

37- Getting Even

They'd taken Comet.

They'd taken my wife and daughter just to get back at me.

It wasn't right. I'm supposed to be the one protecting them, not putting them in harm's way because of things I've done in my past. If something happened to them and they... I don't know what I'm going to do. I can't do this without them. I'd get them back. I'd get them back and make sure that I killed Chrysalis *permanently*, even if that meant the extinction of the entire changeling race. Anything to keep my wife and daughter safe.

I trudge through Ponyville as if in a trance, dragging the dead changeling behind me. Oswald is flying close by, occasionally nudging me with his beak. I ignore him. He can't help me right now unless he can lead me right to Cheerilee and Comet. I do vaguely remember how he seemed to sense that the changeling wasn't actually Comet. I guess that could be a useful thing in the near future.

All around me I can hear gasps and murmurs. I can imagine why the sight of me dragging a dead changeling behind me might cause some uneasiness. Ponyville hadn't been hit with changelings like Canterlot had, but they had all heard the stories. Enough that they would recognize them. I didn't doubt that they had started to think that Ponyville might have an infestation. Maybe we did. I doubted that the only two changelings in the area were either being interrogated by Celestia or dead behind me.

I push the library door open and walk inside. Celestia, Luna and Twilight are all standing around the captured changeling, who'd been secured to the floor with magical chains. All three ponies turn around when they hear me walk in, and their eyes immediately widen at the sight of me. I toss the dead changeling at their hooves.

"Comet," I say blankly. "This one was pretending to be Comet."

"I was afraid of that," Twilight mutters. I grunt in response. Twilight grimaces and motions back to the captured changeling. "We're close to finding out where they are, TD."

"As they are part of a hive mind, it is more difficult to discern where exactly they have hidden your wife and child, but it will not be long," Luna assures me.

The changeling looks down the body of its fellow, almost as if studying it, before he looks up at me and grins. He lets out that hiss of a laugh again. "You have no idea what tortures they are enduring," it cackles. "We'll keep them alive just long enough for them to watch you die. Or we might not kill them. They'd be delicious."

Before anybody else can do anything, I charge directly at it and slam my fist right into its jaw. I keep hitting it and screaming obscenities, not even caring that my hand is starting to bruise from hitting the hard chitin. Once again Celestia pulls me away from it, but she's not going to stop me this time."

"TD, that is enough!" Celestia insists. "I understand that you're upset, but--"

Her magical grip on me fades when I smash her right under her eye. She cries out in shock more than pain, but it gives me time to charge at the bug again.

"TD, stop it!" Twilight cries, grabbing me in her magic while the changeling starts laughing at me again. "This isn't helping anypony!"

"Get the *fuck* outta my way, Twilight!" I roar, balling up my fist to hit her next. Before I can, I'm wrapped in a golden aura and lifted into the air.

"Get him out of here, Tia," Luna says. "We shall handle this from here."

"Don't you dare stop me, you bitch!" I screech, flailing in Celestia's grasp. "Get their location from it and then give it to me! I'm going to make it scream! Chrysalis will *cry* when she sees what I've done to it!"

Celestia carries me into the kitchen and rotates me until I'm face-to-face with her before letting me go. "TD, I cannot allow that kind of speech. I know this must be difficult. I cannot imagine how this must feel for you, but killing that changeling before we can find out where they are will not help them or you. I must insist that you calm down."

"Oh what the heck do you know?" I growl. "Just... just..."

My jaw starts wobbling, and tears begin welling in my eyes. My breathing becomes shaky and I slide onto the floor with my back to the fridge. Celestia cautiously walks up to me, her wing extended. I take the offer for what it is and lean into her embrace, not even caring that tears are streaming down my face and my breathing is becoming marred with audible sobs. I don't even bother trying to control it. I know I can't.

"Shh," Celestia soothes, gently rubbing my back as she pulls me in closer. "It will be alright. We will find them, I promise. They shall not be harmed."

"I don't wanna lose them," I moan, holding on to Celestia as though she is the only one who could stop this nightmare. "I can't."

"And you won't, TD," Celestia insists. "Through our interrogations we have confirmed that it is indeed Chrysalis who has taken your family. I can only surmise that she is doing so to get revenge on you. If that is the case, she will not harm them."

"I just hate that she's using them to get to me," I reply, wiping my eyes with the back of my hand. "I'm supposed to be protecting them, not allowing them to be pawns in some kind of crazy revenge scheme."

"I understand, TD. Believe me, I feel that Chrysalis has made a grave error in taking your family. I have been considering a means of dealing with her in a more permanent fashion lately. I cannot have her foalnapping any more of my subjects."

I feel a flicker of hope at that. "So when we get them back you can make sure that she won't come after us anymore?"

Celestia nods. "Yes. As long as there are changelings then she in of herself cannot die. As a result, I feel that some sort of stasis is required. Perhaps even making her into a statue like I did with Discord." Celestia sighs and shakes her head. "I would not do it if I felt I had any other choice, but she has forced my hoof."

"Yeah." I take a few deep breaths, wipe my eyes again, then get to my feet. "But before you get to that, I'm going make her *suffer*. The last thing she remembers is going to be pain like she never realized was possible."

Celestia's expression turned dark as she stood up herself. "No. You won't. Torturing her will get you nothing. What I wish for is justice in a form that will protect my subjects. What you desire is nothing more than revenge. If you decide to take your revenge then you will find more problems arise than even I could foresee. Let my sister and I disable her, then you no longer have to worry about her foalnapping your wife and child again. If she is killed then she can go into hiding again, and we will have missed our chance. On top of that, she may not take such a theatrical method of gaining her revenge again. Changelings are not beings that are easily stopped if they truly wish to infiltrate an area. If you have your revenge, you will not be the only one to pay for it."

"Yeah, yeah, I got it!" I snap. "We'll talk about that once we've gotten my family back, okay?!"

Celestia stares at me if she's studying me for a few seconds. I shift uncomfortably, ready to say something else, but before I can, she speaks herself. "Very well. As I said: we are close to discovering their location. If all goes well, we shall have your family back by the morning."

"Good. Let's get back to it, then."

I try to leave the kitchen, but Celestia stops me by putting a hoof on my shoulder. "Actually, I'd like you to stay in here, TD. You being in there helps nopony right now, and we need this to go as smoothly as possible."

"I'm not going to do anything else," I snap, slapping her hoof away. "I'm fine!"

"You are not fine, TD. You are understandably hurt," Celestia insists. "Right now I must insist that you stay here. I promise that my sister and I will discern the location of your family in short order, but it will take longer for us to obtain that information if you are there. It will focus on you, which will heighten its defenses. I am not asking you to stay here for the rest of the night."

"Fine, I'll stay here!" I glare at Celestia. "But wherever they are, you're taking me with you to come get them. I'm not just going to sit by and wait while you try to fix the problem."

Celestia stares at me for a few more seconds before letting out a tired sigh and nodding. "Very well. I do not suppose I could stop you at any rate. I only ask that if you do come along that you do not seek your revenge. That is critical to preventing this from happening again."

"I got it, Celestia, now would you please find out where my family is?!"

"Of course." Celestia turns around and walks out of the room. Just before she reaches the entrance, she turns back to me and gives me a comforting smile. "We will find them, TD. I promise you that."

With that little promise she exits the kitchen, leaving me alone with my thoughts. I sit down at the kitchen table while Oswald perches on the back of the chair next to me. Heh, I actually cried in front of Celestia. Sheesh. I know the situation sucks and I never want my family to endure anything like this again, but I thought I could be a little stronger than that. I can't show any weakness right now. I needed to help my family, then I could think about maybe getting a little emotional.

My mind wanders to the changeling they're interrogating. Maybe they'll let me have it once they're done. Or what, are they just going to throw it in the dungeon? Just let it go? Definitely not that last one. I wouldn't let her do that. If I couldn't get revenge on Chrysalis herself, maybe I could get the changeling who pretended to be my wife as a consolation prize. Already killed the one pretending to be Comet.

I can't say how long it takes for them to finally get back to me, but when they finish up, all three of them file into the room, grim looks on their faces. My stomach tightens up and I shoot to my feet.

"Where are they?"

"She's taken them to the Everfree Forest, TD," Celestia says. "They're holed up in our old castle."

"Oh." I nod and lean against the table. "Oh. So what are we going to do about that?"

"It is a complicated issue," Luna admits. "The Everfree Forest, as you know, is a very dangerous area. We do not know the exact number of changelings she has brought, but we do know she is

not alone in there with your family. Given the dangerous nature of the forest, it would be unwise to charge in with an army, but a small strike force bears the risk of being overwhelmed."

"I'm not totally sure about that," I point out. "She wants me more than anything. She's not going to risk me being killed before she can get ahold of me. Since she didn't take me right away, I can only gather that she's set a trap for me."

"Possibly, yes," Celestia admits. "On top of that it would be difficult for a large army to pass into the forest completely undetected."

"So a small strike force it is." I crack my knuckles. "So when are we going in?"

"Given that time is of the essence, I feel it is best to go in this evening. We need time to prepare for our attack."

"Fine." I nod in the direction of the changeling. "And that? What are you going to do with that?"

Celestia and Luna exchange an uneasy glance before responding. "What we have decided is that we shall deal with it upon Chrysalis's capture," Luna replies. "It is obvious we cannot simply let it leave."

"If you don't want to deal with it, I will." I smirk at them. "I already got the last one. Why not give me this one?"

"We will not do that," Celestia says with a frown. "I have no intention of letting you torture it. We shall deal with the changeling once we have captured Chrysalis, not before." Celestia's frown turns into a glare. "You are going down a dark road, TD. Do not let your desire for revenge overtake you."

"Fine. Keep the damn thing. Whatever." I return her glare. "But don't you dare stop me from going to get them. I'm not sitting at home."

"I have already given you permission to come along," Celestia points out.

"I don't need your permission!" I snarl. "You're not my ruler, Celestia."

"Perhaps not. However, you are an Equestrian citizen. I will not have you endangering your fellow Equestrians by running off in some mad revenge scheme." My hand tightens into a fist, which she notices right away. Her eyes narrow and she lights her horn. "Do not force my hoof. You are emotional right now. Go home and prepare. We shall meet at the edge of the forest at dusk."

And if that's true, I have a bridge to sell you.

"Fine." I brush myself off and push past her. "I'll see you then."

* * * *

I make it to the edge of the forest an hour before dusk, where the strike team is already gathering. They look like they're just about to leave. I reach the group and walk up to Celestia, a smirk on my face.

"You look like you're ready to go."

I see a faint frown crease Celestia's face. "Yes, we finished preparations just before you arrived."

"Excellent." I look out into the small crowd of ponies. It appears to be a group of six guards all dressed in light armor, alongside Twilight, Rainbow Dash and Applejack, each of whom is wearing a light chainmail shirt. The other three are standing beside a tent that I can only assume is for the medics. Makes sense to me that they wouldn't want to do any direct fighting. I myself am only wearing my chainmail shirt underneath my usual clothes. My armor isn't very heavy, but it'll still slow me down more than I'd like. I'm armed with Reginald and my belt of knives.

"Hey buddy..." I tap Oswald's claw. "Can you go help out the medics? I think you'd be a big help."

Oswald mutters something, then flies off to the tent, landing on Fluttershy's back. She smiles at him and reaches back to pet him. Normally I'd be happy to let Oswald fight alongside me. Heaven knows he's done it enough, but we don't know what's going to happen, and his tears will certainly be invaluable for any wounded. With that settled, I walk over to the fighting half of the Mane Six.

"So, interesting to see you coming along," I say.

Rainbow Dash confidently smirks. "Oh yeah, we're totally going to kick their plots! We're going to send them back with their tails between their legs!"

"Well Princess Celestia actually wants to capture Queen Chrysalis so she doesn't do something like this again," Twilight points out. "Otherwise we could have to do this again."

"Yeah, yeah, I got that," Rainbow Dash says with a wave of her hoof. "But she's gonna regret messing with us!"

"Hold on there, Dash. Let's get orders from Princess Celestia before we all go runnin' off," Applejack says patiently. "We don't wanna go do somethin' foolish."

"Right. Still..." I begin tapping Reginald on the ground. "If at all possible, leave Chrysalis to me."

Twilight flattens her ears. "TD, let's--"

"End of discussion." I walk back over to Celestia and Luna who seem to be discussing something. "So, let's head out."

"In a moment, TD," Celestia says. "We need to decide--"

"Well, if you're not ready, I am." I sling Reginald over my shoulder. "Come in after me when you want to get serious about this."

"TD, wait!" Luna grabs me with her magic and holds me back. I'm really done with that today. "We do not wish for you to go in alone. Merely wait a few moments until we have finalized our battle strategy."

"You mean finalized your plans to keep me away from the battle? You had all day to figure out what you wanted to do." I tighten my grip on Reginald and glare at her. "I'm coming along, Luna. You wanna stop me? You're going to have to hurt me quite a bit. I'm here now. Every second you waste is one I could spend getting my family back."

Celestia closes her eyes and sighs before shaking her head. "I suppose you are correct. Very well." She opens her eyes and glares back at me. "But I must remind you again: if you find Chrysalis, do *not* kill her. Merely incapacitate her. Otherwise she will come back for her revenge again, and it will not be so elaborate."

"Yeah, yeah, I got it," I reply, waving my hand. "Can we just go now?"

"I suppose so." Celestia turns back to the strike team and spreads her wings, letting them know that she's ready to speak. They all stop their conversations and turn to her, the guards instantly snapping into formation. "Mares and gentlecolts, time is of the essence. The Everfree Forest is dangerous, so you will have to work together to make sure you all survive. This mission is not without its risks, but I believe we shall be victorious. Our objective is my sister and I's old castle. Let us be quick. I do not know how many enemies we shall face, but I do know that they will not defeat us."

Yeah, they won't do it *again*. I've heard the stories from the wedding.

"You have your orders," Celestia continues. "Let us begin."

Good enough for me. I grip Reginald in a fighting stance and instantly charge into the forest. I don't go so quickly that I can't see the rest of the strike team behind me. They're the ones who know exactly where we're going, after all, but it can't be too far away.

As I move through the forest, I see a flash of red and yellow out of the corner of my eye. I turn to face the thing in a fighting stance and see that it's a manticore. Yeah, not really in the mood to fight one of those things. I will if I have to, but it'll just be a waste of time at the end of the day.

Wait. Something's off. It takes me half a second to realize it, but the manticore isn't charging. In fact, it isn't moving at all. It's just leaning against a tree. That's when I see it. Blood. A lot of it. Blood is streaming from the manticore's neck as if its throat has been ripped out. I gingerly walk up to it and nudge it with Reginald. Yeah, definitely dead. My eyes narrow. What the heck is a dead manticore doing here? Before I can think on it further, I look around to see if what killed the manticore is around. Instead I see something else beyond it. Several piles of sticks that look like they could have been timberwolves. Beyond them is a dead crocodile looking creature.

"What the heck?" I whisper. Something is slaughtering the wildlife. I suppose Chrysalis doesn't want anything to get in my way. I push those thoughts away. It'll just make it easier for me to wipe her out.

"What happened here, TD?" Twilight whispers as she walks up to me.

"Chrysalis is killing anything that could stop me from getting to her. She's laying her trap, and if I want to face her, I need to spring the trap." I nod in the direction we've been walking. "How close are we?"

"Not too far," Rainbow Dash says, landing next to me. She grimaces and backs up a bit, trying to avoid the blood. "There should be a path leading us there, right?"

Twilight nods. "If they haven't hidden it."

"Doubt they would have," I point out. "She's trying to make sure I get to her."

Before Twilight can respond, an inhuman screech comes from behind us. I whip around just in time to see half a dozen changelings charging at us.

"SKREEEE!"

I swing Reginald at the closest one, and a *crack* echoes through the forest as it collides with its head. Twilight lights her horn and blasts two out of the air, just as several green flames erupt around us. Celestia, Luna and her guards charge into the swarm of at least three dozen changelings, blasting them out of the sky with magic and weapons. Twilight notices one of the changelings is standing up, so she blasts it with her magic while Rainbow Dash and Applejack join the fray. I slide one of my knives out of my belt and throw it directly into the neck of one of the nearby changelings. It gurgles and grasps at its neck as it falls to the ground.

"You're going for kills?!" Twilight cries as she blasts another changeling away.

I don't respond, choosing instead to rush over to the dying changeling and pulling my knife out of its neck. With one hand I knock another changeling aside following that up with a swipe at another one with my knife. Even as I'm fighting them I can tell that they aren't fully trying to harm me. Of course not. Chrysalis wants me for herself.

Well then, let's get to that.

I leave the rest of the strike team to fight the changelings. I'm not going to waste any time, and they have Celestia and Luna to help them. I rush over to the slightly overgrown path, stopping only to bat any changelings that get in my way aside. I only pause to finish off any changelings on the ground. Once I reach the path, I bolt in the direction of the castle.

As I rush away from the battle, the forest gets surprisingly quiet. I still notice a few dead animals near the path. It isn't too long before I break through a nearby treeline and see a rickety rope bridge across a giant chasm. If the bridge doesn't hold then my Equestrian life is going to be over very quickly. I gingerly put one of my feet on the nearly rotted wood and put a little pressure on it. It creaks but doesn't crack or break. I take a deep breath and put my knife back in my belt, then move onto the bridge. It creaks and swings, but it holds my weight. I crack my neck and begin running over the bridge. With each step the wood groans, but it doesn't break. I make it to the other side without any real issue. If this was a movie then one or two of the planks would have broken under me, leaving me hanging on for dear life.

I slowly move into the castle, scanning my surroundings for any changelings. It wouldn't make sense for me to be attacked now, given Chrysalis's behavior so far, but it doesn't hurt to be careful. I step into the castle itself, almost expecting to be attacked by a dozen changelings the second I walk in. Nothing happens. I can't hear anything, not even crickets in the distance.

It'll just be her and me, then.

Now there's just the issue of where her and my family are. I assume they'll be in one of the areas of the castle with the roof still intact. I take a guess and go down the nearest corridor. I look through each of the rooms that I pass, each one empty. Just as I think that I've taken the wrong way, I hear voices at the end of the hallway. My eyes narrow and I rush in the direction of the voices, stopping just outside of the large room at the end of the hall. The door is cracked open slightly, allowing me to peer inside. Chrysalis is strutting around the room, a smug look on her face. She seems to be monologuing. Right in front of her are two cocoons, one holding Comet, and the other holding Cheerilee.

"--and once he arrives, I'll destroy him quickly, leaving him begging for mercy at my hooves. I will see the fear in his eyes before you watch me destroy him!"

"Ha, that's what *you* think," Comet says smugly. "*My* daddy's not scared of anything!"

"I think you kind of underestimate him," Cheerilee points out. "He's beaten you already."

"And he will not do so again!" Chrysalis snarls. "I will make him endure tortures the likes of which he cannot even imagine!"

I've heard enough. I push the door open with Reginald and stand in the doorway. The three of them notice me, and all of them smile for different reasons.

"Daddy!" Comet says happily. "Go kick her ass!"

"Cheerilee, when we were on our honeymoon, what happened when we went into that alley?" I ask, my voice blank.

"Oh, uh, you beat those muggers up."

"Comet? When you met Princess Luna, what did you call her?"

"A cock!" Comet says gleefully. "Not as much of a cock as this bug here, though."

Cheerilee is smirking, but her face falls when she sees my expression. It's a mix of blank and complete rage. She gulps and looks over to Comet. "Comet, close your eyes. Don't look, okay, baby?"

Comet rolls her eyes. "Come on, Mom, I wanna watch Dad wipe the floor with her!"

"Comet don't look!"

Chrysalis cackles and buzzes her wings. "Yes, child. We wouldn't want you to see my destroy your father. I assure you that even though you will not see it, you will hear his pained scre--"

While she's not looking I charge. I hit her so hard several of her teeth scatter on the floor. Her ear-splitting screech of pain almost makes me want to cover my ears, but I'm not done. I don't even let her stand up before I begin smashing Reginald into her head. She manages to raise her head, and I hit her head in the opposite direction, causing it to snap to the side. She gurgles and lights up her horn, managing to tear Reginald out of my hands. I shift my hand into a bear paw and slap the side of her head, breaking her jaw. She manages a whimper and tries crawling away, but I grab her by the hind hoof and drag her back over. She tries lighting her horn for another spell, but I swipe at it with the bear paw, completely breaking it off.

"Please," Chrysalis croaks, but it's way too late for that crap now. I pull one of my knives out of my belt and plunge it right into her underbelly. She wails in pain and tries weakly crawling away, but I stomp on one of her hind knees. She's not going anywhere. I grab her by the back of the head and begin pulling the knife up. She weakly tries pushing my hand away, but her movements are becoming weaker. Her guts are just about spilling on the floor as I disembowel her. I'm not even thinking about what I'm doing. Rage is dictating all of my actions. There's nothing anyone can do to stop me now. I jerk the knife up more as her twitches get weaker and weaker.

Then she's still.

I pull the knife up more, stopping just as I reach her throat. I have to make sure she's not going to get up. If she does then she can hurt my family again. When I finally pull the knife out, my rage begins ebbing away. I start breathing deeper and I notice for the first time that I'm covered in green blood. My rage fully subsides leaving me with nothing. Nothing at all. For a few moments all I can register is my breathing and the blood. I briefly glance down at the corpse that used to be Chrysalis. I begin shivering. I can't look at her. I didn't do that. I know I was brutal the last time, but not this much. Last time was partially escape, too. Killing her let me escape. Here...

I don't want to think about that.

"Dad?"

My eyes snap open and I shoot to my feet. Comet and Cheerilee are staring at me. Cheerilee is blank, but Comet is looking at me with a little uncertainty, almost like she doesn't understand. I quietly gasp and rush over, almost stumbling in my haste. I pull another knife out of my belt and begin cutting the cocoons away. I pull the goo away as I'm cutting, nicking my fingers a little bit. Comet and Cheerilee try to help me push the cocoon out of the way. It's a solid five minutes of cutting, but they slide out of the cocoons. I throw the knife down and pull them into a crushing hug. I never want to let go. I'm never letting this happen again.

"I'm sorry," I whisper. "I'm sorry this happened."

"Don't worry about it, Dad," Comet says, nuzzling my neck. "You came and got us! I always knew you would. She kept saying that she'd kill you and stuff, but I knew you'd never let that thing beat you!"

I turn my attention to Cheerilee and run my fingers through her mane. She's staring up at me, her eyes watering. She glances behind me and flinches back when she sees Chrysalis's body. I take in a shaky breath and hold her head close. "Don't look. I just... I'm sorry, okay? I didn't think..." I shake my head. "Let's just go home, okay?"

"Yeah," Cheerilee whispers. She leans into my chest and nuzzles me. "Yeah, I just wanna go home."

"Mom told me that when one of those retarded bugs tried to take her away she broke its nose!" Comet says happily. "Guess she learned that kind of stuff from you?"

A ghost of a smile appears on Cheerilee's face as she pulls away. "I could have gotten away if they hadn't brought in another five to dogpile me."

I weakly laugh at that. "You'll have to tell me all about it." I stand up and turn to leave, moving Comet's head until she looks forward. I can't let her see what I did. I turn to the door and flinch

back when I see Celestia standing there. Her expression is completely blank as she stares at Chrysalis's body. She blinks once and takes a breath that almost sounds like a sigh.

"TD, I was under the impression that I'd ordered you to incapacitate her, not disembowel her." She walks into the room, her gaze never leaving the body. "What have you done?"

"I just... I didn't... I made a mistake, alright? I didn't mean to..."

Celestia finally looks at me and gives me the most unsettling expression I've ever seen on her. I can feel rage radiating off of her, and for the first time I really understand how powerful she is.

"This was no mere mistake. This was deliberate. You wanted your revenge. You took it. Now you've put yourself in far more danger than if you'd merely listened to me." She shakes her head. "It is done. Take your wife and child and go home."

"Celestia, I--"

"Get out of my sight."

I've never heard Celestia speak so coldly. I actually take a step back. After a few moments I slowly nod and walk out of the room. I pause briefly to tear off my bloody shirt, leaving me with my undershirt covering the chainmail, then I pick up Comet. She murmurs in contentment and nuzzles my chest.

"You came and got us, Daddy. I always knew you would."

I smirk and scritch her ears. "Yeah, I did. I always will. You never have to worry about that. But there isn't going to be a next time, alright? I've stopped her."

Will I be able to stop her the next time?

37-Worry

We go straight back to the house after that. I don't bother to update Twilight and her friends on what's going on, even though she walks up to me to ask. I just keep walking and ignore her. My family is far more important at the moment. I'm sure Celestia will tell her all about it later, probably to tell her to watch out for more changelings in the future.

Cheerilee and I are completely silent, both of us trying to get over the shock of what I just did. I see a look of contemplation on Cheerilee's face, like she has to keep reminding herself that it's real.

Comet, on the other hand, isn't picking up on any of that. She's happily walking alongside the two of us, chattering away about the adventure she just had.

"--and then you like totally kicked her ass and stuff! I wish I could have watched, though, because it sounded really awesome." Comet shudders a little bit. "I think I *felt* it when you hit her the first time. *CRACK!*" Comet mimics swinging Reginald. "And she goes down!"

Right. Reginald. It's still in the castle in the forest, if I remember right. I never picked it up. Huh. Might have to go back for that at some point. I need to take care of my family first, though. They're more important than some silly stick.

We finally make it to the house, thankfully not bothered by anyone. Comet is still happily bouncing around and fighting off imaginary foes. Part of me wants to stop her, but that would let her know that I'd gone too far. To her, what I'd just done was something straight out of my book, and I only did awesome things in my book from her perspective. Now I'd just done one for her.

She'd realize it someday. She'd think back on it and realize the scope of everything. For now, let her be innocent.

"So Dad..." I feel Comet nudge my leg. "Why couldn't I see you kick her ass? I'm almost a mare. I can handle stuff like what's in your book."

I give her a weak smile. "Yeah, you're growing up pretty fast." I exchange a nervous glance with Cheerilee before clearing my throat and kneeling down to Comet's level. "It's just that... I know it's fun to read about fights like that in my book, but it's not as fun to watch. It's different when you see it. That's all."

Comet frowns at that. "But it's couldn't be any worse than the first time you killed her, right? I mean, you pointed out in your book that you really beat her bad from that."

"Yeah, I did, but... it's just not something somebody should see, especially not at your age."

"I'm almost thirteen, Dad," Comet grumbles. "I'm gonna be a mare really soon!" She tilts her head. "So could I hear what you did then?"

"Let's talk about this later, Comet," Cheerilee chimes in. "Aren't you tired right now? I know I am."

"Nope," Comet replies happily. "I could stay up all night!"

"Well you do that in your room," I say. "Your mom and I are really tired from everything. I could use a good night's sleep."

Comet huffs and rolls her eyes. "Fine, fine. You're getting old, Dad."

"Well I did have a really busy, draining day. We'll talk about it tomorrow, alright? For right now, let's all get some rest."

"Yeah, I guess that makes sense." Comet smiled and nuzzled me. "I'm glad you came and got us, Daddy. I never thought you wouldn't."

"I'm so glad you two are safe." I scritched behind her ears. "We're not going to be bothered by her anymore, alright?"

"And if we are you're just gonna destroy her again," Comet says happily. I flinch back at that, but Comet doesn't notice.

"Whatever happens, it's best your mom and I get some sleep right now." I begin walking up the stairs to my room, my family following me. "You have a good night, Comet, and we'll see you in the morning."

"Alrighty, good night, Dad."

Comet goes into her room, leaving Cheerilee and I to silently walk over to ours. I take a deep breath and lay down on the bed, hoping that my wife will come and lie next to me. Instead she just sits at the foot of the bed, not looking at me.

"TD... what was that?"

I grimace and sit up. "It..." I sigh and run a hand through my hair. "I don't really know, Cheers. You guys were in danger, you know? I wanted to protect you."

"By doing that?" Cheerilee shudders a bit. "How can you have done something like that?"

"Cheerilee, I guess it's just..." I grimace as I try to find the words. "I'm not going to try to excuse it, Cheerilee. It was the wrong thing to do, and I know that. I suppose it's because I'm a human who already lost everything once. I can't lose you guys too."

"What does being a human have to do with it?"

"We can be pretty violent, especially when those we care about are in danger. We've started whole wars and revolutions because we've not been able to protect or feed our families. We're hunters. We fight. My world is nowhere near as peaceful as Equestria. Our brains are wired a little differently than ponies. In some ways I think we've both forgotten that a little." I put my hand on her back and feel a little relief when she doesn't flinch away from my touch. "I wanted to protect you two and I... lost myself a little. I gave in to some base instincts that I shouldn't have."

"I think I might understand. Still, seeing that..."

"I wish I could erase those images, Cheers. I'm just glad Comet didn't really see it. She doesn't need those memories."

"I'm happy she listened to me," Cheerilee admits. "I think in her mind you would react how you did in your book. Then again, you never really went into detail about what you did to her the first time."

"It wasn't much prettier than that," I admit. "But there was a desperation factor there, too. If I didn't kill her then, I wouldn't have been able to get out of the hive at all. Plus she'd already threatened you and your class." I sigh and run a hand through my hair. "I guess that's how she knew to go after you two. She already knew my weak points." My eyes narrow and I squeeze a handful of bedsheet. "When you push a man too far, he goes too far in response. It's not right, but that's how we can work. Not all humans, of course, but..."

"I suppose so," Cheerilee mutters. "I have nothing to compare it to. Of course stallions here would protect their families, but they don't get that... brutal."

My stomach tightens into knots and I can't look at my wife. This... this is going to be a while before things go back to normal. I can't just erase those memories from them. I even have to worry that Comet will think back on this and start to understand the implications. Understand that it wasn't just Daddy charging in to heroically save them. She'll remember our reactions to what I did.

A knock on our door brings me out of my thoughts. I grimace and stand up. I know darn well who this is, and I have no intention of letting her rant at me about how awful I am.

"I'm just going to tell her to go away. I'll be right back," I growl.

"TD, just be careful," Cheerilee says, putting her hoof on my back. "If you lose your temper at her she might lose hers."

"Don't care. I'm not going to let her get all high and mighty on me."

I do *not* want to deal with this right now. No matter how this happens, it's not going to be pretty. Yeah, it's a conversation she's not going to just drop this because I ask her to, but right now I need to be with my family. We both need to cool off before we talk about what happens next. As it stands right now, we're both just going to be angry at each other.

I reach the door and throw it open, instantly glaring at Celestia. She's trying to keep her face carefully neutral, but I can see a hint of a return glare on her face.

"May I come in?" she asks, her voice slightly cold.

"No, you can't," I instantly retort. "I need to spend time with my family. It's more important to me that I'm there for my wife instead of being chewed out by you until you wear yourself out."

Celestia's eyes narrow ever so slightly. I am not helping her mood. Do not care.

"TD, we need to discuss what will happen going forward. Chrysalis will not stop until she has destroyed you and your family. She will not be theatrical next time. She will merely capture you and your family, and if she takes you to her hive, I do not think that we will be able to find you in time."

"Her hive is somewhere in the mountains between Saddle Arabia and the Crystal Empire," I growl. "It's right there in my book. What she did was an act of war, and you know she's going to threaten you in the future."

"And if we attack her, that will take time and resources, not to mention the deaths of who knows how many ponies before we defeat them," Celestia countered. "All of that would be avoided if you had merely listened to me!"

"We can talk about this later," I snap, anger slowly boiling up inside of me. "Right now let me be with my wife and child."

"TD, we may not have time. What you did--"

I slam my fist straight into the wall, denting the drywall with my blow. "That *bitch* came into my *home*!" My breathing became shaky as Celestia and I stare at each other in silence for a few moments. "In my home where I take care of and provide for my loving family! Where I live with my wife. Where my daughter lays on my back because to her it's the safest place on the planet. My family should *never* feel like this isn't a safe place for them, and that pathetic little *insect* violated that. We humans protect our families. I am a human, not a pony. I'm still trying to figure out what I just did, but I have never for a second wondered why."

"And you call that protecting them, do you?" Celestia says, glaring at me. "Had you listened to me Chrysalis would have been taken care of for good. Instead you took matters into your own hands and gave her the opportunity to strike at them again. You will be lucky if she does not simply kill them outright and display their bodies on the front door of your home before slaughtering you. Your best case scenario if we cannot figure out a way to stop her is that she merely foalnaps all three of you and drains you until you become shells of what you were. I fail to see how that is 'protecting' them."

"So what, then?" I quietly growl. "Do you have any plans in there? How about you, me, Cadance and Luna go to that hive and kill everything we see?"

"I will not be part of the wholesale slaughter of an entire species, TD!" Celestia snarls. "Any solution will not involve genocide, is that clear?"

"Clear enough." I take a deep breath and run my hand through my hair. "We'll talk about this later when we're not so pissed off at each other."

I try to close the door in her face, but before I can, the door is encased in a golden glow, preventing me from slamming it shut. My eyes narrow and I tighten my hand into a fist. "Celestia, let go of my door and--"

Anger began boiling up in me when Celestia encased me in her magic and actually had the balls to lift me into the air. "TD, we need to discuss--"

"Celestia, if you don't put me down right now I will get free of this and show you just what a human can do."

Celestia's glare doesn't fade, but she sends a magical pulse through her horn that washes over me, and her magical grip fades away. I land on the ground a little harder than I could have before backing away. "Get off of my porch, Celestia. We're done for the night."

With that, I slam the door right in her face.

I take a deep breath and lean my head against the wall for a few moments. I can't fault her for being upset. I know I didn't listen to her and now I'm in a lot more trouble. I just... didn't have anything else to lose at that point. If I lost Comet and Cheerilee... I couldn't think of anything worse.

"Dad?"

My eyes snap open as I instantly straighten up, turning to see Comet standing on the bottom steps. I give her a weak smile and move over to sit down next to her, bringing up a hand to scratch behind her ears. She murmurs in contentment as she sits next to me.

"So, Dad... why was Princess Celestia mad at you like that? Did you do something bad?"

I sigh and lean back a little, keeping myself propped up with my elbows. This is not a conversation I want to have. "It's... complicated. She had a few problems with how I handled Chrysalis."

Comet frowns and tilts her head. "Why? You saved us. Princess Celestia probably just wanted to give her a second chance, right? I don't think that would have worked. She'd probably just fake it for a little bit, right? The way I see it, you stopped her for good!" Comet's frown deepens. "Right?"

I ignore the pang in my gut as I put on a half convincing smile for Comet. "Yeah, of course. I guess she didn't like how violent I got."

Comet scoffs and rolls her eyes. "Sheesh, is that it? Maybe she should pick up a history book sometime, because I read about all kinds of violent stuff that she did a long time ago. She, like, decapitated this griffin king and put his head on a spike to warn other griffins. Compared to that, what the Tartarus did you do that was so awful?"

"It's nothing you need to worry about Comet, okay? I promise. I can handle Princess Celestia being mad at me for a little bit. You and your mom are safe. That's all I care about."

"Yeah, totally." Comet leans on my shoulder and nuzzles it. "If something does happen again, you'll totally kick their asses like you always do. You never get scared by anything." Since she's leaning against my shoulder, she feels my flinch. A frown crosses her face and she straightens up. "Right? Like, you never got scared at all in your book. A lot of that was way worse than some dumb bug taking us for a little bit."

"No, nothing I've ever experienced was worse than that," I mutter, not even making eye contact with my daughter. "Comet..." I put an arm around her and give her a little squeeze. "I've never been more scared in my entire life than when I found out she'd taken you and your mom. I can't imagine anything worse than the feeling that I might lose you two."

"But... I thought you didn't get scared. I mean, in your book--"

"Comet, I was scared all the time. Fighting a minotaur warlord in a death match? Getting in the middle of assassinations with griffin emperors and dukes? Being in the changeling--" I pause and clear my throat before continuing. "Doesn't really matter. When I got scared, I knew that it would be over and I could just leave the country I was in. Anything that happened probably wouldn't be forever. But if I lost you two? That's forever. The idea of never getting to hug you or your mother again. Never coming home and asking about your day..."

"Never getting to rail Mom so hard she can't walk straight."

I barely crack a tiny smile at the painfully obvious attempt to lighten the mood a little. Comet's hopeful smile that she managed to make me feel better falls, and she scoots closer to me.

"At any rate, I get scared all of the time. Bravery isn't about never being scared. It's about pushing forward even though you may be terrified."

"And are you scared that that bug thing might come get us again?"

I actually do manage a smile this time, and I comfortingly rub her head a little. "No, not at all. Princess Celestia just got mad because she wanted to arrest Chrysalis. That's all. She's not coming back."

"Well good. Although if she did come back, you'd definitely beat her back."

I lightly chuckle and hug my daughter close. "Yeah, no question about that."

* * * *

The next three months are fairly quiet.

Things haven't totally gotten back to normal for the three of us. Cheerilee is still a little distant at times whenever she's reminded of what happened, which Comet can pick up on. On the whole, though, things are starting to improve. Cheerilee and Comet never go anywhere without an escort from me. I walk them to and from school every day, and all shopping trips are done as a family. I won't fail them again. I'll keep them safe.

As far as I know, there have been a few missions to find Chrysalis's hive, but nothing fruitful. A joint mission with Sultan Mesud did find the hive I'd run into on my travels, but it was completely deserted. They stopped the missions after that. No point, really. The alternative was scouring every inch of the planet hoping to stumble upon it. They could have set up their hive in the Everfree Forest for all we knew. Now, I doubted that, but they could have.

Speaking of, I still hadn't gone back to get Reginald and my knife. Doing so would leave my family alone, and I wasn't about to take them into the Everfree Forest to get some stick, nor would I just send Oswald out alone to get it. I'm sure I'll get it back someday, but for right now, I couldn't get to it without posing serious risk to my family.

Still, it's been three months, right? I'm sure that they're going to come back for me, but last time it took her over ten years to gather enough strength to face me again. She wouldn't move so soon, right? Especially since Celestia is watching the three of us. Turns out Cadance has her own special ops group she calls the Blade Wings. Every now and again I see movement out of the corner of my eye, turning just in time to see somebody dart behind a building or into a treeline. Given that Celestia has assured us that we're under her protection right now, I assume that's what I'm seeing. She did offer to move us to Canterlot, but I couldn't do that to Comet and Cheerilee. They have a life here, and I don't want to ruin that for them because of a dumb mistake I made. Plus it would let Comet know that no, we're not safe here. Chrysalis could come back for us at any moment, so we need to be ready to move if we get a hint that she might be hunting us again.

I wanted to be better than this. I'm the man of the house. My job is to protect my family, not put them in more danger. I'd do anything to stop Chrysalis if she showed up again, but she leads a race of shape-shifters. It's not like a minotaur, which I could see coming from a mile away.

I just... don't want to fail them. I can't fail them. I have to find some way to fix my mistakes so that they can be safe for good. That's my job as the man. Provide and protect.

For now, though, the three of us are at the park. I'm tossing a frisbee to Comet, who is happily catching everything I throw at her while Cheerilee and Oswald look on from a picnic blanket.

"Alright, be ready for this one, Comet. It's coming your way!"

"Bring it on, Dad. I'll catch whatever you got, old man!"

I scoff as I ready the frisbee. "Old man, huh? Well then let's see you catch... *this*"

I fake throwing the frisbee and, like a dog, Comet completely goes for it. She scans the air, hoping to spot the frisbee before it hits the ground. She realizes my master plan too late. I run over and neatly pluck her out of the air before bringing her down for a tickle attack.

"Who's the old man now?" I say with a giant grin.

"Y-you are!" Comet manages between her laughter. She's flailing her legs and wings, trying to stave off my attack. "Y-y-you're an old m-m-man!"

"Not that old yet if I can still tickle you!"

"S-stop!" Comet manages to brush one of my hands out of the way, but I merely find another ticklish spot on her.

"You might want to give up, Comet," Cheerilee says, smirking at the two of us while Oswald giggles.

"Okay, okay, you're not an old man!" I instantly stop tickling Comet, who uses the opportunity to slide out from under me and fly into the air just beyond what I can reach. She sticks her tongue out and crosses her forelegs. "You're young. Really young. Young enough to be one of Mom's students." Comet fake gasps. "Did you do your homework?!"

I roll my eyes. "Yeah, I've got it bad. I'm hot for teacher."

Cheerilee scoffs and walks over to us. "You've certainly picked up your father's wit, Comet. Come down now, though. I think it's time for us to head on home."

"But Mooooooooommmmm," Comet whines. "Can't we stay out a little longer?"

"We have school in the morning and it's almost your bedtime." Cheerilee points to the horizon. "See? The sun's going down. It'll be dark by the time we get home."

"Fine, fine, we can go home." Comet scowls at Cheerilee. "But see if I go to bed!"

"Oh, that's right. You should still have some homework left to do, don't you?" Cheerilee says thoughtfully. "As a co-worker of Ms. Blackboard, I do remember that she's very understanding about late homework, and absolutely buys any excuse thrown her way."

Comet flattens her ears and gulps before landing next to Cheerilee. "Uh... yeah, maybe I have a few more worksheets I need to do. Right."

"Good to know. I'll be sure to check up on your progress."

Comet frowns and grumbles something to herself that probably isn't very family friendly, but we both decide to let it drop, choosing instead to pack up the picnic blanket and basket. Once that's settled the four of us make our way home. Out of habit, I scan the area around us, my eyes landing on Whitetail Woods just as I see something dart between the trees. I frown and keep staring at the area. After a few seconds, something emerges between the trees. Looks like Lyra Heartstrings, actually. Yeah, I've had a suspicion for a while that she's one of the Blade Wings. I nod in her direction and keep walking with my family. However, before I can fully look away, Lyra is engulfed in green flame, leaving a changeling in her place. My eyes widen, but before I can say anything, the changeling instantly shifts back to Lyra. It turns its attention to my family, then back to me. I can't miss the predatory look in its eyes, nor when it licks its lips and rubs its belly.

No, not here. Not now.

"Da.." My voice cracks and I have to clear my throat before continuing. "Dang. It's really getting dark fast. We should pick up the pace a little, yeah? We're almost home."

"Come on, it's not *that* dark, Dad," Comet says, fluttering beside me. "See, the sun hasn't totally gone down yet."

"No, but it's best we're home before it does."

"Dad, it's Ponyville. Ponies don't even lock their doors around here." Comet frowns and tilts her head. "Is something wrong?"

I scoff. "Not a thing." I slow my pace a little. "I guess I'm just a little tired. Been a long day, right?"

"Yeah, I guess," Cheerilee replies.

We don't say anything else as we reach our house, but I'm constantly scanning the area for any more ponies watching us. Given the late hour, not many ponies are around and those that are aren't really paying attention to us. Still, I can't hope that what I saw was just some trick of the light. I can't really hallucinate green fire like that. No, changelings are in Ponyville, and I need to get my family out now. Ideally Canterlot so Celestia can figure something out. I'm in over my head like this. Still, though, I'm not sure why it revealed itself. Maybe it's toying with me. If that's the case, I might have time to move my family.

Just as I start wondering what to do, I'm knocked back when something collides with me. I manage to regain my balance in time to stop myself from falling, but I hear something crashing

on the ground. I regain my senses and see Berry Punch, who apparently had some packages on her back which I've knocked over.

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry, TD! I didn't see you there!" Berry says.

"No trouble at all," I reply, kneeling next to her so I can help her pick her things back up. Cheerilee and Comet start walking over, but I wave them away. "We're fine here. Be there in a second."

"How clumsy of me, TD." Berry manages a weak smile. "I should look where I'm going."

"Eh, it's fine. I wasn't really paying attention either."

I reach for the last package right at the same moment Berry does. Just before I can grab it, she leans in a little closer and her voice drops low.

"We'll keep them out of it if you don't resist." She picks the package up and returns it to the spot on her back. "Inform them in any way and our queen will take them too. Everfree Forest in half an hour. Don't be late."

My heart drops into my throat as I straighten up. They want me to sacrifice myself for them. Chrysalis will have me and in exchange they won't be bothered. I... I...

"Sorry again for running you over, TD," the changeling pretending to be Berry says. "I'll get you a drink on the house whenever you're at my bar again."

"Uh... yeah, sounds good. I'll... see you later."

With that, the thing walks away like nothing happened. I stare at the changeling walking away for a few minutes before walking back to my family. I can't run over to them like I want to. Then they'd figure out that something's up. I can't. If they have any idea of what's going on then they'll get taken all over again. I can't have that. Whatever else happens, they need to be safe.

"Clumsy Miss Berry Punch," Comet says with a grin as I reach the three of them.

"It happens," I reply with a forced smile. "I've done the same thing myself before."

"Well, then clumsy Dad," Comet says, poking the side of my head.

"I admit, I didn't notice her either until she ran into you," Cheerilee chimes in. "Guess none of us were paying attention."

"Well, it is getting dark," I pointed out. "Could have happened to anybody."

We reach the house after a few more minutes. I open the door and walk in ahead of my family, scanning the dark entryway room in case I can see anything that wants to jump out at us.

Nothing happens. Not as though I could really fight off whatever would attack us anyway. My knives are in our room and Reginald is still in the forest.

I flinch when I hear the door close, and wheel around to see that it's just Cheerilee and Comet. Right. It's fine. Nothing is in here. They're safe.

They're not safe, and I don't know what I can do about it.

"You okay, TD?" Cheerilee asks. "It's just us."

I give her a confident smile. "Yeah, I guess I'm just tired. A bit on edge for some reason." I yawn and stretch out a little bit. "I think I might hit the hay. How about you, Cheers?"

"Well now that you mention it, I could use some sleep myself." Cheerilee turns to Comet and gives her that "motherly glare" she's gotten good at over the years. "But I'd better see some completed worksheets when I get up tomorrow."

Comet scoffs and waves her hoof. "Yeah, yeah, I'll get them done and go right back to bed. Sheesh."

"See that you do." I snuffle and crack my neck. "I'm gonna get a drink before bed. I'll see you in a second, alright, Cheers?"

"Alright, sounds good."

Cheerilee and Comet make their way up the stairs, and I smile at them like there's nothing wrong at all. Nothing at all. Oswald stays perched on my shoulder, which is perfect for me. I'm going to need him in a second here. The moment I hear their doors closing, I rush over to my writing room and pull out a piece of paper and a pencil.

Celestia, the changelings are here in Ponyville. They're coming for us soon. Cheerilee and Comet are in Manderley. Send help.

I roll up the letter and turn my attention to Oswald. "Hey, buddy, I need you to give this to Twilight. Make sure she gives it to Spike to send to Celestia, alright? This is important."

Oswald tilts his head at me questioningly, but he takes the letter in his beak and flies out of the room. I follow him just in time to see him flying out of a nearby open window. Good. That's one thing settled. I just wish the changelings had given me more time. Then I could hole up in my house while Celestia dealt with things. I glance at a nearby clock on the wall. I have fifteen minutes to make it to the Everfree Forest as it is. I have no illusions that Celestia can get here in time to save us.

But... but Comet and Cheerilee will be safe, right?

Think, TD. Think this through. There has to be a way to get out of this.

But I don't know how many of them there are. My time could run out and fifteen changelings could break down the doors. I can't fight that many off by myself. Given the time frame, I have maybe five minutes to figure something out before I won't be able to make it to the forest in time.

Rush over to the train station?

We wouldn't make it halfway there. If we left the house at all we wouldn't be able to make it to where we were going. Plus if we stayed in Ponyville they'd just follow us to our destination anyway. So I can't fight, and we can't run, which leaves...

I glance at the clock. Twelve minutes.

I have to protect them, no matter the cost. They have my money, and Celestia will protect them when I can't. I take a deep breath and grab the door handle. It's me or all of us, and I can't let them go through that again. The last time they saw it as a sort of odd adventure. This time, though...

I can't let my family be tortured. They'll be okay.

With one last deep breath, I push the door open and step out into the cool Ponyville night. I have time to make it to the Everfree Forest if I hurry. I can't hesitate, or I might not make it. I close the door behind me and pick up the pace. I'll just make it.

They'll be okay. Celestia will make sure nothing else happens to them. It'll hurt a lot, losing both me and their home, but at least Chrysalis won't be able to get to them. They'll be safe and provided for. I'll have done my job.

I reach the edge of the forest with a few minutes to spare, but I still don't hesitate to walk right in. I'm not instantly attacked, but I'm certain it's coming. Maybe they want to make me stew in my thoughts, or...

My eyes widen as the thought strikes me. Maybe they just lured me out of my house with some empty promise leaving my wife and daughter all alone. I wheel around and am about to run back to the house when four changelings pop out of the forest around me. Two of them fly in front of me, blocking my escape route.

"You showed up," one of them cackles.

"Yes, now leave my wife and daughter alone. For good!"

The changelings laugh among themselves as more of them come out of the trees to surround me. I tighten my hand into a fist, hoping beyond hope that maybe Celestia will show up just in time and we'll be saved.

"Maybe we will, maybe we won't," another changeling says. "Regardless, our queen would very much like to see you. She has such *plans* for you."

"I won't resist as long as you leave them out of it!" I roar. "You'd better--"

I cry in pain as a beam of magic slams into my back. I stumble forward, but before I can even hit the ground, another one hits my side, sending me flying. Before I can even move, the changelings around me shoot more beams of magic into my body, and every time I curl up to protect an area that they'd just hit, more beams would smack into the exposed spots. All I can do is shield my head with my arms and wait until they get bored. I lay like that for what seems to be an eternity before a beam to my skull knocks me out.

* * * *

My head feels like somebody hit it with an axe. Repeatedly. I groan and rub my head, trying to relieve some of the pain pulsing through it. The pain doesn't completely go away, but I don't feel like I'm about to die. I groan and slowly push myself to a sitting position. The ground feels weird. Almost like...

My eyes shoot open, and I realize instantly that I'm lying in dirt. I shoot to my feet and look around. I'm in a small cell of some kind with thick metal bars in front of me and on either side. For a split second I wonder where the heck I am, but the realization returns with the memories of what just happened. The changelings. I'd just been taken by the changelings. Who knew what they were going to do to me now.

Before I can think about any kind of plan going forward, a single voice takes me out of my thoughts. A voice that makes this entire situation infinitely worse.

"Daddy?"

My eyes widen and I wheel around to the source of the voice. My heart sinks when I see Comet and Cheerilee in the cell next to mine, leashes around their necks that are attached to the wall behind them. The two are holding on to each other for dear life, and tear streaks stand out against their dirty faces.

"No, no, no, no, NO!" I run over to the bars and shove my arm through, hoping that I can reach out and touch them. "I'm here. Just hold on, okay? I'll find some way to get us out."

"Daddy," Comet whimpers. She breaks free of Cheerilee's embrace and rushes over to me, but the leash stops her halfway over, and she snaps back, falling to the ground. She slowly pushes herself back to her hooves before moving over to me as far as the leash allows. She reaches out to touch my hand, but we can't... quite... reach.

I strain to move my hand further into the cell. The bars are too close together for me. We're inches apart! Let me hold my daughter's hoof, you bastards!

"TD, what's going to happen?" Cheerilee whispers. "I thought you were going to protect us!"

"I am! I... look, they told me that they'd leave you alone if I gave myself up. I was trying to protect you. I didn't know for sure if they were lying, but I literally had minutes to make a decision."

"Why did you hurt Chrysalis like that, Daddy?" Comet whimpers. "Mom said that Princess Celestia told you not to. Why didn't you listen?" Comet stops trying to reach to me, choosing instead to shrink back into Cheerilee's embrace.

"I know. I'm sorry. I was just trying to protect you two."

"And a fine job you've done, I see," a chillingly familiar voice says behind me. I wheel around to see Chrysalis herself strutting up to the bars of my cage. She's a little smaller than last time, and her eyes are more sunken and she doesn't carry herself with the strength and dignity as she usually does. She's weak from hunger, but I can't miss that predatory look in her eyes. I still manage to stand up and glare at her out of whatever scraps of defiance that I can muster.

"This is between you and me, Chrysalis. Just let them go and I won't resist."

"Oh, you won't resist anyway," Chrysalis says idly, walking over to their cage. "I'd hate to see what happens if you don't do exactly as I say." Chrysalis's eyes narrow, and she lights up her horn, forming a sickly green beam of energy around the tip of her horn. "I think you'll find that you are holding none of the cards here."

"Chrysalis for god's sake just let them go!" I plead, throwing myself against the bars. "You can torture me! You can kill me! Just leave them out of this!"

"And why would I do that?" Chrysalis grins and licks her lips. "I can *taste* the love between you three. You might as well be asking a mare starving to death in the desert to ignore the three course meal set in front of her. No, you have brought this upon them. Think about that while you're rotting in this hole in the ground where nopony will ever find you."

With that, she turns and strides away, happily humming to herself. I shakily sit down on the ground, not even able to make eye contact with my wife and child.

"Daddy, why didn't you just stop her?" Comet whimpers. "Why did you leave us alone in the house?"

I can't even respond to that. Instead I turn to them and try my best comforting smile. "I'll get us out of here. Somehow, some way. I promise you that."

Maybe if I said it enough, I'd start believing it too.

37-Love

I sit in the corner of my cell and stare at the hard stone floor. I can't even make eye contact with my family right now. Knowing that this is all my fault and that they wouldn't even be in this situation if I had just listened to Celestia and not killed Chrysalis...

I failed. I failed my family because I put revenge over their safety. I can't put anything ahead of my family. Now it might be too late for me to ever make things right again.

But no, I had to keep the promise I made to get us all out of here, even though it seemed impossible. I tried breaking down the bars of my cell in the vain hope that they weren't connected to the walls very well, but all I got from that was a sore shoulder. I couldn't get through the walls to dig out, even if I had something to dig with. The changelings weren't around enough for me to see any patterns, and they were never alone around us.

Something. There had to be something I could use to get us out of here. I wouldn't rest until I had my family back in Equestria safe and sound. I'd make it up to them even if it took me the rest of my life.

"Daddy?"

I flinch back and press harder against the wall. I can't look at her. I can't look at her and tell her that it's my fault we're in this mess. She knows that already, but I'm not going to confirm it for her.

"TD, what are we going to do?" Cheerilee whispers, fear in her voice. "You have to have some kind of a plan. Y-you always do. You've gotten out of worse situations before."

"I..." My voice cracks and I clear my throat. "I don't know, Cheerilee. I'll try to think of something, it's just..." I took a deep breath and ran a hand through my hair. "I'll try to think of something."

I get to my feet and begin looking around my cell. It's even smaller than Comet's room at Manderley. Definitely not something that I can move around too much in. The walls aren't dirt or stone, but rather the sort of material I was cocooned in last time I was here. Maybe if I...

I transform my hand into a bear paw and begin picking at the wall. I doubted that it would all just come apart with a little work, but maybe I could make enough progress that I could get us out with a night of hard digging. A small flame of hope wells up in me as a few small flecks of the wall come off as I scratch. Not enough that I could get us out in a few hours, but enough to let me know that I could possibly do this. I turn to my family with a weak smile.

"Okay, I think I have an idea."

Cheerilee returns my weak smile. "I knew you would, TD. What are you going to do once you get us out?"

"I'll..." I turn back to the wall. "Let's take this all one step at a time. Let's focus on just getting out first."

"But how are you going to stop the changelings from seeing you?" Comet whimpers. "Won't they catch you?"

I grit my teeth and continue picking away at the wall. "I have to try, Comet. I can't just sit here and do nothing."

"So then what exactly are you planning?"

I wheel around at the sound of the voice and see Chrysalis behind me flanked by two changelings. All three of them are smirking at me. I change my hand back to a human's hand and cross my arms with a glare.

"You really didn't get enough last time, did you?" I growl. "You'd think that after being beaten to death by me twice, once when I was imprisoned, you'd get the idea and just leave me alone."

Chrysalis cackles and knocks on the bars of my cell. "Strong words for a being at my complete mercy. If I wanted to I could have you killed now, but we'll get to that part much later." She turns to Comet and Cheerilee and walks up to their cell. "For now, I have a few better ideas."

She motions to one of the changelings behind her, who walks up to the bars of my family's cell and opens the door for her. Cheerilee instantly scoops Comet up and hugs her tight while doing her best to back away.

"Don't you dare!" I roar, rushing over to the bars between the two cells and ineffectually grabbing at them. "If you think about hurting either of them I'm going to rip you in half!"

"Is that so?" Chrysalis hmms in thought and taps her jaw. "Well, I'll look forward to seeing how you get out of there, then. Until then, I fail to see how you're going to stop me from doing anything." Chrysalis turns back to my family and grins. "Let's see. Let's see." She points at Comet, who flinches back. "Eeney." She points at Cheerilee. "Meenie." Back to Comet. "Meiney." Back to Cheerilee. "Moe."

I slam my shoulder into the bars with as much force as I can, hoping beyond hope that I can break through them and stop whatever is about to happen.

"Catch a. Pony. By her. Toe."

"Chrysalis, don't!"

"If she. Sobs and. Wails and. Cries. Let her. Screams echo. Through the. Skies."

"I'm going to kill you!"

"My. Queen. Said. To. Pick. The. Tastiest. One. And. You." She slowly walks over to my family, using her magic to drag them into the center of the cell. She moves behind them and puts her hoof on Cheerilee's head. "Are." Her grin widens and she licks her lips. She slowly hovers her hoof over Comet before gently placing it on Comet's head.

"It."

She looks over to her soldiers, her hoof still on Comet's head. "This one."

"You fucking bitch! I'm going to rip you to pieces!" I roar, trying in vain to get through the bars to my family while Chrysalis's guards use their magic to rip Cheerilee and Comet away from each other. Comet is crying so hard she can't even talk, while Cheerilee is screaming at them, futilely trying to reach out to Comet. I continue slamming my shoulder into the bars. "When I get out of here you're going to *wish* for what I did last time!"

Chrysalis gives an exaggerated yawn as a response. "Yes, yes, I'm sure you'll make things very painful. Until then..." She turns to me with a nasty grin. "This is going to be really fun."

"Daddy!" Comet wails, trying to wiggle out of the magical grasp of the changeling guards as they carry her past my cell. I rush over and shove my hand through the bars, the tips of my fingers barely brushing over her mane. "Don't let them take me!"

"Just hold on, Comet, we're going to be out of here soon!" I try to slip through the bars, but I can barely get my shoulder through them. If I can just get out then nothing they do will be able to stop me from destroying everything in this hive.

I can't just stand around! I have to save her! The screams of Comet and Cheerilee echo around me as I throw my whole body weight against the bars, but they don't budge an inch. If I can just.

Get.

To...

Comet's screams die down as they drag her further into the hive, until all I have left is Cheerilee's sobs. The energy slowly leaves me and I slide down onto my knees, my head leaning against the bars. I squeeze me eyes shut as hot, thick tears begin dripping from them.

"I'm so sorry, Cheerilee," I whimper. "I... I tried."

"This is all your fault!" Cheerilee wails, making me flinch. "Th-they're gonna kill Comet and it's all your fault!"

"I know," I sob. "I just wanted to protect you." I slowly turn my head to look at my wife. She's lying in a fetal position in the middle of her cell, convulsing from the sobs. "Th-they're not gonna kill her, okay? They'll bring her back and we'll get out of here and be fine."

Cheerilee slowly lifts her head and looks me straight in the eye. At first she didn't say anything, she just stared at me, unblinking.

"Go to Tartarus," she spits, with more venom than I've ever heard from her.

With that, she curls back up, shifting so her back is to me. I stare at her for a few more minutes before slowly, shakily getting to my feet and beginning work on the walls again.

* * * *

I'm awoken much later by the sound of the cell door next to me opening. Or maybe only a few hours. It's impossible to tell in here. I shoot to my feet and rush over to the bars between the cells to see the changelings carrying Comet back into the cell. They roughly drop her on the ground and attach the leash back around her neck before exiting the cell and slamming the door behind them. The noise wakes Cheerilee up, and she gasps and wraps Comet up in a tight hug. Comet hisses in pain and wiggles out of Cheerilee's grasp.

"Comet! Comet, are you okay?"

Comet begins sniffing, and Cheerilee begins stroking Comet's head. I feel a gut punch to my stomach when I see that the changelings have cut off most of her mane, leaving only small patches behind. Even worse, even through her dark coat I see bruises beginning to form.

Comet slowly pushes herself up to her hooves, and turns to look at me. I let out a tiny gasp when I see she has a black eye.

"Daddy," she whimpers, leaning her head against Cheerilee. "Why did you let them do this to me?"

"I didn't! I mean... I tried!" I insist, trying once again to get through the bars. "I'm gonna get us out of here, Comet, I promise!"

"I don't know if I believe that anymore," Comet whispers, burying her face in Cheerilee's chest, while Cheerilee gently wraps her forelegs around Comet. "I think they're gonna kill all of us. Sh-she said she was gonna."

"She's not going to be able to, Comet, I swear on everything!"

"And how are you going to stop it?" Cheerilee says bitterly, gently stroking Comet's head. "If you hadn't gone out for revenge, we'd all be safe at home! I'd be teaching, Comet would be playing with her friends, we'd be happy! But you had to kill her, didn't you?"

I slowly back away from the bars, unable to meet my wife's gaze. I can't even muster a single word. My jaw flops up and down but I'm not even making sound. I just slide back into the corner of my cell, curl up, and stare at the wall.

* * * *

My cell door opens up and I hear something being slid across the floor. I crack one eye open and see that it's a single wooden bowl. I slowly crawl over to it and see that it's full of some kind of gruel. It doesn't look like something I'd feed a Diamond Dog, much less eat myself. Still, I imagine that it's all I'm going to be eating until I get my family out of here. If they're going to torture us, they're at least going to keep us alive.

I glance over at Comet and Cheerilee, and I see that they both have bowls in front of them as well. Comet is looking down at the bowl, her nose wrinkled in disgust, but Cheerilee leans down and whispers something comforting in her ear. She kisses the top of her head and nudges the bowl closer. Comet slowly picks it up and takes a sip. She shudders at the taste, but continues eating.

Good, it's not so bad that Comet's going to starve herself. I look down at my own bowl and pick it up. It doesn't smell the best, but, again, they are trying to keep us alive here. I breathe deep then take a few gulps. It doesn't taste good, but it makes the worst of the hunger pangs go away. I feel a little more energized. I don't know if they're going to feed us with any consistency, so I need to make this count.

Another glance at my family shows me that Comet and Cheerilee have finished theirs. Good. I take a few more small gulps, leaving me with about half left, then crawl over to the bars and push the bowl through. It takes a little effort, and I spill some, but I get it through and manage to slide it within Comet's reach. She looks up at me and frowns, which I return with a confident smirk.

"Don't worry, it's fine. I lived on less than this when I was traveling sometimes. Heck, it tastes better than some of the stuff I scrounged up."

Comet eyes the bowl as if it's going to bite her, but after a few moments she slowly slides it over to her and lifts it to her mouth, draining the rest of the gruel. When she puts the bowl down she actually manages to smile at me.

"I guess it was a little good."

I give her a weak smile back. "Yeah, see? There you go. We need to keep our strength up."

Cheerilee frowns and tilts her head. "But won't you get hungry?"

My stomach quietly growls, but I manage to give them a confident smile. "Nah. Like I said: I learned how to conserve my energy when I didn't have a lot of food around." My smile falls and I look at the small dent I've made in the wall. I have to figure out how to break down the wall without them noticing. I doubt they're going to give me a movie poster to hide the hole, and that's not even counting the pieces. I can't do nothing, though. I have to try. Right now it's my best option. It's the next right thing to do.

Other than kill Chrysalis again.

No, she'd never let me get close enough to her.

The wall it is, then. I turn my hand back into a bear paw and begin clawing at the hole I've already made. I work in silence, with only the breathing of the three of us as noise. I can tell that my family is watching me intently. When I get us out of here I'll spend the rest of my life making it up to them.

Although, if I had to sacrifice myself so that they could get out, I'd do it without hesitation. As long as they were safe and free, that's all that mattered to me. Celestia would protect them if she didn't manage to capture Chrysalis.

Just focus on the now. Do the next right thing, and that's hacking away at this wall. Figure it out from there.

* * * *

I spent pretty much all night breaking down the wall. Or at least, I think I did. It's impossible to tell time in here. Comet and Cheerilee had long since fallen asleep by the time I ran out of energy and couldn't lift my arm anymore. I had taken a decent sized chunk out of the wall and did my best to hide the bits in the corner where it was darker. I wouldn't be able to hide them like that for long, though. After hours of hacking away to the point where my claws started to wear down a little bit, I finally went to sleep.

I don't know how long it was before I woke up again, but my eyes flutter open when I hear my cell door opening. Wait, is it my turn? If they let me out of the cell then I can gather some intelligence. Even if they're taking me somewhere to torture me, I can figure out some basic information about the hive. Even if they blindfold me before taking me out, better me than Comet or Cheerilee.

I hear hoofsteps on the ground and pretend to be sleeping while barely cracking one eye open. My heart leaps in my chest when I see that Chrysalis herself has actually walked up to me. Is she seriously that dumb, or are we the luckiest people on the planet? Didn't she learn anything from last time? If I can just get her within reach...

"Wake up, human," Chrysalis growls, kicking my side. "We have a lot to--"

Before she can finish her sentence I pounce. Green fire envelops my hand as it shifts into a tiger paw. I put as much force into my swing as I possibly can and catch her right on the side of the head. She cries out in pain and flies back into the wall. I shoot to my feet and charge. She's leaning against the wall, trying to push herself up, but is too stunned to stand up straight. I grab her by the neck and slam her back against the wall, my fingers tightening on her windpipe. I give her my nastiest grin and raise my paw high.

"Too easy," I chuckle.

"It was, wasn't it?" a voice from behind me said. It sounded like... no. No that can't be right. I slowly turn my head to see Chrysalis standing outside of my cell smirking at me.

But...

I look back to the Chrysalis in my grasp, and she's enveloped in green fire, revealing a basic changeling drone. He's grinning at me, but it doesn't quite reach his eyes. Guess I knocked him pretty good. I turn back to Chrysalis, not letting go of the drone.

"If you--"

"If I what? If I let your family go you'll let my changeling go?" Chrysalis cackled. She shook her head and walked closer to the bars that I hadn't noticed had been closed behind the fake Chrysalis, preventing me from attacking her. "You are a fool. Do you think I care for the life of a single drone enough to let your family go? No, I do not. However, I can say that if you don't drop him in the next five seconds, you'll see that what I did to your daughter is not even the beginning of my cruelties."

The two of us stare at each other for a moment, and I consider merely breaking the changeling's legs but not killing it.

No. No, that's the kind of thinking that got me into this mess in the first place. I slowly loosen my grip on the changeling until it slides out of my grasp and lands roughly on the floor. It instantly scurries back to the bars, which are opened just far enough for it to slide through. It looks as I walk up to it. I grab the bars with one hand, then flip Chrysalis the bird with the other.

"I'm going to--"

"Going to what? Kill me? My, my, you are a fool, human. You killed me twice before." She motioned to the bars. "And now look at you. Look at your family. What do you think I cannot do to you?" Before I can respond, she lights her horn and envelops my head in her magic, which she slams against the bars and holds me there. I grasp at my head, then try to push against the bars in a futile attempt to get out of her grip. "I could kill you now, human. I could break every bone in your body." She envelops the rest of my body with her magic to the point where I'm

immobile. "I could finish the transformation that I started with you those many years ago. How long has it been?" She chuckles then flicks out her long, forked tongue, which she slowly drags against my cheek. "Or I could do other things."

"Go to hell," I groan.

"Perhaps." Chrysalis pushes me back and releases me suddenly enough that I can't regain my balance, and I crash onto the floor with barely any time to break my fall. "Or perhaps it is you who will be wishing for something as sweet as Tartarus. Maybe you will long for simple pain. But until then, you have spirit, human. You still have the spark of defiance in you. I must caution you: those are unwise things to have in your situation."

I slowly get to my feet and give her a defiant glare. "Yeah, well, nobody ever called me wise."

"I have no doubt. But you will break in time, human. They all do. I don't have to hurt you. I don't have to give you anything more severe than a paper cut." Chrysalis slowly glides over to the bars of Cheerilee and Comet's cage. "Torture for the sake of torture is so simple. So crude. If you want to cut into the heart of someone, you have to discover what makes them... tick."

She lights her horn and once again covers me in her magic to the point where I can't move. I can't even speak or blink. She motions over to one of her subordinates, who rushes up to the bars and unlocks the cage. Cheerilee grabs Comet and holds her close, once again doing her best to back away, but finding herself unable to because of the leash.

"It's your turn, my dear mare. Your husband's defiance is going to cost you dearly."

"Don't hurt my mommy!" Comet wails, holding out her hoof as if that's going to stop anything.

"Don't hurt my mommy! Don't hurt my mommy!" Chrysalis caws in a mocking voice. "Don't you worry, little filly. I'll bring back all of the pieces when I'm done."

I'm exerting every single bit of energy I have into breaking free of Chrysalis's spell, but can't even wiggle a finger. All I can do is stare as Chrysalis's soldiers tear Cheerilee and Comet apart. Their cries and screams are echoing through my ears, but I can't do anything about it. I can't even yell at Chrysalis. As I watch my wife being dragged away, I feel small shreds of defiance fade away, and tears begin welling up in my eyes.

My fault.

All of this is my fault and I can't do anything about it.

As the changelings pass by my cell with a thrashing, screaming Cheerilee in tow, they stop. Chrysalis wraps a band of magic around Cheerilee's muzzle and turns to me with a nasty grin. "See the true price of defiance, human. I don't plan to lay a hoof on you for quite a while, but every time you fight back..." Chrysalis chuckles and runs her hoof down Cheerilee's mane while

licking her lips. "Well, I don't suppose it makes a terrible difference. We'll all have fun either way."

The magic around Cheerilee's mouth fades away, and her screams echo through the halls as they carry her to whatever they have in store for her.

It's only when I can't hear her screams anymore that the magic holding me disappears. I collapse on the ground, not even trying to break my fall. The only noise is Comet's sobbing.

"Why didn't you stop them, Daddy?" Comet wails. "You could have if you tried harder!"

I don't even think about responding. I don't have the mental capacity. All I do is curl up in a fetal position and begin sobbing.

* * * *

I cry myself to sleep. When I wake up my eyes are still wet with tears. I guess I was crying in my sleep, too. Upon opening my eyes I see that the changelings have brought Cheerilee back. Seeing my wife again gives me the strength to push myself up to a sitting position.

Cheerilee isn't moving. She's just sitting with her back to me and staring at the wall. Comet is lying down behind Cheerilee, her eyes flicking between the two of us. With a great deal of effort I managed to crawl over to the bars.

"Cheerilee?" I whisper.

Cheerilee takes a deep, shaky breath, followed by a quiet sob. Tears begin welling in my eyes again, and I use the bars to help me get in a kneeling position. "Cheerilee, it's going to be over soon. I'm making good progress on the wall. We'll get out and... Celestia can help us and... and we'll never think about this again. We'll wake up from this nightmare."

"I don't know if I can believe that anymore, TD," Cheerilee whispers. She finally turns to me and I can see that she doesn't have any bruises or cuts on her. "I-it might be better if we just died. Th-then we could be together forever in Paradise. You, me and Comet."

"I don't wanna die," Comet whimpers, burying her face in her forelegs. "I wanna go home."

"We will go home, Comet, I promise you. I'll do whatever it takes." I shakily get to my feet and transform my hand into a bear claw again. "We'll go home..." I scratch at the wall and a few more chunks fall to the ground. "And Oswald will be there, and we'll see our friends again..." Another scratch and a few more chunks. "We'll have the best meal ever. Whatever you want."

I turn to my family and give them a weak smile. "What sounds good? What do you want for our feast?"

Comet raises her head and wipes her eyes with the back of her hoof. "Um... I dunno. Ice cream?"

"Oh yeah, of course. Lots of it. Every flavor and topping you can think of." I turn back to the wall and scratch out a few more chunks. "What about you, Cheers? What are you gonna have?"

I glance back at my wife and see her scoot over to Comet. She scoops Comet up before responding. "Um... anything you make. Maybe some meat?"

"Definitely meat." I chuckle and kick aside a few shards of wall. "Chicken and fish and crab and lobster and..." I chuckle to myself. "Double bacon cheeseburger with lettuce and pickles. Potato fries with barbecue sauce. Maybe dip a few of those in the ice cream."

Comet actually giggles at that. "You can't put fries in ice cream."

"Sure you can. It just has to be the right kind. We'll all try it out when we get home." My scratching gets lighter, and it becomes more difficult to raise my hand. I take a few deep breaths and continue on. Maybe all of this talk of food is making me realize that I haven't eaten in a while. Lord knows when they're going to feed us again. "After the meal we'll go play... in the park..." My breathing becomes heavier, but I force myself to continue. "We'll play and... then... then whatever we want." A small ache forms behind my eyes and my stomach growls loudly. I need to eat soon if I'm going to keep up my strength. "Whatever we want is going to happen and... and we'll be better."

I slide to my knees, unable to even stand up. The pressure behind my eyes intensifies into real pain, and I rub my temples in the vain hope that I can ease some of the pressure.

"I'll fix this. I'll fix this. I love you guys. More... than anything."

I don't remember much after that.

* * * *

I'm awoken by something hitting my foot. I sit up and see that it's another bowl of food. I instantly grab it and down the entire thing in a few gulps.

Probably should have saved some for Comet.

No, maybe not. She can have some of the next meal. I need to keep up a little strength if I'm going to get us out of here. I toss the bowl down and see that Chrysalis is standing in front of my cell door with a smirk on her face.

"Was that good? I had it made special for you." I don't say anything, I just stare at her and bite back any retort that I can. She twists her lips into a pout. "Aw, no retorts? No vain threats about how you're going to tear me apart the second you lay your hands on me?" Chrysalis lets out an

amused grunt. "Or paw as it were. I admit that I'm still not totally sure what I'm going to do with that. When you and your family are husks then there's no point in finishing the transformation." Chrysalis made a thoughtful noise and shrugged. "Well, we have time to think about that, I suppose. Until then, let's see what you've learned."

Chrysalis motioned to one of the changelings beside her, who lit his horn and opened up the door to my cell. Chrysalis slowly walks up to me and places her hoof on my head as the guards actually close the door behind her. "Go on, then. Hit me. Tear me to shreds. Take the gift I've given you and fight me to the death. You know you want to." Chrysalis leans down next to my ear. "My guards might not be able to stop you if you decide to. I've seen your prowess before, human. You could probably take my head off if you wanted to."

My gaze flicks over to Cheerilee and Comet, who are fearfully staring at the two of us. There's a changeling right outside their cell door, waiting for the command to take one of them.

"Well..." Chrysalis puts her hoof on the top of my head. "Aren't you going to say something? Don't you have a witty retort?"

My jaw tightens. I have a hundred. I can't put my desires in front of my family again. If I give her even a sideways glare, she'll hurt them again.

"Hm. You seem to be learning your place." She shoves my head down and begins circling me like a shark. "Or is it something else? Hope maybe?" Chrysalis turns to face me, and uses her magic to lift my head so that I'm looking her in the eye. "What could you be hoping for, I wonder? Do you have some plan I don't know about? Some hidden tactic that I have not foreseen? Perhaps." Chrysalis taps her jaw and stares down at me like she's examining something interesting she found crawling on her floor. "Hope can be a double-edged sword, human. You can use it for strength, but I can use it to take every last bit of emotion I can from you. I can both give and take hope."

"How do you figure?" I reply, trying to keep the growl out of my voice.

"It's quite simple, really. I know it doesn't look it, but I am capable of kindness and mercy." Chrysalis calls one of her changelings to her side and runs her hoof down the side of his head, almost like a mother comforting a child. "And I can bestow such kindness and mercy upon the three of you. It will be instinctual. A feeling you can't control. You'll find that in the back of your mind that there's some way out of this. That I'm not the monster I seem to be. Perhaps I can even be persuaded to let your wife and daughter go. You know you'll never leave this place. But if they are free, then things will be okay in the end."

Chrysalis motioned to two of her changelings and they left for a few moments. When they return, they are carrying two cups in their magic. The changeling next to the Cheerilee and Comet's cell opens the door, and brings the cups to my wife and daughter. They slowly reach

out and take them, and for a brief moment I feel better. At least they're getting water out of this little speech.

Chrysalis's smirk returns and she looks down at me.

"Or not."

With that, she tears the cups out of Cheerilee and Comet's hooves with her magic and pours the contents onto the ground. Comet squeaks and flinches into Cheerilee's grasp. I bite back another retort. If I say anything, she'll do worse than simply spilling a little water in front of them.

"Was my demonstration effective, or will we require another one?"

"I think I get the idea," I say through gritted teeth.

"Excellent. You may be smarter than I originally thought. Though not by much." With that, Chrysalis turns to her changeling guards. "Take them both this time."

I can't help myself. I shoot to my feet, my fist clenched and ready to go. She's locked in her with me. They won't be able to stop anything. Chrysalis turns to me and her face hardens in a glare.

"Sit. Down."

I pause for a moment, trying to register the command. Do I sit down or do I rip her head off? Is it even her this time?

"I said..." Chrysalis turns to me and flares out her wings. "Sit. Down, human. You cannot stop what is about to happen, but you can control how poorly things go for them. Maybe this time I'm just going to get them something real to eat. Maybe I just want to have a little chat with them about how you've failed them and they're going to die because of it. Maybe I won't lay a hoof on them in any way."

My leg twitches. Maybe...

"What I *can* assure you of is the fact that if you raise your hand even slightly then everything is off the table. There will be no potential for mercy. All they will know while they are out of your sight is torture and pain." Her smirk returns. "Unless, of course, you sit down."

My gaze travels to my family, who have already been muzzled with magic. My leg twitches again. What... what can I really do? Maybe she won't hurt them so bad. She'll definitely hurt them if I try to hit her.

But if it is her then me tearing her head off will stop them all.

But if it isn't...

I slowly sink down to the floor until I'm completely seated. Chrysalis grunts and pats me on the head. "That's a good boy. In fact, I think we'll leave your daughter as a little reward for you. No, even better..."

The door to my cell opens and Chrysalis walks out. She takes Comet out of the magical grasp of the changeling holding her. My eyes widen when I see her carrying Comet back into my cage.

"She can stay here until we're done with your wife. You two can catch up, I suppose."

Chrysalis drops Comet and I lunge forward, instantly wrapping Comet up into the tightest hug I can. Hugging my daughter again is the first real joy I've had since we've been in this wretched place. Part of me thought I'd never get to hold her again, and since we'll be able to spend some time together, she can lie on my back and--

"Oh, wait, did I say spend time with you? I meant a short hug."

Before I can respond, Chrysalis lights her horn and rips Comet out of my arms. With a cry of panic I reach out to grab my daughter, but Chrysalis lifts her higher than I can reach.

"Oh, I'm sorry, was that mean of me? I didn't mean to do that," Chrysalis cackles. "Do you have something to say about that?"

I bite my tongue so hard I start tasting blood.

"No? Well I suppose that's good. We can leave her in the cell next to yours, then."

Chrysalis gives Comet back to one of her guards who brings Comet back to her cell. Just before the changelings leave with Cheerilee, Chrysalis turns back. "Oh, and one last thing..." She grins and motions to herself. "Real me."

I flinch back like I'd been punched.

I had her. I had her and nobody would have been able to stop me.

* * * *

The days carry on like that. They take Comet and/or Cheerilee away from me, Chrysalis says something, and I just sit there like a weakling. Eventually the temptation to retort simply fades away, and I just sit there and take what she gives.

Every day I take out a little more of the wall. I'm running out of places to hide the chunks, but I'm hopeful that I can hit a point where I can just claw away at it all night and free us in one go. We have to be quick when that happens. I don't even want to know what will happen if she catches us outside of our cells. Maybe she'll just kill us.

Would that really be so bad?

No, we're going to get out of here.

The days are blending together, not that they were ever totally clear in a place like this. Sometimes they'd leave us be for days at a time, showing up only to give us our meager meals.

The three of us rarely talk anymore. We're not really sure what to say. I barely believe any of the comforting words I think up. Anything like that is undercut by the fact that I roll over like a good boy whenever Chrysalis comes around. They still haven't told me what she does to them other than a few vague hints, but it's not like I'd want to know anyway. I don't think I can handle that.

Chip away. Hide the pieces as best I can. Eat. Maybe say a few words to my family. Roll over whenever Chrysalis shows up. Sleep. Eat. Chip away.

Hold on to whatever tiny spark of hope I can. Real hope. Not the false hope she tries to give me.

* * * *

"I think I'm close." I take a deep breath and turn my hand back to normal. There's a decently sized chunk taken out of the wall. After Chrysalis's next visit, I'll work until I'm free, then free my family.

"That's wonderful, TD," Cheerilee says with a small smile. "I knew you could do it."

"Yeah, I can do it." I scratch off a few more pieces. "Just a little more time and we'll be free."

"How long have we been here?" Comet groans, nuzzling into Cheerilee's chest.

I chuckle and shrug. "No idea, Comet. Doesn't matter now. We'll be out soon."

I hear hoofsteps coming up behind us, and I turn to face the door with my back to the hole I'm making. I'll pretend to do whatever she wants. I can make it. We'll be fine. Just a little while longer.

Within a few moments Chrysalis comes into view, smirking her usual smirk. She stops in front of my door and has her guards open it up.

"Good day, human." She points to the floor. "Kneel before your queen."

I do my best impression of a broken man, and groan as I sink to the floor, my shoulders slumped. To be fair, for a long time it hasn't been acting.

Chrysalis walks up to me and holds out her hoof. "Kiss it."

I stare at the hoof. She's never asked me to do that before. I guess she thinks I'm sufficiently broken. I'm close, I suppose, but I have the hole. I slowly lean forward and give her hoof a little peck.

"Well done." Chrysalis begins circling me like a shark. "I've noticed that you haven't been your old self lately, human. You barely react when we take your wife and daughter now. I know it hurts you. What's the matter? Don't you have anything left?"

I keep my head down and don't say a word. I don't even look over at Comet and Cheerilee. Just a little longer. Do whatever it takes.

"I don't suppose I can blame you really, but I'm also not so sure I believe it." She leans down next to me. "You have something, don't you? Some escape plan. You have some lingering spark of hope left in you. I can feel it. Maybe... maybe it's because I put it there in the first place."

My mouth creases into a small frown.

"I wonder what it could be. Maybe... maybe you were trying to, say, use your changeling powers to dig a hole through the wall of your cell? Yes, that sounds about right."

My eyes widen and I shoot to my feet, but Chrysalis instantly hits me with a beam of magic that pins me to the opposite wall. She laughs and shakes her head. "Did you seriously think I didn't know? That it wasn't obvious? You're in a tiny cell with nothing to hide it. It has been rather amusing to watch over the past few weeks, I must admit. I admire your tenacity."

With another burst from her horn, Chrysalis calls every single piece of wall that I've hidden around the cell to her and begins molding them back into the wall itself.

"No!" I cry, trying to struggle out of her magic. "For God's sake just let them go! I'll do anything! Anything!"

"Oh dear, you have been a naughty one, haven't you?" Chrysalis says as she idly runs her hoof down the newly repaired wall as if smoothing it down. "I suppose I can't blame you. I'd do anything to escape in your position, too. But I'm not in your position. I can do whatever I want to you and nopony will stop me. Oh well for you, then."

She slams me against the bars separating my cell with my family's and I have to look into their terrified eyes and know that I failed them again.

We lost.

There's nothing we can do anymore.

Maybe...

No. We can't.

Tears begin streaming down my face as Chrysalis walks up behind me. I don't even have a brief, fleeting thought of trying to fight back. It would only make things worse.

"Still, there must be some punishment for this, and there will be. But I'm sure you've discovered the pattern by now. It won't be you who suffers the real consequences. So, say goodbye to your family for a while."

I can't help it. I just glare at her. I have to do something.

Wait, though. It's been the real her for the past long while, I think. She hasn't broken me so much I can't take advantage of a little hubris. Before anyone can react, I turn my hand into a tiger paw once more and slash her right across the face, leaving long gashes bleeding green blood. She flies back, and I raise my hand one more time for the killing blow. No mercy, no torture, just one quick kill.

"You haven't learned a thing, have you?" Chrysalis said from behind me. "I thought for a moment that you might understand your situation, but maybe I'm the fool for once."

I wheel around to face her, which leaves me completely unprepared for the beam of magic that hits me in the back, causing me to sail forward and slam into the bars. I slide to the floor just as the door opens up and Chrysalis walks in. She smirks and shakes her head.

"Too easy. I'm not even the real Chrysalis." She points to the Chrysalis that I'd attacked. "She is."

No! I had her!

"Or maybe that's a lie," the Chrysalis who I attacked said idly. "Maybe neither of us are. Maybe you haven't seen the real Chrysalis since that day in the Everfree Forest so long ago."

"But in the end, does it really matter?" A third Chrysalis said from outside my family's cell. "Whatever the case may be, I have you, and nopony is going to save you."

"Now, I believe I asked you to do something," the Chrysalis closest to me said. She lifted me up with her magic and forced me against the bars between my cell and my family's. "Say goodbye to your family. I promise to bring them back mostly intact."

"Go... to... Hell," I groaned.

"If that's the way you feel."

The third Chrysalis dropped her disguise, revealing her to be a normal changeling. He opened up the cell and three more changelings followed behind him, one of them silencing my family

with his magic. The Chrysalis holding me dropped me, and I tried to push myself up to a kneeling position, holding onto the bars for support.

"We'll get out of here," I groaned, reaching through the bars to my family. "You'll see. We'll get out... of here."

"I'm afraid that's not the case," the Chrysalis closest to me said. "But I will bring them back at some point."

Just then, Comet slams her head back into the muzzle of the changeling carrying her, who cries out in pain and drops her. Comet hits the ground and instantly scurries over to me, actually managing to squeeze through the bars. She leaps on top of me and uses herself like a shield. She can't cuss them out, but she's glaring pretty hard.

I groan and wrap my arms around my daughter. I'd give anything to keep her safe. I slowly begin pushing myself away with my legs, holding onto Comet for dear life.

"Such a touching scene," the Chrysalis I attacked coos. "You still believe you can protect her."

I give her a weak glare but keep pushing back, even though my movements are becoming weaker and weaker. I can't... can't let them get her. I barely make it halfway through the cell before my body gives up completely, and I can't do anything except lie there and hold onto Comet, although even that's getting harder. One of my arms flops down, unable to hold on anymore.

"Go... Fuck..."

My vision begins blurring. I feel like I've been enveloped in a thick fog. What's going on, again? I feel something being lifted off of my chest. What was on there? Something about Comet. I hope she's safe. Her and Cheerilee will get out of... wherever we are.

Something bad is happening. I feel a ringing pain in my head.

Someone help us.

* * * *

Comet.

Cheerilee.

Chrysalis.

Right.

I open my eyes and only see fog with a few vague outlines. One of them looks like Cheerilee. I'd recognize that mane anywhere. She's sitting next to me and holding something. She brings it to my mouth and I take a few sips. It doesn't taste good, but my vision starts to come back. She doesn't look so blurred now. I weakly lift up a hand to stroke her cheek. It instantly flops down the second it makes contact with her.

But she's here. That's what matters.

* * * *

How long has it been? Cheerilee and Comet. Get them out.

* * * *

Wasn't I digging something? Get them out. I don't matter anymore. Only they matter.

* * * *

help us

id even be ok with celestia

let chryslis do wht sh wnts to me no matter

i feel somethn hittn me water maybe

bowl

drink

see comet

hug her

save her

cant

how long been

no time

* * * *

more fog

someone near

magic noise

fog going away

Huh?

Not so bad now.

I blink.

I'm still in the cell, but the fog isn't as bad.

I hear more magic and things start coming into focus. A bowl is brought to my lips and I eagerly drink its contents. I feel a little more strength return to me. Enough to sit up. Maybe enough to stand. Didn't think I'd ever stand again. I manage to raise my head and see Chrysalis standing above me with that same irritating smirk on her face.

"Ah, you're awake. Excellent. We have much to discuss."

I slowly get into a sitting position and look into Comet and Cheerilee's cell. They're both still sitting there. Huh, they don't look as bad as I thought. Maybe Chrysalis has been feeding them better.

"So, you've been here for quite some time, human." Chrysalis begins circling around me.

"Enough that I've been thinking over some things." Chrysalis giggles and pats my head. "You should see yourself, human. It's quite the sight. It might even be enough that I could pity you. I think I do. Perhaps I have been too cruel to you."

I don't even pay attention to her words. She can't give me false hope anymore. The pain stopped when the hope went away.

"So I think it's time we end this little game of mine."

So she's about to kill me. Finally. I knew this day would come.

"So in the spirit of that..." Chrysalis lights her horn and the door to my cell opens up. She stands beside me and motions to it. "You can go."

Wait, what?

My eyes narrow and I look up at her. That doesn't sound right.

"Yes, my game has ended. I doubt we shall see each other again. You can leave. Goodbye."

I slowly get to my feet and back away from her. "You're lying."

"I am not," Chrysalis grumbles at me. "What is it that thing the pink pony says? A Pinkie Promise? Well, I'm making one of those." She moves her hooves around in an odd, random gesture. "I don't actually know the motions, but you get my point." She motions to the cell door again. "Please leave my hive and do not return."

No, this can't be happening. This has got to be a dream.

But what if it isn't? What if it is real?

"What about my family?"

Chrysalis facehooves. "Oh, yes, I forgot about them. Of course. We wouldn't want to forget your family." She turns to one of the nearby changelings. "Bring them out and then they can leave."

Is this happening?

The changeling opens up the cell door and takes off Comet and Cheerilee's collars. They instantly rush out of the cell and into mine, where I kneel down and wrap the two of them in the tightest hug that I can. If this is a dream, I don't care. This is what I've been dreaming about ever since she brought us here.

"I'm so sorry," I whisper. "Let's go home."

"I don't think we can, TD," Cheerilee says, nuzzling into my shoulder. "Celestia wouldn't let us."

My eyes narrow. "Of course she would. She'd..."

Comet and Cheerilee are bathed in green fire, and when it fades away, I'm left hugging two changelings.

What?

No. No no no no no.

I feel a fire well up inside of me, and I shoot to my feet and wheel around until I'm facing Chrysalis.

"You rotten bitch! What did you do to them?"

"I?" Chrysalis scoffs and waves her hoof. "You wound me, human. I haven't done anything to them. As far as I know, Celestia has them. My spies informed me that you sent Celestia a note about the situation. Her and Luna were in Ponyville before I could move on them. A smart move on your part."

My knees began shaking, and I fell to the floor, tears welling up in my eyes. I let out an audible sob despite my best efforts, which made Chrysalis's grin widen.

"How does it feel, human? Knowing that you've been fighting and defying me and thinking up escape plans all for nothing? You've been giving love to a pair of changelings who have been sucking you dry. It was..." Chrysalis licked her lips and rubbed her belly. "Delicious. I haven't felt love that potent since Shining Armor."

I collapse onto the ground in a fetal position, not even trying to stop my sobs.

"You should see yourself, human," Chrysalis says, nudging my side. "You are every bit as pathetic as I thought you were. Can you believe that I once thought you a worthy foe? Someone who was worth my time and effort to defeat? Perhaps you once were. Now I doubt I'd even notice if you tried anything. You are lower than the dirt on my hooves. You are *nothing*. However..." Chrysalis grabs me in her magic and forces me into a kneeling position. "I was not lying, human. You may leave. You're too pathetic to kill at this point. It would be a waste of my time." She shrugged. "Or if you'd rather, I can cocoon you again and you can be a member of my hive. I can put you to work washing the hive's floors with your tongue, but you will love it as you will love me." She throws me outside of the cell, and I slam into the wall. "Or you can leave."

I look around at my surroundings. I'm outside of my cell for the first time in... I don't know how long. Is her offer genuine? I have to take that chance. If she's serious I can escape. If she's not... what else do I have to lose at this point? I slowly get to my feet and take a few heavy steps away from the cell. I'll find a way out of here.

"Oh, human? I almost forgot. I have one last thing." She wraps me in her magic and drags me back over to her. "I need one last little taste." She raises my left hand to her mouth. "Your wedding ring. It has some lingering love left on it. Since I won't be able to partake again..."

With that, she slides my ring finger into her mouth and begins licking it. I shudder in disgust, but it's a small price to pay if I get to leave.

But that's when her jaw snaps shut, instantly severing my finger. I scream in pain and fall back, clutching the stump on my hand. I look up at Chrysalis and see her crunching on my finger. After a second she spits out the wedding ring, and I leap forward to catch it on pure instinct. It bounces off of my hand and rolls away.

Chrysalis lights her horn and takes it off of the ground, examining it in the meager light of the hive. She swallows and looks down at me. "Not a very good ring, is it? Aside from the love it represents, it has no value. I'm doing you a favor, really." She shrugs. "Or I would be if you still had somewhere to put it. No matter. Get out." She chuckles when she sees that I'm still staring at it. "Unless you'd like to try and get it back."

The thought is tempting for a moment. But only a moment. It's a thing. It's a symbol only. I can get another one and wear it around my neck like Cheerilee does.

The pain of losing my finger gives me an adrenaline boost, and I stand up and begin running. I'm clapping down on my hand, trying to stop the flow of blood. If I bleed out before I make it anywhere...

I stumble through the hallways of the changeling hive, hoping beyond hope that I'll find a way out. All of them look exactly the same. Am I going in circles? Every now and then a changeling points in a certain direction, and each time I follow their instructions. I have no idea if they're leading me out or not.

Then I see it. The most wonderful sight I've seen in a long time.

Sunlight.

I stumble toward it like a starving man going toward a four course meal. It's coming from an opening large enough for me to fit through. I pick up my pace and almost dive through the exit.

I'd forgotten what sunlight felt like. Real sunlight. I squint and shield my eyes with my hand until they adjust to the sudden brightness. I stumble forward until the sun isn't so bright and I can gauge my surroundings.

I see...

Nothing, really. Only a vast rock maze, and just in the horizon, I can see what looked like grass.

Just get to the grass first.

My shoes are completely ruined, so I have to be careful where I step. They're providing limited protection against the stones, but enough that I'm not cutting up my feet too badly.

"It's amazing, isn't it? Feeling the sun after so long?"

I wheel around and see three changelings behind me. My eyes widen and I back away. "Back off," I growl.

The changelings cackle among themselves. "Or what, human?" the one in the middle says. "Are you going to fight us off with that hand? I doubt it."

"You'd better get moving," the one on the right says. "It's hundreds of miles to the closest sign of civilization. No sense in wasting the day about it."

Well, I suppose that's true.

* * * *

It takes me several hours to make it to the grass, during which time the changelings are still following me, narrating on everything I do. My hand has stopped bleeding, but my shoes are completely useless, and I have several cuts on my feet. The sunlight, previously a blessing, has now become a curse as I have no shade to protect myself from it. I can already see that I'm getting burned. What little water I have in my system is being sweated out. I don't know how long that's going to keep me cool. However, if there's one thing I learned it's that if there's plant life, there's gotta be water around somewhere, or at least rain.

I'd take a flood at this point. Anything to get rid of the dryness in my mouth.

And so I walk. My steps are heavy and the changelings are annoying, but I can deal with that. I can make it. Hundreds of miles? Hah. I've done that before. I don't need a walking stick. Just sheer force of will.

The sun eventually starts to set. By that point I'm barely able to move my feet. My mouth is so dry I don't even have saliva in it, and I'm so hungry it feels like someone is digging a knife in my stomach.

I would know. I had someone do that once.

The changelings are still there. I've grown used to their comments and have learned to tune them out. I just look ahead for anything. A single plant that looks like it could have something resembling food on it. A patch of water.

Something.

Anything other than the endless stretch of grass before me.

My eyes start to droop, but I keep going. If I fall asleep will I even wake up? I have to sleep at some point, though. Even a few hours would recover some strength, right?

Yeah, I should do that. I slowly lie down on the ground and curl up. The night will probably be cold.

"Is he giving up?" one of the changelings asks.

"Does that sound like him?" another replies.

"Well, you saw the way he cried in front of the queen," the third one says. He nudges my side. "Cried like a little baby pony. He is pathetic, isn't he?"

"Ah, but let's let him sleep. He's had a hard day."

Well, at least they're letting me do that. I take a deep breath, curl up a little tighter and close my eyes.

* * * *

I'm awoken by a kick to my side. I grunt and roll away from the attacker, holding out my good hand to prevent any more attacks.

"Wakey wakey, human," I hear one of the changelings say before I'm kicked from the other side. "It's been a whole twenty minutes. You wouldn't want to sleep in, would you? You're wasting the day."

My eyes flutter open, and I glare at the changeling. "Just let me sleep."

The changeling behind me kicks my back. "No dice, human," he says. "Don't you want to see your family again? You'll never get back to them if you just sleep all the time."

"I think he's just lazy," the third changeling said. "Or maybe he doesn't want to see his family *that* much. What's the matter, human? You got a whiny brat and a pestering shrew waiting for you back home?" He sticks out his tongue. "I wouldn't want to go back to that either."

Realizing that they're not going to let me get back to sleep, I push myself up and begin walking again. The air has gotten colder, but I can handle that. As long as it doesn't get down to around freezing temperatures, I'll survive. I'll stay warmer if I just keep going.

But I need some water and food soon, or warmth is going to be the least of my problems. I constantly scan the area hoping for any sign of something I can use, but I can't see...

Wait...

No.

It can't be.

I stare out into the distance and rub my eyes, but it doesn't go away. I can see a small lake just waiting for me. I pick up the pace and run over to it, not even caring that the pain in my body is screaming at me to slow down. Screw that. If I get some water then I might have a tiny chance to make it.

I stumble down and kneel at the edge of the lake. The crystal clear water is the most beautiful thing I've seen in ages. I cup my hand and dunk it into the lake. When I bring it back up, I have a meager amount, but I don't care. I think I'll be here for a while.

Just as I bring my hand to my lips, a blast of magic knocks it aside. I turn my head and see one of the changelings wagging his hoof.

"Uh, uh, uh, human. You don't want *that* water. Who knows how many diseases or parasites it has in it? You could get really sick, and that would be bad."

I glare at him and flip him the bird. "I think I'll take my chances."

"But we'd be poor guardians if we let you," the second one says mockingly. "It's our job to ensure that you make it back to civilization, and you dying of some horrific disease halfway there just wouldn't do at all."

I quickly dunk my hand back into the lake and actually manage a small sip before they knock it aside again. Even that little bit feels amazing.

"Oh, so that's how it is, huh?" the third changeling says. "You want water?" All three of them light their horns. "Well then have some!"

I'm encased in their magic and, before I can even think about struggling, they dunk my head into the water. I thrash about, trying to escape from their grip but completely unable to. I have the sense of mind to take a few gulps, but that just makes my breath run out faster.

Before I start blacking out, they throw me back out of the water, and I lay there catching my breath.

Ugh. Totally worth it. Even the little bit has me feeling a little stronger. Still, I doubt they'll let me get near a water source again.

Nothing else to do but carry on.

* * * *

I walk through the night and into the day.

Then I do it again on as much sleep as they'll allow me, which is about ten minutes this time. It's something.

The water has been sweated out already. The meager strength it gave me has long since been spent. But still I walk. Into more grassland. More... nothing. My feet are blistered and bleeding, and the tiny bit of where my finger used to be is starting to turn black. That'll have to go once I get saved.

If I get saved.

My vision is blurring again. My body is weakening. The changelings are still following me.

Just one more step.

Now another.

One more.

One... more...

My body completely gives up and I collapse onto the ground. My eyelids are growing heavy. No. If I fall asleep now I might never wake up. I have to get back to my family. I picture them in my mind and reach forward, grabbing onto the dirt to pull myself a few more inches.

"I think he's about on his way out," one of the changelings mutters.

"Good, I'm sick of following him," another grumbles. "You hear that, human? Just die already!"

I can't. Gotta get back...

I try to move my hand forward again, but I don't have any strength left. There's nothing left except the picture I have in my mind of Comet and Cheerilee.

I failed them.

I tried. At least I tried.

The last thing I hear before my eyes close is the sound of thundering. Maybe it's about to rain.

* * * *

I feel something. Something soft and warm covering me. Maybe I'm in paradise. I shift my hand and feel something in it. A small pain. I crack one eye open and see... an I.V.?

Wait.

But that would mean...

I open my eyes and look around me. I see the sterile white walls of a hospital room. I hear a heart rate monitor beeping beside me.

I'm alive?

"Dad?"

My heart leaps at the sound of my daughter's voice. I turn my head and see that she's lying next to me on the bed, curled up beside me with one wing draped over me. I shakily reach forward and touch her cheek, most of me expecting that I'll start feeling drained.

But I don't. If anything the action fills me with more energy.

"Comet," I croak, my voice still weak. I crack her a smile and do my best to wrap my arm around her. Her jaw wobbles and she throws her forelegs around me in a crushing hug and sobs into my hospital gown. I pat her head just as a hoof touches my hand. I look up and see Cheerilee, a small smile on her face which is also streaked with tears.

"You're alive," she whispers. "I didn't know if I'd ever see you again."

"Yeah, I guess I am," I chuckle, grabbing her hoof.

"We were so scared when they took you!" Comet wailed. "W-we didn't know what they were gonna do!"

"Nothing ever again, I can promise you that."

"But you don't have all your fingers anymore!"

I chuckle and begin stroking Comet's mane. "Didn't know what to do with so many of them anyway. Good thing I have nine more though, right?"

Cheerilee lets out a half sob/half laugh and nuzzles my hand. It and Comet's hug are the most wonderful things I've ever felt.

Before I can ask anything else, the door opens up and Celestia walks in. She takes a deep breath and closes her eyes. "Good. Very good."

"Hey, Celestia." I squeeze my wife's hoof and hug Comet closer. "How did you find me?"

Celestia opens her eyes and looks up at me. "Do you recall the night you killed Chrysalis the second time?" I feel a pang in my gut, but I shake my head.

"Not really, no."

"I see. Regardless, there was a moment where I lifted you in the air. I used that opportunity to cast a tracking spell on you. While you were in the hive her magic blocked it, but when you left, it appeared again. Luna and I led a joint strike team with some Zebrican soldiers, with the intention of both getting you back and stopping Chrysalis once and for all."

"Did you?"

Celestia nods. "The battle was fierce, but we prevailed. My sister and I trapped Chrysalis in stone and put her in the deepest, darkest place we know. She will never escape, I promise you that."

"That's something, at least." I take a deep breath and ask the question that I really didn't want to, but had to know. "How long was I gone?"

"A little over a year," Cheerilee whispers. "We never gave up hope that we'd find you someday, TD. We never did."

I wish I could say the same. Right now, that doesn't matter to me. I'm back and safe. Chrysalis won't hurt anyone ever again. With that thought, I hug my family tighter like I never want to let go.

38-Dreamland

I stare into the mirror, barely recognizing the person in front of me. I'd been given a shave, haircut and bath, so I looked presentable, but that didn't help with the gaunt, sunken face, the emaciated body, and the missing left ring finger. I glance at my arms, previously so powerful and strong because of my time around the world. Now they looked like twigs that wouldn't be able to beat a middle schooler in an arm wrestling competition.

Basically, I'd... looked better.

Cheerilee goes up beside me and gently nuzzles my leg, causing me to stumble a little and I have to lean against the wall to keep my balance. Her eyes widen and she put a hoof to her mouth.

"Oh my goodness, I'm so sorry, TD! I didn't mean--"

"Cheers, it's fine." I give her a comforting smile and put my hand on her head. "Just wasn't prepared is all." I take a deep breath and slowly begin limping back to my bed. My gaze lands on Comet who is staring at me with wide eyes and a haunted expression. I even see her slightly shivering. She manages a weak smile when she sees me looking at her, but only for a moment.

"Look at you, Comet," I croak as I slide into my bed as slowly as I can manage. "You're almost a mare now, huh?"

Comet's jaw wobbles and a pair of tears stream down her face. She snuffles and wipes her eyes with the back of her hoof. "I thought we'd lost you, Dad," she whimpers.

"Me? Nah. I've gotten out of worse spots than that."

Cheerilee puts her hoof on my hand and gets as close to me as she can. "TD... what happened in there?"

My smile instantly evaporates and I squeeze her hoof as tight as I can which, given my current physical state, isn't very hard. I look down at the floor and shake my head. "No. You don't need to hear about all of that. It's..." I look my wife in the eye. "It was hard enough for you to go through me disappearing without hearing everything that happened. I don't want to think about

that kind of thing. I'd rather think about the happier times, you know?" I lean back in bed and nestle into the pillows. "Like... like that one time we went out with Comet to get ice cream. You remember that?"

Comet actually manages a small little giggle at that. "Yeah. I got lotsa stuff on my ice cream. That was the day you told me about you goin' around the world and stuff."

A tightness in my chest I didn't even know was there slowly starts fading away and I manage a bigger smile. "Yeah. You asked me if I'd kicked a minotaur into the sun."

Cheerilee nuzzles my shoulder with a little chuckle. "I believe the term she used was 'drop-kicked.'"

"Yeah, that sounds about right."

I close my eyes as a feeling of relief spreads across my body. This is my family. My real family. Not some changelings here to torture me.

I lay there as content as could be given the circumstances for a few minutes before I hear the door to my room open up. I crack an eye open and see that it's a nurse wheeling in a tray with a bowl and small cup. I sit up as my stomach audibly growls.

"Jeez, you would not believe how long it's been since I've had a real meal. What's on the menu for today, doc?"

The nurse gives me a small, sad smile as she sets up a tray on my bed. "It's going to be a little while longer, I'm afraid. You're suffering from severe starvation, Mr. Powell. If we feed you incorrectly it will kill you. We're just going to take it nice and easy right now. Just some light things and vitamins so your body gets healthy enough to eat full meals again."

I look down at the bowl in front of me and see that it's just a light soup, and the cup is filled with orange juice. Well, it's better than the gruel I've been eating for the past year.

"Now be sure to eat that slowly, Mr. Powell," the nurse says. "No gulping it all down in one go."

"I'll do my best, doc," I respond, slowly stirring the soup with my spoon. I lift my spoon up to my lips and take a sip. It's a little bland, but it's still better than I've had in a long time. I turn to Comet and smile. "See? I'll be back to full strength in no time."

"Yeah, Daddy," Comet whispers. I can see her start to shake again. "It's..." Comet's voice cracks and she clears her throat. "It's all gonna be okay."

"Absolutely." My smile slowly fades and I glance over at Cheerilee. "So... what happened with you guys while... you know."

"It wasn't easy," Cheerilee mutters. "I heard the door to our house open up while I was in bed and went downstairs to see half a dozen guards rushing in all armed. I thought about running back into the room for one of your knives but then Princess Celestia came in and explained that she'd gotten a letter from you." Her ears flatten and she nuzzles up closer to me. "I didn't realize that you'd gone at first. When Princess Celestia explained what had happened." Cheerilee took a shaky breath in and nuzzled my arm. "I've never been so scared, TD. Not even when I had to face the dragon."

"I'm so sorry I put you through that," I whisper, not even able to make eye contact with her. "I just thought that..." I sigh and lean back on the pillow. "I didn't want you to go through me leaving. Chrysalis told me that I didn't have long to get to the Everfree Forest to protect you guys. I didn't think I had the time to actually get Celestia to our house before we had an army of changelings smashing through our windows and taking us all. It might not have been the smartest move, but it was the only one that I could think of."

"What... what happened to you, Dad?" Comet whispers. "What did she do to you?"

I don't even make eye contact with Comet as I shake my head. "No. I'm sorry, but like I said, we're not going to talk about that. We don't *ever* need to talk about that. It was... bad. Really bad." I manage a glance at Cheerilee. "She didn't do... that to me, if you were afraid of that."

"Oh," Cheerilee says so quietly I can barely hear her. "I guess that does make things a little better."

"Yeah, I guess."

The three of us are silent as I slowly take more sips of my soup. I wish more than anything that I could down the whole thing in one gulp then order as much as I wanted afterward but, heh, that would kill me. I didn't survive Chrysalis's torture just to die from overeating.

"So what happened after Celestia showed up?"

"She took us to Canterlot Castle for protection. She stationed a lot of guards in Ponyville, hoping to find anything that might lead her to Chrysalis so she could stop her and save you," Cheerilee said. "As far as I know she didn't find anything."

"Makes sense. Chrysalis would have wanted to get out of there pretty quickly once she'd gotten me. Wouldn't want to risk running into Celestia on the way back to her hive." I take another sip of orange juice before continuing. "So you stayed there the entire time?"

Cheerilee nodded. "Yeah. Celestia got a sub for Ponyville, and I spent my time tutoring foals in Canterlot." She took a deep breath and leaned her head on my shoulder as best she could. "I didn't know what to do, TD. I wasn't sure whether you were alive or if I should start mourning and what would happen to Comet and I..." I flinch back slightly when I feel tears dripping onto

my shoulder. "After about eight months I started to... try to look to a future without you. I still had Comet to take care of."

"Hey, you didn't do anything wrong, okay? You did the best that you could." I stare down into my soup, unable to make eye contact with my family. "This is all my fault. If I hadn't killed Chrysalis none of this would have happened." I plunk my spoon back into my soup and lean back. "I don't think I've ever been that angry and scared, not even when I was traveling around the world and getting into all sorts of trouble. The thought of losing the two of you is the worst thing I can think of. I lost myself in my anger and now..." I took a deep breath. "Here we are."

"You were just trying to protect us, TD," Cheerilee says. "I won't lie and say that it wasn't frightening to see all of that, but you did what you thought you had to."

I shake my head. "No, I went too far. Celestia even said that she had a plan to deal with Chrysalis that was contingent on me not killing her. If I'd just listened to that then none of this would have happened."

The three of us share a painful, awkward silence for a few moments. Nothing I do will ever erase the memories that Cheerilee has of me beating Chrysalis to death. Nothing can change the year of uncertainty that the two of them went through while she had me.

"So," I begin, breaking the silence, "where's Oswald?"

Cheerilee lets out a slow, shaky sigh and I hear Comet sniffing beside me again. "We don't know," Cheerilee says. "He left a few days after you were taken. We haven't seen him or heard from him. I think he was out looking for you. Hopefully now that you're back he'll come home."

"I'm sure he will. He's always had a pretty good sense of where I am. I guess because I was..." My hopeful smile fades and I shake my head. "He'll be back, is what I'm saying. Then we'll go back to the way things were and... move past all of this."

"Of course, TD. Of course we will." Cheerilee puts a hoof on my hand. "We've come through worse things as a family."

"Oh yeah? Like what?" Comet growls. "What happened to us that could possibly compare to Dad being taken by that fucking bug bitch?" She shoots to her hooves, her wings fully spread. "Don't try to play this off as something that's not a big deal! *Nothing* we've ever been through as a family has been worse than this! Nothing we've even been through period has been worse! I'd take the fear of when the ponies pretending to be my parents tried to foalnap me before I spent *another second* scared that Dad was dead!"

"Comet, I know it was scary, but I'm fine now, so--"

"No you're not!" Comet cries. "You just looked at yourself in the mirror, so how can you say you're fine now?"

"I'm safe now, then. I'll recover and we can try to move on. Celestia and Luna said that they already captured Chrysalis, right? Well, we won't have to worry about her any--"

"Just stop it!" Comet moans, putting her head in her hooves. "I don't want you to pretend! Stop lying to yourself!"

"Comet, I'm not ly--"

"I said stop it!"

Comet spreads her wings and flies out of the hospital room, her sobs audible as she went down the hall. Cheerilee and I stare at the door for a few seconds, half expecting her to come back in. After a few moments, she still hasn't. I sigh and lean back against the pillows.

"I know it couldn't have been easy for her," I mutter. "She'll come around eventually, right?"

"Of course she will, TD," Cheerilee says, taking my hand in her hooves. "You... being gone hurt all of us, of course, but it seemed to hurt her on a deeper level. She never really came to accept that you might be gone for good. For weeks afterward she would just sit by the window, hoping that you'd come back. She barely ate. Every time she saw Princess Celestia or Princess Luna she asked about you. Eventually it just seemed to... break her a little. I'm not sure if it's even fully hit her that you're back."

"She's probably trying not to get her hopes up," I say. "If she loses me again..."

Cheerilee's jaw wobbles and I see tears brimming in her eyes, but she manages a weak smile and squeezes my hand harder. "No, no, she won't. I won't. You said it yourself: Princess Celestia and Princess Luna stopped Chrysalis. We don't have anything to worry about anymore. There is no reason for us to lose you like that again. You're safe. *We're* safe. Nothing is going to hurt you anymore."

I manage a small smirk and put my hand on top of one of her hooves. "Are you saying that to reassure me, or yourself?"

"Me." Cheerilee chuckles and leans her head against my arm. "I know I'm supposed to be reassuring you, but I can't help it. You were gone for a year and you come back looking like a skeleton with a finger missing and..." Cheerilee takes a shaky breath in. "I have to remind myself that everything will be okay now."

"Yeah." I plop my head down on my pillow and stare up at the ceiling. I'm rather tired all of a sudden. I guess dinner wore me out a little bit. I'm still starving, but since I can't eat anything

else right now, sleep is probably the best thing for me. I give Cheerilee a comforting smile, then close my eyes.

* * * *

When my eyes flutter open again, I expect to see Cheerilee sitting beside my bed. Maybe even Comet has calmed down and is in the room again. Wait. No. I'm not lying in a soft bed. Wasn't everything white? No. It can't be...

I sit up quickly and my unease dissolves into full-blown horror when I see where I am. I'm back in the cage. No. No I was out. I shakily get to my feet, almost collapsing from the effort, and brace myself against the nearby wall. I wildly look around the room, trying to see if there is some way out of this predicament. I can't do this anymore! I glance at my hand and see that my ring finger is still missing, so that part must have been real. If that's true then Cheerilee and Comet really were changelings and I don't have to worry about them feeding off of me anymore. I can focus on escape. I just want to see my family again!

Maybe I can dig through the wall again. Use every ounce of adrenaline I have to knock it down and make a break for freedom. Maybe Celestia really did put a tracking spell on me and I just need to get out of the hive and I'm saved! It's all I have left. I lean against the wall and begin scratching it, trying to break off the pieces so I can make my way to freedom. The wall would be a little weaker from my previous attempts, right? This'll go much faster than the first time. I just gotta get free before they see me!

"Oh my, I see somebody still doesn't get it."

My heart sinks as I hear her voice behind me again, just like I've heard a hundred other times over the year I've been here. I can't stop digging, though. Maybe she'll get overconfident and give me just enough time to escape.

"I must commend you on your persistence, human. Most beings would have just given up and died by now, but you really love your family that much." She chuckles and lights her horn, causing all of my previous work to go back into the wall. "I think / of all beings would know."

I don't even acknowledge her. I just attack the wall again. Every time I get a chunk off, she puts it right back. Just give me ten minutes! Don't do this to me anymore!

"As amusing as this is, I'm afraid that I cannot be here all day watching you claw away like a rat. We have things to do."

I groan in fear as I'm enveloped in a sickly green light and dragged away from the wall. My arms are still outstretched, hoping beyond hope that I can manage to break free. Just a little longer.

It doesn't matter. I'm never getting out, am I?

Chrysalis turns me around and presses me against the bar of the cell. I want to close my eyes to avoid seeing her nasty, triumphant grin, but for some reason I can't. She chuckles and strokes my cheek with her hoof.

"I thought I had broken you, I must admit. That moment when you realized that my changelings weren't even your wife and child was one I will never forget. It is a memory that will remain long after everyone in Equestria forgets you. Give it enough time and that little memory I have will be the only evidence that you ever existed here at all. Or will you provide me with a better one? Will I see the moment you truly break?"

"Please," I moan. "Just let me go."

"Oh, begging, are we? Well, maybe I don't believe that you really want me to let you go. Your begging leaves a little something to be desired, doesn't it? You aren't showing proper respect to your mistress." She slams my head against the bars and licks her lips. "Go on, human, really beg for me. I want to hear the defeat in your voice."

My mouth flops up and down like a fish as I try for the words. What's the point of dignity anymore? I've well and truly lost at this point. Anything to make her leave me alone for a little bit is worth it.

"I... I..." I groan and slump down, barely registering the soft blue light that has appeared in my cell. "Please. Just..." The light is growing brighter, and Chrysalis's grin is fading into a frown.

"What is happening?" She glares at me. "What are you doing?"

No, this is another trick. Something else to torture me. She can play pretend all she wants. I know what she's up to at this point. I'll get a little bit of hope and she'll tear it away from me. I can't hope anymore. It hurts too much and is pointless. Still, though, the light is getting brighter, but not harsh. Wait, what is going on?

"Wh... wha...?" Chrysalis's magical grip on me fades away, and I slide down to the ground, only I don't hit it. Instead I'm wrapped in her magical aura again. But wait, her magic isn't blue.

"Begone, foul creature!" I hear a voice say from what sounds like a great distance. You will not torture this man further! He is safe from your evil!"

It sounds like... Luna?

I don't want to believe it. Why wouldn't Chrysalis fool me into thinking that Luna was coming to save me? It's just another one of her tricks. It has to be.

No. Wait. My cell is melting away around me with darkness taking its place. I can see the shimmering of faint stars in the blackness, vaguely illuminating my surroundings. With great effort I turn to look behind me to see Luna herself casting her magic and expelling all of the

horrible images of Chrysalis and the tiny, dirty cell I spent a year in. She gives me a small, comforting smile and gently lays me down on the ground which has turned into white mist.

No, this isn't real. It's just a trick.

"Do not fear, TD Powell. You are safe now." Luna slowly walks up to me and puts her hoof on my shoulder. I blink and touch it. It feels real. But a lot has felt real lately that wasn't. "I knew you would suffer terrible nightmares after your ordeal. How could you not? Now that Chrysalis's magic is not longer blocking my own, I am able to help you through your sleepless nights."

Maybe this is real.

I take a few, deep breaths while my mind fully realizes that I'm truly safe. This isn't a trick by Chrysalis. I'm free, and she's never going to take me away from my family again. My jaw wobbles and before Luna can say anything else, I pull her into a tight hug, holding on for dear life as though she's the last bastion of safety and security in my life. She sits down and returns the hug as my sobbing grows louder and my tears wet her dark blue fur. She wraps her wings around me and rubs my back. She doesn't say anything. She doesn't need to. Her just being here to comfort me while I cry like a little child is enough. I can't cry like this in front of Cheerilee and Comet. They need me to be stronger than that.

"Is this real?" I whisper after a few moments, wiping my eyes with the back of my hand. "Am I really safe?"

"You are," Luna assures me. "You will not be harmed by her again."

I see something white out of the corner of my eye and turn my head to see Celestia of all ponies walking up to us. She has a comforting smile on her face and she puts her hoof on my shoulder.

"I am sorry, TD. I wanted to find you sooner. After you were taken, I spent weeks scouring Equestria and the lands beyond hoping to find some trace of you. I tried, TD. I truly tried."

"I know." I pulled out of the hug and adjusted myself into a sitting position in front of them. "And thank you for protecting Cheerilee and Comet. I know that what happened couldn't have been easy for them. Comet's probably going to need as much therapy as I do. Cheerilee too, maybe."

"We will continue to support you three as long as you need," Celestia says. "You needn't be afraid anymore."

"Yeah." I look up and alternate looks between Celestia and Luna. "You said you stopped her. She's not going to return?"

Luna shook her head. "We have. She will never again see the light of day."

"Show me." I slowly got to my feet and looked Celestia dead in the eye. "Show me how you beat her. I spent a year being tortured by her. She did things to me that I may never truly recover from, and I'm not even talking about how she bit off and ate my finger."

"TD, I am not sure that would benefit you," Luna says, standing up beside me. "After your ordeal, surely more violence is not what you need."

"I said show me!" I roar. "*Prove* to me that she's not coming back to kill me! I'm not ever going to truly believe that you've actually dealt with her until you show me! I'm not going to take your *fucking* word on this!"

Celestia and Luna exchange an uneasy glance, which does nothing for my nerves. If they aren't willing to prove themselves a little bit, I can't ever truly be certain that Chrysalis is done for. After a few moments, though, Celestia slowly nods and lights her horn.

"Very well, TD. If you are certain."

"I am. And don't show me some stupid edited nonsense that's going to downplay everything. I want the real thing, plain and simple, just like it happened." My expression hardens into a glare. "And I'll know if you're bullshitting me, so don't even bother."

I hear Celestia quietly sigh, but she doesn't say anything. She merely nods to Luna, who lights her own horn. Bright white balls of light float out of their horns and meet in a spot between us. What looks almost like a TV screen of sorts appears, and I see Celestia and Luna standing in front of a small army outside of Chrysalis's hive. Both are wearing heavy armor and carrying swords. Celestia's is made of flame, and Luna's of shadow. Neither of them say anything. Celestia just motions forward with her sword and the army charges forward. Instantly a black swarm of changelings pours out of the hive and meets the army head on.

I stare at the brutal, bloody battle and my stomach tightens into a knot. If I hadn't killed Chrysalis, the soldiers who fought and died would be home safe. None of this would have happened. But I needed my revenge. I clenched my jaw to prevent more tears and forced myself to watch the battle.

Celestia and Luna cut through the changeling forces and straight into the hive, blasting and slicing anything in their way. Soon the changelings aren't even trying to attack them, allowing them clear access to the throne room where Chrysalis herself is waiting with a small force of guards. The guards charge and are instantly blasted aside.

"Have you come to kill me, then?" Chrysalis sneers, lighting her horn and shooting a beam of magic at Celestia. *"Was the life of that wretched human really worth that much to you? How was it coming across his corpse, knowing that you were too late to save him?"*

The two don't respond, instead charging at the same time. Celestia shoots a beam of magic at Chrysalis, who dodges. Unfortunately for her, she dodges right into Luna's attack. She is

knocked back into the wall and barely has any time to react before the princesses are upon her. She reaches out with her foreleg and, but screams in pain when one quick swipe from Celestia's sword neatly severs it. She falls to the ground, just as Luna slams a hoof into the side of her head, knocking her into the throne. Chrysalis whimpers in fear and fires off a few paltry shots at the princesses, who easily dodge them. Celestia reaches her and slices off one of her wings with her sword, while Luna comes from the other side and cuts off the second.

"Please," Chrysalis whimpers, falling to the floor and reaching her remaining foreleg out to Celestia. *"M-mercy!"*

"This is mercy, changeling," Celestia growls in a tone I've never heard from her. It even freaks me out a little bit. *"You shall never harm another one of our subjects again."*

With that, Celestia slams her hoof into Chrysalis's back, and I flinch when I hear her spine break. Chrysalis screams in an ear-shattering cry of pain just as Celestia and Luna light their horns again. They fire twin beams of magic at her and when they hit, stone begins crawling up her body. She whimpers in terror, and her hind leg twitches slightly, but it isn't more than a few moments before she is completely covered, leaving only a terrified looking statue lying pathetically on the floor.

The memory ends and there is silence between the three of us. I'm still staring at the spot where the memory was played for me, barely able to digest what I had just seen. After a moment, Celestia sighs.

"I am not proud of that, TD," she begins. "You must understand that I have not been in a battle like that for quite some time, and I had just seen several good ponies die. Given everything that she has done to our country, I'm afraid I... lost myself a little."

"Hm." I take a deep breath and rub the stubble on my chin. "I see. You know, Celestia? I get it. I understand that you want to protect your subjects and all that. Battles have to be stressful, especially against an enemy like that. I know you're not perfect. Having said that, sometimes... you can be a real cunt."

Before Celestia and Luna can say anything, I materialize Reginald in my grasp and swing it as hard as I can right into Celestia's head. She's not in the real world anymore. She's in a dream. What's more, she's in *my* dream. She doesn't have the protection she normally would. As such, she flies back with a cry of pain.

"TD, what...?"

My next strike hits Luna right in the throat, choking off her speech. I instantly take another swing at her head, and the resulting blow causes her to crumple onto the ground. I look back at Celestia just in time to see her fire a beam of magic at me. I reach out my hand and stop it midair for half a second before firing it right back at her. It misses her head by inches.

"You know what I'm really sick of?" I growl, walking over to Celestia with Reginald at the ready in case she tries to get up again. "These fucking double-standards that you hold me to. Oh, if you or your little ponies do it, it's fine, but heaven for-fucking-bid that TD does anything out of line!"

I hear Luna get up, but I reach out my hand and materialize a series of thick vines which wrap around her, keeping her from moving.

"I hit you in the face? Boom! Twilight and her friends beat the hell out of me with no repercussions! I finally find somebody who I want to spend my life with? Well we can't have that without threats of violence if I make a mistake!" Celestia opens her mouth to reply, but I slam Reginald into her head again. "I do what I shouldn't and kill Chrysalis? Torture her even? Well, I almost deserve what I get, don't I? But you can do it! When you cut off her leg and wings and snap her spine that's totally okay because you were angry about ponies dying in a battle!"

"TD, I never said it was o--"

I put my foot on her head and force it down. "Don't, Celestia. You don't get to pretend that you don't hold me to a different standard than you and your precious ponies! You've never really trusted me like you trusted your subjects, have you? I know we got off in the wrong foot, but I just want a quiet, happy life with my wife and child! That's all I *ever* want!"

"TD, I understand that you feel helpless. You haven't had any power over the last year and you're--"

"Stop!" I grab Celestia by the neck and force her up. "Stop analyzing me! Stop trying to give me some reason! *Why. Can't. I. Just. Be. ANGRY?!*"

In that moment all strength leaves me, and I collapse onto the ground. Great. They're not going to let this one go, and I don't know if I have the strength to do anything. I'm just tired all of a sudden. I can't do this anymore.

Celestia stands up and I hear her light her horn. Probably to free Luna. Sure enough, after a few seconds I see her standing above me. Neither of them look angry, though. They look sad. I groan and flip them the bird.

"Why don't you understand?" I whisper. "Why the hypocrisy?" My breathing becomes more rapid, and my jaw wobbles. I whimper and tears begin pouring down my face. "Why can't I just live happily with my family? Why do I have to keep getting torn away from them?"

"TD..." Celestia gently lays a hoof on my shoulder. "I understand. Life has not been fair to you, and I played a large part in that, and it is something that I will forever regret. You deserved so much more happiness than life has given you, but even now you have a family that loves you and never gave up hope that one day you would be safely returned to them. And you have been. You are right. You have at times been held to a different standard, one that is unfair to

you. What has been done to you is not right. I am guilty of the hypocrisy you accuse me of. What I did to you and what I did then was wrong."

"When's it going to stop?" I whisper, curling up in a ball. "When can I just live a quiet, safe life with my family?"

"I hope that time is now, TD," Luna says. "After all you have been through, you deserve nothing less."

I let out a humorless chuckle at the idea. "Yeah, maybe. These last eighteen years have taught me that deserve doesn't have anything to do with how your life goes. Never has. Never will. All I can do is take it one day at a time and hope the next awful thing isn't today." I scoffed and rolled onto my back. "Because *that* works."

"Perhaps," Luna says. "But you are not alone in this fight. You--"

"Don't fucking say that I never was, because until I started my relationship with Cheerilee, I absolutely was. Sure I had people who liked me, but someone I could truly, unconditionally count on to support me? Someone who would brave life with me whatever happened? I had no family until then. Not anymore, at any rate. But I guess overall..."

I shut my eyes and when I opened them again, I was back in my hospital bed, with a dim beam of moonlight shining through a crack in the curtains.

"Tomorrow is another day."

38-Reunited

I wake up to find Cheerilee snuggling next to me in bed. She has a foreleg draped over my chest, and I smile at the peaceful rising and falling of her chest as she breathes. I adjust my arm to hold her closer, but the movement causes her eyes to flutter open. She murmurs in contentment when she sees me smiling down at her.

"How are you doing, TD?" she asks, nuzzling my chest.

"Doing a lot better. Not so hungry, which is always nice. Maybe I'll finally be able to eat something more than soup soon."

"I hope so, TD," Cheerilee says. "When you finally get out of here, we're going to make the biggest, tastiest meal that we can. All of your favorites. A lot of meat."

"Oh, Comet's going to really enjoy that," I reply with a little chuckle. "Remember the time when she tried to sneak some chicken out of the freezer and took a big bite out, not knowing that she had to cook it first?"

"Of course I do," Cheerilee replies with a smile. "I think Oswald was smug the entire time she was sick. Probably because he was annoyed that he didn't actually stop her from eating it."

"I think that's probably why she eats as much as I do now. She's trying to spite him."

"Probably."

The two of us lie there for a little while after that, just relishing in the fact that I'm completely safe and that nothing is going to happen to me again. Celestia and Luna stopped Chrysalis. She's not coming back for me or my family. We're safe from her forever. Everybody is.

Ugh. Just the thought of her hurts. Not only because of what she did, but that it was all my fault. Everything that happened afterwards was... if I hadn't...

Cheerilee senses that I'm lost in thought and looks up to me with a frown. "TD? Are you okay?"

I sigh and lift my hand to run it through my hair, but stop when I see the spot on it where my ring finger used to be. I'd need to get another ring, but that wouldn't be an issue. It was just a simple golden band. I could wear it around my neck like Cheerilee does. I'd adjust to life without my finger. It was just one little finger. But it was still just one of the costs of my revenge. I lower my hand and look down at Cheerilee, who is looking back with wide, uncertain eyes.

"I just... I don't know how to feel right now, you know? I feel more guilt than you can possibly imagine. For all of it. It's completely my fault."

Cheerilee shakes her head and sits up in bed to look me in the eye. "No, TD, no, it wasn't. It was *her* fault. She was the one who did all of that, and that's not--"

"If I just hadn't lost my temper," I whisper. "If I'd just kept a cool head, we would have stopped Chrysalis right then and there, and she wouldn't have taken me. You two wouldn't have had to go through the pain and uncertainty of if you'd ever see me again. I wouldn't have had to go through what I did. I'd still have a finger..." I take another deep breath. "And the ponies who died trying to stop Chrysalis once I'd gotten out would be fine. They'd be back with their families. Th-they'd be... they'd be okay."

Tears began welling up in my eyes, and I wiped them away with the back of my hand. It was my fault. All of it.

"TD... I know..." Cheerilee pokes at a loose thread of my blanket, but can't keep eye contact with me. "It's not like they died for nothing, right? I mean... they stopped Chrysalis and... Equestria is a lot safer now. She's..."

"Don't," I mutter. "If I hadn't killed her the second time then they'd be fine. I'll bet their families are going to hate me forever now. Not like I don't deserve it, or anything. Even if Celestia doesn't say that they were there to stop her because of what I did in the Everfree Forest, they'll still have to live with the fact that their family members are gone. If I didn't do what I did, then everybody would be fine. You, Comet, me... them..." I take in a shaky breath and lean back in bed. "I just want it to be over."

"It *is* over, TD," Cheerilee insists, taking my hand in her hooves. "The worst of it is over. I know it hurts, TD. I can't imagine what you're feeling right now, but we're here for you. Me and Comet are going to be right here by your side through whatever comes our way next."

I pointedly look around the room. "Where is Comet, anyway? It's been a few days since I've seen her."

Cheerilee lets out a sad sigh. "She's spent most of her time in her room. This has been hard for her. After everything with the orphanage, then her daddy going missing, it's hit her really hard. She doesn't know how to handle seeing you like this."

"Yeah, I understand that. Still, it would be nice to see her." I smile at Cheerilee and sit up. "I'm doing much better than I was a few days ago, at least. I'm not on the verge of death, and I've cleaned up pretty well. Once I gain some weight back, I'll be just about as good as new, and I'll look like her dad again." I nudge Cheerilee off of the bed, allowing myself to slowly, weakly stand up myself. I stumble for a moment, but Cheerilee helps me stay on my feet. "So is her room close?"

"We've been staying in a little room in the hospital until you get better. That way we don't have to keep going between here and Canterlot Castle whenever we want to see you. If I had to guess, that's where she is."

"Well then..." I adjust my hospital gown and motion to the door. "I think it will help her out a lot if she sees me actually walking instead of languishing in a hospital bed. Show her that I'm getting back to my old strength."

"Are you sure you're up for that?" Cheerilee asks with a head tilt.

I scoff and wave my hand. "I have to get out of bed at some point, Cheers. Besides, I need the exercise, and it's not too far away, I assume."

Cheerilee shakes her head. "No, it's just a few hallways down. There aren't any stairs, or anything like that."

"Well, then, I think it's time for me to stretch my legs a little bit." I grimace as I begin walking toward the door. "But yeah, I'll probably be pretty wiped from this for the rest of the day. Totally worth it, though."

"Well, if you think you're capable, then I think it will do her a world of good." She opens the door for me before quickly standing beside me. "But if you need somepony to lean on for a few minutes, that's okay."

"Might take you up on that, might not," I reply with a shrug. "In any case, I need to see Comet."

It's not the fastest journey from my room to theirs. I overestimated how much energy that I had, but I soldier on. I do have to lean on Cheerilee a few times, but I never feel like I'm about to collapse. Besides, if I'm stubborn enough that I literally walked all over the world, a walk down a few hallways when I'm a little weak isn't that big of an issue. I mean, there were days on my journey that I was really hungry. Nothing to it. Just put one foot in front of the other.

Even with my drive, the walk that would normally be about a minute takes ten. Yeah, I'm definitely going to have to rest for the remainder of the day. No question. This is a good first step, though. Once I can do this walk fine, I'll be able to get out of here and go home. Our real home. To Ponyville. With my family.

I wanted nothing more.

Eventually, we reach the plain wooden door that leads to Cheerilee and Comet's room. I take a deep breath to steady myself, both physically and emotionally, and push it open. All of the lights are off, but that's undoubtedly Comet's doing. She's a bat pony, after all. She gravitates toward dark places when she's stressed or upset. Makes her feel safer. I leave the door open, but don't bother turning on any of the lights. I don't think it would be the best idea.

However, I don't need to turn on the lights to see the lump on the bed that is undoubtedly Comet under the covers. I allow myself a small smile at the sight. It reminds me of all of the times when I'd come into her room after something had scared or upset her. She'd probably be under the bed if it was higher up and she was smaller, but she'd grown in the last year. It was a little weird to see.

The lump under the sheets shifts a little bit, curling up into a tighter ball.

"How is he?" I hear her croak. "Is... is Dad doing better today?"

"Well, why don't you come out from under the covers and see for yourself?" I say with a smile. "I'm at the point where I can actually answer, so that should give you some hint right there."

The sheets shift once again, lifting ever so slightly so that I can see a pair of glowing eyes underneath. Comet narrows her eyes as if she's not quite sure if she's really seeing me. Well, she is. After a solid minute, she slowly starts to emerge from underneath the blanket.

"Daddy?" she whispers.

I chuckle and take a few steps into the room. "Yep. As you can see, I'm doing a little bit better right now. Not back to a hundred percent, naturally, but the proof is right in front of you: nothing can bring me down for too long."

Comet slides off of the bed, crouching with her wings extended once she's on the floor to make a run for it in case anything goes wrong. Not sure what would, but I imagine that it's her bat pony instincts kicking in. I walk up to her as Cheerilee slowly brightens the light in the room. Comet's eyes go back to slits as the room goes bright, but all she's doing is staring at me. I slowly, gingerly sit down in front of her.

"How are you doing, Comet?"

Comet takes in a few shaky breaths, but gathers the strength to take a few steps closer. She starts sniffing the air, confirming that I'm not a changeling or something like that. Comet takes a few more shaky breaths, but slowly comes close enough that I can actually hold her, nuzzling me under the chin.

"I thought we lost you," she whispers. "I thought that once we got you back, you weren't going to get any better. I didn't want to see that."

"Hey, it's okay, Comet. I'm doing miles better," I reply, finally able to wrap my daughter in a hug. It's the most wonderful feeling that I've had in over a year. Finally hugging my daughter.

"So Princess Celestia finally stopped her, right? She's not going to come back for us."

"Not at all, I promise," I say. "Everything is going to be okay now. We can go home a--"

I'm cut off by the sound of a loud thud against the bedroom window that makes all three of us jump. Comet throws her forelegs around me in a tight hug as Cheerilee slowly walks over to the window.

"Hello? Is there anypony there?"

We get a response, but it isn't a pony voice. It isn't a changeling skree. Instead...

It's a squawk.

Cheerilee's eyes widen and she rushes over to the window, throwing back the curtains to reveal Oswald hovering behind the window. He lets out another squawk when he sees me and charges toward the window again. Cheerilee barely gets it open in time to prevent him from going

straight through it. Oswald tackles me with enough force that I'm knocked back for a moment. Thank goodness he's a phoenix and thus is not particularly heavy. He begins chattering in phoenix-ese and flying around me to make sure that I'm okay."

"Wow. How did he know you're here?" Comet asks.

"Well, if you'll recall from my trip around the world, Oswald has always had a sense of just where I am. Must be some bonding thing. When Chrysalis had me, the magic that prevented Celestia from finding me must have blocked that sense. Now that I'm back..."

"Now that you two are back, we're a family again," Cheerilee says, sitting next to me to nuzzle my shoulder.

Oswald squawks again and lands on my leg to lean against me. I chuckle and scratch his head feathers.

And so the four of us sit there, relishing in each other's company. We're a whole family again. I've waited for this moment for over a year, and now it's actually happening. I blink back tears as I hold my family closer.