. Now, yes or no, do you forgive me right here and right now for what I’ve done.”

Fluttershy opens her mouth and for a single awful second I think she’s going to say yes. But then she looks up into my eyes. Even though it isn’t her usual stare, the crushed innocence there is just as devastating. She looks down at her hoof, dripping blood on the marble floor.

“No.”

I grin, and grab her broken foreleg. This time when I slam it into the Element of Kindness, it shatters like glass. I quickly back away as the unleashed energies overwhelm her and she screams. Pink hairs are torn out of her mane and mix with the equally-pink vortex of power swirling around her. The drones and I watch eagerly, lapping up compassion from the edge of the torrent without getting close enough to be swallowed up.

When the energies die away, Fluttershy is laying there unmoving. It’s a pity I had to say all of those things, all those untruths that aren’t who I am at all. After all, if I’m not a good friend then what’s left of me?

Speaking of lies, it’s time to move down my checklist and work on the next most stubborn Bearer. I run the flat of my tongue along the roof of my mouth, willing the new venom sac I’ve been experimenting with to shift into place. The first dozen or so ponies I experimented on with this new cocktail had various seizures and died, but I’m up to a reasonable survival rate. Besides, Applejack is made of stronger stuff than most.

I swing by the vault to pick up the next Element, glaring at the three that still remain there as I lift Honesty off its pedestal. It and Generosity are still gleaming, if a bit less brightly than before. My crown, though, is another matter altogether. The starburst-shaped amethyst has faded to a dark grey, almost black. I narrow my eyes and just stare into the gemstone for a few minutes, unable to shake the sensation that it’s looking right back at me. When I reach out and touch it, a nasty jolt of magical energy lances right through my foreleg, and I nearly collapse from the pain. It’s gotten stronger than the last time I



tried a few days ago. “You go ahead and keep on kidding yourself. I have all the time in the world to figure you out, and I *will* end you one way or another. I promise.”

Unsurprisingly, the magical jewelry elects not to say anything in response. Instead I take Applejack’s necklace up to the fairly nice suite I’ve been keeping her in. Physical discomfort was never a part of my plan to get her to go along with destroying the Element, and if anything I think leaving her in material comfort while she knows her friends are going through worse gnaws at her more than a prison cell would.

I open the door to her bedroom, but don’t see her anywhere. With a small sigh I throw up a shield the instant before her diving kick hits me, and she bounces roughly to the floor. At least she’s creative about coming up with new angles to attack me from. “Really, Applejack? Do we have to go through this every single day? I don’t suppose you’ve changed your mind, finally,” I ask. We both have our futile routines to go through, week after week.

“Buck you,” she snarls. “Why ya’ doing this, Twilight? You said it’s to keep the Elements from blowin’ us all up, but if they were going to they’d’ve done it by now.”

That does give me pause. “I’m just being extra cautious. They’re dangerous, even now. They need to go.”

“So you’re just gonna keep comin’ in here, day after day, no matter how many times ah tell ya ah’ve made up my mind?”

“Oh, don’t worry. Today’s the last day I’ll be asking,” I say with a grin that shows off both my confidence and copious amounts of fang. “If you won’t change your mind, well, I’m happy to change it for you.”

Applejack’s legs tremble a bit, but she remains defiant. “That mind control stuff again? Didn’t work last time, not gonna work this time.”

I shrug. While that would have been a convenient loophole that would have saved us all a lot of trouble, the connection of a Bearer and their Element is a good deal more metaphysical in nature. My job would be a whole lot simpler without all that

pesky free will getting in my way. “Let’s just say I whipped up something a little different, especially for this occasion.”

I dart forward with snake-like agility and chomp down on her back. Applejack cries out in pain as she falls to the floor, clutching her head. I watch her rolling around with concern; I don’t want her to die, at least now just yet. After a minute or so her thrashing about starts to slow down until she’s lying on the floor panting for breath. “What... what was that?”

“You know, the pony mind really is an amazing thing.” She stares up, confused, as I go on. “Did you know that your sensory input makes up only a small fraction of everything you perceive? Everything else that you think you’re seeing or feeling is just your brain making up the details as it goes along. It’s really interesting, when you really dig into some of the neurology of it. The upshot of it is that what you believe is the ‘honest truth?’ That’s just your brain telling you a convincing lie every second of every day.”

“Only liar here is you, tryin’ to fill my head with all that nonsense about not knowin’ what’s real and what isn’t.”

I sigh. This would have been a more productive discussion if I’d had time to give her a full rundown on introductory psychology, but much as I’d have liked to I’ve had a rebellion to put down and a city to raise up. “I’ll just have to give you a demonstration. Then you can decide for yourself if you want to keep pretending that the truth is going to set you free.” I toss the necklace onto the floor in front of her. “That venom? It makes you... let’s just say suggestible. But instead of changing the way you act, we’re going to turn all those nifty little neurological quirks in your brain on their heads. Doesn’t that sound like a fun experiment?” I should probably be all somber and threatening, but the prospect of seeing if the last month of reformulating and transforming my venom will work the way I hope it will makes me more than a little giddy.

Applejack, though, just shakes her head. “Won’t work. You just told me that nothing I’m about to remember is true.”

“But it’ll *feel* true, in every way that matters. Because in the end, true or false doesn’t matter. Just what we believe.”

“Ah don’t believe you. A mare can tell herself over and over that things are a way that they ain’t, but sooner or later the truth catches up with her. And the longer she runs, the uglier it’ll get when it does.”

I snarl. My patience with her and her ridiculous ideas about truths and lies is rapidly running out. Like anything is that black and white. Sometimes, all anypony can do is just try to find the lightest shade of grey that she can, and anypony who says otherwise is just a naive little foal. “Alright then, Applejack,” I say through clenched teeth. “Let’s talk about the night your parents died.”

Applejack jumps up to her hooves, ignoring what must be tremendous pain from those envenomed bites, and leans towards me like she’d going to try to attack again. “You don’t deserve to even speak about them. Besides, I told you what happened. There was a fire, weren’t nopony’s fault, and ah made my peace with that a long time ago.”

“Well,” I say, lazily examining the back of my hoof, “that’s how you remember it right now. And hey, if knowing that’s what really happened is enough then nothing else I say’s going to make a difference no matter how real the memories feel.” The pupil of her eyes have started to dilate, which means the venom’s kicking in. “Allow me to present an alternative narrative, though. One where you were more personally involved.”

She’s starting to tremble. “Don’t you dare. Ah loved them, still do.”

“Sure, let’s run with that,” I say. Like I just told her, the brain is so wonderful at filling in missing details, building a narrative out just a few little scraps of information. All I need to do is plant the seeds. “Maybe... How about you were jealous of how your parents weren’t paying attention to you as much as they had been once there was a new foal for them to look after. Seems like as good a motive as any. If you couldn’t have them, then nopony could.”

She falls to her knees and pulls her hat over her ears. “Stop it. That’s not what happened. Stop it.”

“So one night,” I continue, raising my voice so she can’t block it out so easily, “you decided that you’d had enough. A fire seems awfully impersonal though, why don’t we make these new memories a little bit more hooves on? Isn’t it funny, the little details that stick in your head? The creaking floorboards as you snuck down the stairs. Banging a shin against the counter in the dark and hoping nopony would wake up. The moonlight glinting off the edge of the knife. I bet by now you’re remembering them like it was only yesterday.”

Applejack stares off into the middle distance, her eyes wide as images only she could see play out in front of them. She mumbles some plea, or prayer, but she’ll find no relief in me. She should have broken the necklace instead of forcing me to do this to her.

“So you took the knife and, well, how is it you usually go about preparing apples for a cobbler, or maybe a pie? Take a knife and peel away the skin? Gouge out chunks of the flesh and let the juices dribble all over your hooves? Nice, familiar motions you’ve been through hundreds of times. Well, I’m sure your mind can do a better job of filling in exactly how it felt. Not to mention the looks on their faces when they saw who was doing it to them.” Judging by the way she’s whimpering and trembling on the floor, it’s doing exactly that. She stares at her front hooves and starts to vigorously rub them on the carpet, trying to wipe away the stains that are only there in her head.

“Not...” she tries to speak but her voice trails off into nothingness a few times. “Not what happened.”

“Nope!” I proclaim entirely too cheerfully. “All just a profound, terrible lie. One you’ll never, ever get out of your head, no matter how many times you tell yourself it didn’t really happen. Oh, and one more little detail before those thoughts settle in permanently.” I lean down to whisper to her, and despite herself her ears perk up. “You loved every second of it.” She starts to cry, silently, with only the sound of her gasping for a shallow breath filling the quiet bedroom. “Break the necklace, and it goes away.”

With that, I simply turn and walk out of the room. She deserves to be alone with her thoughts.

That just leaves one Element to go, and not the one I would have pinned as the longest holdout. I'm still mulling over just how to polish off the set when I get a message that means my day is about to get even better than it's already been. A pair of ponies who I expected to come see me weeks ago. I don't even bother to fly down to the train station, I just teleport straight there as the train pulls up. There's only one passenger car, and several drones are on it along with the ponies I'm waiting for, so I sit right in front of the door they'll be stepping out of any second, bouncing up and down on my hooves willing the train to slow down a little faster. After a minute that seems to drag on for at least fifteen, the train's engine gives a final hiss and the door swings open.

"Cadance! Shiny!" I call out as I lunge towards them.

Instead of being excited to see me, they both scream, and Shining throws up a shield that I run into with a painful thump. I collapse to the ground and rub my shoulder where I hit it, my excitement tempered a little. I realize just what shape I'm in, and that those two might not have great memories associated with a changeling queen lunging at them.

"Sorry! My bad!" I say as I change back into my old shape. Every time I shift back into this form it feels tighter, itchier, more inappropriate than the time before. I'm not sure why my mind would be rejecting the shape, though, it's only my old normal which you would think would be the easiest to keep up.

"Twilight? That's... is that really you?" asks Cadance, still holding tight to Shining Armor.

I grin. "It sure is! Sunshine, sunshine—"

Cadance holds up her free hoof to interrupt me. "Let's... let's just skip that this time, okay?"

My smile slips a little bit, but I force myself to brighten right up again. She's probably just tired after the long trip. "Sure. Glad you could finally come see my city."

“Sorry it took us so long,” says Shining cautiously. “The Empire’s been getting a pretty major influx of, well...” he glances down at Cadance, who nods back at him “we’ve been getting a lot of refugees.”

“Really? From where?” I ask, tilting my head. “You should send some of them here. The stupid rebellion’s been spreading all these nasty lies and we’ve got a lot of vacant properties that have opened up. Great locations.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” says Shining. “Twiley, is it true that Mom and Dad...”

I rush in to hug him again, and this time he doesn’t push me away. For just an instant I feel like the little filly who fell down the library steps and bumped her head until her big brother found her and made it all better. I sniffle and let out a few tears, but quickly enough I realize I can’t afford a public breakdown, not now. So I force those feelings back down and compose myself. “You should have been here for the funeral. I needed you.”

“I’m sorry, Twilight. I wish I could have been.”

“And you missed my wedding too, you dumb jerk.”

I feel him stiffen up in my forelegs. “Right, your wedding,” he says with a note of caution in his voice. “You just kinda... married a Princess randomly out of the blue.”

I glance at Cadance, then back to him. “Oh, like you’re one to talk.”

He shrugs. “Yeah, but I knew her for most of my life. Even if you got to know Luna in the time loop, which I’m still not entirely clear on, by the way, isn’t it still really sudden for her?”

Cadance nudges him in the side. “Dear, I’m sure once we talk to Luna it will make more sense. I thought perhaps we could all have dinner together tonight?”

I shuffle nervously, trying to find a spot to look that’s anywhere but at them. “She’s been sort of under the weather for the last... month. I doubt she’ll be up for that.”

“Sorry to hear that. I’ll have to bring her a bowl of soup when I look in on her.”

I gulp and start to sweat. “She’s... contagious?”

Cadance narrows her eyes at me, but says nothing. Shining Armor diplomatically clears his throat to break the ensuing silence. “So your letter said that there was something wrong with the Elements of Harmony? I’m sure we can take them back to the Empire with us and have the archmagi there take a look at them.”

“Oh, I took care of that. Already destroyed three of them.” Shining’s eyes go wide with alarm, but before he can ask a follow-up question we all feel a surge of magical energy from the direction of the castle. It billows around us as it rushes past, and then it’s gone as quickly as it came. “Actually, make that four.”

Cadance looks sick to her stomach, more nauseous than she should from just a little magic surge. I lean in to examine her more closely even as she pulls back from my gaze. I take a couple of deep whiffs. Something about her smells off to my enhanced changeling senses. There’s something she isn’t telling me. Before I can ask about it a loud keening wail fills the city, and she goes pale. “What was that?”

“Oh, that,” I struggle to find the vaguest way to answer that question without actually answering it. “There’s somepony who just found out she isn’t going to be able to forget something she was hoping to. Are you alright? You look a little out of it.”

Her foreleg wraps around her abdomen and she grunts. “I just... this city doesn’t feel like it used to. I’d heard rumors, but I thought they were just exaggerations.”

“I know! Isn’t it great?” I frown. That’s not all that it is. “What aren’t you two telling me?” I shift back into my changeling queen shape, which feels so much sharper and with it than when I’m a unicorn. I take a deeper whiff and she recoils even further from me, eyes squeezed shut. Mine, on the other hoof, snap open. “Wait, are you pregnant?”

Cadance and Shining Armor both stare down at me. “You can tell?”

I gape at them for a long moment while my mind catches up with the new information, then I break into a huge grin. I had no idea how badly I needed a piece of news like that until I heard it. “Ohmigosh, that’s amazing! Congratulations, you two! I’m gonna have a niece? Or a nephew? Oh, I bet he’s going to be just adorable, aren’t you little one?” I get down on my belly and talk directly into Cadance’s side, not caring if I look ridiculous. “Won’t you? Won’t you be just so cute I could eat you right up?” I glance up and catch the look of horror my brother and sister-in-law are giving me. “Uh, figuratively speaking. Do you know when you’re due yet?”

Shining coughs and looks away. “Nope. Too soon to say.”

I’m instantly suspicious. Shining Armor’s never been a great liar, and even from here I can hear the way his heart’s started to beat a bit faster. “Are you sure? You should at least have a guess.” They say nothing, and look away from me. “I mean, the more notice you could give me the better. I know it’s hardly an exact science but I want to make sure that I’m there when—”

“No.”

Cadance’s command is almost a whisper, but it carries an unmistakable tinge of authority with it. “What... what do you mean ‘no?’” I ask. My excitement is slowly fading into confusion, with disappointment not far behind.

“Look,” says Shining Armor, “I’m sure once we talk a bit more we’ll find some sort of compromise.”

“No,” says Cadance again. “Shining, look around you. Does this look or feel like the Canterlot you remember? Ponies are fleeing the place in droves, Celestia’s *dead*, Luna might as well be for all we know, and you think I’m just going to invite the pony, sorry, ex-pony, who made it happen to cuddle up next to us in the delivery room and pretend everything’s just fine? I might as well be asking Chrysalis to my baby shower.”



I step back like I've just been struck. "But... but Cadance, it's me. It's Twilight."

Cadance just scoffs. "Not anymore. All I see is a changeling queen looking for an easy meal. We should never have come back here."

"Hey, Cadance, come on," says Shining Armor. Still he stays by her side while she glares at me.

"Well at least I was here!" I scream at her. "Where were you two? In your nice, safe palace up north while I was fighting and dying and suffering to save as much of this place as I could? I *needed* you! I needed *somepony*! My foalsitter or my big brother or somepony who would protect me from the monsters, but *you weren't here* and now you have the gall to judge me for what I did to beat them?"

Cadance looks at me with contempt and maybe a tiny shred of pity. I'm not sure which I hate more. "It looks to me like the monster won."

I scream, more of a roar really, and my fangs snap out as I lunge for the two of them. How dare they. How *dare* they question my choices? They'll learn respect. They'll learn obedience if I have to pump them each so full of venom that they—

For the second time in ten minutes, I slam into one of Shining Armor's shields. This time it hurts a lot more. I scramble up onto my hooves and see that he's put himself between the two of us. "So, you too, huh BBBFF? Siding with her over me?"

"It's not about sides, but if you try something like that again I'll do whatever it takes to keep you from hurting her," he replies. He motions for Cadance to get back onto the train they just left. I could have some of the drones inside jump them, but on further consideration I pull them back. I want to look him in the eyes when I tear out his throat with my own teeth.

"Fine. I don't need you. I don't need either of you. I'm strong. Stronger than you, stronger than the Princesses, even stronger than the Elements. I'll prove it, too. You're going to regret abandoning me and Equestria when I... when we needed you

the most. Run back to your precious Crystal Empire and pretend you're safe there." Cadance's horn glows, and the train engine starts to stutter forward. Shining Armor casts one last pleading look back at me, and all I see reflected in his eyes is the image of the monster who's screaming threats at him. But it's his own fault. I didn't want things to be this way. "Don't get too comfortable up there, because I'm going to prove to you that I'm stronger than ever. I'll break your city apart piece by piece until there's nowhere left to hide. Then you'll suffer like I did. You'll suffer until you're nothing but a withered, hate-ridden shell of what you used to be. Is that what you want? To be me?"

I blink and realize that at some point while I've been standing there ranting, the train has disappeared over the horizon. The sun seems lower in the sky than I remember it being a minute ago, too. I squeeze my eyes shut, and try to remember what I was just screaming at them, but all I can remember is little pieces and fragments, all soaked in rage and hatred.

I throw my head back and let out a shrill cry, one that drones all throughout the city echo. The Swarm is going to war.

# Breaking My Rules

## BREAKING MY RULES

“Luna? I’m back.”

I trot back into our bedroom, and as the door closes behind me I finally let myself relax. My shoulders slump down and I exhale a deep, sighing breath as I rub the exhaustion from my eyes. The last two weeks have been hard, and part of me wishes I hadn’t let what happened back there at the train station happen the way it did. Since then, my scouts report that the endless blizzards around the Crystal Empire have become even more intense than usual. Not a bad first line of defense against an army of exothermic bug monsters, and that’s not even taking into account Shining Armor’s shield around the whole city. Now that they know we’re coming, they’re watching the ponies coming into and out of the Empire more carefully, and the few infiltrators I have managed to slip in there wouldn’t be enough to cause much damage on their own.

And I *still* can’t seem to stomp out this stupid rebellion! It’s gone from a minor annoyance to a major thorn in my side with my forces shifting the way they are. Where are they all even coming from, anyway? One cell seemed to have links back to Fillydelphia, and I sent a wave of drones out to discourage their meddling in my city’s affairs. Plus they brought back quite a bit of extra food, just what a growing swarm needs. Even so, the rebels keep popping up, sabotaging my infrastructure and spreading the baseless lie that I’m a tyrant, or that Luna’s gone for good, or all these other ridiculous allegations I have to spend the time I don’t have to correct. You would think the public executions would help, but no. All the ones I’ve bothered to attend have just started blurring together in my mind. Yesterday the executioner beheaded a pony that I would have sworn was the exact same stallion as one I’d laid eggs in a month ago.

When I’m not dealing with military affairs or the political machinations of the few ponies who still show up to my court,

I'm in the lab trying to figure out how to give my drones resistance to the arctic temperatures we'll be invading through. I don't mind that so much, I've always loved experimentation, and I have a wealth of subjects who are more than happy to volunteer. Just yesterday I managed to graft a freshly severed unicorn horn onto a drone and actually integrate our two species' magical aptitudes together. It only had the chance to try out a few new types of spells before it expired, but just the proof of concept opens up a whole new world of possibilities that I could spend centuries teasing out. If there were only a few more hours in the day!

None of those things are my absolute top priority, though. That is, always has been, and always will be coming back to this room to snuggle with my wife. I haven't missed a night yet, and I just know that Luna appreciates the attention.

She's lying in the bed just like always, not reacting to my appearance at all. I trot over and when I give her a gentle kiss on the cheek, a little spark of life appears in her blank stare. She jolts back, slamming her back into the headboard as she awakens from whatever trance-like state she was in. "How are you feeling tonight, love?"

She glares at me in silence, not answering.

"I'm sorry I haven't been here very much lately, everything's been so busy," I continue, pushing her aside and climbing into the bed with her. She tries to crawl to the other side, but I'm having none of that and wrap my forelegs over her chest, pulling her back against me. I close my eyes and take a deep whiff of her stringy, faded blue mane. Running a hoof over her side, she trembles slightly as I brush over her wing. "Almost better. That's good. And it looks like it's set right this time. I'd hate to have to break it a third time and keep you cooped up here for even longer."

"I think it's well enough to fly again," says Luna. "Why don't you let me out of here a little earlier? I'd like to see the stars again."

"I know you would," I say to her, "don't worry, I'm doing my best with them each night. I even thought maybe we could talk

about designing a new constellation, dedicate it to Celestia. We could even roll it out whenever we finally get around to giving her a proper funeral.”

She turns over to face me, putting one of her forelegs between her chest and mine and pushing me back a bit. “You haven’t buried her yet?”

I shake my head. “I can still use the body. It’s what she would want; one last lesson she can teach by my cutting her up and examining her physiology.”

Luna wrinkles up her nose and looks away again, saying nothing.

“Luna? Is something wrong, hon?” I ask, nuzzling at her neck. “I feel like we never talk anymore. I miss that so much. You don’t want our marriage to fall apart because we don’t communicate, do you?”

She lets out a bitter laugh. “Trust me, if our ‘marriage’ doesn’t work out, that won’t be why.”

“Oh, well that’s good,” I say, a bit nervous at her tone. Then I grin. “Somepony sounds cranky. I would be too, being stuck in here all the time. But I know juuuust how to cheer you up.”

Luna’s eyes go wide, and she tries to push off of my chest. My forelegs wrap her up tight, though, and I flip her onto her stomach. Rolling on top of her, I press her face down into the bedding until her struggles stop. Then I lean down and run my tongue along the very edge of her ear, making her shudder with anticipation. “I’ve got a lot of steam to blow off,” I whisper, “so things might get a little bit rougher than usual.”

“Twilight, please don’t. I don’t want this. I don’t—” her words devolve into a series of short gasps as I wrap my hind legs around her midsection and squeeze with my thighs. I feel her ribs threatening to snap inward as they press into her lungs, forcing the life-giving air out of her body.

“Oh, that’s what you always say at first,” I say with a giggle. “I’ve used an awful lot of venom today, so I’m afraid I’m not up for any love bites. I’ll make it up to you, though.” With a few quick twists of my wrist I wrap a chunk of her mane up

around my hoof and yank. She lets out a strangled scream as her neck bends, forcing her to stare up at the ceiling. I take a deep breath and cover her open mouth with my own, easing the pressure on her barrel as I exhale straight into her lungs while I wrestle her tongue into submission with my own.

I am just such a hopeless romantic sometimes.

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When I finally roll off of her a half an hour later, I'm the one gasping for breath. About halfway through she went a bit limp, I guess unable to keep up with my insatiable need for her. Didn't slow me down too much, though.

She slowly comes back around as I study all the new welts and bruises I've just given her, taking in each and every one so I'll be able to call to mind the moments of ecstasy each one gave me long after they've healed. "Wow," I say, unable to suppress my goofy smile. "I think that was the best yet. Think we'll be able to top that tomorrow?" When there's no answer forthcoming I lift her up like a ragdoll, and place her straddling my belly so I can just gaze up at her. I can feel her body shaking against me. It kind of tickles. She's so happy that she's even crying as I brush a loose hair out of her face. "I love you."

She bursts into even more tears, shuddering as I hug her and stroke her back until she calms down. "You... you... I..."

I giggle and nuzzle the tip of her nose with mine, feeling her short, hot breaths against my lips. "Don't be embarrassed to talk about your feelings. Not with me. I want to hear exactly how you feel about me."

She looks down and there's a little twitch at the corner of her eye. "You want to know how I feel about you?"

"Of course. I know you have a way with words. I even read one of the books of sonnets that I'm not supposed to know you put out under a fake name. They were beautiful. Although what else would I expect when they came from such a beautiful soul?"

“You... really don’t want me to say it,” says Luna, but I can tell just a little more encouragement will break down those last few defenses.

“I don’t mind if it’s a little sappy,” I say. “Come on, woo me. Take everything you feel and put it into words as best you can. I bet I’ll fall in love with you all over again.”

She just looks at me for a few more seconds, and I can see the gears turning in her head. Then, ever so slowly, her blank expression morphs into more of a snarl. “Twilight Sparkle,” she spits the name at me, “you are—”

And then everything goes black.

The next thing I know, I’m sitting against the wall on the far side of the now-destroyed bedroom. I look down and my hooves are covered in gore. But... but what...

Something on the other side of the room stirs, a figure lying on the ground wrapped in sheets so red with blood you’d never guess they used to be white. I rush over, staggering as my mind races trying to figure out what just happened. “No!” I scream when I confirm that the broken mare is Luna. She looks like she’s been almost torn apart by whatever attacked us. One of her hind legs is twisted at the knee, the lower half of it hanging off of her by just a string of ligament. Splintered ends of broken bones jut out of her side. “Luna? Luna, hold on. I’ll fix this. I can fix it.”

“Don’t... you dare...” she wheezes, coughing up blood as she does. “You’ve... done plenty already.”

My breath catches in my throat as I begin to channel a huge surge of healing magic, fueled by a panicked burst of adrenaline. Light bursts out from my horn and into her body, and Luna starts to scream in agony. Having flesh tugged and yanked back together is just as painful as the wounds that caused the damage in the first place, if not more. I don’t have time for anything more delicate, and when her eyes roll back into her head I think I may have lost her for good anyway. When my magic finally fades, completely spent, Luna’s covered in scars. I doubt she’ll ever walk again, either. But she’s alive. I grab her and pull her against me, rocking back

and forth as we both sob in one another's grasp. "I thought... I thought I lost you, Luna," I whimper. I sniffle and wipe my eyes as I gently lower her back to the floor. "Who did this to you? What happened?"

She gives me a funny look, confused and scared. "You really don't remember?"

I shake my head. "You were about to say how you felt about me, and then nothing. Did somepony hit me from behind?" I feel at the back of my head, but can't find any injury there. "Was it the rebels? Assassins from the Crystal Empire?" She goes quiet. "I'm sorry. It doesn't matter. Don't try to remember it right now, just hold me." I cling to her even as I send out the command for my changelings to scour the city. Turn the whole place upside down if they have to. I don't know what I'd do if I ever lost her. "I bet it was the Crystal Empire," I mutter. "The cowards are scared of me. You should have seen the look Cadance gave me when the train pulled away. If that racist bitch had *anything* to do with this, and I find out, she'll wish she were dead. When I take the city, I'm not just going to kill her. I'm going to slice her open, rip out her baby, and make her watch me stomp it into paste." The anger rising up in me is like nothing I've ever felt before. Sitting there on the floor holding the sobbing Luna against me, though, it slowly begins to taper off. The rage cools down, but it doesn't go away. "I only wish I remembered what you said."

"What I said?" repeats Luna, her breath quickening.

"About how you feel about me. You have such a way with words, I'm sure it was absolutely wonderful. You don't happen to remember exactly what it was, do you?"

Luna goes silent, and for a while I suspect that the memory is just too painful for her. After what she's just been through, she doesn't have to tell me what it was if she doesn't want to. I open my mouth to tell her so when she gives me a forced smile. "I said you were great."

"Great?" I raise a quizzical eyebrow. I've seen this mare launch into a spur of the moment ode to a well-cooked meal,



complete with iambic pentameter. I was expecting something a bit more flowery.

“Yep. Just... great. Really great.”

I shrug, and smile. The mare just came back from death’s door. It’s only fair to cut her a break instead of trying to fish some elaborate compliment out of her. “Well, you’re pretty great too.” I kiss her now-scarred neck, and just hold her for a few more minutes. I’m far too wired to sleep now, my earlier exhaustion wiped away. She’s still weak and shaking, so I bundle up the sheets and blankets into a makeshift nest to replace the destroyed bed. I’ll bring new furniture down tomorrow. She passes out on the floor while I’m doing that, so I gently carry her over and settle her into them with my magic. It’s a strain to even carry her after all the power I expended on that healing spell. With one last kiss on the forehead, I shut off the light and leave, locking the door behind me just to be safe.

“Sounded like you two were having fun in there,” says Chrysalis from the nearby cell.

“Did you see anypony leave this room before I did? Or hear any voices besides ours?”

She frowns. “No, just you two. I’ve gotten pretty good at identifying the two of you by just your screams after all this time.”

I shake my head, wishing I could remember what happened during this strange gap in my memory, or what would have triggered it. “Inform me right away if anypony tries to get in. What I do to them will pale before what I do to you if you try to hide any information from me, you understand?”

“Of course, my Queen,” she says, a sneer spread across the face that used to belong to me. “I live to serve.”

With one last glare at her, my mind trying to puzzle out just when everything went so wrong, I head upstairs to get back to work. This stupid world isn’t going to fix itself, after all.

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By the following morning, the strain of the all-nighter is starting to get to me. I wish I could take the day off and head

back down to my bedroom, already under repair, and just hold Luna for hours. Maybe that would help make this strange ache in my chest and the accompanying migraine fade a bit. But there's no rest for the wicked, and even though my heart's down there with her the rest of me is in my lab examining the latest clutch of modified hatchlings.

"You have a good eye for color," I say to the pony glaring at me from her cage in the corner, "what do you think of this shade? Decent camouflage against the snow?" I hold up the struggling infant by the scruff of its neck, its pale grey chitin still soft to the touch. It cries out at the disturbance, flailing uselessly in the hopes I'll return it to where it was cuddled up with its broodmates.

Rarity just scoffs, tossing her dirty mane over her shoulder with what little dignity she can still cling to. "...Still too dark," she eventually says. She's learned the hard way what happens when she doesn't cooperate with my questions. Really, she used to be such a courteous and respectful pony, at least from what I remember about the time before this loop started so long ago. Maybe my imagination's just playing tricks on me.

I sigh. I was afraid of that. I didn't want to squander any more of my most limited resources, but I don't see how I have a choice in this case. I'll just have to be judicious with their use. I compel the pair of drones who I use as lab assistants, affectionately nicknamed Two and Three, to go retrieve something for me from storage. Glancing over at Rarity, who doesn't notice me looking at her since all she really does these days is stare at the floor, the beginnings of a scheme start to form in my head. I send Three to the vaults instead, to retrieve a pair of items that just might prove useful. They scamper off to obey their orders, like good assistants should. "Oh, Rarity," I call to her in an overly cheerful tone. She perks up. "How would you like to see an old friend?"

Her eyes narrow, justifiably suspicious. "I can't say I would. I would prefer my friends as far from you as possible, if it's all the same."

"Don't be like that, it's someone who's been just dying to see you," I explain with a smirk as Two returns carrying a sac of

viscous semi-opaque green slime on his back. He drops it down onto the stainless steel table. I take it and prop it against the side of her cage. Despite herself, she approaches it and peers closer trying to make out the identity of the shape floating inside. I wait for her to get close to it before sending a bolt of magic through it, popping it like an overfilled water balloon and showering her with goo through the bars. I chuckle as she shrieks in horror at the green mess clinging to her coat and mane, but quickly enough she quiets down and returns to glaring at me.

“Not amusing, Twilight. And if you think a little mess is going to get me to do what you want, prepare yourself to be disappointed.”

I shrug. That wasn't my intention at all, I just thought it would be amusing. And maybe shake her up enough to make what's coming next more effective. Three returns from the vault with what I ordered him to retrieve, and I take the Element of Generosity from him. Unlike Magic, this one doesn't have any sting to it, and I fasten it around my neck. “What do you think? Looks good on me, doesn't it? Matches my coat. Of course...” a flash of green fire while I take Rarity's shape and voice, “...you really do pull it off better than I do.”

“Oh please,” she scoffs. “You really think stealing my appearance is going to bother me?”

“Isn't that what you're all about? Appearances? It's easy for me to change mine, but yours is a bit more resistant.” A burner hovers off the counter and floats over to me. From inside the cage Rarity winces as I used a spark from my horn to ignite it. “Changing appearances is my new specialty. What do you think you would look like with half of your face burned off? Should we find out, or are you going to break the Element for me?”

“Do your worst, Twilight. Morph into whatever you wish, disfigure me if that's the only thing you can think of to change my mind. No matter what you do, you'll still be the truly ugly one here.”

There's a throbbing pain forming at the back of my head. Why is she making me do this? I thrust the lit burner towards her, but at the last second it twists in my magic and clatters against the bars. I blink a few times in confusion and straighten it out to try again. Every time it gets close to the cage, though, it twists again and refuses to go in. "How are you doing that?" I growl at her.

Rarity looks as confused as I am. "I'm not doing anything." Then her mouth slowly creeps into the most infuriating smirk. "I knew you were bluffing."

I don't know why my magic isn't working right, but I can disabuse her of that idea pretty quickly. "Bluffing?" I ask her as I sort through the folds of the collapsed sac for its preserved contents. In one move I yank the slimy corpse of Spike, drained of blood with its rib cage torn open, out and hold it up for her to see. "Does this look like a bluff to you?" The effect on Rarity is immediate. Her resolve vanishes and she spins away from me, but I follow her around the cage so she has to look. "What's the matter, Rarity? Upset that somepony else besides you found a way to take advantage of his heart?"

When she realizes I'm not going to let her look away, she takes a deep breath and steels herself. Even so, staring into his lifeless face leaves her trembling. "Oh Spike, what has she done to you?"

"I needed the parts. And he brought this on himself. Every loop I woke up in, he'd always say the same thing. Always *mocking* me for another failure." I shake the body, and it takes everything I have not to slam it into the wall. "Guess what, Spike? Looks like this time it did work."

"Twilight, you know that can't be true," says Rarity as I quietly seethe in place. "I'm not the pony he loved the most. You are. Sure, he had a bit of a crush on me, but you know it was you he was truly devoted to."

"No pony loves me." The words slip out unbidden. Why would I say that? Lots of ponies love me, I know that. I shake my head to try to clear away the pain in my head that's becoming sharper by the minute. "Why don't we ask him?"

“Ask him? How could we possibly—”

“Magic!” I interrupt. “Here. Hold onto this for a second.” The Element of Generosity vanishes from around my neck and reappears in the cage with her. Hopefully she won’t suspect anything until it’s too late. I take the other item Three brought up from the vault. “Look familiar?” I ask as I hold up the fire ruby brooch for Rarity to see. “Technically, any sufficiently large gemstone would work as a focus, but this one felt the most appropriate. I hope you don’t mind it getting a little messy in the process.” I channel some dark power through my horn, and little black spots start to dance across it. Matching magic courses through the amethyst rhombus at the front of the Element of Generosity until the gem starts to glow.

“What are you doing to my Element?”

“Resonant frequencies!”

Rarity blinks. “Uh, if you could maybe clarify exactly what that’s supposed to mean?”

I chuckle a bit, and clear my throat. “It’s just basic science. Every solid object has its own natural frequency that it oscillates at when something strikes it. Energy at that frequency is transmitted more efficiently. The spell expands on that principle, and allows energy at the right frequency to be moved between two different objects.”

She furrows her brow. “I’m afraid you’ve lost me.”

“Basically...” I lift the Element of Generosity with my foreleg, appreciating its weight for a moment, then smack the necklace down on the surface of the table. A sharp crack sounds out through the room, followed by a gentle hum from the gemstone in its center. “Listen close, and you’ll hear it.” I take the fire ruby, feeling its vibration crawl into my hooves despite my efforts to block them out. Moving it from one hoof to the other and shaking out the first one which has gone numb for some reason, I place it up against the cage. An unpleasant tone rings out through the room and I wince.

“Beautiful,” says Rarity, smiling a bit at the note.

“Awful.” That noise is making my headache worse. I pass the necklace through the cage bars, and Rarity accepts it. Now for step two.

“You know,” I say in a fashion that she cannot possibly be dumb enough to construe as ‘casually,’ “if you wanted to, I could give you a chance to say goodbye to him.

Rarity is, understandably, cautious. She narrows her eyes and glares at me, while I put on my most innocent smile. The fangs probably aren’t helping. “Ah, it’s all becoming clearer,” she says, and it’s all I can do not to burst out laughing when I feel the wave of smug self-satisfaction billowing off of her. She thinks *she’s* got *me* figured out? I can hardly wait for her to find out how wrong she is. “You must have something you want to say to him yourself. An apology, perhaps?”

My smile vanishes. “No. I did what I had to do. It wasn’t pleasant, but I made my decision. I made it again and again and again and always the same way. I needed the potion, so he had to die. No apologies.”

“Did he fight back?”

My eyes snap open and the memories, the hundreds of different moments I drove the knife with hundreds of different cuts, growing quicker and more methodical with practice. “No,” I whisper, “he was just... he didn’t even have time to be angry at me. Just... he was always so confused at the end. Confused and a little..”

“Twilight,” Rarity says softly as she reaches through the bars, resting a hoof on my back. My ephemeral wings twitch at the touch, but I don’t pull away. “It’s alright to admit that you made the wrong choice.”

I yank myself away from her. “Wrong choice?” I ask. I almost thought, for just a second, that she really understood. “*Wrong choice?* I made *every* choice! Thousands upon thousands of them spiraling outward from that stupid restart point. Right choice or wrong choice, right or wrong, it doesn’t matter.” I remember my plan and snatch the fire ruby up off the table again. My black, twisted horn grows even darker as dark magic appears in the air around me, and I channel it into the

ruby. When the heart-shaped gem throbs with an angry inner darkness of its own, I shove it into the gap in Spike's chest.

The necromantic enchantment I wove into the jewel reacts immediately. Flesh and bone starts to twist itself back together as Rarity looks on, horrified but fascinated. "Why don't I give you two some alone time?" I ask as I turn back to my workbench. A glow of my horn and Spike's mending body winks out and reappears in the cage with Rarity. I feign nonchalance and start fiddling with beakers and measurements without any real direction. Anything to keep my horn glowing.

Despite herself, Rarity edges a bit closer to investigate the body. Until it twitches. "What did you do?" she asks. Then after a moment's hesitation, "Spike?"

Spike moans. The second movement is a lot more definitive this time, his claw reaching for something unseen. Rarity takes a cautious step towards him, and reaches out with a hoof to brush against the very edge of his fin.

The next moan is louder, and far more harrowing. "There may have been a little necrotic decay to his synapses, did I forget to mention that? The higher brain functions are the first thing to go. But I'm sure he still has most of his... baser... instincts."

Rarity's eyes go wide in alarm as Spike rises up, his expression blank and and milky-white calluses blocking out all the color from his eyes. He stands there for a moment, then takes an experimental whiff of the air around him. Then he turns to Rarity and stares at her. Not with adoration, but with *hunger*. And then he takes a single, staggering step in her direction. "Spike, it's me. It's Rarity, dear. Don't do anything you'll regret."

"Trust me, he knows," I call back to her over my shoulder. "I'm sure if he were still capable of higher thought he'd be happy to know that his first time was with the mare he's always had a crush on. It's not really my place to comment, but I do hope you'll be a *generous* lover."

"No!" cries Rarity, pressing right up against the threshold of absolute panic as he draws closer. "Spike, stop this right now!"

“If you want him to stop, you’ll have to stop him yourself.” I turn my full attention back to the cage. “Free magic tip: destroying the gemstone I used for a focus will end the reanimation spell. Of course, you don’t have anything to cut into his chest and get it out so that doesn’t wor—”

A beakerful of some solvent or another crashes to the ground as my magic cuts out for a moment, and for the next several seconds all I can do is stand there frozen as I try, with little success, to breathe. Even Spike’s stopped walking across the cage.

“So... so that isn’t really an option,” I say. Those words don’t hurt. Spike’s advance resumes as Rarity presses herself against the bars trying to get away. “But gosh, if only you had something else that was enchanted to transmit energy through resonant frequencies you could break instead.”

Finally, she gets it. I don’t know how I could have spelled it out any more clearly. Her eyes go wide as she looks down at the Element of Generosity clutched in her grasp. Then she looks up at me and glares. She drops the necklace just as Spike’s claw reaches out and grabs her tail. Closing her eyes, and with tears streaming down her cheeks, she stomps down and breaks the gem.

Energy courses out, into Spike, Rarity, and dancing up and down the bars of the cage. The surge is deafening, but not quite loud enough to drown out her screams. It takes a minute or so for the magic to stop pouring out of it, but when it does she collapses with an empty, vacant stare that matches Spike’s.

For his part, Spike is still standing in the middle of the cage. What a great assistant. Helpful to the end, and even beyond. The glow of my horn ceases, and my little puppet collapses now that the strings have been cut. “Zombie dragons. Geez, I can’t believe she bought that,” I say to myself with a little chuckle. That’s all five of the Elements, their reign of terror ended at last. I turn back to my workstation and start humming a random little ditty. It’s a load off my mind, now I need to focus on—

“Well that didn’t work.”



I spin back around. That sounded like Spike, but that's impossible. He's dead. "Who's there? Who said that? Two, Three, if that was one of you I'll..." I trail off when I realize that there isn't anypony else there. The hivemind tells me that my assistants are across the hall in another room altogether, while Spike and Rarity lay motionless in the cage right where I left them. Must have imagined—

"Well that didn't work."

"Shut up!" I scream. Now I'm sure I heard that. It definitely came from the cage, and it was definitely his voice. I take a few deep breaths to try to slow my racing heartbeat. This is a trick. Somepony with a ventriloquism spell, or... or... or something. When you've eliminated the impossible, then whatever remains must be the—

"Well that didn't work."

*"I said shut up! Stop saying that! Stop it!"* I lift Spike's corpse off the floor in my magic and pull it up against the bars, right in front of my face. There must a clue somewhere in the aura, a hint of who's mocking me like this, but I can't find any—

"Well that didn't work."

Right out of his mouth, even if his lips never move and his jaw just hangs there. "Stop saying that, Spike. It worked this time. It did. It did work."

"Well that didn't work."

I scream. Out of control, I wrap my field around his tail and swing, his head arcing downward until it bashes into the floor. Ichor and brain tissue spatter all over Rarity's coat as his skull splits with a sickening crack. I glare at the mess. I didn't really want to do that, but if it was the only way to make his voice stop than it was worth—

"Well that didn't work."

This time I don't stop swinging until there's nothing but a bloody mound of pulp left.

Silence, sweet blessed silence, descends over the lab. I walk away from the cage, sending out a mental command for Two

and Three to do something about the resulting mess. So much for the alchemical value of the rest of his body. Maybe I'll be able to salvage something later, but for the time being there's one other thing I can try. Another source of potentially viable parts.

Alicorn parts

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I enter the makeshift mortuary behind a door with an ornate golden '6' scribed into the wood, a relic from its previous use as castle barracks for the royal guard, and pass by the vats that hold the remains of the failed hosts for some of my previous creations. They don't have any new answers for me, but maybe I can find some in the one body I've been putting off examining all this time. The very last vat at the end of the row sticks out, bigger than the others. It has to be, since the pony inside of it is larger than most.

I tip the vat over the grated floor and the liquid inside rushes out and drains away. Celestia's corpse, dyed a messy orange from her stay in the preservative fluid, flops wetly onto the floor. Looking her over, I can tell the concoction has done a serviceable, if not perfect, job. The body wasn't in such great shape when Chrysalis finished with it anyway. Deep burns run along her left side, her wing torn away completely. That half of her face is charred and warped almost beyond recognition, as well. I look down on her and give her a brief moment of silence, then lift the body onto the dissection table, laying her out so I'll have access to her intact side. It's then that I realize that I've left the instruments on the cart over by the entrance, and I trot back over to retrieve them.

"Twilight."

I freeze in an instant. I know that voice all too well, although it wasn't one I ever expected to hear again. It's not possible.

"Twilight, look at me when I'm speaking to you." I slowly turn back towards the table. Celestia is sitting up, the broken-off tip of her horn nearly scraping the ceiling. She glares at me with her one remaining eye for a moment while the scene before me sinks in. "I'm so disappointed in you."

“Princess?” I manage to squeak. “Are you real? Am I imagining this?”

“The answers to those questions are yes, and no. Not necessarily in that order however.” A little hint of the playful smile I remember so well plays at the corner of her mouth, but it’s gone as quickly as it appeared leaving her looking grimmer than I’ve ever seen her. “More importantly, though, do you really think this behavior is acceptable? That this course of action is one I approve of? You stupid, deluded little filly.”

I stagger back from her, suddenly on the defensive. “The loop... I didn’t have a choice.”

Celestia is having none of it. “You were the only one who *did* have a choice. I never thought you would choose this, though. I figured even you would be smart enough to have found a correct solution by now.”

My incredulous stare does nothing to dull the edge in her expression. “This is a test?”

She scoffs. “Everything is a test, Twilight. Every conversation we’ve ever had, every game we ever played, every lesson you struggled to grasp. I watched you, judging your every move and cataloging all the ways you came up wanting. All the thousands of mistakes and failures. I never forgot a single one. This one certainly tops the list.”

“But... but... You always called me your most faithful student.”

She raises her eyebrow. “You’re my *only* student. Don’t tell me you didn’t know, deep down, that you weren’t good enough? Wow, that’s even more pathetic.”

“None of this is my fault. I had to be stronger, that’s why I made myself this way. Once the rebellion is gone—”

“What rebellion?” she asks.

“The ponies who don’t want me to be queen. There are more of them than I expected, but I’m sure they’ll run out soon.”

Celestia doesn’t answer me right away. Instead she steps down from the table and walks over to me, scraps of torn skin

flaking off her side. Has she always towered over me like this? “Fine, I’ll spell it out for you. There were a few ponies fighting back against you at first, but you massacred them easily enough. Nothing left to fight. No pony left to blame. Couldn’t have that, now could you? You’d have to take responsibility for once. But you had all these drones that could look like whatever you wanted them to. A part of you got so used to fighting the monsters, it never stopped. The only rebellion left is right up here.” She reaches out and taps my head, and that awful pain is back. I flash back to the executions I saw last week, except the stage is green and black with the corpses of broken drones. That’s not what happened. They were pony traitors. The blood was red, not green. Why am I remembering it wrong?

“Stop it. Stop telling me things that aren’t true,” I mutter as I look anywhere except up at her.

“I’m only telling you what you already know, I’m just not bothering to sugarcoat it for you anymore,” she replies. “You’ve always known you weren’t really worth the time I put into teaching you. You just faked it and tried to convince yourself I wouldn’t notice. I gave you every conceivable advantage, when the whole time you knew they were wasted on you.”

“Please stop.” I cover my head and try to block out her voice, but it feels like now it’s coming from inside my own head.

“You haven’t changed a bit since the day I met you. You’re still the scared little filly who can’t pass the test without outside help. Of course the Elements rejected you. You deceitful, cruel, selfish...”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry Princess, I’ll do better. I’ll try harder. Please, stop.” I blubber through my hooves.

She doesn’t. “...unfeeling, treacherous little failure. I should have left you friendless. Certainly you don’t deserve friendship, or understand it in the least.”

It’s all too much. I spin on my hooves and run for the open door. No matter how fast I run, the door doesn’t seem to be getting any closer. All the while I hear the Princess screaming

at me from somewhere behind, hurling insults at me that hurt all the more because deep down I know they're true. I squeeze my eyes closed and teleport ahead blindly, toppling into the basement hallway as I arrive. Taking a moment to catch my breath, I look at the blank patch of wall at my back. There isn't a door there. Nope, just a bare patch of wall, an aberration in the regular spacing of the other doors. I don't know why the architect who designed this place originally skipped from door '5' to door '7.' Probably some silly, irrational superstition, but for whatever reason there's just a featureless stone wall where you might expect door '6' to be. There isn't any door, and there certainly isn't a room behind that door, and since there's no room it would be ridiculous to believe that there could be anything to worry about inside a room that isn't there behind a door that doesn't exist.

I shake my head, rousing myself from this silly little train of thought. I had... something important I came down here to do, but now I can't remember what it was. Oh well, I'm sure I'll remember later if it was really important. For now, onto other business. That invincible changeling army isn't going to breed itself.

I walk away from the bare wall, and as I leave I hear the squeak of rusty hinges as a door closes somewhere behind me.

# Breaking My Heart

## BREAKING MY HEART

I let out a contented sigh as the liquid I'm stirring in the tub in front of me goes from pink to yellow. I can't say I'm surprised that I found the solution to my little problem; solutions are what I *do*, after all, but that doesn't make it any less satisfying to tic another item off my list. Then there's a little splash and the surface of the opaque, syrupy liquid ripples as something, the thing that's the entire point of the last few weeks efforts, stirs. It refocuses me in the moment. There's still so far to go.

"Aww, you like that, don't you little guy?" I coo at the liquid. I know there's no point to my doing so, seeing as how the life I'm growing hasn't developed enough to have ears or much of anything else in the way of senses. But it's only natural for a new mother to want to talk to her baby.

I suppose, in a way, I'm a mother to all the changelings of the swarm, especially those I've bred myself. I have three hatcheries running right now, all full to bursting with the most adorable little drones you'll ever see. But this project is special. Every parent picks favorites, even if they say they don't (in our house I was totally the favorite. Ignore Shining Armor if he tries to tell you otherwise) and I can't wait to see what this one grows up into. I've spliced so many different species and powers into its patchwork body that not even I can be entirely sure what it's going to be like, but the one thing I do know for certain is that it's going to be very, very powerful and very, very dangerous. I reach a foreleg into the goop in front of me and feel around until I brush up against it, already feeling the twitch of muscles like steel cables just beneath the surface of its rigid, unpierceable skin.

It recognizes my touch, bound to me in mind and whatever it has that might pass for a soul. A little fleshy tendril slithers up and into one of the holes in my forelegs, nearly pitching me straight into a giggling fit. They grow up so fast, and in fact my little buddy here has nearly doubled in size just in the last

few days. The nutrients from the chemicals I've been pouring into the tub won't be able to keep up for much longer, it's time to move my little guy to a new environment to encourage the next stage in its development. Luckily, I have just the perfect place in mind already.

Luna's been distant lately, ever since somepony broke into our bedroom and tried to kill her. I suppose that isn't entirely surprising, and I hate myself for having put her in danger even though I keep telling myself it wasn't really my fault.

Anypony who would do such a thing must be just the worst sort of monster, deserving of nothing but a slow, torturous, agonizing death as I slowly flay them alive. Still, she needs something that will give her hope again, and relight that wonderful spark I first fell in love with.

A new baby on the way is just the thing.

I've always been a multitasker, so the idea of killing two birds with one stone followed by using said stone to bludgeon an empire into subjugation is a naturally appealing one. To that end, I retrieve a big glass jar from the other side of the room and scoop it through the tub. I feel my little bioweapon slip inside, and the rest fills with the liquid it's been suspended in. That'll keep it healthy while I'm moving it.

I very carefully carry the precious cargo with me through the halls, not taking my eyes off it or the amorphous silhouette inside that's writhing and shifting, used to having a bit more space to spread itself out. Better get used to it, since it'll be living in even more cramped quarters for the next six weeks of its metamorphosis. At least it'll be somewhere softer and warmer than a glass jar while it grows. Proceeding as methodically as I am, it takes a bit longer to reach our repaired and renovated bedroom. I converted my walk-in closet into a comfy surgical theater, time to put it to good use. "Luna? Are you awake?"

Luna's eyes are open, but they're sunken and hollow and show no signs of any life or recognition. See? Distant. "It's time, hon. Time for what we talked about the other night." Well, I talked and she mostly listened, but that's just how close we are. Words would only get in the way. "Do you want to see it

before we get started?” I lower the jar near her face, and she does lean forward a bit to gaze into it and try to make out the creature within.

Then she snaps her head back as a tentacle rushes into the wall of the jar and sticks there. Pressing up against the glass we have a clearer view of its underside, covered in pale suckers, and within each little circle a quintet of tiny claws scrape against the glass looking for purchase to grip. Each contraction leaves little grooves and scratches visible in its wake, but there’s nothing that the claws are able to sink into. Yet. Luna’s eyes go wider and unfocus as she starts to hyperventilate while I return the jar to the table. It’s so cute how they’re already bonding! Soon they’ll be inseparable. She looks up at me, pleading, and though her mouth is moving no words emerge.

“It’s too bad I had to leave it outside of you long enough for it to get this big, or the insertion process could have been a *lot* more fun,” I say with a teasing wink in her direction. All those tentacles; it’s really a missed opportunity, but oh well. I run a hoof over her tight but scarred belly, still bearing all the evidence of her past injuries. I’m about to add a few more. “I’ll dose you with the anaesthetic, then I’ll make the initial incision... hmm... probably right along here.” I trace a path from her sternum down to just past her navel, then on impulse I lower my face down to just between her teats and leave a trail of kisses right back up to where I started. I can’t wait to implant our child into her. To lay down against her bulging abdomen and feel it squirming within her. I know she’s just as excited for it as I am. “It’ll basically be a reverse Cemarean-section. You’ll be sore, and you’ll need to stay on bedrest for a little longer than we talked about, but there shouldn’t be any other complications. Probably. Now I better go wash up. Don’t want to keep you waiting, right?”

I trot away from her with a little extra spring in my step, and into the sterile washroom. Even though both mommy-to-be and baby should be preternaturally resistant to disease, there’s no reason to risk the possibility of infection or sepsis. It’s going to be a very demanding pregnancy for Luna, after all, and her natural defenses might be compromised. I look down at my hooves and try to make sure I’m slathering the



antibacterial soap onto every nook and cranny, every gap and hole, and rinsing them under scalding-hot water. When I think I've done a good enough job, I look up to regard myself in the mirror for the first time since walking in.

I'm not there.

The room behind me is, and I spin around to confirm that I'm not looking into another room altogether. I pull down a washcloth from a hook on the wall behind me, and when I look back at the reflection shows the same washcloth laying where it fell. But no sign of myself. It's a little bit unnerving, to say the least. Is the mirror enchanted somehow? It seems like a silly enchantment to put on a washroom mirror, and I certainly didn't put it there. Confusion turns to curiosity now that I've been presented with a new puzzle to solve. A mirror that doesn't reflect living creatures? Or just me? This calls for an experiment!

I reach out with my changeling senses and find a nearby drone, and with just a bit of extra effort teleport it into the room with me. The confused drone appears in the mirror as well, so this irregularity seems to be localized to just affecting me. Odd. Maybe it's something to have to do with my shape? I gave the drone a silent command, and it turns into me. Or the little unicorn I used to be at least. I haven't used that shape in a while now, and even looking at it from outside makes my skin crawl. The drone-Twilight plants its front hooves on the sink next to me, and the reflection in the mirror stares right back at it. The drone turns to me, looking confused, while in the mirror Twilight looks up at nothing but empty air.

I sigh and close my eyes. I don't have time for this right now, and my head is starting to hurt again. I dismiss the drone, and hear it walk out of the room behind me. Alone again with just my thoughts, I leave my eyes closed for a few more seconds trying to will the pain away before I feel well enough to open them again.

When I do, the drone's reflection is still there looking out at me from the mirror.

My jaw drops, and I take a hesitant step back. That just makes the me in the mirror lean forward and glare at me, purple sparks flying off her horn. She's shouting, ranting at me and even pounding her hoof on the edge of the sink for emphasis, but no noises break the plane of the mirror and pass through to my side. "I. Can't. Hear. You," I say, exaggerating each word in the hopes that she'll be able to read my lips.

Whether she hears my reply or not, she just grows more upset. Now she's pacing around the other room, her mouth flapping at a mile a minute as her magic grows more intense. When I just cock my head and stare back at her, not understanding what she wants, she lets out a silent scream and stamps on the floor. She looks back up at me with bloodshot and angry eyes for a moment, then she lowers her head and charges the mirror.

The rattle of something impacting against the glass from the far side is the first thing I've heard since I turned off the water.

"Stay back!" I yell. She can't come through. I can't let her out. She has to stay there where I can't hear her. I can't hear her. I *can't* hear her. My reflection stumbles back, a bit dazed from the impact, and my attention locks on to a little crack that's spreading out from where she struck. She lowers her head to charge again, and somehow I just know that this time the barrier won't hold and everything is going to come rushing in and it can't I can't let it I won't let it stop it stop it stay away *stay away STAY AWAY!*

Without any other option at my disposal, I yank the metal tap out of the wall. A spray of water erupts on both sides of the mirror, soaking me and my unicorn doppelganger. When she looks up at me again, the water flowing down her face almost makes it look like she's crying.

She hesitates, which is all that I needed. I grip the length of metal piping in my magic and smash it into the glass. The mirror shatters, exposing the truth: there's nothing on the other side except for dull gray stone. No other world. No other me. I breath a sigh of relief now that everything's back under control again. I do some quick math in my head, and at three hours each that's 20,440 loops of bad luck. Lucky I paid in advance, and with considerable interest.

Cutting off the water with the shutoff valve under the sink, I towel off my face and body as best I can. Just my imagination acting up on me, nothing more. No reason a little thing like that should make me postpone performing major surgery, right? Just gotta keep it together and everything will turn out fine. I stride back out into the bedroom and immediately panic when I see the jar with my special little baby teetering on the very edge of the table I left it on. From the bed, Luna strains with what little magic she has left and it passes the tipping point.

By the time I catch it in a field of my own magic, it's just inches from breaking on the floor. "Luna!" I admonish her, "sweetie, I know you want to keep our new child close, but you have to be more careful! You're weaker than you realize right now." Disaster averted, I managed to relax, just a bit. She does too, going limp as I transfer her over to a gurney and wheel her out of her little protective binding circle. Is this the first time she's left since I inscribed it? She winces as we reach the other room, the bright lights shining straight down into her face. My tools are all set up and waiting for me, a gleaming silver scalpel resting on the nearby tray. "Goodnight, my love," I whisper into her ear, then I chomp down on her neck and inject her with the cocktail of drugs that will keep her from feeling this, or at least remembering it after she wakes up. Her eyes roll back and blood dribbles down from the two little pinpricks I've made. I let a few droplets collect on my hoof, then carefully pry open the lid of my jar and let them drip down into it. At first nothing happens as the blood dissipates and leaves the jar's contents a slightly darker shade than before. Then it starts to bubble and churn as the thing inside gets its first taste of what I added, and it wants more.

I lift the finely honed scalpel in my magic, and make the initial cut into Luna's abdomen. She groans, but the venom holds and the vasoconstrictors I mixed in keep her from losing too much blood. I gently separate the layers of tissue and muscle, one by one, until I reach the very deepest part of her, her womb, and slit it open. One of my baby's tentacles has slithered out from the jar and probes at Luna's side, curious and eager to explore. I bet it gets that from my side. I gently take it in my hoof and

guide it inside of its new mommy. As it finds its destination, instinct takes over as it latches on to her inner walls. The connection made, three more tentacles grip the jar's rim. The slimy fluid pours out onto the floor as it hoists itself up, it's central body rising out of the obscuring depths.

I smile. My child is so beautiful.

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Surgery is a resounding success. And I leave Luna, now bulging with the new life developing inside her, to sleep off the rest of the anaesthetics while I head for my throne room. Looks like I'll be planning an invasion *and* a baby shower! A whole contingent of drones are milling around the Great Hall, and my throne sits vacant waiting for me to claim it. I take a step towards it. Everything is perfect.

Another step, nearly skipping along.

Well, things are *almost* perfect. That thing with the mirror is still nagging at me. All those vicious, terrible lies that the other Twilight said. The ones I couldn't hear. I'm still not hearing them over and over in the back of my head.

Another step, not quite as energetic as the last one.

I mean, no kingdom is perfect, really. I still have plenty to be proud of. I wish my parents could be here to see it, but of course they're gone now. At least I wiped out the ponies that did that to them, I haven't seen any evidence of the rebellion for weeks. They're all dead too. All dead.

The throne is closer, but my hooves feel heavy.

My friends aren't dead, at least. Sure, they aren't quite 100% after... after I... I mean the Elements are the one that hurt them, but only because... because I...

It's like walking through haunch deep mud, but I manage another step.

Cadance and Shining Armor seem fine, at least. Because they've avoided me. Because everything I touch ends up twisted and dead. It's that dumb time loop. It's the time loop's fault that I'm planning to invade their city and massacre their

citizens while I force them to watch. That's not excessive. They were *really mean* to me!

I've reached the base of the stairs that lead up to the dais. Just four stairs not more than a couple inches each. They might as well be mile-high cliffs.

At least I'll always have Luna. As long as I have her love I can keep going. As long as I have her to hold me and kiss me and make love to me even when she says no at first she always say no at first but then I take her I take her when she doesn't want me to oh no oh no oh please no I'm not a rapist I'm not raping her she wants she doesn't want it she never wants it she never wanted me and I've been raping the mare that I love over and over and over and I can't be a rapist good ponies aren't rapists but I am a rapist so that would mean no that would mean *NO* that would mean—

**“NO!”** I bawl. When did I collapse? I don't remember falling, but here I am on the floor being pounded by wave after wave of guilt and shame. Everything the Twilight in mirror said. She was right. I know she's right. I've always known she was right. I can't. I can't do this alone but everypony I've ever loved is gone. Please don't be gone. Please come back.

There's a flash of green in the corner of my vision. I look towards it, and my eyes go wide.

“Mom? Dad?”

“Twilight!” My mother rushes over to me and throws herself around my neck in the greatest hug ever, my father close behind. “But... but you two died. Didn't you?”

“Ha! You think we'd let a little fire take us away from our favorite little filly?” asks my father. “Not on your life.”

“But...” I stammer, “but then where have you been?”

The two of them look at one another. “After the attack, we had amnesia. We just now recovered.”

Wow! That's amazing! And completely plausible! “I missed you so much. I think... I think some of the things I've done...”

“Don’t worry about that, Twilight,” says Mom, “you have a swarm to care for now. You have to do what it takes to keep them healthy. That’s more important than anything.”

My brow furrows. Something’s wrong, but I can’t quite put my hoof on it. Then my mother cradles my head in her lap and I stop caring. Another flash of green catches my eye. “Girls?”

Standing there, happy and healthy as the day we first met, are my five best friends. They rush me, and I welcome them into the growing cuddle pile. “Boy!” says Rainbow Dash, “those Elements sure have a kick to ‘em, huh? Took me longer to sleep that off than the time I chugged an entire keg of AJ’s special cider reserves.”

“Uh huh, me too!” says Pinkie. “In fact, I think I might have accidentally achieved enlightenment in that no-sensy room! But I forget what I learned so now I’m back to endarkenment.”

“So... so none of you are mad at me? After what I did to you? You forgive me?”

“Oh Twilight,” says Fluttershy, nuzzling my cheek, “there’s nothing to forgive. You needed to destroy the Elements and you needed us to do it. Our pain isn’t important, only that you achieved your goals and helped the changelings prosper. You’re a good queen.”

“A good... queen,” I repeat, my eyes slipping half closed. I could bask in this feeling for days. For months. Forever.

“And an even better student,” says a new voice. My eyes snap back open at the sound, only to find myself staring up at Princess Celestia in her full, radiant glory. “You passed the test. Flying colors.”

I don’t even question her presence. It’s Celestia, she always has worked in mysterious ways. The important thing is that she’s proud of me again.

“Oh my goodness,” exclaims Rarity, looking back towards the door. “Princess Luna, are you pregnant? I simply *must* make you something new to wear.”

As much as I don’t want to move, I lift my head up in time to see Princess Luna walk into the room. She’s giving off the

healthy glow of an expectant mother and smiling, but an icy dagger of guilt plunges into my chest. “Luna. Luna I’m so sorry for what I did. I’m so sorry that I—”

She holds up a hoof and cuts me off. “You didn’t. I enjoyed every second of being with you, whatever I may have said. And now look at me.” She sits down a few steps from me and rubs her bulging belly. “Could there be any greater proof of our love? I don’t just want to give you a child, Twilight. I want to give you an entire brood.”

“You... you do?” I ask. It’s confusing, but being confused hurts so I stop being that way.

“I want to bear *thousands* of your children. For the glory of Canterlot Hive.” She reaches over and brushes a hoof through my mane, and I smile.

“Of course, Luna. Whatever you want. I love you so much. I’ll never stop giving you children if that’s what makes you happy.”

“It is,” she replies and kisses my forehead. Everything is good. Everything is right.

I look over at the entrance to the throne room. That other Twilight, the Twilight from the mirror, is standing there watching us. Her lower lip quivers and her eyes are wide with alarm. “We did it, Twilight,” I whisper. Even though she’s so far away I know she hears me. “We saved them all. We did it.”

With that, the little unicorn turns and runs. Down the hallway, out of sight, and out of mind.

“You say something, sugarcube?” asks a confused Applejack. She didn’t see her?

“Oh, just talking to myself,” I reply. I lay there with nine ponies who I love more than anything else in the world. I wish that other Twilight would have just let me explain why everything is good. Why everything is right. Eventually, my eyes snap open. “This calls for a friendship report!”

My friends and family stand back as a quill and scroll answer my call. I clear my throat, and the quill immediately begins scratching away. “Dear Princess Celestia,” I begin, grinning at

my mentor, “Today I learned that a true friend is a pony who will help you do what’s necessary no matter what. Even when it hurts somepony else, even when it hurts *them*, a good friend is a pony who will understand that the ends justify the means. One who will make sacrifices for you when you ask it of them. One whose obedience is never in doubt. I’m lucky enough to have friends like that. In fact, I have thousands of them now that I’ve taken control of the hive. And before long I’ll have a whole lot more. Your faithful student, Twilight Sparkle.”

Satisfied that we’ve all learned a valuable lesson from all this, I grab the scroll to re-read what’s written there.

*Dear Princess Celestia,*

*Help me help me help me help me stop me help me help me  
help me kill me help me help me help me end this end me end  
me forever help me help me help me stop the pain help me stop  
the suffering help me help me help me I never wanted this help  
me help me help*

*I’m so sorry,  
Twilight Sparkle*

I stare at the letter for a long time.

Then I tear it to shreds. The others are looking askance at me as I do. “Misspelled ‘obedience.’ I’ll rewrite it later. Right now we should—”

Something happens that cuts off everything else. Something nearby. My horn buzzes as spacetime puckers and warps around us, magic rippling through the entire castle. I reach out with my senses and find that the epicenter is in the library. I look through the eyes of a nearby drone and...

*There’s that other Twilight! And she even has a friend with her. I order them brought before me for an audience.*

I’m sure we’ll have lots to talk about.



# Breaking My Soul

## BREAKING MY SOUL

I stare at the door of the vault, still locked shut, and for the first time I understand.

An overwhelming wave of magical power rips through the walls as Other Twilight's and Star Swirl's spell goes off, and it feels like it rips something intangible out of me as well. I gasp and fall to my knees, squeezing my eyes shut as the veil I've had wrapped over them is torn away.

Finally. Finally it's almost over. "Thank you!" I call out to her, hoping she'll hear me. "Thank you, thank you, thank..." I trail off. I feel like I'm seeing things clearly, more clearly than I have for a long while. This awful, wonderful clarity as I review with fresh sight everything that I've done to the ponies I professed to love. I can't believe what I was almost about to do. I tried to rip her mind away from her, torture and kill her, when all along she was only here to give me something I haven't had for a very long time, and haven't deserved for even longer: Hope. Real, genuine hope. I need to capitalize on this moment of lucidity before my mind sinks back into the miasma of delusional insanity that's been poisoning me.

I walk slowly down the hallway towards a balcony that overlooks the city. It's destroyed. I took something beautiful, and given the chance to remake it in my own image that's exactly what I did. No wonder it's a ruined, hollow shell of itself; It's a perfect reflection of its Queen. I squeeze my eyes closed and try to cry, but no tears come. That's not fair. I shift back into the little unicorn I used to be, hoping it's just a quirk of changeling physiology, but still nothing. How am I supposed to prove how sorry I am, then?

I call out to the swarm, and give them one simple, final command: *Up*. They stop what they're doing and lift off, soaring higher and higher into the sky as I watch. They'll obey for as long as they can, rising until muscles, wings, or lungs

give out. Maybe if they're lucky a few of the strongest will somehow rise high enough to get just the tiniest glimpse of the same thing I just have, even if there's no way they'll fully understand. Even I don't really understand, but at least I understand enough to realize how little I do know.

I know exactly where I want to be for this. I swing by the armory to grab a dagger, rusty from neglect, and descend down the stairs into the dungeon headed for Luna's bedroom one last time.

"Finished with those two already?" asks Chrysalis. "You're slipping. I figured you would take at least a few years breaking each one of them." I just glance over at her, saying nothing. Of course she expected me to. She probably understands what I really am better than anypony. I continue on, making a concerted effort not to look into the cell across from hers. I don't need to see my five friends to picture, vividly, everything I've done to them.

I walk into Luna's bedroom and close the door behind me. "Luna? Sweetheart?" I ask, knowing it's futile. I rest the dagger on the nightstand and climb into the bed where her body still rests, the vertebrae in her twisted neck jutting out at an unnatural angle. Thanks to the blankets, her body hasn't begun to cool yet, and when I close my eyes I can almost imagine that I feel her breathing. I nuzzle the back of her broken neck. "I am so sorry, Luna. I am so sorry for everything. I know you probably can't hear me anymore, but... please don't think less of me if I pretend you can. Not that you could think much less of me than you already do."

When I finally open my eyes and stare into her lifeless gaze, I find myself thinking about how lucky she is. I stay there like that, a little ball cuddled up between her slack forelegs, for a long while. "You know," I eventually begin, "I never really studied much theology. It seemed like a waste of my time, to worship anything I couldn't perceive. The closest I ever came was my faith in Celestia, but even that wasn't the same thing, not really. I do know the basics, though, of a couple of the major monotheistic traditions."

For a pony who prides herself on being smart, it all took me an embarrassingly long time to figure out. But then, maybe resisting truths this unpleasant is just everypony's basic nature. "I thought I was a good pony, Luna," I whisper into her ear. "I made mistakes, but I tried to be good. A good daughter. A good student. A good friend. But... even though I tried, I think that underneath everything, so deep I couldn't see it for a long time, I'm just bad. If I really were good, I never could have done this to you. I don't think I'm in a time loop, not really. I think I died and... and I think I went to Hell. I think I'm in Hell, and I think that I'm supposed to be here. Because I don't deserve to go with you, or my friends, or Celestia. They're all good, and I'm... I'm not. Maybe you're supposed to be here too, for all the Nightmare Moon stuff. Maybe I'm your punishment."

Still no tears. Damn it. I'm trying to be penitent, trying to prove that I understand. Do I not even deserve that? Not even that tiny release? "There's good news, though," I say. "Whatever higher power that guides our lives and decided that this is where I was supposed to go, I think... please don't laugh, but I think that He or She or It sent us a pair of angels, Luna. I think now that I know how bad I am, now that I hate myself as much as I deserve to be hated, I think It might have forgiven me. I don't deserve to be, but I think It sent that other Twilight and Star Swirl to save me from this. They closed the loop. It's over. They promised me that when I die it's over. You just got to go a little sooner than I did."

I shift my weight up onto my side so I can run a hoof through her mane. Even in death, she's beautiful. "What's it like?" I ask. "I know I'm not going to Heaven or Elysium or Paradise or wherever you are now, and frankly after all this I don't really see the appeal of eternal life. If only one of us gets to be happy, I'd rather it were you than me. I just want this all to stop. I want it to finally stop."

I close my eyes again and try to imagine what the best possible thing that could be waiting for me would be, then after a moment I smile. "You know what I hope it is? I hope... I hope it's just like this room. I want to end everything and then wake up in a bed just like this one. I fell asleep here so many times,

after spending a loop making love to you, but I always woke up in the library afterwards. And then after the changeling queen thing I stopped really sleeping entirely. I want to wake up from this nightmare, all gross with a messy mane and tangled up in your sheets, and while I'm waking up I'll roll over and find you watching me. Not saying anything, or even touching me, but just watching me sleep. I want my eyes to meet yours, and I want the last thing I feel to be realizing that you love me just as much as I love you. To believe that somehow there's still something inside me worth loving." I look up at the ceiling, plaintively. "Could I just have that for a few seconds? Please?"

My eyes go wide and I cover my mouth with a hoof. What am I thinking? "I'm sorry!" I cry out as the atmosphere in the room grows foreboding and disapproving. "I'm sorry! I don't deserve that, and I'm sorry I asked for it. I know how bad I am, I really do. I understand that I'm not supposed to be happy. Please still forgive me, I promise I understand that I don't really deserve forgiveness, or love, but please don't take it away now."

The room is still silent. Whoever or whatever sent those two to close the loop, they have to see that I've learned my lesson. "Please don't punish me anymore." My eyes dart around the room and settle on the dagger. I need to finish this before I do anything else that makes them change their mind, makes them think I need to suffer more. I snatch the dagger up in my magic and roll over on my back. "I'll punish myself, see? So you don't have to. Bad Twilight." Without any more hesitation I plunge the dagger into my own side, and cry out in pain. Finally, the tears start but now I'm not sure if that's a good thing. Am I supposed to take my punishment in silence? Why won't they just tell me what I need to do?

"I'm bad," I gasp, yanking the now-bloody dagger out of myself and plunging it into a new spot. "I'm bad. Bad. Bad." Each word is punctuated with another thrust. The blood starts to bubble up from the wounds, and I roll over away from Luna. I've already dirtied her enough, but at least I can spare her from this one, last indignity. I don't deserve to look at her anyway.

“I’m... I’m bad...” I repeat, but the words are getting harder to form. The dagger slips out of my magic, and I can’t channel enough to grip it again. I fumble for it and manage to get it into my hooves, awkwardly stabbing it into my chest. The familiar sensation of death begins to creep up on me. Maybe I should have picked a more painful way to kill myself, to atone for the unimaginable suffering I’ve caused. The best I can do now is make sure the pain lasts as long as possible. Won’t that prove that I’ve learned my lesson?

As my eyelids droop another unforgivable betrayal slips into my head. Doubt. I try to speak, to admonish myself for even daring to question whatever it was that decided that I deserved this. Of course I deserved it. Bad ponies are supposed to suffer, and I'm bad. "What do you want?" I ask the empty air around me. "I don't understand what you want from me. I've tried everything I can think of. Please let me rest now. Please. Pl..."

The world around me goes dark. Just like every other time, I'm hovering alone as bits and pieces of myself fade into blackness. There's nothing left of me but yearning for the embrace of the void, and then not even that.

And then in a blinding flash, I'm wrestling with a terribly familiar headache. I feel the solid floor below pressing into the unbroken skin on my side, as wisps of magical power all around me begin to fade into the nothingness I've been denied.

Please. Please, no.

I open my eyes, and sure enough I'm back in the library again. Back in the the spot that no matter how far I run I'll never truly escape. Spike's standing nearby, looking at me with concern. Time slows for me as he opens his mouth.

No. No. Please no. Please. No. No No No No NO NO NO NO  
NO NO **NO NO NO NO NO NO NO**

“Well that didn’t work.”

