

My Second Life (Original Version) by [Coal Buck](#)

Formatted into Google Documents by [Extantdread](#) with permission.

Table of Contents:

Click “View”, then “Document Outline”. Hurrah for Google automacy.
On mobile, Document Outline is under the more symbol (...)

Links:

[Chapters 1-30 \(GDocs\)](#)
[Chapters 31-60 \(GDocs\)](#)
[Chapters 61-90 \(GDocs\)](#)
[Chapters 91-120 \(GDocs\)](#)
[Chapters 151-180 \(GDocs\)](#)

Downloads:

[Full story \(.txt file\)](#)
[Full story \(.docx/Word file\)](#)
[Chapters 121-130 \(Word\)](#)
[Chapters 131-140 \(Word\)](#)
[Chapters 141-150 \(Word\)](#)

.PDF / Other Formats: Click on the “File” button in the top left corner. Hover over “Download as” and then click PDF Document / Other desired format.

Chapter 121: New Life?

Please be Ok! I was making my way through the cave as quickly as possible! Surely they are down the middle tunnel where I first met Sasha. I'm paying extra attention to every wall and the roof of the cave. She can apparently climb up them if she needs to. My dagger is hidden under my coat; and my short sword is in my right hand, the lantern in the left. I was reaching the spot where I first met Sasha, but she wasn't there! I walked forward some more and eventually discovered a tunnel near the very back of this area.

This tunnel curved at a slight degree as I walked through it. It was plenty tall enough for me, but it was very thin. I had to eventually turn on my side in order to keep going. As this went on and on my frustrations began to boil over! Copper is in serious danger and I can't even find him! How long ago did he let Sasha take him!? Darnit kid! I figure he probably did it to save the girls...maybe...I don't know what is going on! All I know is that they were tied up, and now Copper...fuck...just fuck.

There came a point where it started to get wider again, and I was able to press forward unhindered. I could see very minute traces of light the further I went down the tunnel until I came into a totally enclosed space...where I found Sasha. The light was coming in from a hole in the roof of the cave. I couldn't tell you where in the forest I am now, but dealing with Sasha has finally arrived!

"Sasha! Where is Copper!?"

She perked up upon hearing me, and started to cackle. "He isss...clossse."

"What are yo...no..."

Sasha moved and revealed Copper lying on the ground with traces of blood leaking out around him.

"What did you do to my son!?"

"I had my fun. He wasss deliciousss."

"Oh my god...you didn't..."

"Didn't?...Ahh, you think I enjoyed him the way I enjoyed you. Don't be sssuch the fool. His body isssn't ready for sssuch thingsss. Not for sssomething of my sssize anyway."

"Then...what did..."

"What isss more fun than feasssting upon the body of a misssguided child? It isss a ssshame you found usss. He and I could have had thiss fun again and again. Now I think I'll have that fun with you!"

"You...were eating him!?"

"In a manner of ssspeaking. I prefer to sssay feasssting. It isss more interessting."

I don't know whether or not to be relieved here. Copper didn't get...yeah, but he is bleeding out! I think...

"I don't understand you Sasha! You've had opportunity after opportunity for this, so why now of all times!? Why did it have to be Copper!?"

"The young are sssso much tassstier. Essspecially when they feel assss much assss this one doesss. I could almosst tassste hisss resssolve to sssave hisss friendsss. It wasss sssso deliciousss!"

The blood is starting to rush to my head! I take back everything I ever said about your character Copper. Even if you can't always handle yourself like you used to...you're definitely worthy of being called an adult.

"You've gone too far Sasha...I can't let you off the hook for this." I raised my sword and readied my body. "I'm going to make sure you never try this shit again!"

Sasha just cackled and wrapped her tail around Copper. A few drops of blood fell from him as his limbs dangled limply. The poor boy was knocked out cold, but what Sasha started doing next made me thankful he wasn't awake for it. She started licking up all the blood from his body and puncturing him with her claws to open up new wounds. I couldn't believe what I was seeing! My whole body just wanted to lash out at her, but...I wouldn't be fast enough to prevent damage to Copper if she had that in mind! He is already getting hurt, and there isn't shit I can do about it!

"Nnnn! Thiss child'sss body iss a ssstrange one. He told hisss ssstory, and I can tassel the magic in him."

"Woah...what!?"

"Kahkahkah! You didn't know? Thiss child will be sssomething ssspecial when he growsss, but...only if I let him."

"Fuck you Sasha. Fuck you, your race, and I hope you burn for this!"

"Sssuch hate! Kekekeh! Your eyesss...you ssshare much with your child."

"Don't play mind gamess with me! You and I both know that I'm leaving with Copper one way or another, so make it easy on yourself and tell me what needs to happen for that."

"I want to devour you! Oohh the sssmell of your blood iss intoxicating! To feassst on the only human would be sssuch an interessting thing!"

I raised my hand and cut my palm with my sword. Blood immediately started dripping to the ground, and I saw Sasha quiver in what I can only assume to be delight.

"You want it so badly? It's only going to go to waste from here. Let Copper go and you can 'feast' or whatever the fuck you want to call it. But let me warn you now; try anything funny and death will be your fondest wish!"

"You forget who holdsss the key to victory human. I can usse thiss child to get everything I want out of you. You have no way to defeat me without the losssss of your sson."

I think I just popped a fucking blood vessel! I've never wanted to kill something like this before! When I killed those wolves it was because I felt I had to, now...I just want this bitch dead!

"Tell me what has happened to you Sasha! You weren't like this the first time we met!"

She scratched her neck with a face that told me she was contemplating. Copper's body had stopped bleeding, but the look on his face broke my heart. His eyes were closed and his mouth hung open. There were obvious signs of tears as the coat around his eyes was matted down. The pain was so evident, and I feared for him.

"Ssss...I wasss feeling...amussed. To meet a new creature, and to have sssome fun wasss enough. I had gotten ussed to the lonlinesssss that isss thiss cave, but you made me want more. How much fun it isss to get to play with sssso many different livesss!"

"You monster...tormenting others...that gets you off? Copper is just a child...have you no guilt?"

"Guilt? Why ssshould I feel guilt? I ansswer to nothing but my own desssiresss. Partaking of this boy pleasssesss me, sso I will do it ass I want."

I was losing my cool and took a large step forward. She reacted by slowly opening her mouth, and getting very close to Copper. "You wouldn't dare..."

"It would be sssuch a wassste of a toy ass good ass thiss one. I'm sssure you intend to kill me if this boy diesss, but I doubt you could live with yourssself if he doesss."

At that point she took Copper into her first right claw, and started running her individual claws against his stomach. She would occasionally break the skin; which got a whimper out of Copper. How he is still unconscious I don't know, but thank god for that. Just sleep Copper...you don't need to be awake for this.

I threw my sword to the ground and got onto my knees. It hurt so much to do this, but I prostrated myself before Sasha. "Please release my son. He doesn't deserve this. I'll take his place."

A part of me felt like a monster for trying to trick Sasha this way. I was going to pull out my dagger when she was close enough and take her out. No matter the excuse; lying is still lying.

She seemed pleased with this. I could hear her slowly walking towards me, and then in one quick motion my coat was torn off from me and thrown against the wall. My dagger was inside it, but didn't make a noise due to the stuffing in the coat. My plan was over before it could honestly begin!

"Your eyesss tell my you lie, but I like that about you. You do anything to sssave thossse you

care for. No matter how much you may hate it. Tell me, what makesss you care sssso much for otherssss?"

"Heh...I pity you." Sasha blinked a couple of times in what I assume to be surprise. "You live in a dank dark cave all alone, and you can only blame yourself for it. It didn't even take me two weeks to be accepted by the community, so it probably wouldn't have taken you long either. Yet you chose to stay in this place either out of fear, or ignorance. I care about others because I love them; a feeling you probably aren't capable of. You make me sick Sasha. Now put down my son and do what you will."

Sasha growled at me before turning around and walking back to the center of this cavern. She hadn't let go of Copper, and was now being even less gentle with him. He began letting out pained cries as I could see her grip tighten. My hands began to shake as I wanted nothing more than to return that pain to her a hundred fold!

"You both are too interessting, but...I can have more fun with you. How will we do thisss? I will not be relinquishing the child to you, sssso what do you proposse?"

"I...don't want him to see this if he wakes up. I'll wait here if you would set him at the cave's exit."

"That isss a very good idea, but not for me. Once Copper isss out of my clawsss you'll attack me with your blade."

Idea...hope this works. "Take my sword with you. Then I won't have anything to threaten you with." I chucked my sword at her feet, and she gave me a scrutinizing look. As long as she doesn't think to check my coat; then I'll have my dagger.

"...I ssshall return ssshortly."

Sasha took the blade in her teeth by the handle, and made her way out of the cavern. I watched her up until she was out of sight, and then I grabbed my dagger out of my coat. Now where can I hide this on my body? Putting on the coat would make her suspicious, so...I'll slip it into the side of my shoe on the outside of my leg. Just be careful not to cut myself, and...there we go. I just reach down and grab the handle to use it. I'm going to try diplomacy a little longer if I can. I don't want to kill her, but I'm going to if I have to.

* * * *

Wha...where...OH LUNA! Agh! My body! I can't believe Sasha did all that to me! This hurts so much! Wait...where is dad!? Ohnononono! I have to help him, but I can hardly move!

"Copper!"

"Huh? Sweetie Belle!? When did....how did..."

"Coal saved us, and told us to leave; but I just couldn't! Oh Copper, what happened to you!? You're so bloody..."

"Sasha...did things to me, and...you don't need to know what."

Sweetie Belle started crying and trotted over to me. I was on my back and couldn't bring myself to really move any. "I-if only I was better at magic! I could levitate you out of here! I'm so sorry Copper!"

"No...you've done nothing wrong. I'll be fine; you should get out of here now Sweetie Belle. Dad will take care of things, but he may need my help."

"I'm not leaving you again!"

Sweetie Belle immediately got next to me and pulled me into a big hug. "Sweetie Belle! I'm bloody! You'll stain your coat..."

"I don't care! I love you Copper, and I was so scared for you!"

ba-dump "I I-love you too, so so much..."

"I know, and...I won't let it bother me anymore. I'll...let you know when I'm ready."

My eyes went huge and I stared at Sweetie Belle in disbelief. "A-are you saying that...you...someday...with me?"

"Mmhmmm."

Getting torn up by something I thought was my friend...now worth it.

* * * *

"Good, you waited sssso patiently. It isss now time for our fun.

"Yeah...so what now? Are you just going to bite into me, or..."

"You ssseem sssso eager...ssstrange."

"I'm ready for this to be over! You've put me through so much already and I'm just past the point of wanting you out of my life."

"Your wordsss are sssso cold. You mussst hate me sssso much."

"I do. You were nice enough before, but now...I don't even know what I ever saw in you. Maybe I felt sorry for you for being alone, but now I can see why you're alone. Just bite me or rape me, whatever! Just know that your sorry ass is going to pay for this in the end."

Sasha seemed to be getting angry at me. She normally takes everything said in stride, but maybe I'm hitting some buttons. Hmmm...

"I think I'll jusst feassst for now. Remove your clothes."

Shit! I best try and be difficult here. Just start with my shirt and hope she won't say anything else. I need the right moment if I'm going to do this.

"Fine." I threw off my shirt and threw my arms out wide. "Just get this over with."

"Remove the ressst assss well."

"No. You have all the bare skin you need for this. I'm not going to let you bend me anymore. Just pick a spot and get to work." She seemed really pissed off at that, but didn't say anything else. Now I need to pick a time where I can grab the dagger and bring it over her mouth first. As long as she can't bite me...I may survive this.

Sasha leapt forward and ran her claws straight across my chest leaving three long open wounds. It stung like all sorts of hell, but thankfully her claws are pretty sharp; so minimal resistance.

"Aahk! Damn it Sasha...these better not scar!"

"It doesss not matter if they do. Now be sssilent. I'm going to enjoy thisss."

She started lapping up my blood, and it nearly made me puke. This is so damn gross! I just know these wounds are going to get infected! Who knows how much weird stuff she eats!?

"I wish I could understand you. It hurts me to know that there are creatures just so naturally wicked in this world. I'd wish upon you death, but your life must be a punishment as it is."

"Sssilence! You know nothing of me. Dare to judge me, and I ssshall dare to do with you assss I will!"

"Isn't that what you're already doing?"

Sasha cackled at me and with a sinister smile she leaned right up into my ear. "I'll tell you sssomething human. You will find it most interesting."

"Will it explain your weird ass behavior?"

"Kehkehkeh! It may!"

"Then what is it!?"

"I'm feeding my child with your and the young one's blood. The egg should be ready."

"Holy shit! Are you serious!? How in the buck did you even get with child!? Is there another creature like you here!?"

"No. The femalsss of my ssspecies reproduce assexually. The malesss were killed off long ago, but a unicorn took pity on my kin; and gave usss thiss ability."

"So you're saying you've been behaving this way...because you're basically pregnant and very hormonal?"

"Doesss that change anything? I have done what I have done regardlessssss."

"It changes everything! I'm so sorry for judging you! I can't believe this! If all you needed was blood for sustenance, why did you do all of these horrible things!? Taking the girls, seriously hurting Copper, and trying do the same to me; the list goes on and on! Why didn't you just ask for help!?"

"Asssk for help? Why? I do what I pleassse and all of that wasss fun to do. That isss the way of my kin."

"Great...now I feel sorry for you all over again! Damnit Sasha; just freaking take the damn blood you need! I seriously don't have time for this right now! You've thrown my convictions and preconceived notions out the metaphorical window, and now I'm left fighting an inner war that can't be won!"

Sasha just stared at me. I don't know why I talk so unusually when I get like this, but if it'll make her stop then good!

"You never ceassse to prove how much fun you are. I ssshall enjoy this meal more than any other."

AAHKG! Damnit that hurts! This just isn't fucking fair! I can't kill her without killing an innocent child! Fuck my life! AUGH! How did Copper stand this!? Each puncture and cut is agonizing!

This went on for what felt like hours! My whole body was cut and bruised which made me look worse off than I did during the Big Mac incident. The rest of me was getting colder at the loss of blood. Sasha was licking her lips with a smug look on her face. She started eying me again and began to laugh.

"The buck is so funny about all of this?"

"You are what isss sssso funny. You have sssso many livesss to protect, but you refusse to take anothersss even if they do harm to your or your family."

"If you weren't with child I would have already killed you." I stood up and gathered my shirt and coat. Sasha got right in front of the exit trying to black me off.

"You aren't leaving sssso ssssoon. You will ssstay here and keep feeding me."

I took a moment to put back on my shirt and coat casually. With a lot of my blood gone...I could think a little more clearly for whatever reason. Once I was fully clothed my hand made its way to the dagger. Sasha reared back as I brought it to a stop right in the center of her face.

"Get out of my way Sasha. I'd prefer not to kill you now, but I already know how I'm going to be dealing with you. So you have a choice, move and live; or don't and die."

She growled at me but complied. I flipped on the lantern and walked looking backwards most of the way. When I reached that especially large area where I first met Sasha, there came a strange sound and several rocks fell from up high. I looked up to see Sasha clinging to the side of the roof, and she jumped at me knocking me to the ground.

In reflex I raised my hands to defend myself, but Sasha ended up landing neck first onto the dagger. I immediately started freaking out as she yelled out, or at least tried to. All that came out were gurgles that made my stomach wrench! She collapsed onto the ground and bled everywhere.

"Damnit Sasha! Why couldn't you have just left well enough alone! Now you and your child will die!"

Sasha only cackled some more...I think. Again I could hardly understand her anymore. She raised a claw to her stomach, and...oh dear lord...that is...I think I'm going to be sick! I...can't believe she did that...h-how...uurg.

There is no other way to say it, but...she removed her egg from within herself. It was about the size of a volleyball, but had a more oval shape to it. She rolled it over to me...and died. This whole thing is just sick. My stomach nearly emptied at the sight of her. I had to get out of here, but...what do I do with this egg!? How long was she carrying this thing anyway!? I really didn't

want to do this, but I reached down and picked up the egg. It...it's alive...

Chapter 122: What to do?

Just great! Just fucking perfect! Sasha is dead, and now I'm left with this egg! What in Equestria am I going to do with this!? I'll have to worry about it later. I have got to find Copper and make sure he is alright!

While walking the rest of the way out; I started inspecting the egg some more. It is a black egg with very faint marks of red here and there. It probably weighs close to ten pounds at least. I've got so many concerns and thoughts about this dang egg now. Should I...kill it? Will it be able to survive without its mother? If it does hatch, will it have the chance for a good life? I can't honestly bring myself to keep this. It just wouldn't be right. To raise the child of a creature I killed...even if it was an accident...that just puts a bad taste in my mouth. At the same time I need to take some kind of responsibility for this egg's well being. Maybe Twilight will have some ideas.

I wasn't paying much attention to anything while I was walking due to all my thinking, so I ended up at the entrance in what felt like moments. I step out into the sun and take in several deep breaths. This has been an ordeal, but I'm glad the worst of it is over. Still...knowing that I've killed again...doesn't sit well with me. I know I went in there somewhat prepared to kill her, but she probably wasn't in her right mind. It'll just be one of those things I'll always wonder about. My sword was sitting on the ground near the exit, but there were no signs of Copper anywhere.

I called out to him a few times and started to panic when there wasn't a response. Surely Sasha didn't stick him in some weird part of the cave! Right when my panic started to take over; I heard Sweetie Belle call out to me. I followed her voice and found her to be just outside the cave with Copper. He had passed out and she was holding him close. I'm thankful that Copper is in a situation he would love, but a part of me is ticked that Sweetie Belle came back. I better not say anything though...it did turn out alright in the end.

"Let's get out of here Sweetie Belle."

She gave me a small nod in response and stepped aside so I could pick up Copper. My hands are absolutely full at this point. What with the lantern, my sword, the egg, and now Copper; it is annoying to say the least. I would have liked to carry Sweetie Belle out too, because she walks slower than I do. I'm ready to get Copper bandaged up, and to take this egg to Twilight. Instead I hold back so Sweetie Belle doesn't feel rushed. I'm a little surprised how inconsiderate my immediate feelings are. It makes me feel like an ass.

After a seriously long trek out of the forest; I see Applejack charging towards us. Applebloom was right behind her trying to keep up. Applejack came a screeching halt right in front of me, and looked angrier than I've ever seen her before.

"What the buck is goin on Coal!? What happened ta' Copper!?"

"I've taken care of it AJ. The thing that took Applebloom and Sweetie Belle won't be coming back. There are several things that need doing, so it'll be late before I get home. Copper is pretty messed up, but nothing serious. I'll drop him off at the house before leaving again."

Applejack calmed down a little after that, but a new expression formed...confusion. "Ah'm surprised at ya Coal...yer so calm about all of this."

"I couldn't tell you why AJ, but let's not worry about it now. We do need to get Copper cleaned off as soon as possible."

"Can...can I come with you?"

Sweetie Belle was tugging on my pants leg with pleading eyes. I really wanted her to get home to Rarity, but if this is what she wants...it'll probably make her feel better. I better make sure of something before I give her the Ok though.

"Do any other ponies know what has happened AJ?"

"Not that Ah know of..."

"Good. We don't need a mass panic to top off all of this! Ok...then it should be fine if you come with us Sweetie Belle." She gave me a smile and a quick hug for my leg as a response. I turned my attention to Applebloom for a moment though. She has been so quiet, but I think she is alright. "How are you holding up Applebloom?"

"Huh? Oh! Ah-Ah'm fine. Ah'm just scared fer Copper..."

"Speaking of, we need to take care of this now."

I could tell Applejack had a lot more she wanted to say, but she refrained. We made our way back home, and I immediately get Copper cleaned off. I hadn't been too worried about him until I saw all the blood that washed off. It nearly gave me a heart attack when it didn't stop after a few minutes. Like I had reopened his wounds, but it stopped almost immediately after that point. Applejack is always so unbelievably reliable. She had purchased a small assortment of medical supplies, so I was able to get Copper bandaged up a little more professionally.

Scotaloo did as she was told and waited at home, but was freaked out when she first saw Copper. I decided it was best to keep my coat on so no pony would see my end of the deal as well. It isn't too bad, but unlike Copper it is very visible. Sweetie Belle and Applebloom joined Scotaloo in her room as they told her what happened.

Once Copper was properly taken care of I tucked him in and grabbed the egg. Applejack stopped me at the door before I could leave again though.

"Wait ah moment Coal. Ah still smell blood on ya. Ya ain't hurt none right?"

Oh hell! Those noses aren't just there to look cute I take it, cripes! "I'm fine AJ, but I'll be better once I get this to Twilight."

"Ah'm serious Coal...iff'n yer seriously hurt and ya don't tell me...Ah'll...Ah'll...Ah just don't know what Ah'll do."

"I won't lie to you AJ, I am a little hurt; but not horribly. You can make me feel better later I'm sure."

This made Applejack smile, but she still didn't look too pleased with me. She spotted the egg and got a little closer to it. "What is that egg anyway?"

I seriously don't want to tell Applejack, but she'll know if I'm lying. Best just be straight forward with her. "I told you about Sasha before, right?"

"Yeah...ya told me enough..."

Why do I get the feeling Applejack is hiding something from me now? Hmm...GAH! Stop getting distracted! I don't want to have this egg longer than I have to!

"Well this is her egg. She was the one who took the girls and hurt Copper. I was prepared to deal with her if she wouldn't let the kids go, but later lost my resolve when I found out the main reason she was freaking out. Apparently her species can breed asexually, and this is her egg. Anyway, I finally managed to get a chance for escape; but she fought me till the end. She tried one last time to make me stay, or....I honestly don't know what she was thinking at that point; but I ended up wounding her mortally by accident. Sasha died after giving me this egg. At least that's what I think she was doing. So now I'm on my way to Twilight's to figure out what the buck to do with this thing!"

Applejack was stunned. Hearing all of that out loud makes the whole thing sound crazy, but what more can I say? After a moment I tapped her head a couple times and she snapped out of it.

"O-ok Coal...ya'll get that taken care of, and Ah'll watch after the kids fer ya."

"Thanks AJ. I should be back soon."

* * * *

"Hey, I think he is coming to!"

"Well don't smother him! Ah doubt he can breath iff'n ya keep that up!"

"Yeah. Give him a break Sweetie Belle."

What...is going on? Ahk! Geez! My whole body stings like buck! Where am...oh...I'm back in my bed.

"Copper!"

"Huh? Oh! Thank Luna...every pony is safe..." The girls are sitting around me on the bed looking at me. They look concerned, but I think I'm well enough. Just a little sore is all. I knew Sweetie Belle was alright from earlier, but Applebloom I'm not sure. "Are you Ok Applebloom?"

"Y-yeah Ah'm fine. Yer the only one that got hurt any."

"Don't worry about it. It wasn't too bad..."

I'm glad the girls are alright, but I don't like how they keep having to worry about me. It seems like this junk follows me around wherever I go. I don't want to be a burden on them! I want to be the one to protect and comfort my friends, but it is always the other way around! When I get better...I think I'll need to ask dad a few questions...

Anyway, we sat there in silence for several minutes...no pony knew what to say. It started to get really awkward, but that was when AJ poked her head into the room. "Ok ya'll, ya need ta' be gettin home now. Copper needs ta' rest and Ah ya'll do too."

The girls nodded and hopped off the bed. They didn't seem too happy about it, but this is probably for the best. I'm very sleepy still, and for whatever reason I've got this really funny feeling in my wings. I didn't get to think about it long though. After the girls left AJ walked up and kissed my forehead a couple times before tucking me in. She rubbed my head until it eventually put me to sleep. Thank Luna for AJ...she always knows what makes me feel better.

* * * *

I can't believe I'm going to Twilight for a favor...AGAIN! I swear I will never be free from personal debt to this girl. Honestly...I owe my whole life to her. In more ways than one! She brought me here to begin with; got me to the hospital when I was dying; and has helped me with various things numerous times! She is just so dang reliable! I hope someday I'll figure out some way to pay back Twilight for all of this, or maybe she will. As long as I can make her happy; that'll be

enough.

Well this is an old feeling. I'm getting a lot of curious stares from ponies as I'm walking through town. I wonder if they think this could be a dragon egg. It does look kind of similar to Spike's, but it is a bit bigger. Wait a moment...Spike...hmm...well this thought is making me hopeful. Dragons are generally hoarding monster, but Spike isn't. Granted he is very young, but if Spike can go against his natural ways...maybe the child in this egg can too! I may be getting a little too hopeful, but it makes me feel better.

Once again I think before I act and choose to knock before I enter. In a matter of moments the door opens...by itself...kay.

"Hello?..."

"Come on in Coal."

"Twilight? Did you levitate the door open? Where is Spike?"

"I gave him the day off. Is there something going on Coal? I...think I smell blood..."

Oh dangit! Now Twilight is going to be worrying too! Best just avoid that topic. I walk into the library to see Twilight sitting in the middle of the room surrounded by books. She has these half reading glasses on, and...she looked adorable. It honestly picked my spirits up just seeing her look so damn cute! After stifling myself a little; I took a seat in my usual spot with the egg in my lap. Twilight eyed it curiously, but I spoke before she did.

"Don't worry about it Twilight. I do need your help though. I've come to...have possession of an egg...that happens to be from a sentient lizard like species."

"What!? Where did you get such a thing!?"

"Let's just say that it's one of those things I keep from you to protect you."

"...it's related to why you're hurt...isn't it?"

Oh come on! Really!? I'm never going to be able to hide shit! "Oooooo god...yeah...yeah it is. Long story short...I...killed this creature that had been causing me and Copper a lot of grief. It wasn't on purpose, but I was prepared somewhat for it. She...removed this egg from herself before she died. I...don't know what to do with it. This may be the child of a...well...monster, but it hasn't done anything wrong! I can't just kill it! Yet at the same time; would it suffer if I let it live? I'm seriously at a loss here morally Twilight. I was hoping you would have some ideas, or be able to reassure me in one way or another. Heh...I unload so much crap on you...I think I need to say something before we go any further here..."

Twilight was looking shocked, but at the same time understanding up until this point.

"I mean this as a friend, but I'm very serious when I say this. Twilight...you're some kind of amazing. Time and time again you help me, and I have to force you to let me pay you back. I love you so damn much...thank you a millions times over! And no matter what it may be; I hope you know I will do anything to help you. I don't care what it is! If you need me to clean your house, or take on a manticore; and everything in between; I will!"

What Twilight did next astonished me. She didn't look surprised, she didn't look unnerved by my choice of words; she only got up and hugged me. It wasn't even one of our normal hugs either; it felt very comforting.

"Thank you Coal...but you don't need to worry. I'm glad I can help you, and I don't really need anything in return. We're friends, and that's all the reason I need to be there when you need me."

"You have got to be a saint Twilight...ohh man...too many different emotions at once..."

She laughed at this, but stopped moments later to inspect the egg. After a few moments of this, she levitates down a couple different books; and starts looking through them.

"Know anything about this Twilight?"

"I'm not sure. Can you tell me more about this creature?"

"Yeah. It was a reptile...I think. It had three sets of legs, and could stretch itself very far. Her scales were red, but her eyes and teeth were black. She could speak; and seemed plenty intelligent, though she seemed plenty crazy...Twilight?" She was staring at me with fearful eyes, but...why? "Do you know something?"

Twilight didn't snap out of it immediately, but when she did she flailed her legs about denying anything. Ok...I may not be as perceptive as Twilight, but...she is hiding something from me.

"Care to let me in on what you know Twilight?"

"I-I don't know what you're talking about Coal! ...heheh..."

"Heh, you don't need to tell me if you don't want to Twilight. I trust you; so if I shouldn't know about it, then I won't pry further."

"Coal...I...well...you deserve to know. The creature you're talking about is...Sasha, right?"

"Y-yeah...it is..."

"I saw most of your first meeting with her...via a spell."

"Wait...do you mean to say...you saw her...with me, and..." Twilight slowly nodded with shame and embarrassment. "Well crap...sorry you had to see all that, but...I guess it doesn't change anything. I'm not mad Twilight, but...have you used that spell on me since?"

"Not on you, but I used it to find Copper once."

"I'll keep that in mind if I ever need to find that kid again."

Twilight was having a hard time looking at me now. I guess she thinks my being...seen...would make things really awkward. If I wasn't so out of it right now I suppose it could be, but all I'm wanting is to get this egg situation taken care of. She kept on reading her while sometimes inspecting the egg some more, and this went on for what felt like hours! It was getting dark out now, and I really wanted to get home to check on Copper; but this is going to keep bothering me if it doesn't get settled.

"Well Coal...this egg is ready to hatch any time now."

"...seriously?"

"Yes, but I couldn't tell you when exactly. The book I was just looking over couldn't tell me much. It didn't even have a proper name for the species. I'm afraid there isn't anything I can tell you that you probably don't already know."

"Crud...well, thanks for trying. Do...you have any thoughts on what should be done? I've already decided I can't keep this egg. It wouldn't be right of me after all I've done..."

"I doubt it was your fault Coal. You just don't have the heart to be as bad as you find yourself to be."

"I'm over that for the most part Twilight, but thanks."

"It is the truth, but anyway...I don't want to kill the creature. At the same time I'm not sure if it could live and not suffer, so I'm going to take it to the princess tomorrow."

"Oh Twilight, I can do that much! You've done so much as is!"

Twilight smiled, but raised her hoof at me. "I'm going to do it Coal. It'll give me a change to catch up with the princess anyway. If anything you've just given me the perfect excuse for a visit."

"It still feels like I'm using you..."

"You're not. I'm sorry to say this Coal, but...you need to get home and take a shower. I can't handle the smell of blood any longer."

"OH! So sorry Twilight! Gosh I'm so inconsiderate! You're sure that the egg isn't a problem for you? I really don't want you to feel obligated..."

Twilight just giggled a little before standing up, and pushing on me with her back leg. "Just get out of here Coal. Stop by anytime, but leave your reserved nature at the door."

"Ha...thanks again. Let me know if you need me for anything."

"I will Coal...get some rest."

I got up and waved goodbye to Twilight. I'm glad this whole thing is being handled, but I hate that I'm just changing the owner of the problem. Hopefully Celestia will know what to do.

As I was walking home thoughts of Copper filled my time. This kid can't ever seem to get a break! Unless it is him being broken! AJ handled it well...good thing Dash isn't here; she probably wouldn't handle it as well. *sigh*...I miss you Dash...I hope you're coming home soon.

* * * *

Author's notes: Sorry this one took so long. I'm taking some stuff to deal with a little pain, and it messes with my head a bit. Today was the first day I felt I could write again. Hopefully this chapter wasn't sub par, but let me know if it is. I'll wait until I'm sound to write again if so.

Chapter 123: What doesn't kill you only makes you stronger.

Dash had recovered from the initial landing, and was now being led around the farm by Pearl. Dash was trying to remain civil despite the horrid attitude of all the ponies she was introduced to. Not a single one took any interest in her personal well being after dispersing the storm, but instead continued to harp and nag at her to finish what she started. Her body was in decent condition all things considered, but her wings hurt every time she tried to move them. She could probably force herself up into the sky to clear some clouds, but the pain would be debilitating.

At the moment Dash is being led to the northeastern farm's housing to be shown the damage done by the storm. It was Onyx's request. He wanted Dash to see all that she could have prevented had she gotten there sooner. Needless to say her self restraint was being put to the test.

Dash and Pearl were walking side by side down one of the cleared paths on the farm. There

were huge piles of snow pushed together to form large mounds. There were no less than two dozen ponies running around doing damage control on the crops. The unicorns were trying to maintain a certain level of heat to melt small patches of snow, and the earth ponies were busy taking cart loads of snow outside the town. Onyx was busy giving orders to various ponies and chastising those that weren't working hard enough. He spotted Dash and gave her another earful before a more pressing matter came to his attention.

Dash had all she could take and had to let some of it out. Pearl ended up being the recipient as she was the only pony she had spent any time talking with other than a greeting.

"What is with that guy!? I took care of the storm already!"

"Who Onyx? I wouldn't let any pony else hear you talk poorly against him. He is the farm head after all..."

"What!? He can't be much older than me if at all! Where are the elders?"

"There...aren't any really. Life here is very hard, so...most have either passed or left."

Dash stopped almost immediately, and turned to Pearl with a disbelieving look. "Seriously? Is that true...for the other farms?"

Pearl hung her head before speaking. "I'm afraid so. The oldest pony in town is a resident of the southeastern farm, and she is eighteen if I recall correctly."

Dash was unnerved by all of this. Most of the ponies working barely looked old enough to call mature, let alone handle the labor of two ponies each. This whole town's situation didn't sit well with her. She could fix the snow soon enough, but the problems ran deeper than that.

"Hey Pearl...why do the farms hate each other so much?"

Pearl didn't respond immediately. When she did though, it was with a tone and look so serious it sent chills down Dash's spine. "...you're best not getting involved. You should worry about finishing your job, and getting out of here. There...isn't anything any pony can do."

Dash didn't know what to say. Was the source of all this hate between farm far greater than what she conceived? Only time, and a lot of hardships would tell.

* * * *

I made it home about an hour after finishing up with Twilight. I stopped on the roadside to try and calm myself before letting Applejack see me again. Now that all the immediate problems are taken care of, my guilt is starting to seep through. In the end I never chose one way or

another about what to do with Sasha, but the choice was made for me. I found myself thinking back to what Rafe told me once. To stand by my decisions no matter how hard they were, but I never chose; so what do I do now? I guess suck it up and stop being a baby about it.

By the time I got home I was swearing like a sailor. My cuts were burning as the friction from my clothes agitated them. I need to get them cleaned up before I do anything else. I open the door to find Applejack sitting in front of the fire with her hat off and her mane down. The fire was flickering which made the light dance across her form. I wanted nothing more than to join her there, but priorities I guess.

"Evening AJ...how is Copper doing?"

Applejack smiled and gestured upstairs with her hoof. "Sleepin soundly. Scootaloo is too. Ah sent Applebloom n' Sweetie Belle home hours ago."

"Thanks for that. I'm just going to get washed up and get some sleep. I'm falling behind on a lot of stuff I need to do because of all this."

Applejack grimaced at me, but didn't say anything as I walked past. I wasn't sure why she looked uneasy, but I didn't say anything either. After gathering a change of clothes I got in the shower and had to force myself not to yell out as the water came out hot. Applejack must have taken a shower recently, and the hot water made my wounds throb. While Sasha was doing all that to me I kind of spaced out, so this is the first time I've really seen the damage properly after washing off the blood. I look fucking disgusting is the best way to put it. Sadly I was so damn entranced by how grotesque I was, that I didn't hear Applejack come in. She gasped immediately after seeing me.

"Shit..."

She didn't respond verbally, but ran out and moments later came back in with the first aid kit.

"Ah can't believe ya Coal! Yer ah damn fool! Runnin around all messed up like that! Iff'n ya weren't so hurt Ah'd buck ya fer this!"

"I love you too..."

"Don't sweet talk me Coal! Just turn n' face me!"

Applejack started cleaning my wounds with rubbing alcohol...FUCK THIS HURTS!

"AGHK! Easy there with that stuff AJ!"

"Hush up. This is yer own darn fault!"

"Dang you can be mean when you're angry!"

Applejack just snorted in response. I couldn't honestly be mad at her though. Her face told me how concerned she was, and it made me feel like a jerk. At one point she started to tear up as a wound reopened. I had to put a hand on her head to calm her down, but she didn't seem to acknowledge it.

"Honestly I'm fine AJ..."

I was expecting her to respond by yelling at me some more, but when she replied...it made me feel cold. Her voice was shaking and she spoke slowly. Every few words was punctuated with a sob. It didn't help that she wouldn't stop working on me to look me in the eyes either.

"...no yer not...yer so hurt...such ah fool..."

If it weren't for the fact that I would have made a mess of her coat; I would have picked her up and held her right then and there. Instead I could only apologize repeatedly while rubbing her head and cheek with both hands. She calmed down after getting me properly bandaged up, but not once did she look at me.

When we finally got in bed I hugged her close and kissed her repeatedly. Applejack only sighed and reached around me rubbing my back.

"What am Ah gonna do with you?"

"Forgive me I hope..."

"Just stop gettin hurt, and Ah'll think about it."

"Deal."

* * * *

Mmm...morning...*yawn*. That was a pretty good sleep. Let's see...today is Friday...got school...buck. Well don't want to fall behind any. Hmm? Hey...my body doesn't hurt! At all!

I get up and run straight into the bathroom and start inspecting myself. I couldn't find a single cut! How awesome is this!?

AJ walked up the stairs and saw me...she started freaking out.

"Copper! What are ya doin boy!? Get back in bed! Ya'll should know better than to be up after gettin hurt like that!"

"Mom! I'm fine! Really!"

"What!? Ya can't be! Ah saw ya when you were brought in! Ya looked awful!"

"Look for yourself!"

AJ snorted and started very carefully moving aside my coat. She flinched for a moment, but then resumed checking at a faster pace.

"Copper...how...how are ya better? Ah'm happy fer ya, but...this don't make any sense..."

"It doesn't matter too much does it? I'm fine, so...nothing wrong with that!"

AJ stepped back shaking her head a bit. She seemed really worked up and confused.

"Mom? There isn't a problem...is there?"

"Huh? NO! Ah mean...not really. Ah just...ya shoulda needed at least ah few days ta' have all yer cuts healed up. There isn't ah mark on ya...Ah...don't know how that is possible without magic..."

"Maybe it is a side effect of my new body?"

"Yeah...Ah guess that is possible. Ah keep forgetting yer not totally ah normal colt sometimes Copper, but Ah'm glad yer better. Scootaloo left ah few minutes ago. Iff'n ya want ta go to school...there isn't any reason fer me ta stop ya."

"Heh, want and need are two very different things. I'll see you tonight mom."

I flew up and gave AJ a big hug before zipping into my room to grab my stuff. When I got everything gathered up I flew downstairs to see dad sitting on the couch with a newspaper. He seemed kind of stressed out, but seeing him reminded me of what I wanted to talk with him about.

"Hey dad..."

"Copper!?! What are you doing up!?"

"Oh umm...I'm all better. My wounds healed over night apparently..."

"Hmm...must be because of your body...at least there are perks that come with what you had to go through. Well...judging by those books I take it you're going to school. Have a good day

buddy, and I'll see you tonight."

"I'm a little surprised you thought of that so quickly. It doesn't matter I guess, but...there is actually something I want to talk with you about..."

Dad set his paper down and motioned for me to come sit with him. "Alright. What's on your mind?"

I flew over and sat at the other end of the couch before responding. After a few deep breaths I was ready. "Dad...can you tell me how I can be stronger?"

"What? You're strong enough as it is...why would you...Oh...Copper...Sweetie Belle told me what happened. You did what you felt was right. You got hurt because you didn't resist thinking it would protect the girls. You don't need to be any stronger."

"But I want to be! Even if what happened wasn't my fault...I'm always the burden! Time and time again...I'm sick of it. For once I want to be able to swoop in and take care of everything...like you do."

"Woah there...I hardly fix a thing buddy. Even when I do...I need a lot of help. You're a tough kid, and I just don't think you need anymore than that."

I'm feeling disappointed, but I understand why dad is saying all that. I want to protest some more, but I shouldn't give dad anymore trouble. "Ok...I'll try not to let it bother me. Thanks for listening dad..." I got up and started to leave for school when dad stopped me. "Dad?"

He wasn't looking at me, but he seemed to be in deep thought. After a few minutes of this I was feeling a little unnerved. Dad was acting very weird. "Copper..."

He made me jump a little from how suddenly he spoke! "Y-yeah dad?"

"If you're serious about being stronger...meet me outback of the house tonight."

"R-really!?"

"You better be serious though. Don't come if you aren't."

"Y-yes sir!"

Dad let me go and I just had to hug him! Showing affections like this may be weird after asking what I did, but it made me so happy to know dad took my concerns seriously! I don't know what he is planning, but I'm already excited!

* * * *

"Wake up! We need you to help with moving the snow if you aren't going to clear the clouds."

Onyx was shaking Dash almost violently awake. She had fallen asleep on the same bed she had been lent before, and was pissed at being woken up so rudely.

"Can't you give me a break!? I just need a little time to rest is all!"

"You've had your time. No pony eats if they don't work. You won't get better if you don't eat, so you're going to work for it."

"Oh Celestia have mercy...fine."

Dash begrudgingly got out of bed and followed Onyx outside. He got her hooked up to a cart and told her what was expected of her. She was to get no less than ten cart loads of snow from the farm, and take it out of the town limits by nightfall. This doesn't sound too bad, but she has to scoop in the snow; wheel it out of town and dump it; then repeat all by herself. To put the size of cart into perspective; think of the one Big Mac was pulling during Nightmare Night. It was slightly larger than that. If all of that wasn't bad enough; she also had to pull the cart along the cleared paths. That meant she couldn't go straight through. Dash groaned after going over all the variable in her head.

Onyx let shortly after and started barking more orders at other ponies.

"Why doesn't he just work if he is in such a hurry..." Dash grumbled as she made her way to the snow mound.

It was about twelve feet high, and it seemed to loom over her. Before Dash could even start; ponies around her started spouting off complaints about how she is taking her time. Dash was hurt, tired, hungry, and very impatient at this point. Each moment of this was driving her closer and closer to the breaking point. She was about to go off on them, but stopped when she remembered Coal's work load.

"Fifteen hours...I can probably do this much. I miss you...I miss every pony..."

Chapter 124: Overworked

I had about thirty minutes before I needed to head off to work, and I spent that time with Applejack of course. We've spent so little time together and that just isn't right. I'm thinking we need to have a night to ourselves Sunday.

"Hey AJ..."

"Mm?"

"What would you say to a date Sunday night?"

"Ah'd say, what did ya do wrong this time?"

"HA! That was pretty good! In all seriousness though; I'd like to take you out. We've honestly only had a single real date unless you count all the times we just cuddled for hours."

"Ah do. Ah had ah lot of fun with that."

Applejack was clearly trying to get me worked up again. I think she is trying to lift my spirits a bit by taking my mind off things. Best make sure to never let her know I tend to catch onto things like that. She is sitting on my left leg with her head under my chin kissing my neck a bit. She is trying very hard to put as little weight on my chest as possible. This mare is incredible. Not a day goes by that she doesn't remind me of that fact.

"Ah'd like that Coal. We don't have ta do nothin, but bein alone together sounds really nice. It'll have ta be later at night though. Ah'm spendin the weekend with Applebloom."

"That's right. Well...it can wait if you're tired."

Applejack leaned up and rubbed her nose against my cheek for a minute. It feels funny, but also very soothing.

"We may not have time fer a lot, but Ah'd really like ta' spend what time we can together."

"Heh, it's a date."

* * * *

So bored! Too excited for tonight! School can't end soon enough! What is dad going to have me do!? I have already finished all of my work for the day. It wasn't even all that challenging. Are they giving me stuff from Mr. Eraser's class still? They should know by now I'm passed that. I've never asked if I could leave before...worth a shot.

"Since I'm done with my work and all...can I call it a day?"

"You need to stay for the remainder of school hours."

"That is fine and all, but why? I'll stay of course, but can't you at least fill me in as to why?"

"It is for your own safety. I assume your parents will know where you are after hours, so they need to know where you are during."

"Makes sense...alright then."

Well crud...now what? Guess I just wait!

* * * *

"Pick up the pace! Either get busy clearing clouds or earn your stay!" Onyx was once again berating Dash for her results. She had been working since the moment she got up, and that was nearly five hours ago. At the rate she is going she'll end up dumping about eight cart loads of snow. It has been a long day so far, and this guy isn't making it one bit easier on her.

He went on his way to bark more orders as Dash neared the edge of town for the fourth time. Her body ached as she was not used to straining these muscles. Each step was forced and could only be done through sheer willpower. At one point her cart was fitted with a bit for added incentive. It was either meant to humiliate her, or give her something to release her aggressions on.

After finally reaching the unloading point she got out from the cart and began unloading the snow. She undid the back of the cart and as fate would have it; there was too much weight in the back. The snow fell atop her and she was buried. Dash stayed under the snow for a few minutes enjoying it as it cooled her body. The rest and the numbing of her pain became too great a temptation, and she passed out.

Thankfully a nearby pony saw this and dragged Dash from under the snow. The pony left her there and resumed his work after offering all the assistance he was willing to give. She slept there the entire day, and well into the night. A freezing gust of wind was what finally brought her back to the waking world. She had dreamt of home; and being warm inside her bed, being held by her lover. Dash hung her head and cried for a moment, if only out of frustration. When she looked up again she realized that the cart had been taken, and the snow had been moved properly. She had been left there to freeze, because she just wasn't in any condition to do the kind of work demanded of her.

After swallowing her pride; Dash made her way back to the farm house. She didn't expect any meal or hospitality, but she now needed an escape from the cold. The doors were locked tight, and she didn't have the strength left to yell out for help. Dash spotted a nearby pile of hay, and crawled inside. The bristles stung her wounds as many would stab in just the right way, but it soon began to help her in her need for warmth. As her aching body relaxed under the added weight of the hay...a bell went off; signaling the start of a new day.

* * * *

Ok...I've got Scootaloo's, and Big Mac's gifts taken care of. It was nice seeing Steel again; although he was in a pretty grouchy mood. Apparently his son has been getting into trouble lately. Heh, I know what that feels like! Anyway, I'm on my way home for the night. I've still got so much to do, and I'm hoping I can get a few more things taken care of tomorrow. I'm thinking Sunday morning to mid-afternoon would be a good time to inspect some of the animal's homes at Fluttershy's. Hopefully she won't mind it any. Although she'll probably know something is up, but...I guess it doesn't have to be a surprise.

As for right now though...Copper is probably ready for what I have in store for him. I'm honestly hoping what I have in mind will turn him off of this getting stronger kick. If it doesn't...he is going to be a tough ass kid! I mean damn! I'm not a slave driver, but I'm going to work this kid! Hell...it'll get some chores done too! Heh...I'm such an ass!

I step behind the house to see Copper already there waiting for me. He jumped up and down in excitement a few times before putting on his serious face. Yeah...he has a serious face now...right. Anyway, he flies over to me and starts asking me what we're going to be doing.

"It isn't what we're going to be doing, but what you're going to be doing. I've been giving thought to expanding our property, and so I've looked over the deed some. Those five trees in the back are on our land, so I can do with them as I please. I'm wanting you to cut those down, and I'll have more for you once that is done."

Copper gawked at me much how I thought he would. "H-how am I going to do that?"

I walked over to the shed and pulled out the axe that I had Steel fix up for me, and set it on the ground in front of Copper.

"With that. Now listen bud...you get hurt once doing this, and you're done. I'll tell you now the best way to get stronger is through hard work, but I don't honestly want you doing this. AJ is going to kick my flank when she realizes I'm putting you to work like this, but again...this is what you're asking for. So what do you say Copper? Heck...I'll even pay you for it. I'm thinking...twenty-five bits a tree. How does that sound?"

Copper raised a hoof to his chin and thought for a moment. He got this twinkle in his eye as he looked up at me. "Make it thirty, and you've got a deal!"

"Ha! You're an awesome kid! You know that!?"

"Yup!"

* * * *

I think dad is just trying to make me not want to do this, but I'm going to take any chance I have

to get over being so weak! It can't be too hard...right?

I WAS WRONG! THIS IS HARD! I've found the best way to wing the hatchet is spin my body with my wings mid air. It is really hard, but I'm making a dent. I picked the skinniest tree for starts, because...why not? It is about two and a half feet around, and I'm about two inches into it. I've been at this for about ten minutes now, and the first few minutes were spent just figuring out how in the buck I'm going to do this! My jaw is hurting more than anything, but I'm not going to complain!

AJ stepped out when she heard the thwacking sound, and immediately went back inside yelling at dad. I could hear AJ yelling, but couldn't hear dad until he burst out laughing at one point...wonder what that was about. The noise stopped after that, and their bedroom light went on. Ewww...I hope they aren't getting touchy again....EWWW STILL GROSS! Never want to see that again! Blech! Crud...dropped the hatchet.

I'm beat! I've been out here for nearly two hours now! I think...it's hard to tell. This isn't as easy as I thought, and I thought it was going to be pretty hard! The tree gets harder to cut the deeper I get, and that stinks! My neck is what hurts the most now. Supporting the weight of this hatchet is brutal.

"Time to call it a night bud! I don't want you working yourself too hard!"

"Okay dad..."

Dad poked his head out from his bedroom to say that. I put up the hatchet and nearly had to crawl my way back inside. I'm glad there isn't any school tomorrow. I'm going to be so sore.

When I got inside I saw dad had come downstairs with an ice pack. "I bet you feel awesome. Want to keep that up?"

"Har har dad. You're a regular comedian..."

"Heh! You should hear yourself! I should get you worn out like this more often!"

Dad is picking on me, but it's kind of fun. He may be my dad, but...I honestly think of him as more of a friend sometimes. Probably when I think about how he is barely old enough to have a foal; much less a kid my age...whatever that may be.

"How long is this going to last?"

"The soreness? Well...I'm honestly thinking not that long in your case. If you heal up several inch long gashes over night...I'm thinking you're going to be fine tomorrow. We'll see, but I'm placing my bet on your being back up to par soon."

"Huh...I didn't think of that. Wouldn't that be awesome!?"

"You bet it would! Anyway, I'm thinking you're starving! Care for me to fix you something?"

"Yes please!" Ok...maybe he really is more of a dad.

* * * *

"Sleep tight Copper."

"*yawn* Goodnight dad..."

Now for Scootaloo. Copper decided to call it a night early after being fed. Applejack and I don't really enforce a bed time on weekends, so long as it isn't ridiculous. The kids are responsible enough to choose for themselves. It is a little after ten now, and Scootaloo is writing in her diary some more. For once I'm not ornery, and knock before coming in.

"Knock knock sweetheart. Not writing about Cloudy being cute I hope." Ok...I'm still ornery!

Scootaloo looked back at me and stuck her tongue out. I just laughed at her which made her do it more. She stopped after apparently getting an idea."Maybe I am...I have had the talk after all..."

I had been leaning on the door, but I fell straight to the floor when she said that. I mean straight down! I didn't stop myself at all. My freaking nose! "Ow."

"Heh...you alright dad?"

I didn't get up. Instead I just talked in the same position I fell in. Which made my voice come across as very nasally, so it sounded kind of funny. "I'm fine. Just having a minor panic attack due to my little girl growing up. The only cure is for said little girl to come give her dad some love."

Scootaloo giggled at me some, but proved how big a sweetheart she is by squeezing under my arm and smiling at me. I rolled over a bit and cuddled with her on the floor for a while. She got comfortable under my chin and nuzzled into me. I rubbed her back which started to put her to sleep. She would yawn every few seconds and her nuzzling started slowing down. After about ten minutes of this; she was out.

I carefully lifted her up and tucked her in. I turned off her desk lamp and closed her diary without peaking of course. Some things are sacred even to me, and her trust is definitely one of them. I got on my knees and gently played with that little curl in her mane. It was always so cute to me,

and her sleeping face made it even cuter.

After a couple minutes of this Applejack joined me at her bedside. We looked at each other and smiled before making our way to bed. Once tucked in, Applejack started giving me minimal amounts of grief about Copper again.

"Ah'm just not sure he should be doin so much so soon is all."

"It's something he wants to do, and it honestly needs doing. I'm not wanting to stop him, but...I love you; and I'll put a stop to it if you're sure it's what you want."

"Yer makin me feel like the bad pony in this. Quit bein so gosh darn considerate ya big jerk."

Did I mention I was feeling ornery? Cause I am, and again...I am. "Well I have to be if I'm ever going to get some lovin out of you."

Applejack rolled her eyes at me. "We love on each other as often as we can."

"Not what I'm talking about sugarcube." I poked her nose at the end of that sentence. She got the hint and gave me a quick jab in the shoulder giggling a bit. "Ha! Oooh goodness...we do have our fun it seems."

Applejack rubbed the same shoulder she hit for a moment before giving me a quick kiss. "Ah think ya deserver ah little somethin."

Chapter 125: Boiling Over

Most relaxing night I've had in a long time! I really must have deserved something, cause I got it! We didn't do a whole lot of course; what with the kids just being down the hall. Although she either teased me again, or gave me something to look forward to after our date Sunday. I swear this girl can get me so worked up when she wants to.

Despite being up for a while; we both woke up fairly early this morning. I got the fireplace going and we cuddled in front of it for a while. At one point things started getting steamier in a different way, but that was put to a halt when we heard Copper wake up.

He came downstairs and got hugs from us before heading outside to get to work chopping down those trees. I asked him how he was feeling before he went outside, and I so called it. He said that it felt like he hadn't done any work at all the night before. I have to say that makes me jealous as all kinds of buck, but I'm happy for the kid. Copper deserves something after going through all he did. Applejack decided to let Copper go ahead and work like that if he wanted to. She did give him a quick earful on being careful though. He didn't look the least bit annoyed by it. Instead he just flew up and hugged her when she was finished before taking off outside. This

put her in an even better mood; to which she started returning to me again.

It never ceases to amaze me how things can get interrupted though. Scootaloo woke up shortly after we started again, and I was the one who stopped it in a hurry that time. For whatever reason I would probably die if she ever saw me getting the least bit intimate. Yet it wouldn't bother me half as much if Copper saw a little of it. That's probably my mother's double standard seeping through. Blah! Love my upbringing, but not all of it!

Scootaloo came downstairs and didn't read the mood at all. Which is honestly a good thing. She got comfortable in my lap and started going back to sleep again. Applejack and I just laughed softly before sharing a quick kiss after Scootaloo fell asleep.

The three of us sat there for about an hour before every pony's stomachs started going off. It was so funny how that even woke up Scootaloo. Hers was the loudest, and she started chewing on her hoof before she woke up. I had the biggest grin ever just watching her!

Applejack and I got a decent breakfast going and we ended up losing track of time. I had about ten minutes before it was time for me to leave, so I got ready in a hurry and zipped out after getting my goodbyes. I don't really believe in karma, but having such a wonderful morning after all these horrible things with Sasha...does make dealing with that guilt a lot easier.

* * * *

"Are you alright Sweetie Belle? You've been acting very different the last couple of days. You're worrying your big sister..."

Sweetie Belle was sitting on the couch in the lobby of the boutique not really doing anything. Rarity didn't have any customers at the moment, but had been very busy prior; so she just now had the time to really focus on Sweetie Belle.

"I'm fine...just have a lot to think about is all."

"Oh my...did something happen with Copper?"

"I'm not sure I can talk about that with you..."

Rarity just giggled at this and gave Sweetie Belle a quick hug before leaving her be. She did poke her head out of the work room to offer one last bit of advice. "Why don't you go pay him a visit. I think it'll make you feel better." Rarity gave her a quick wink before ducking back inside to finish up a few surprises she had in store for Ponyville's human.

Sweetie Belle was thinking back to the nightmare that was her being trapped for hours suspended by the roof of the cave. The sound of Copper giving himself up and being taken by

Sasha replayed in her mind again and again. She wanted to go visit, but doubted he would be well enough to have company yet; and she didn't want to impose. After another ten minutes of this she decided getting out to be best, but she would go visit Applebloom for now.

* * * *

"Ah'm gonna be gone fer ah few days Applebloom. Ya know what yer chores are, and there is plenty of food fer ya. Granny will be home iff'n ya need anythin."

Big Mac was asked by his mare friend to come visit her parents in Canterlot. He had concerns with leaving Applebloom at first, but she managed to convince him that she would be fine. After poking fun at him by using a word she learned from Scootaloo; whipped. Big Mac had to be explained what it meant, and gave his little sister a dead panned stare when she told him. This only served to make her laugh; to which Big Mac did eventually as well.

"Ah'll be fine! Have ah nice time, but ya better come back! Don't let em change ya none either. Ah don't think Ah could look at ya the same way if ya came back like one of them city ponies!"

Applebloom was having too much fun at her brother's expense she felt, but he was laughing too; so it was alright.

"Ah'm too stubborn for that sis. Now be good, and Ah'll see ya in ah few days. Oh, n' have ah nice time with Applejack."

"I will! Bye Big Mac!"

It was now a little after eight and she was going to meet with Applejack at about ten. She immediately got to work on her chores so she wouldn't fall behind later into the weekend. Due to the farm being closed down for the most part during Winter; the chores got done quickly enough. It came time for her to head down to Coal's, but she was stopped by Sweetie Belle coming down the road.

"Heya Sweetie Belle! What are ya doin down here?"

"I was just bored and hoped we could hang out some."

"Oh umm...Ah'm sorry Sweetie Belle, Ah'm spendin the weekend with mah sister."

"Oh yeah..." Sweetie Belle's ears dropped at this, but she forced herself to perk back up so as to not upset Applebloom. "Well have a nice time with that! I'll find something else to do."

"Why don't ya just come with me and visit Copper? Ah bet he would love ta' see you." Applebloom gave Sweetie Belle a playful nudge or two as she spoke.

"I was kind of worried he wouldn't be up to it...after all that happened..."

"Not up ta' seein you!? Ya ferget how much that boy likes ya! Quit yer worryin and let's go make his day!"

This got a smile out of Sweetie Belle, and she had to admit that it did sound nice.

"Alright...thanks Applebloom."

"What friends r' for!?"

* * * *

This was a great idea! I started chopping on the other side of the tree, and I'm going to give it a flying buck once I've got it chopped some more! My greatest strength is in my ability to fly the way I do, so I should use that as much as I can! Wait...but I'm trying to get stronger...will I get stronger if I take the easy route? Crud! Oh well...at least I have that option.

I've been out here chopping this dang tree for nearly four hours! I can tell this time because of the position of the sun. Even if the clouds do make it a little harder to see it. I think I'll start chopping along the sides now. If I come in from four different directions, the weight of the tree may finish the job for me; and I wouldn't have technically cheated! It isn't like there are any rules for this, but...oh forget it! I'm thinking about this too much!

"Copper!?"

"Huh? Oh hi girls!" Applebloom and Sweetie Belle are...running at me really fast..."NO WAIT SLOW DOWOOF!" Augh...Sweetie Belle tackled me...why does she look so angry?

"What are you doing!? You're hurt and you're out here working like this!?"

"I'm fine Sweetie Belle, but...would you mind getting off me? This is umm...not unwanted, but..."

"Oh...S-SORRY!" Sweetie Belle jumped off me, and I got up immediately. If she thought I was still hurt...why did she tackle me? I dunno, but...that was kind of nice.

"What do ya mean yer fine!? Ah saw ya the other day; ya looked so hurt!"

"I mean what I said Applebloom. Look and see for yourself. There isn't a single cut on me."

"Ah don't believe it! Hold still!" Applebloom started inspecting me much like AJ did before, but she started gasping and freaking out when she didn't find anything. "Ah don't believe this! Yer healed!"

"That's what I said. Dad and I agree that it is just a side effect or a perk to how this body of mine was made. I'm not sure why or how, but I'm not going to complain!"

Sweetie Belle had been hiding her face from me during this, but she started hugging me again after accepting that I'm fine.

"Ah'm just gonna leave ya'll alone." Applebloom laughed at me as she entered the house.

I heard her talking with AJ for a moment before she poked her head out saying they were heading to town to spend the day together. I was still being choked somewhat by the tight hug I was receiving, but managed to get out a little wave. It was several minutes after I saw them walk down the road did Sweetie Belle finally stop hugging me.

"I'm so happy you're Ok. I was so scared for you..."

Now it was my turn to do the hugging. I've noticed something...I've gotten bigger again. I now stand a few inches taller than the girls. I wonder why I'm growing so quickly. Anyway, it made holding Sweetie Belle that much easier. My wings grew with me some, and I'm able to basically envelop her. She didn't seem to mind, and started getting comfortable.

"I'm sorry I worried you, but I really am fine now. I'm actually out here working so I can get stronger, so you won't need to worry about me anymore."

"You're kind of stupid sometimes..."

"Huh? Why do you say that?"

"Because you got hurt because of us...not because you weren't strong or something..."

"Now you're being stupid. Don't blame yourself for what happened. I'm your...colt friend, and protecting you is what I'm supposed to do."

"Heh...thanks."

A part of me is glad all this happened. I don't think Sweetie Belle is bothered by my feelings anymore, and we can be close again. I do wonder what happened to Sasha though...

* * * *

"Achoo! Ohh jeez..." Dash forced herself to get up shortly after every pony else went outside and started working again. Her wings were starting to feel better, but now her entire body ached to the point that simple movement was forced. Not to mention how hungry she was this point,

and she believed she was starting to get sick from being outside in the cold for so long.

She wasn't even going to bother trying to work today, and made her way inside to sleep somewhere warmer. Onyx spotted her going inside, and of course followed to give her an earful.

"What do you think you're doing? You won't get anything to eat if you don't work!"

"I don't care...I'm hurt, tired, and starting to get sick. I'm going to rest like I should have done, and then I'll finish the cloud work on an empty stomach. Go yell at some pony else, I've had all of you I can stand."

Onyx may have a very dark black coat, but the red in his cheeks was clearly evident as his anger rose. "You best get to work girl! I'm not going to allow you board if you refuse!"

Dash sighed and turned around to face him. She staggered as her own body weight was too much to properly maintain at this point. "Then I'm leaving."

"What!? You're going to abandon your duties and let all these ponies suffer!? I'll be sure to get word to the weather factory about this!"

"You misunderstand you blow hard. I'm leaving this farm. Surely there is at least one decent bucking pony in this place that will at least let me sleep in peace."

Onyx snorted in response, but didn't seem any less angry. "Going to work for one of them huh? Should have known you aren't loyal. After all we did saving you...should have just left you there."

Dash had all she could stand, and her anger was let out all at once. "Now you listen here you pompous bucking foal! Do you have any idea how bucking hard it is to deal with a storm like that!? No! Of course you don't! All I would have needed was a couple days rest to be back in decent enough condition to fix this problem the right way, but you apparently don't have a lick of common sense in that head of yours! It is because of ponies like you that the last pegasus we had here can't fly anymore! I doubt you even care, because he couldn't get the job done! At least we bucking tried! You're lucky I'm the most loyal pony there is; otherwise you would be so far past out of luck! Now get out of my way! I've had all I can stand of you!"

Dash was hyperventilating at his point, and Onyx was stunned. After a moment when he didn't respond, Dash forced her way past him and started for another farm. She was stared at the entire way, most ponies had heard all of that; and she was getting the nastiest of looks. Dash felt a little guilty for going off like that, but given all she has put up with she didn't focus on it.

After forcing her way through most of the farmland, a single pony threw an ice ball at her; which made contact on her back right leg. She was brought down immediately, and she growled at the

pony. When she turned and saw who it was though; her will wavered. It was Pearl, and she wore a face of rage that seemed so out of character. It took several minutes for Dash to snap out of it, but she made it out of the farm shortly after. She didn't make it to the other farm though; instead she collapsed onto the road and pleaded to Celestia for comfort. She looked up at the sound of hooves against snow, and saw several new ponies each wearing a red vest; and a unicorn among them levitated her towards their farm house. Dash's relief and frustrations were too much at this point, and she cried silently the entire way.

Chapter 126: Thanks?

Another day at the spa down, and I get tomorrow off! I can't wait for that date! Being able to spend time alone with my love is just the thing to get me out of this funk. I wonder what more I could get done tonight. I never did get that cake recipe from my mother, but...it's too soon to call again. I think I'll just ask Mr. or Mrs. Cake if they know a recipe Pinkie happens to enjoy more so than others. I haven't really spoken with them at all since I've been here either. I just hope Pinkie isn't there at the moment. I know how she loves surprises, and I'd like to give her one.

The upstairs lights are off, but the downstairs are on. I wonder if that means they are open, or closing. It is their house on top of being their business...literally, heh. I grab the knob and give it a gentle turn trying to make the least amount of noise as possible. I don't want them opening up for me personally if they're closed. Thankfully the door was unlocked so I felt comfortable enough to step inside. The interior was as always decorated with cakes and sweets inside glass containers. Some were built into the sides of the walls for hanging display, and others were inside a case around the front counter. I'm honestly not sure if they are real sometimes or not. It isn't like how it was on Earth, something fake generally has an unusual color to it; so it is easy to tell. I've gotten used to it, but everything here is colored like a cartoon. So those could be completely fake, and I wouldn't be able to tell the difference. I wonder why that hasn't bothered me, or come back to bite me before. Who knows?

Anyway, I could hear some activity in the kitchen; and I decided to take a quick peak before calling out. If it was Pinkie, then I would just try again later. If it was either of the Cakes, then I would ask them for a recipe. Wait...they bake for a living...would they be willing to even sell a recipe? Hopefully so, I don't want them to do it if they aren't comfortable with it though.

I walk up to the door and peek over it...it was the Cakes. I hurriedly snuck back over to the front counter and hit the service bell once. Mr. Cake came out shortly there after with his usual smile on.

"Evening Mr. Cake!"

"Well hello there Coal! I haven't seen you in a long time! Are you here for Pinkie again?"

"Yes and no. I'm wanting to bake her something special for Hearth's Warming, but sadly I don't know any good recipes for that. I was hoping I could buy one off you."

"Oh you don't need to pay for it! If it's for Pinkie; then I know just the one! It is more than a bit difficult though..."

"I may not get it right the first time, but I'll keep at it until I do; so difficulty doesn't matter."

"Ok then, let me just write it down and I'll be right back!"

"Thanks Mr. Cake."

After that he went back into the kitchen and Mrs. Cake stepped out a few minutes later to take his place. She was looking...a little larger than normal. She wasn't a very big pony before, but now she looked...bigger. Not unhealthy big, but...I think she may be pregnant big.

"H-hey Mrs. Cake! Good to see you."

"Oh hello deary! It's nice to see you too! My husband tells me you're wanting to do something special for Pinkie, oh she will be just thrilled!"

"I certainly hope so! I feel like I hardly see her."

"Oh we've kept her pretty busy lately. She is such a help, even when she does get a little...well silly."

"Heh, I can imagine."

"That reminds me! She spoke with us about catering a party for your son...Copper I believe. Do you have any preferences for when and where it will be held?"

"Hmmm...if it's possible, I'd like it to wait until Dash gets back. It wouldn't feel right if she wasn't there."

"Oh? Is she close to Copper?"

Crap! Don't want to lie, but not sure if telling the truth is best here! Wait...GOT IT! "She is his flight instructor. He is beyond thankful for her, and it would make him happy for her to be there."

"How sweet! Do you know when she will be back?"

"I don't know for sure honestly. She said a week at most, but something tells me it may be a bit longer than that. I'll let you know when she gets back, and then we can hopefully work up a set

date."

"Sounds wonderful dear." At that point Mr. Cake came back out with a slip of paper in his mouth. It thankfully was dry...another thing I'm surprised I haven't run into lately.

"Thank you Mr. and Mrs. Cake! You've been a great help, and it was very nice to see you both!"

They both smiled and wished me a pleasant night as I took my leave. That didn't take long, and I'm feeling there must be more I could do. Well...now that Dash is in mind; I think I'll handle her gift next. Now where do you buy tickets for shows out of town around here?

* * * *

"Anything you want to do Sweetie Belle?"

She and I were sitting on the front porch of the house cuddled up with each other. My right side is against the edge of the porch, and Sweetie Belle is under my wing on the left. She doesn't look all that sleepy, but I'm hoping she won't get bored if we aren't doing anything. I don't want her to think we have to do something for me to enjoy this time though...I'm thinking too much again.

"I'm happy if you are."

"I am." She seems a little out of it though. Wait...CRAP! I bet she is still bothered about what happened to her! She has been worrying about me so much I completely forgot that she must have spent who knows how long being tied up somewhere!

We were both sitting on our legs like normal ponies do. I say normal, because I've seen this one pony who sits like dad does. She looks kind of funny! Anyway, since we're sitting like that; I'm able to rub my cheek against hers pretty easily. I hope she knows I'm just trying to be comforting, and not...well...the other stuff. When she started nuzzling me back I felt reaffirmed in my actions. It was so nice to not have anything to worry about, just the two of us fighting off the cold by staying close. I love moments like these.

* * * *

"Can we go sleddin sis!?"

"Huhuh! Sounds like ah lot ah fun ta' me!"

Applejack and Applebloom were walking through town trying to come up with ideas for what to do. Applejack was worrying about it more than Applebloom, as she was just beyond happy to be spending time with her sister.

They ran home real quick kicking snow back and forth at each other as they ran, they picked up a classic wooden sled and drug it up the hills north of Ponyville. There were a few other families doing the same thing, which made the atmosphere a very pleasant one. Laughing and giggling could be heard for nearly a mile as fillies and colts raced down the hill as fast as they could.

The sled was thankfully big enough for both the girls, and they spent several hours going up and down. At one point they both fell off during a trip down, and spun down the hill holding onto each other laughing. When they came to a stop they were both covered in snow, and couldn't be having a better time. Being Winter, the sun sets at an earlier hour, so unfortunately they had to call it good as an exceptionally cold blast of air jolted them to attention.

They hurried back to the farm, where Applejack fixed up some hot chocolate for the two. They sat inside cuddled up together while enjoying the peace that was this moment.

"Thanks fer spendin the day with me AJ! Ah had so much fun!"

"We get ta' spend tomorrow together too iff'n ya'll would like."

"Really!?"

"Course sugarcube! Ah said the weekend, and Ah meant the whole weekend."

"Yay!"

* * * *

Dash was brought to the northwestern farm house, and was immediately given a warm bed and hot soup to eat. Every pony seemed unusually hospitable after what she had been put through. The pony that appeared to be in charge was a rather short unicorn stallion with a forest green coat, and brown mane. His name was Pinewood, but he asked Dash to just call him Pine.

The room she was given was on the second floor of the farmhouse, and appeared to belong to some pony who was rather wealthy. The room was furnished with a bed centered in the room against the back wall, with a dresser and desk. There were bookshelves stocked to the brim with all sorts of reading material. Mostly about farming, but several books looked rather peculiar. They were horror stories, and they made up nearly a third of the collection. Dash didn't think much of it, and immediately turned her gratitude back to Pine.

"Thank you very much!" Dash sneezed once and Pine quickly gave her a tissue. "Heh, thanks."

"No problem at all Ms. Dash. I'm just so very sorry that your first experience in our town was with those awful ponies in the northeastern farm. That Onyx is such a foal, and doesn't know

how to properly treat a lady."

Dash was starting to feel a little uncomfortable. Pine was being very friendly, but...almost too friendly. He seemed to wait on her every need, and only left her alone for a few minutes at a time to handle business somewhere.

He came back at one point and insisted on retreating Dash's wounds. At the time she didn't think much of it, but he seemed to take his time when applying ointment to various areas. He would compliment her form, and seemed to not once take his hooves from her. Dash had to insist that she was alright to finally get him to stop. He seemed unperturbed by it, and complied without complaint.

"I think I should get some sleep now. I'm sure you're busy and have things you need to attend to other than me, but thanks again. I'll try and get better quickly to take care of the clouds."

"Don't worry about it at all Ms. Dash. You stay for as long as you need to! My home is your home, and you're welcome to stay for as long as you like!"

"Th-thank you..."

"I'll let you rest now. Beauty sleep and all that! Hahaha"

"Y-yeah..hehehe..."

Pine closed the bedroom door behind him, and Dash immediately let out a sigh of relief. She took a moment to rest herself mentally before noticing movement to her left.

There was a window that overlooked a fair portion of the farm, and Dash saw why this farm must be doing better. The entire population was of unicorns. Each seemed adept to say the least in the ways of magic. They were all pretty scrawny physically, but seemed to be in good health. Again, all of them were very young. The youngest she saw couldn't be older than Scootaloo or the others. She seemed to be a very bright filly, but her demeanor left Dash a little uneasy. Something about this whole group just didn't feel right to her, but she couldn't discern as to what.

"I should probably be getting you home Sweetie Belle. I don't want Rarity getting mad at me if I kept you out too late."

We ended up spending the whole day together. I brought her inside at one point and made some soup I saw dad make a couple times. It came out pretty good if I say so myself! For once I didn't feel all that awkward spending so much time alone at home with Sweetie Belle. She was

pretty mild mannered the whole day, and I'm worried she is still thinking too much about what happened.

"Ok Copper."

She is even talking less for whatever reason! I'm starting to get a little concerned here. I think I need to cheer her up a bit. After we got outside I scooped her up and took off. She yelped at first, but calmed down moments later.

"Are you sure you're not bothered by something still? You've been awful quiet today..."

"I'm fine, really. Just have a lot to think about. Nothing to be worried over though."

She has a lot to think about? I wonder what it could be. Best not pry though...I'll just be here if she wants to talk about it later.

We arrived back at Rarity's much too quickly in my opinion. Sweetie Belle was having the hardest time looking at me as I walked her to the door, and...I wasn't liking it one bit. I worked up some guts and took her hooves into mine which made her look at me, and I kissed her. It only lasted a moment, but when I opened my eyes...she was starting to cry.

"Nononono! I'm sorry! I-I-I just thought that would make you smile, and..."

She cut me off with another one of her big hugs, and it left me so dang confused; but...hugs are nice.

"I'm not sad about that, *sniffle* thanks Copper. It's just...I...have to go live with my parents for a while..."

"What!? How soon!? And for how long!? When was this even decided!?"

"I got a letter this morning...Rarity doesn't know about it yet. My parents are coming to pick me up Monday."

"Sweetie Belle..."

"I don't know how long I'll be gone, and...I was just so scared to tell you! I'm sorry I wasn't any fun today, but I had a very ni..."

....

....

....

"*sniffle*...you're getting awful comfortable doing that..."

"What...are you doing tomorrow?"

"I'm telling Rarity tonight, and...I'll probably be with her all day."

"Can...I visit you tomorrow night...like I did before?"

"Y-yeah, I'd like that."

Chapter 127: Coping

Author's notes: I don't know how many of you read my blog, but this chapter is a good example of what I talked about in it. I'm hoping the more...broadened view of things will make things more interesting for everyone. If nothing else I hope it doesn't detract any, but let me know if it isn't to your liking.

"Welcome back Sweetie Belle! Did you have a nice time?"

"Yeah...I did."

Copper and Sweetie Belle parted roughly five minutes ago. She had been sitting outside trying to ready herself for breaking the news to her sister. It wasn't likely that Rarity would take it as hard as Copper did, but Sweetie Belle still had her concerns.

"Rarity...I need to tell you something."

"Oh? Well come have a seat with me and tell me all about it."

Rarity's mindset was going along the lines of Sweetie Belle having a problem with Copper, or just anything involving him. He has been the primary cause of most of her little sister's stronger emotions lately.

They got comfortable on the lobby couch together, and Rarity patted Sweetie Belle's head a few times for comfort. It helped, but not enough to make this any easier.

"Mom and dad...are coming to take me home with them Monday..."

Rarity's eyes got big and she nearly yelled out, but refrained when she saw the hurt on her sister's face. Instead she took a few deep breaths and pulled her into a hug.

"When did you find this out?"

"I got a letter this morning. I don't know when I'll be coming back...or if I will..."

"Don't talk like that darling. You'll surely come back someday. They are probably just missing you. I've loved having you here, and I feel we have gotten much closer for it. At the same time...I do feel for our parents. Not being able to see either of their girls after all."

"Yeah...I guess you're right. I'm just going to miss every pony."

"We'll miss you too Sweetie. I haven't actually heard from mother and father in a while...are they still living at that nice cottage outside of Manehattan?"

"No. The letter said we would be moving to Canterlot..."

"Canterlot! Oh how marvelous! I'm sure you will just have the most wonderful of times!"

"It would be nice, but..."

"Oh, I'm sorry Sweetie Belle. Well dear, would you like to do anything special tomorrow? I'm sure Pinkie would be more than happy to throw you a goodbye party."

"Thanks, but...I'd rather not. I haven't even told Applebloom or Scootaloo yet...saying goodbye just hurts so much..."

Sweetie Belle wasn't crying any, but she was near the breaking point. Thoughts of leaving every pony behind for an indefinite time was weighing heavily upon her. Rarity took note of this and sang her sister's favorite lullaby. She is a little old for it now, but the sentimental value it holds still rings true. The kindness of the act got through, and Sweetie Belle's heart was calmed. She pushed herself deeper into Rarity, and fell asleep near the end of the second verse.

* * * *

I can't believe she is leaving...and we just started getting close again too. This bucking sucks. Life just isn't fair sometimes, but...I'll try not to let it get to me. I'm going to miss her so much, but I can't let it wreck everything else I have going. Part of being stronger isn't just the physical part, but the emotional part too. Tough times come and go, but as long as I cherish what I've had...I'll be happier in the end. Easier said than done, but I'll do my best.

I didn't head home immediately. Instead I decided to work off some of my frustrations by flying around town. Many places were still lit up as most ponies stay up later on the weekends. I saw all sorts of couples sitting outside enjoying each other, and I felt like the world was kicking me. After seeing couple after couple together, I just had to put a stop to this particular flying session.

I made my way back home and immediately got to work on that tree. It seemed to loom over me as I readied the hatchet. With a leap and several flaps of my wings I swung into the tree again and again. I got into a steady rhythm, and lost myself to the monotony of the task. With each swing my body grew more and more tired, but I just couldn't bring myself to stop.

This kept up for I don't know how long now, and my entire body ached. With a final swing and thunk...the tree leaned to the left...and fell over with a loud crash. I dropped the hatchet immediately and fell to the ground panting. It was a bittersweet moment. I finally found the will to work through the difficulty of this task...it only took losing the most precious thing I have to obtain it.

Moments later I heard the sound of leaves being crunched as dad came into view standing over me. He had a smirk on his face as he picked me up and dusted me off.

"Good work Copper. Let's call it a night. You kind of look like you've been through heck."

I smiled at this, but didn't have the energy for much else. Maybe things won't be so bad. I've got the best family ever, and I know I'll see Sweetie Belle again sooner or later. Of course sooner will always be preferred.

* * * *

"Goodnight Applebloom. Ah'll see ya tomorrow."

"Today was ah lot of fun. Ah can't wait fer tomorrow ta' come. Ah love ya big sis."

"Ah love ya too sugarcube."

Applejack tucked in Applebloom and made her way to the front door. She was stopped on the way by Granny Smith who had gotten up a short while ago.

"It does mah old heart good ta see ya'll spendin time with yer sister like this. It feels like the good ole days..."

Granny Smith was sitting at the dining room table, and Applejack joined her after she was spoken to.

"These days are plenty good too, Granny. Ah've never been happier."

"Ah suppose being swept off yer hooves would do that to ah gal."

"Ya joke, but that's really how it is. Anyway Granny, are ya still doin fine? We don't get ta' talk

much while Ah'm workin here durin the day..."

"Don't yew worry 'bout me none. Ah sure sleep an awful lot, but Ah've got plenty o' life in me!"

"Ah'm glad. Sorry Ah don't get ta' see ya all that often."

"Ah know yer busy with that uhh...what is he again?"

"Human, Granny."

"That's right! That human friend o' yers. Weirdest dang thing Ah ever saw, but he seems like ah nice enough feller. Ya'll should bring him around here more often, so Ah can make sure he is able ta' support ya right like."

"Heheh, he does that plenty well as it is. Ah swear iff'n Ah didn't force him not to, he would work all the dang time."

"What does he do exactly?"

Applejack rubbed the back of her head a bit as she worried how her grandmother would take Coal's profession. It isn't exactly the hardest of work, but the sheer amount of time he puts into it is what makes it difficult.

"He works fer the spa in town. Ah suppose ya should think of what he does as makin ponies feel good."

"Well that sounds like ah fancy pancy city job ta' me! Ah doubt he is much in the way of real work then."

"He works plenty hard. Ah think he probably works harder there than he had to here on the farm."

Granny Smith snorted at that, but didn't argue it. "Ya'll should bring em by sometime. Ah'd like ta' fix ya'll ah nice dinner once in ah while."

"That sounds mighty fine Granny, but it wouldn't just be us. Coal would probably want to bring the kids too."

"Wait ah gosh darn second! Kids!? As in more than one!? When did this happen?"

"Oh...Ah never told ya'll about that?"

"Ya sure didn't! No pony ever tells Granny nothin unless Ah make em!"

"Heh, sorry Granny. Ya know about Scootaloo, but the newest addition to our family is Copper. How he came to be...is complicated, but he is ah mighty good colt! He can be ah hoof-full, but he makes me proud. Heh, he calls me mom sometimes, and...it makes me really happy."

Applejack smiled and looked down at her hooves as she said that. She was a little unsure as to how Granny Smith would respond, but she wasn't worried. She just stopped the visual distractions for a moment, and recounted times Copper made her feel like a mother. Granny Smith beamed at the face her granddaughter was making, and she got up immediately to hug on her.

"Ah've never seen ya look so gosh dern happy child. Ah guess Ah can't rightly call ya that anymore, but Ah hope ya'll won't mind it none."

"Course not Granny. Ah may have ah family of mah own now, but Ah'll never ferget where Ah come from; and who raised me."

"Ya make me proud child. Do bring around those youngins sometime. Ah'd like ta' see mah great-grandchildren."

"Ya...already think of em like that?"

"What!? Course Ah do! Yer mine, and they're yers; so o' course Ah'm goin ta' love em!"

Applejack was overcome with a plethora of emotions. She hugged her grandmother, and felt much the same comfort Applebloom did earlier. They stayed that way for a while; but when the clock struck ten, Applejack knew it was time to get home. She and Granny Smith said their goodbye, and Applejack raced home all too excited to see her family again.

* * * *

Scootaloo spent all that morning not knowing what to do with herself. She saw Copper and Sweetie Belle getting close from her bedroom window, so she decided not to stay at the house. Coal was at work, and Applebloom was spending the whole day with Applejack. It seemed every pony had something or some pony else to spend the day with besides her. She pouted a little as she arrived at town, but that quickly left her as she saw Cloudy flying nearby...a bit unsteadily though. He came to a halt as he lost his balance and crashed into a pile of snow. Scootaloo laughed a little, but quickly helped him to.

"Heh, thanks Scootaloo. Jeez...I must look really lame..."

"Pshh, naw! You were really cool up until you crashed!"

"Thanks, but that brother of yours is the cool one. I've seen him flying around before...makes me jealous."

"Copper is special. You don't need to compare yourself to him."

"I know, but still."

Scotaloo gave Cloudy a quick reaffirming pat before getting an idea. "Say...I don't have anything to do today, want to hang out?"

Cloudy smiled at this and nodded quickly. "Want to go practice flying together?"

"Yeah!"

Scotaloo and Cloudy ran off for the same park that Dash liked to practice in while she was around. It is usually unoccupied being so close to the forest, so it made the perfect spot for two young pegasi to practice flying without being judged if they failed. They spent the entire day practicing the techniques Dash had taught Scotaloo. It helped Cloudy with his control, and Scotaloo managed to get off the ground and stay that way for several minutes at a time.

Near the end of the day the two were exhausted. Cloudy was going for one last attempt at doing a trick he saw Dash do once, and crashed right into Scotaloo. They both laughed about it until the situation they were in struck a cord. Cloudy was atop her, and very close.

"Umm...C-cloudy?"

His heartbeat quickened, and he lost control of his senses. A single second later his will broke, and he made a bold move. He stole a kiss from Scotaloo, and she was stunned. It lasted for several minutes, but when it ended Scotaloo immediately pushed Cloudy off; and sat upright twiddling her hooves.

"S-sorry Scotaloo...I-I just..."

"Don't. I'm...not mad...just surprised is all..."

"You're not? Really?"

"Yeah...I like you, and...you clearly like me."

"Heh, yeah I do. Still...I should have asked..."

"D-don't worry about it. You've done it before after all. Just not..like that. Well umm...it is getting late. I should probably get home or my dad will freak out."

"R-right. Can...we do this tomorrow?"

Scotaloo stopped twiddling her hooves to look back at Cloudy. She thought for a moment, and replied with a smile. "Yeah."

* * * *

It surprisingly wasn't as hard to figure out where to buy tickets as I thought. There is a stand that deals tickets to all sorts of different shows. I can't believe how many entertainers there are! The show only spoke of Sapphire Shores and the Wonderbolts, but there are dozens! I need to look some of these ponies up sometime! I imagine they would be a blast! The tickets weren't all that pricey to be honest, and now that is one less thing to think about. After taking care of Fluttershy's tomorrow; come Monday I'm thinking it'll be past time to head down to the gem mines. I'll probably see if Twilight has a way for me to find the gems more easily.

I'm now making my way back home with a lot on my mind, but I'm brought out of my thoughts by the steady rhythm of chopping. Copper is really giving it his all right now! I quickly ran over to the side of the house, and watched Copper as he worked. That boy is something else. He seems so calm as he just works away at that tree! I probably stood there watching him for thirty minutes before he finally finished off the tree with an exceptionally good swing.

The boy crashed immediately. He looked like he pushed himself to and past the limit a fair deal. I walked over to him and gave him a big smile. I'm just so gosh darn proud of this kid!

"Good work Copper. Let's call it a night. You kind of look like you've been through heck."

He didn't say anything back, but I think he appreciated the humor. I carried him inside and tucked him in. He seemed far too tired to do anything else, and that includes eat. I'm sure he'll be plenty hungry in the morning, but right now this is probably for the best. Copper let out a single yawn before his eyelids grew heavy and he slipped into unconsciousness.

It was pretty late at this point, and Applejack was the only one not home. Scootaloo was in her room up until I brought in Copper. She seemed to avoid my eyes for whatever reason, but I didn't pursue it. I offered her dinner, but apparently she wasn't hungry. Hmmm...I'm getting an awful feeling about things. I hope I'm just overreacting here.

Anyways, I get comfy on the couch after Scootaloo went to bed. It's my turn to be the one waiting on my love for a change. I'm thinking I'll give her a hard time when she gets home. It'll be fun to be on that end of the line for another change. Applejack arrived home about thirty after ten, and she seemed to be in a fantastic mood.

"Hey there hot stuff! You kept me waiting so gosh darn long. How are you going to make it up to

me?"

She just smiled at me and jumped into my lap. It didn't take her two seconds to start kissing me like we were home alone. I almost started to panic, but...I'll just let it slide this time. Not a single sound could be heard in the house. It was just me, and a very loving Applejack as we kissed like we hadn't for a long time now. I'm not sure what has come over her, but so long as we aren't caught...it will never be a bad thing. We kept this up for nearly an hour, and I was to the point of bursting from my cravings for her. It couldn't happen though, and I started entertaining thoughts of a freezing shower. Applejack...could tell what was happening long ago, but not once did she seem to be perturbed by it. Which actually started to make me concerned again...what DID happen today!? I broke the kiss for a moment to talk with her, but one look from those dreamy eyes of hers...and I just thought buck it. I pulled her back in which got a soft moan out of her.

This continued well into the night. Applejack ended up being the one to stop things, and I'm honestly glad she did. That shower was calling my name in a dozen different languages at this point!

"Ah'm lookin forward ta tomorrow night Coal. Ah'll see ya in bed after ya take care of...that."

"You. Tease. I love you so much."

"Ah know it."

* * * *

Dash spent the entire day being waited on to the point of extreme irritation. She kept her cool and put up with every increasingly weird thing Pine would do. At one point he began enveloping her in a "healing" aura. Dash felt it to be unusually invading and insisted he stop. Once again he complied without a single look of annoyance. It seemed he would enjoy whatever Dash threw his way.

Near the end of the day she felt the need to move around some. Her body was still very sore, but she felt immensely better. Every pony she passed had that same friendly, but in a very unusual way demeanor about them. Each seemed to move in an unspoken orderly fashion. As if they each knew exactly what they were supposed to do before it needed doing. How did they know that Dash was in need of their help anyway? There is no reason to be that close to the neighboring farm without cause. Dash pondered these thoughts up until she accidentally bumped into that same filly she saw earlier.

She was a blindingly bright white unicorn with a mane that seemed to be an endlessly deep red. Her eyes were the same color, and Dash felt they could peer straight through her.

"S-sorry about that. I'm Rainbow Dash, what's your name?"

The filly just stood there for a moment, but eventually spoke with a soft bow. "I'm Crimson Snow. It is very nice to meet you Ms. Dash."

"L-likewise."

"I should be returning to my duties now. Please excuse me."

"O-of course!"

Dash immediately stepped aside and Crimson went about her duties. Dash watched her as she would levitate large quantities of snow out of the farm with incredible ease. Dash marveled out how expertly Crimson went about her magic. Eventually she had to force herself to stop watching. The situation as a whole started to put a bad taste in her mouth. Everything here felt too organized...too perfect. Even if every pony here was a skillful unicorn...how were they this much better off than Onyx's farm? They had some unicorns, but they were more the norm.

Dash spent the rest of the day exploring the farm without so much as a single pony ever stopping to bother her. They would each smile with a tilt of their head, but nothing more. When it came time for sleep; Dash was feeling way past disturbed. The farm went from being busy with several ponies, to silent and still in a matter of no more than five minutes.

Pine seemingly came out of nowhere to escort Dash back to her room. He was his usual perky self with plenty of compliments and praise that Dash felt she hadn't rightfully done anything to receive.

Dash didn't see it as she was being led by Pine; but from the shadows of the farmhouse corridors, there were a pair of crimson eyes watching her.

Chapter 128: This isn't goodbye.

This was looking like a bright morning for Dash. She awoke with little discomfort to be found in her wings and body, so she felt it was past time to get to work taking care of the snow the right way. She was already days behind schedule, and she was ready to get out of this bizarre town.

Dash rose from bed and made her way outside through the window. It was still somewhat dark out, as the sun wasn't high enough in the sky to shine some light through the layer of clouds looming overhead. With a quick beat of her wings, Dash flew upwards and stopped right below the clouds. She would need to melt the snow in each individual farm before the town could be handled. This would require maintaining the right position of the clouds over the town, so she would be moving them slowly with the sun. This was done in order to prevent flooding. Too much melting too soon would drown all the crops that couldn't handle that much moisture.

It was going to be an annoying job to say the least, but it gave her the perfect excuse to get away from that farm for a while. She could lie atop the clouds and enjoy the peace and warmth the sun offered, but at the same time she couldn't find rest in it. There were too many concerns and unknowns for Dash to lie around. She had already gotten to know the northeastern and northwestern farms. As she recalled, the southeastern farm was home to the oldest pony in town. Granted, this pony was roughly eighteen years of age.

After cutting out a large circle of cloud to remain, Dash quickly got to work breaking up all the other clouds nearby. Some she merely moved outside of the town limits in case they were needed to replace the cloud being kept over the town if it began to dissipate.

The whole job took no more than thirty minutes for her, and now she had a few hours to kill before it would be time to move the cloud with the sun. Dash could see ponies of all farms coming outside earlier than usual to bask in the warm glow of the sun. Even the unusual ponies of the northwestern farm came out and for once showed some personality and life. This eased Dash's discomfort somewhat, but she still wanted to get a better idea of things. It was past time she visited the other farms in her opinion.

The first stop was the southeastern farm, where every pony wore a yellow vest. Dash was looking for the farm head, who ended up being easy to spot: a tall, very regal-looking light purple mare with a rich blue mane that came down a mere four inches above the ground. In Dash's mind this had to be the pony in charge. She flew down to her and extended her hoof in greeting.

"Hey! I'm Rainbow Dash, and I'm just wanting to figure out what the situation is around here at all the farms. Are you the pony in charge of this farm?"

The mare smiled softly, and spoke in a pleasant but somehow cold voice. "I am. My name is Lavender. Thank you for clearing the skies, Ms. Dash. I'm sorry that your stay has been less than pleasant."

Dash was slightly surprised by this. "How...do you know that?"

"It is obvious, my dear. Your mane and coat are in complete disarray while your form suggests you would be a very attractive mare when cleaned up. I was informed of which farm you landed in after your initial clearing of the storm, and I'm sure Onyx gave you no end of trouble."

"You can say that again. Do you have any idea why things are like this? I've never been more weirded out by a town before!"

Lavender looked up and away from Dash, and she stared off into space as she spoke. "There really isn't much to say. I can tell you when the quality of life here started to plummet, but I can't tell you what has made the other farms behave the way they do."

"Anything would make me feel better. I don't want to just assume all the ponies I've met are just creepy for no reason..."

Lavender chuckled, her gaze returning to Dash. "Come inside and let me get you cleaned up first. I'll be more than willing to enlighten you once you're done."

Dash wasn't one for going out of her way to look nice, but at the same time getting clean would probably make her feel better. With a somewhat reluctant nod, Lavender led her into the largest farm house yet. It was three stories tall, in contrast to the two stories of the other farm houses. The entire exterior looked to be kept in immaculate condition, and the interior was much the same. The front door led into a huge living area with dozens of other ponies. Once again Dash noticed things that made this farm unusual too. Nearly 95% of the residents here were female. She didn't say anything, but her mind started spouting off questions at light speeds.

Why did each farm so far have at least one clear abnormality? The first farm had been unusually cruel and brutal. The second farm had been unusually calm and collected, with every resident being a unicorn. And this farm was almost entirely female. Comparatively, this farm was the most normal, but only time would tell if there was more to be concerned about.

* * * *

"Are you sure this is all you want to do today, Sweetie Belle?"

Rarity had a few orders she needed doing, and Sweetie Belle insisted this was how she wanted to spend the day: finally getting to help her big sister for the first and last time in a while.

"It is. I'm just not very good with goodbyes. I would probably start crying...."

They were inside the sewing room, Rarity at the sewing machine, and Sweetie Belle was behind her, gathering materials as requested. Rarity looked back at her little sister with a heavy heart. This wasn't the first time she'd had to leave for a while. In fact, this was the longest stretch of time that Sweetie Belle had stayed with her. That was probably what made saying goodbye that much harder this time around. Rarity stopped working for a moment to hug her sister and try to encourage her.

"You know Sweetie Belle, this may not be so bad."

This made her look up at Rarity with a look of hurt and confusion. "Why would you say that?"

"Don't get me wrong here, darling. I just mean you'll make plenty of wonderful new memories in Canterlot, and maybe things won't be too hard. It hurts now, but it'll get easier. I'll make sure that little colt friend of yours stays in contact with you. You're such a pretty young mare now. I'm sure

you'll turn heads of all the other colts in Canterlot."

This made Sweetie Belle chuckle slightly. Even though the thought was flattering, it didn't really appeal to her. "Heh...I'd be happy just turning one head...."

"Oh Sweetie Belle...you've got it bad, don't you?"

"Heheh, yeah."

Rarity both loved and hated her little sister's first encounter with romance. First crushes usually end horribly, and that is a stepping stone that leads to personal growth. In Sweetie Belle's case, it turned out to be something special. It wouldn't have grown so big had it not been for "the incident," but it is what it is. Rarity honestly wanted her sister to move on from this love, if only so her heart would hurt less, but she didn't entertain thoughts of it happening anytime soon.

"We've never really talked about why you're so fond of Copper, Sweetie Belle. Why don't you fill me in while we work?"

"I-I'm not sure I can talk about that. It's...kind of embarrassing."

"Surely if you could talk about it with any pony, it would be your big sister. I love you Sweetie Belle, and I'd like to know what makes him so special. Of course if you really don't want to talk about it, I won't force you. You've just got your big sister curious is all."

Sweetie Belle shuffled nervously for a moment, but eventually gave in. Maybe talking about it would help some. "Well...it started with my kind of feeling sorry for him...."

* * * *

"What do you want to do today, Scootaloo?"

"I'm not sure. We could always practice flying more."

"Sounds fine to me!"

Cloudy and Scootaloo met up at the edge of town a few minutes ago. Things were slightly awkward as the two made their way through town. Thoughts of yesterday's "moment" kept replaying in their minds. Surprisingly enough, Cloudy was more embarrassed about it than Scootaloo was.

They were making their way back to same park when they spotted Mint walking towards them. He was accompanied by Furnace who had a bruise on his left cheek. After Coal helped out Mint's mother, Mint cooled off and Cloudy started enjoying his company again. Now they were

close to the friendship they once had.

Scotaloo didn't take too kindly to Mint for obvious reasons, even if he wasn't as big of a jerk anymore. She didn't say anything, though. The two groups merged momentarily, and Cloudy struck up a conversation.

"Hey guys. What happened to you, Furnace?"

He didn't seem to eager to talk about it in front of Scotaloo, but after a nudge from Mint he spoke up.

"I messed up my dad's workplace by accident. He got angry and gave me a quick jab. It didn't hurt that much, and that was all he did. It just looks really bad."

"Yikes! Sorry to hear that." Cloudy felt a little bad asking about it now, but Mint didn't seem to take note of it. Instead he just turned to Scotaloo and spoke.

"So anyway, Scotaloo...how is that brother of yours?"

She was surprised that Mint even took an interest, but the sooner this talk was over, the sooner she could spend some time with Cloudy.

"He's doing fine. Nothing really worth mentioning..." She thought about the Sasha incident, and felt a little bad about lying.

Mint shrugged at this and turned to Cloudy. "So I hear you're wanting to join the Royal Guard Training Academy. When is that going to happen?"

Scotaloo immediately faced Cloudy with a look of befuddlement. He was laughing nervously, but stopped to answer Mint.

"It isn't going to happen for a while, but it's really my dad who is wanting me to join. It'll be good for me though, so I'm not arguing about it."

"Good way to think about things I guess. I'll let you two get back to your little date. See ya."

With that Mint and Furnace walked around Cloudy and made their way down the streets of Ponyville. Cloudy was watching them up until Scotaloo jabbed him in the shoulder.

"Ow!"

"So when were you going to tell me about that?"

"S-sorry...I just didn't want to talk about it since it won't be happening for a while."

Scotaloo let out a heavy sigh but quickly gave Cloudy a peck on his cheek. "Let's not worry about it then. I'd like today to be fun if it's all the same to you."

Cloudy beamed at this and responded with a gentle nod.

* * * *

Every pony left home a little while ago. I'm kind of moping around a bit. At least I was for about an hour; now I'm back outside working on another tree. It helps take my mind off things, and once again I woke up feeling physically sound. My stupid emotions keep bugging me, though. I'm wanting to do something special for Sweetie Belle tonight, but what can I do? I'll be breaking curfew and putting myself in a bad situation if I get caught. It'll be worth it if I can see Sweetie Belle one more time before she leaves. It isn't like I'll have much to do after that. Well...maybe I should just focus on making myself a better pony while she is gone so that I can impress her when she comes back. I wonder what dad is going to have me do with these trees once they are all cut down. Something is telling me that THIS is the easy part.

* * * *

Applejack and Applebloom met at the farm that morning, and went into town to enjoy breakfast at one of the local spots. After enjoying their meal, they passed the local theater, and Applebloom saw a movie poster that caught her attention.

The film was about a young pony born with three legs, and the story was about the pony overcomes his limitation by developing a new kind of magic. It was based on the true life story of one of the most notable unicorns born in the past hundred years. Applejack remembered Twilight going on and on about it at one point, but she liked the story well enough.

The two got their snacks and sat in the front row. This was more Applebloom's idea, but Applejack was just happy that she was having a good time. They enjoyed the movie thoroughly, but one point in particular got a lot of emotion out of Applejack. It was the scene where the protagonist was failing time and time again with his magic but never once stopped. Even after his own magic mangled him at one point, he wouldn't quit. It made her think about the incident with Copper and Sweetie Belle.

By the end of the movie there was hardly a dry eye in the audience. The protagonist finally discovered how to restore entire limbs on ponies, but it took his entire life to do it. He passed before ever getting to perform it on himself. The worst part of the whole story was that many important details of his research died with him. There was an entire lab of unicorns trying to figure out how he came up with the method to that day. Some thought he lied about it, and he merely made up discovering such a thing. There was however a single pony that received the

treatment, and it was through her testimony that his accomplishments were made known.

Applejack didn't expect to enjoy this as much as she did, and Applebloom was tearing up for nearly ten minutes after. They spent the rest of the day walking about town doing some window shopping. By the end of the day, Applebloom was feeling exceptionally loved and enjoyed every second she spent with her sister.

* * * *

I got up and about fairly early today. I wanted to get at least Fluttershy's gift handled before it came time for my date with Applejack tonight. It's at times like these I'm thankful my employers pay me in cash. Granted, I'm not sure if "cash" is the right word for it. Anyway, after making my way to Fluttershy's, I saw her sitting in her cottage enjoying a warm drink. I felt a little bad for imposing, but I was sure she'd appreciate it in the end.

After a couple of knocks, she was at the door.

"Oh, hello Coal. What you brings you by today?"

...I went blank. For whatever reason, I hadn't thought about how I was going to get myself into Fluttershy's house to see if any of her animal homes needed replacing. You know what...forget beating around the bush. I'm just going to be honest!

"I'm wanting to know if any of your animals need new housing. If so, I'd like to get you new ones for Hearth's Warming."

Fluttershy started acting...well...shy at this, but she was smiling. "Y-you don't need to do that for me. Knowing that you care enough to think of me makes me very happy."

"I don't need to, no, but I want to. We hardly see each other, and that just isn't right. I consider you to be as much of a friend as I do any pony. So if you'll let me, I'd like to do this for you."

This got me the most adorable smile I've ever seen on a grown mare. Her nose scrunched up a little, and her cheeks turned a little red, but the smile made it perfect. I could take a picture of this and show it to the hardest man Earth had to offer, and I guarantee you his heart would melt.

Moments later Fluttershy gave in and showed me a few things that were in need of replacing. I jotted them down on a little notepad I brought with me and sat down with Fluttershy for a while. We hadn't really talked one-on-one at all since I'd arrived here, unless the time I ran into her after my emotional breakdown counts. On top of being shy, she is very modest. She has actually been featured in a country wide magazine about animal care for her tips and advice on the subject. Apparently Celestia introduced her to the editor of the magazine after Fluttershy took care of Philomena a while back.

I was of course all shades of impressed with her, but each compliment only made her resemble Copper's coat more. It was honestly starting to amuse me at how she gets like this. I did stop a little later, however, and we parted ways after that.

My next stop was getting these new homes commissioned!

* * * *

"There we are. Don't you feel better now Ms. Dash?"

"I-I guess, but was all that really fancy looking soaps and stuff really necessary? And I could have bathed myself just fine. You didn't need to send in those other ponies..."

Once again, Dash was being treated unusually well in this farm. It honestly didn't feel much like a farm at all. The farmhouse interior was very modern-looking and had class you wouldn't expect to see in such a place. There was just as much land being worked, but all the workers seemed to be incredibly well-groomed. Dash was being led around by Lavender, but as she was being shown around...another disturbing trend kept coming up. The male ponies seemed to be at the beck and call of the female residents. There were only five male ponies that Dash saw, and each one looked...a little off. They weren't nearly as neat or tidy as every pony else, and they seemed almost to be malnourished. It got to be too much, and she just had to ask.

"Why do those male ponies over there look so...unhealthy?"

Lavender's ear fluttered, but she did nothing else physically to acknowledge Dash. Instead she continued to show her around, but did respond verbally.

"They are...assistants. They maintain the morale around here, and sometimes they tend to get a bit...unkempt."

"So...they're just doing their jobs?"

"Precisely; they get cleaned up at the end of the day to prepare for the next."

"Ok then...."

Dash didn't trust one word out of this mare's mouth. She looked back to see one unlucky stallion being led away by a very unhappy looking mare. He was led into a room, and for a split second she locked eyes with him. His eyes looked a lot like how Copper's used to. No light, only emptiness.

* * * *

Scotaloo and Cloudy once again went about their flight techniques for most of the afternoon. With the added incentive of not wanting to hold Cloudy back any, Scotaloo pushed herself to stay airborne for as long as possible. There wasn't a lot of improvement in Cloudy's control by the end of the day, but Scotaloo did manage to improve her time to roughly eight minutes.

They were now sitting down leaning against each other exhausted.

"You're incredible Scotaloo. I can't believe how much better you're getting so quickly. It took me forever to stay off the ground that long."

"Thanks, but I won't be happy about it until I can make Copper eat some dust."

"Heh, does he give you a hard time about being able to fly?"

"Not at all. I just get annoyed by it sometimes still. I hope that doesn't make me a bad sister..."

"I don't think so. Say...Scotaloo...can...I kiss you again?"

"...Yeah."

* * * *

"That is amazing! I had no idea you worked like that!"

I was talking with the "wood smith," as I call him. When Twilight bought me that walking stick a long while ago, I threw out the question about who the carpenter was. She didn't think that was the right word for him, and now I know why! He doesn't carve the wood, he is a unicorn; he literally shapes the wood with his magic. There are no tools involved! He just shapes them into whatever is requested.

He goes by Rick...I asked but he wouldn't tell me why! Not a big deal I guess, but that is the most normal name I've heard since I've been here! I have to know the story behind it! Oh well...he is a beige pony with dark brown mane. His appearance isn't all that striking, but his cutie mark is rather interesting. It is a wooden "carving" of a pony with what appears to be sparks coming off it. I assume it represents how he can create with magic, and it looks pretty dang cool!

Anyway, that brings me back to why I call him a "wood smith". It isn't right considering he doesn't smith anything, but "carpenter" doesn't do it for me, either. So take what you can get I guess.

"It's actually pretty common in Equestria. Where are you from again?"

"A completely different plane of existence. I lived on a planet called Earth, but that doesn't compare when you know I've come across worlds to be here."

"I'd say! You'll have to tell me more about it sometime. Anyway, I'll have your order ready for you by the Wednesday. It'll come up to 115 bits."

"Sounds good Rick! I'll see you then!"

I WILL NOT STOP WONDERING ABOUT HIS NAME! How did a name that normal come to be!? I wonder if he is just screwing with me...maybe. Oh well...what time is it anyway? I made my way to the town square where there was a decorative looking clock atop the bank. It was only ten after four!? There is time for something else I'm sure! *snap* Got it! I'll fix up Applebloom's clubhouse! Hardware store here I come!

* * * *

Slowly, every pony started returning home. First was Scootaloo who wore a huge grin for whatever reason.

"What has you in such a good mood, sis?"

"Oh nothing." She trotted upstairs humming a soft tune to herself. I guess she had a good day!

Dad was the next to come home, and he looked worn out! There was paint on him in various places, and he had taken his coat off. It is freezing outside, and he took it off!?

"Are you alright, dad?"

"Huh? Oh I'm fine buddy. I just had some work that needed doing. I'm going to be taking AJ out tonight, so I'm trusting you to behave while we're gone. Can I count on you?"

BUCK! I'm now going to be feeling guilty as buck when going to see Sweetie Belle tonight! I...I have to ask him. I don't want to be a liar!

"Well, dad...I...want to ask you a favor..."

He cracked his neck and took a seat on the couch. "Lay it on me."

"You see...Sweetie Belle is going to live with her parents, and she leaves tomorrow. Can...I go visit her one last time tonight?"

The face dad made scared me to death. His eyes got huge and moments later he jumped up

and put his hands on my shoulders. "Are you alright?" He seemed so incredibly serious. It was really unnerving.

"Y-yeah, dad. I'm plenty sad, and I'm wanting to have at least one more good memory before she leaves. M-may I?"

Dad let go of me and leaned back. He put his hands on his face and let out several sighs. Without looking at me he spoke. "Don't do anything stupid, and have a nice time, Copper."

"R-really!?"

"Yeah. I'm not such a hard ass yet that I don't know when some rules deserve to be broken. Thank you for asking me, Copper. You're really acting more and more grown up every day."

"Th-thanks, dad!"

I've said this before and I'll say it again. Best family ever!

* * * *

Rarity and Sweetie Belle spent the rest of the day working together. Sweetie Belle even managed to use magic for the assistance during most of it. Near the end she got pretty worn out, and had to do things manually.

Rarity loved hearing about how Sweetie Belle came to have the feelings she does now. It did reassure Rarity about how serious this was though. It couldn't rightly be called a crush at this point, and this made her sympathize with Sweetie Belle all the more.

As the sun went down and Rarity finished up her work, she once again asked Sweetie Belle if she was Ok with leaving like this.

"Do you really not want to say goodbye to every pony?"

"I...just can't do it face to face. Saying goodbye to Copper last night hurt more than anything."

"Well...would you like to write them goodbye letters? It will make them feel more missed than no goodbye at all."

"That...sounds like a good idea. Thanks, Rarity."

The two sisters sat down at the table downstairs and spent the next hour writing up goodbye letters. Sweetie Belle wrote three. One for Applebloom and Scootaloo personally, and an overall goodbye letter to every pony else.

"Is there a reason you aren't writing one for Copper?"

Sweetie Belle was thinking about having the real goodbye tonight, but couldn't tell Rarity about that. She came up with the next best idea though. "We already had our goodbye. Writing a letter after that just seems funny."

Rarity didn't buy it. Sweetie Belle gave it away when she didn't tell the whole truth. Rarity knew this was a hard time for her dear sister, so she decided to forgive whatever was going to happen just this once without giving her trouble.

"Besides Rarity...this isn't goodbye. You only say goodbye when you aren't going to see each other again. I'm not going to forget him, and I know he won't forget me either."

A single tear formed in Rarity's eye, and she nuzzled her sister for her own comfort. "You're so grown-up. When did my little sister become not so little?"

"I don't know, but...thanks. I really enjoyed living with you. You're the best sister ever."

The tears started coming down harder. "You too, Sweetie Belle. You too..."

Chapter 129: A night for two.

Author's notes: It has been 26 chapters, so time for another intimate moment! It worked out really well this time around, because it doesn't come til the very end. So it should make things easy for anyone who doesn't want to read it. I hope everyone enjoys this chapter either way!

Dad took a really long shower tonight and got pretty cleaned up. Heh, it is still kind of gross thinking about my parents going on a date. He didn't call it that, but I could tell.

I was again having a hard time thinking of something special I could do for Sweetie Belle, but thankfully dad went ahead and paid me for getting that tree chopped down. So, I have a little something to work with — not that it really matters. She probably won't be willing to leave the boutique, but that's probably for the best. I wouldn't want to get her in any trouble.

Dad relaxed on the couch waiting for AJ, and he ended up not having to wait long. I could hear them talking from upstairs, and they both sounded like they were excited. Occasionally I feel sorry for them. They don't get to be as close as they would like while Scootaloo and I are here. Ewww...no mental images, thanks! Still, I hope this is a fun night for them!

About twenty minutes after AJ got home, dad walked up to my room to let me know that they were heading out.

"Now, Copper...remember what I said about not doing anything stupid. AJ and I will be out and about I'm sure, so try not to bring any attention to yourself."

"Attention to myself? How would I do that?"

"Heh, I'm sure you could manage. I hope you get the memory you deserve, buddy, good luck to ya."

"Th-thanks, dad..."

I watched dad and AJ walk down the road to Ponyville for a few minutes. They were clearly going to have a fun night. I hope I will too.

* * * *

"The romantic in me wants to be all over the top for you, but I know that isn't your...barrel of apples."

"Har har, yer ah regular comedian, Coal."

"Heh, so I've been told."

Applejack and I were walking down the road to Ponyville, and I was having a hard time coming up with something she would like. She is so reserved, it makes potential spots come across as a bit...too much for her.

"Yer stressin out about this, ain't ya?"

"...At this point you probably don't even have to ask questions like that anymore. You know me to a T."

"That Ah do. How about we start the night off with ah drink. It was awful fun the last time we did it."

Oh boy! Here we go! I didn't say anything back; instead, I just put a hand on the side of her head and rubbed her a bit. She cuddled up into my leg as we walked. It made things a little awkward, but I didn't care. I was honestly a tad concerned about where this might go. When Applejack becomes my "sweet southern drunken angel," she passes out. Granted, we've only gone drinking once before, and I remember that being a rather dark time. Hopefully, she won't feel the need to get...well...hammered tonight. Wait...innuendo...mixed feelings.

We made our way to that same nasty-as-hell bar, but I was mentally prepared for it this time. Surprisingly, it was...actually rather nice this time around. We walked inside, and yeah it was a

bar, but...it didn't reek of all the unpleasant...stuff like it did the first time. I didn't say anything about it, though. I just mentally jotted down the moment as something to thank the world for later.

Applejack and I took the same seats we had before, and the bartender came up giving us a bit of a hard time.

"Well, long time no see! That must have been some kind of a hangover there, AJ, if it kept you away for so long!"

He's on a nickname basis with AJ? I raised an eyebrow at her, but she didn't notice.

"Easy there, Whiskey. Ah've got more on mah plate than Ah used ta. Wouldn't be right fer me ta' come around as much."

Applejack used to come around here frequently? Hmm...methinks some teasing is in her future.

"I take Coal here keeps you busy then!"

"Huh? How do...right. Equestria's only human...I keep forgetting sometimes...."

Whiskey just laughed at me. "Now how can you forget something like that!? I would think towering over every other resident would be a constant reminder!"

I like this guy; he is pretty funny. "Well, you get used to certain things, I guess. Now, I'm a little curious about something. Surely your parents didn't name you Whiskey. How did you come to have that name?"

"Don't you know? Often times ponies will change their names when they get their cutie marks." He turned and showed me his. It was an empty beer glass being filled from a tap. "When mine showed up, being called Sandy didn't really do it for me anymore."

"I guess being called Sandy Beer wasn't an option either."

This got a good laugh out of him, and he asked us what we would like.

"Ah'm not wantin ta' really get drunk tonight. Ah'll just take somethin light."

Thank god! This is only the second date we've really ever been on. If it ended like the last one...how would I explain to the kids as to why Applejack is spouting off obscenities and telling me to get frisky? Well...she only told me to "kizz" her last time, so it probably wouldn't be that bad.

"I'll take the same." Not that it really mattered what I got. Drinking this stuff would never get me drunk. Well...I suppose if I drank several dozen, maybe, but that would be overkill.

Whiskey smiled at us and stepped away, looking like he was coming up with an idea or two. Should I be concerned about that? Applejack started leaning on me, and I put an arm around her. I heard some jeering from behind, but I didn't care. I've got the most attractive earth pony under my arm; how could they possibly make that a bad thing?

"Thanks fer bringin me out tonight Coal. Ah know it just started, but Ah'm havin ah mighty fine time."

"Me too, AJ. I'd love to be able to do this more often."

"Then why don't we? It isn't like Scootaloo n' Copper are babies n' need constant attention. Hmm...but Ah'm not sure if it would be all that responsible of us...."

We definitely are parents now. Even when we have the night to ourselves, the squirts are going to be mentioned sooner or later. Every parent I ever talked with on Earth made it seem like a bad thing, but...in all honesty, it's just one more thing Applejack and I share — and I love it.

"I'm thinking we could do this at least every other week. I'd take you out as often as you wanted if I could, but I know what you mean about the kids. I'm not sure how Scootaloo would react to it...if she would at all."

"Heh, Ah'm more thinkin of Copper in this. That boy doesn't need any ideas about Sweetie Belle."

Yikes! Applejack doesn't know about what's happening with that situation. I better not say anything tonight, though. I don't want to sour her mood or anything.

"That reminds me of something an older friend of mine back on Earth said to me once. Boys tend to be mama's boys, and girls are daddy's little girls. I guess we are proving that tonight!"

She giggled some, and that was when Whiskey brought us our...drinks? There were three glasses: one was filled with a clear liquid, another was filled with a bluish liquid, and the last one was empty. Applejack and I looked at him, a little confused. He plucked out a couple of straws and put them in the empty glass.

"Mix the two. and thank me later!"

...What is this guy planning...there is a red light flashing in the back of my mind with this. Should we even....

"Thank ya Whiskey! Yer makin me all curious about this!" Applejack nudged me and gave me a quick wink. "Let's do this, Coal!"

HA! I love this girl! "Heh, you got it, AJ!"

She took the clear liquid glass in both hooves and slowly poured it into the empty one as I poured in the bluish liquid. As the two liquids combined, they let off this...pinkish fume that made my mind a little fuzzy. Applejack seemed to have the same reaction. Once they were mixed together, we each took a straw and drank it down. It was a very sweet drink, but I enjoyed it.

Applejack's cheeks started getting pink, and she smiled as she drank the mix. Her eyes were closed, so she didn't see how much I was admiring her adorableness. Whiskey did, and he stifled a chuckle as he trotted off. Now my only concern is...why did he tell us to thank him later?

* * * *

After giving AJ and dad a head start of several minutes, I took off for Sweetie Belle. I couldn't come up with a single special thing to do for her, but hopefully she'd know what she wanted.

It wasn't all that cold tonight. I say that, but I think it is, because the wind isn't really blowing. It's just the perfect kind of...well...snuggling weather. I'm trying to keep my spirits up by thinking about how nice tonight will be, but I know that, come morning, my mood is going to crash. Sweetie Belle didn't tell me what time she was leaving, but I'll try to wake up early so I can wave her off.

Upon arriving at the boutique, I noticed that Sweetie Belle had left her window open for me. I wore a big smile as I flew from underneath it and saw her waiting for me on her bed.

"H-hey Sweetie Belle. Hope I didn't keep you waiting too long..."

"Not really. Now hurry up and get in here. We can't really enjoy each other if you're outside."

This made me smile! I landed on her bed and instantly noticed how nice it smelled in her room. She closed the window, and that made the smell all the more noticeable. Sweetie Belle always kind of smelled like blankets for some reason, but her room smelled like an assortment of rather girly things. I liked it though.

I think we were both a little embarrassed to be doing this. Dad may have given me permission, but it just felt funny being over so late. We scooted close and I put my wing around her. For the longest time we just nuzzled each other silently. I don't think we've ever been this affectionate for so long. It was so nice, and it slowly made the hurt of reality fade away.

At one point we both heard Rarity walk past her room, and we froze. She would definitely freak

out if she were to see us. Thankfully, she didn't open the door, and Sweetie Belle almost immediately went back to rubbing the top of her nose against my cheek. I loved everything about her, but occasionally her horn would stab me a bit. I didn't say anything, but it would take me out of the moment.

We both lost track of time until we heard the midnight chime of the clock in her bedroom. I think Sweetie Belle started considering how little time we had left, and she started to tear up a little. I lifted her face with the end of my wing and worked up my courage. At first I dried her eyes with my nose, and that made her smile a little, but it wasn't enough. I took a deep breath and readied myself, and then I kissed her. It didn't take her but a second to kiss me back. It was such a wonderful feeling, but in the back of my mind I never forgot that this was probably the last time we could do this for a long while.

A single tear formed, and I couldn't stop it from sliding down my cheek. It rolled right onto Sweetie Belle, and she started to cry silently too. We didn't stop, but it made this a very...sad kind of happy. This continued for I don't know how long, but I've never before been so happy and so sad at the same time. My eyelids started to get heavy, and I fought against it with every ounce of willpower I had.

We did eventually stop, and Sweetie Belle twiddled her hooves a bit looking unsure. "Copper...there is a picture booth near the arcade; would you be willing to fly us there? I'd...like to have something more to remember you by...."

I immediately hugged her tight from how happy that made me. "That...sounds perfect."

* * * *

Applejack looked like she has a pleasant buzz going on after leaving the bar. We had stayed for about half an hour when our stomachs started a-rumbling, and we knew it was time for the next stop.

I had to keep a hand on Applejack because she kept stumbling over herself. "Should I be carrying you? I'm surprised my strong farmer gal can't handle her alcohol."

"Ahhh shaddup! Ya ain't gettin any if ya keep pickin on me!"

I laughed. "You are a hoot! Who do I have to thank for making you so stinking cute!?"

She didn't say anything, but she gave me a big smile. We stopped at a park bench, and I just petted her for a while. I wasn't sure where we were going to stop next, but bringing in a drunk Applejack didn't sound like a good idea. It was Sunday night, and a lot of ponies had to work in the morning, so we were mostly alone. There were a few other couples here and there, and they would each stop momentarily and giggle at us. There was no doubt the entire town now knew

that Applejack and I were an item. It wasn't a bad thing, of course, but I knew how Applejack liked to keep our business private. Well...she used to. We hadn't really talked about it too much, so maybe she was more open to it now. I certainly hoped so, at least!

After about another thirty minutes passed, Applejack was looking to be about normal. Her cheeks were still a little flushed, and she was being awfully cuddly. Awful isn't the right word — she was being amazingly cuddly! She didn't want to eat at a fancy restaurant much how I knew she wouldn't. Besides, I was pretty sure all of them were closed at this hour. There was an interesting-looking place still open, and, sure enough, it was more of a bar than anything. They did serve food, though, so we took a booth and got comfortable again. I expected us to sit across from each other, but Applejack scooted in right next to me after I took a seat. I mentioned she was being cuddly...but dang! She got right under my arm and rubbed my shoulder with the back of her head.

The waitress chuckled at the sight when she came up, and I just blushed a bit, scratching my chin. Applejack did stop, but it seemed to be reluctant. What has gotten into this girl? I'm not complaining, but...well...I guess I should just shut up about it, then.

We ordered our food, and Applejack went right back to making me doubt my self-control. I've never been much for affection in...public places. I looked around and saw that every other pony in here was with some pony else. They were all clearly being rather lovey, but my girl took the grand prize for that!

"Heh, are you feeling alright there, love?"

"Ah'm feelin great. Ah almost can't believe how nice this is. Yer gonna have ta' take me out more often at this rate."

"Well, I suppose I could be convinced." She laughed a bit after rubbing me some. This was turning out to be just the thing I needed. I couldn't remember the last time I had felt so relaxed. I could only hope this night wasn't ending anytime soon.

* * * *

It was a pretty quiet flight over Ponyville. Sweetie Belle was holding onto me really tight, and I just loved it. I took my time, wanting to make this last as long as possible, but eventually our destination came into view. The photo booth was pretty simple, but it would do the job. We would just climb in and take a seat, I would pop in a bit, and it would take a few pictures shortly after the money exchange. Thankfully, there was a cover over the entrance, so it was private.

We didn't turn it on right away. After that little flight, I was feeling pretty awake again, and Sweetie Belle looked wide awake. We just kind of sat there for a moment, looking at our reflection in the screen. It felt a little funny, but she didn't seem to mind.

With a small sigh, I turned to Sweetie Belle and asked if she was ready. Her reply was a gentle nod, and she scooted closer. It'll take three pictures. There is a ten second gap between each one, and it starts fifteen seconds after I put in the bit. I already knew what I wanted those pictures to be.

I slid in the bit, and the countdown started. I pulled Sweetie Belle in all the way and rested my head on hers. She rested her head on my shoulder, and moments later the flash went off. After that, I turned to the side and put my hooves around her, and she did the same. The flash went off, and with only ten seconds left, it was time to get ready for my favorite picture. I broke the hug and tilted Sweetie Belle's face up. We looked at each other for a moment, but we closed our eyes as I kissed her; the light flashed.

* * * *

It was pretty late by the time we finished eating. We took our time and just enjoyed the moment. It was well past midnight at this point, but I wasn't sure how well past.

"Should we be getting home you think?"

"Not yet; ya don't have work tomorrow, and Ah want ta enjoy this fer as long as possible."

I was wearing Applejack's hat. She had been tired of it getting in the way of our cuddling. She let down her mane, and I must say she looked so damn beautiful. Her cheeks still as rosy as can be, and her mane lightly flowing behind her as we walked...just gorgeous.

We made our way up to a secluded spot a ways outside of Ponyville. It offered a perfect view of the night sky. There was a tree out there, and we took a seat against it. Well, I took a seat against it. Applejack crawled up my chest, so she was leaning against me. We both sat there looking up at the sky for what could have been hours for all I know. Applejack was on her back, so I was too busy rubbing her chest with one hand and her hoof with another. I was able to look down and just barely see the side of her face. The moonlight shone against her. I mentally thanked Luna for the gift.

Shortly after that thought, Applejack turned and started kissing my neck. "Ah want ta' end this night properly. Ah hope ya still have some energy left in ya."

"I was just thinking the same thing about you."

I'm feeling too ornery tonight, but Applejack seemed to love the joke. I pulled her up some more, and when I could taste a little of that drink Whiskey gave us on her breath...I think I know why she has been so cuddly tonight.

"You know that drink may be the thing putting you in the mood. I should get the recipe."

"Ah figured, but Ah believe ya'll get me this way more than anythin."

"Can't it be both?"

"Shut up n' kiss me."

* * * *

I was glad I could put in another bit to make doubles of the pictures. They came out perfectly. Sweetie Belle and I stayed there for several more minutes just looking at them together.

"I'm going to miss you so much, Sweetie Belle. I hope you know how special you are to me."

"I know, and you've made it very clear how you feel about me too. If it isn't too much trouble...I hope you'll write to me. I'd like to know how you're doing...."

"Of course I will! Where...where will you be going anyway?"

"To Canterlot...."

"Wait...isn't that the town up in the mountains southeast of here?"

"Y-yeah...."

"Well goodness! I'm sure I could get permission to fly down there on weekends to come see you!"

"Y-you mean it!?"

"I can't promise anything, but I doubt it would take me more than an hour to fly there."

"That...would be so nice."

This was wonderful! I thought she was moving really far away. If I could be responsible around the house, surely dad would say yes! I was going to hate not getting to see her all week, but at least once a week was better than nothing!

The wind outside was starting to pick up now. A single big gust blew through the booth and made us both shiver a bit.

"I should probably get you home, Sweetie Belle..."

"Yeah. Thanks for coming to see me tonight. You made me feel a lot better."

"You too...I love you, Sweetie Belle."

"I love you too, Copper."

* * * *

*** * * * *WARNING! SEX SCENE STARTS HERE! WARNING!* * * * ***

A part of me is thankful I'm resistant to the drinks Ponyville has to offer now. If Applejack is made THIS excited, I'd hate to know how it would affect me if it could!

Applejack was definitely in the mood for this. She would break our kissing for only enough time to throw off another article of my clothing. Her body was incredibly warm as our chests pressed against each other. It was all I could do to not hold her close and be put to sleep by how comfortable she made me feel.

I'm thinking I should be a little bit...concerned with how willing Applejack is to do this outside. Granted we are a ways away from town, and it is at night; but still! I'm the guy who isn't big on "public" affection, and it doesn't get any more affectionate than this! I wasn't going to say anything though. I'd do anything for my love, and if she wants this...then I want this.

Applejack wasn't in the mood for a lot of kissing tonight. With dreamy eyes she turned herself to me, and I didn't need to be told twice. I took her by the flanks, and pulled her up slowly. It seems I'm never going to be able to stop teasing during these times. Applejack was slightly inverted as I brought her up higher. I stopped when she was close enough for me to please her, but I didn't immediately. Instead I would squeeze her flanks a little at a time, and blow on her.

It didn't seem to be bothering her any though. She was letting out soft exhales, and started undoing my pants. Applejack somehow got the button undone, and started stroking me. She wasn't going to tease me even if I did her. It didn't seem right to continually tease her now, so I leaned forward and started gently licking her. I like to take these things somewhat slow, so they tend to last longer. Applejack moaned as she nuzzled my member. The wind was starting to pick

up, and the cold air just made me enjoy the warmth of her body more.

I had been wearing her hat through this, but as I spread Applejack with my tongue, her tail flickered and knocked it off. I laughed as she looked back to see what she hit, and she chuckled some too. I reached down and threw my shirt on it so it wouldn't blow away, and Applejack went back to where she left off. Honestly she was taking things a lot slower than I was. As I was starting to lick her more firmly, and she was still just stroking me. It felt amazing, but I can be a little wanting at times. I somehow heard Applejack open her mouth over the wind, and my hopes skyrocketed. I could feel her breath slowly getting closer and closer, and I started to sweat from excitement. It seemed to take her forever, but when her lips wrapped around the tip; and her tongue started going over the end of it, my gratitude just had to be returned to her.

I leaned forward a little more, and forced my own tongue deeper inside her. She bucked once out of reflex straight past me. It made me laugh mentally, and I tried to make her do it again. I would work my tongue back and forth, up and down looking for the right spot; and I eventually managed to find it. I twirled around it; and would press into it, each time making her squeal into me. She wasn't so much bucking at this point, as her legs were just shot out straight behind me. I rested the end of her near the top of my chest to free up an arm, and I ran it up and down her back.

She thanked me by taking more of me into her mouth, and running her tongue over as much as she could. I'm starting to think that drink did affect me. This feels amazing, but I'm nowhere near close to being done. Applejack was really giving it her all for me. She would pop it out of her mouth and let the cold air sting against me, before going back down on me again. It made it feel all the more incredible and warm. She would force her tongue against it and lick up or down. It increased the friction, which forced my eyes closed from how amazing it felt.

I could feel her quiver each time I stopped for a moment and would return with a broad lick along the outside of her love. It became clear to me that she was on the edge of release as she gripped my head with her thighs. This gave me more incentive to finish her off on a strong note. I brought my free hand underneath her, and started pinching her slightly while continually caressing her with my tongue. It didn't take but thirty seconds for her to clench up and finish. She never stopped fellating me though, so her screams of release were muffled; and the vibrations ran all along me. I had to lean my head back and close my eyes. It felt too good to allow myself to be distracted with any other senses but touch. Her orgasm lasted for several seconds, and she took me out of her mouth shortly after. She was panting and gasping for air, but had a huge smile on.

I licked her a few more times for good measure, and lifted her upright and rested her on her back once again atop me. She had stopped gasping at this point, but her mouth hung open and her breathing was heavy. She reached back with her hoof and rubbed my cheek affectionately as I reached forward and played with her love a little.

"Yer gettin good at this..."

I laughed as my ornery mindset once again came into play. "And I wasn't before? I seem to recall seeing that pleased face of yours many times before..."

"Yer lucky yer cute...Ah love ya, Coal."

"I love you too, AJ."

I reached around her and held her close, and she in turn hugged my arms against herself. Leaning forward some, I started to kiss her ears and work my way down her neck and shoulders. She bit her bottom lip and purred as I did this. We were both wanting more shortly after this, and Applejack started slowly scooting down my body. She leaned upright and positioned my member, and continued to slide down.

The cold air was stinging me relentlessly up to this point; but as soon as I started to feel the warmth of Applejack's love wrap around me, any discomfort I had quickly disappeared. We haven't made love nearly as often as I would like, but that only makes it so much more special when it does finally happen again.

Applejack worked her way down until she had taken in all of what I had, and then turned herself on it so we would be stomach to stomach. We were able to look into each others eyes, and we both smiled. Thanks to the fact that my back was curved against the tree, I was able to lean forward a little and kiss my lover.

Applejack pushed against my chest with her front hooves, and made herself lean up. I put one hand under her chin, and the other one on the back of her head. I pulled her into as deep a kiss as I could, and our tongues danced with one another. Her legs eventually tired, and I brought her to rest against my chest once more. She wrapped her hooves around me, and I began to pump into her.

I wasn't sure if she was tired, or just wanted to let me be in control; but she let me take the lead this time. I reached down her back and placed one hand down near the start of her tail, and pushed down as I pumped into her. I used the other arm to return the hug she was giving me, and this continued further into the night.

Our bodies were covered in sweat, and the air around us became warm. It seemed like our loving emitted a shield of heat, and not even the cold Winter air could penetrate it now. I'll never understand how she can feel so amazing around me. Even though our loving was pretty mild compared to previous times, it still felt incredible. She would tighten around me and squeeze my body at the same time as I would reach a pace she liked. Once again she would boost my ego either intentionally or not, by letting her tongue come to rest outside of her mouth against my chest. The coolness it offered compared to the heat of our bodies made it all the more

noticeable. Her breathing was heavy, and very audible. We never really spoke during, but tonight Applejack was continually gasping out "I love you"s as she came closer and closer to finishing.

I was so overcome with emotion at this that I felt nothing I could say would come close to my feelings, so I silenced her with a kiss. Her hooves came to be wrapped around the back of my neck, and I continued to hug her close. It never ceases to amaze me how in sync our bodies become when we make love. We were both close, and we both knew it.

It didn't take long, and our bodies were pushed past the breaking point moments later. We kissed during the entire climax, and for a long time after. Neither one of us felt like ending this here, so we didn't. We kissed and made love again and again. It wasn't until we noticed signs of morning did we agree to end this.

I got dressed and we made our way home. Even though we made love many times, I wasn't satisfied. I carried Applejack the entire way, and we only stopped kissing when walking through town. Not a pony saw us, but we at least tried to control ourselves. We got home and I immediately checked on the children. They were both sound asleep, so I led Applejack into the downstairs shower; and we made love one last time as we got cleaned off.

This was the perfect way to end one of the best nights I've ever had.

Chapter 130: Surely!

Author's notes: Sorry for the late chapter. I got caught up with a lot today. Heh, you guys know how much I want to post a new chapter each and every day!

Leaving Sweetie Belle last night was the hardest thing I've done in a long time, but it was past time. She was getting very sleepy, and she didn't know what time her parents would be picking her up.

I spent nearly an hour in bed just looking at the pictures of us. I was so glad she thought to do that. It took me forever to fall asleep, and it didn't happen until after Mom and Dad got home. I pretended to be sleeping so that Dad wouldn't think I was out too late. I'll tell him the truth if he asks, but I kind of doubt he will.

This morning was hectic, too. When I woke up I had no idea what time it was. What with Mom and Dad still asleep, I shouldn't just leave! I debated with myself for nearly ten minutes before I said "Buck it!" and took off for Sweetie Belle's. I got there just in time to see two ponies, who I assumed were Sweetie Belle's parents, lead her out of the boutique. It was honestly pretty hard to see any family resemblance. Rarity and Sweetie Belle are both really pretty, but they hardly look a thing like their parents, other than sharing their Dad's white coat.

Sweetie Belle got into a carriage with them, and she was clearly looking for me. I flew onto the roof of a nearby building, and she finally saw me. She had a really sad smile on, and I think I did too. Her parents never saw me, but Rarity did. She smiled at me, yet she didn't linger on it. Her focus was on Sweetie Belle and her parents. They talked for a while, but I couldn't understand them.

I wanted so badly to fly down there and get one last hug! Her parents probably would have started disliking me for it, though. Dad leads me to believe that any colt who starts dating Scootaloo is going to have a bucking hard time getting his approval, and I'm already looking a little older than I am! I'm sure her parents would find me creepy.

Every pony talked for about twenty minutes, but it eventually came time for them to leave. Sweetie Belle stuck her head out of the carriage and waved at me. I waved back and watched her up until I couldn't see the carriage anymore. My heart felt heavier and heavier the further away she was. I guess I'm not as grown up as I would like to think, because it took everything I had not to cry.

Rarity was really nice to me though. She called me down shortly after, and now I was sitting with her inside.

"Is there anything I can get for you, Copper? School doesn't start for another hour...does Coal know you're here?"

I shook my head. "He doesn't. I woke up and he was still asleep. It didn't seem right to wake him, so I came down here after making up my mind."

Rarity didn't seem bothered by my answer. She kept patting my head, and it felt really nice. It did feel a little forced, though. She was probably still a little bothered by my persistence with Sweetie Belle. "Thanks for putting up with me, Rarity. I'm sorry that my feelings bother you sometimes...."

"I am too, Copper."

What? What did she mean by that? I looked up at her, but she wasn't looking back at me. "Rarity?"

"I'm also sorry your feelings bother me. Copper...you're a very nice young stallion, and it upsets me that I can't accept your relationship with Sweetie Belle. I won't fight it anymore, though. I'm sure it won't bother me once she is older...."

I...I didn't know what to say here. I was a little disheartened that she really doesn't approve, but...she was at least trying. We sat there for nearly ten minutes in silence. It was really awkward, but...I enjoyed her company. "Thanks, Rarity...that means a lot to me. I uhh...better

get home soon though...."

"Oh! Right! So sorry darling! Have a wonderful day, Copper. Feel free to stop by anytime!"

"Th-thank you, Rarity. I'll do that."

I think she is trying very hard to be nice to me, but I appreciate it. She gave me a smile and waved me off as I flew home. I sure hope Dad isn't up yet...

* * * *

That. Was. An amazing night. Even after getting cleaned up and in bed, Applejack got atop me, and we kissed 'til we fell asleep. I don't know how much of this I owe to that drink, but Whiskey deserves more than a hoof shake at this point!

I just woke up, and Applejack is still sleeping on me. Her cheek is resting on mine, and her legs are hanging off both sides of me. I'm glad I don't have work today. I just hug and kiss her for hours as she continues to sleep.

Heh, I can hear Copper freaking out in his bedroom. The kid must not realize he talks to himself a lot. I wish I could just call out to him and tell him to go see off his girl. He did eventually, but it took him something like ten minutes. If this wasn't so hard for him I would normally pick on the kid a bit, but I'll be sensitive this time around. I honestly feel for him...not being able to see your special pony for so long...I miss you, Dash.

* * * *

It took Lavender a fair while to show Dash around everything, partly because Dash continually had to leave to move the cloud, and also because Lavender would go into great detail over specific things that didn't seem all that important. This resulted in Dash not being informed of how all of the social degeneration started.

It was pretty late, and Dash wasn't sure where she should stay. She had been staying at the northwestern farm, but she spent the whole day at the southeastern one. It was at times like these when Dash's "loyalty" was stretched in usual ways. It wasn't as if she had agreed to stay at one place or another, but she felt inclined to support the northwestern farm, despite their creepy ways, due to the help they gave her. At the same time this farm seemed to be the safer bet. Neither seemed like a good idea, but this one at least treated females well. It was far too cold at night to sleep outside in the clouds, so Dash finally made up her mind to stay at the southeastern farm.

Lavender led her to the room where the female ponies slept after Dash informed her of her decision. Dash wasn't all that interested to be sleeping in the same room with dozens of other

ponies, but it was a sacrifice for "security."

The night was kind enough to Dash for the most part. That was, until an unusual noise that could just barely be heard woke her up. She had very heavy eyes and impaired senses. It took her several minutes to clear her mind enough to deduce where the sounds were coming from. Dash didn't have the words to describe the sound she heard. It was very faint and somewhat...muffled. As if the sound were being hindered by something.

Dash got up very quietly and flew over the sleeping ponies. She was kicking herself mentally for doing this, but her curious side wanted to know what was going on. The sound was getting louder as she flew down the main hallway. She was slowly starting to feel greater and greater concern as the sound became recognizable as being from a pony.

There was light coming from a doorway further down the hall. The door was closed, but the light shone from under it. It was the same door Dash had seen the male pony being led into earlier. Her heart stopped and her mind started racing. She reached the door and gulped as in apprehension of the noises coming from the other side. Dash reached for the knob slowly. Everything in her body told her not to do it — but she just HAD to know. Her hoof was getting closer and closer. Just as she was about to reach the knob...an incredibly loud muffled scream came from behind the door causing Dash to reflexively fling herself. She could hear sobbing, and she started to shake from fear. From down the hall there came a clip-clop of hooves against the hardwood flooring, and Dash slowly turned in horror as Lavender came into view.

"Is there a problem, Ms. Dash?" Lavender's voice was cold, and she glared at Dash with a cruel and calculating gaze.

Dash couldn't find her voice immediately, but she managed to squeak out a reply. "Y-yes! I-I just h-heard some stuff!" She turned to the door; while trying to look as innocent and clueless as possible, she pointed to it with her hoof. "W-what is back there?"

Lavender leered at Dash for a moment before slowly shifting her gaze towards the door. "That is the medical wing. We treat injured ponies there, but some...tend to be foals about it."

A more obvious lie Dash would never find; however, for the sake of getting out of this situation unscathed, she played along. "Oh...that makes sense. I'll just go back to bed then...."

"Sleep well, Ms. Dash."

* * * *

Applejack eventually woke up. I believe it was due to the sounds of Scootaloo getting up and about. I'm just glad Scootaloo didn't poke her head into the bedroom. She occasionally comes in here, and it would be hard to explain this.

"Mmm...mornin, Coal..." Applejack leaned up a bit and rubbed the sleep from her eyes — and I have to say, I love her mane in the mornings. It is slightly disheveled and curls out a little at the ends.

I simply smiled and reach up, rubbing her cheek a bit. "Good morning, love." It was so difficult to get out of that lovey-dovey mindset once we got into it. Applejack leaned back down, and we started making out again. It took Copper talking with Scootaloo to make us snap out of it.

Applejack rolled off me and climbed out of bed. She looked back and flashed me a warm smile before greeting the kids in the hall. It took me a minute to work up the energy required to get out of bed. It was still very warm, and the sheets smelled of Applejack. Funny how anything that reminded me of my girls instantly became more enjoyable.

That was the thought that brought Dash back to mind again. When is she coming home? How many days has it been now? I wish there was a way to contact her, but I'm probably worrying for nothing. Dash is as strong as they come — granted, she has a...softer side when she is alone. Crap...now I'm wondering how much of it is a facade...buck. Well...there isn't anything I can do about it. With that rather annoying thought, I dragged my sorry ass out of bed. I didn't need a shower this morning after last night, so I just got properly dressed for the cold, going over my mental checklist for the day.

If I'm remembering right...yeah...I'm going to go to the gem mines outside of town today. I've never been, but this will handle two gifts at once. I best stop by Twilight's first though...oh, and I don't have a shovel. Okay! Twilight's first, then hardware store! I know they have them, but...I think a shovel wouldn't be called hardware. Why do I care, anyway?

I got dressed and made my way downstairs to find every pony sitting around the dining room table enjoying some toast. Copper looks sleepy as heck; that kid was out late. He can look me in the eyes, so he didn't do anything adult...I think. AUGH! Don't want to think!

"Where are you going today, Dad?"

"I'm going down to the gem mines, Scootaloo."

Applejack perked up at this, but she seemed concerned. "Ah don't know iff'n that is ah good idea, Coal." She was about to say something but stopped as the kids caught her attention. Applejack seemed to pick her words very carefully after that. "There...are these creatures called Diamond Dogs that live underground there. They could give ya ah lot of trouble."

Ahhh...I get it. The kids don't know what they are on Earth. Applejack is a lot of things, and I best remember to add wise on the list. I'm sure they couldn't pose a great threat to me, but I best be considerate of my family's feelings.

"I see...I'll try to be careful then. Hopefully they like to sleep when it's this cold out. If so, they probably won't give me any trouble." Applejack accepted my answer, but the kids kept looking at me weird. "Something wrong?" I asked.

Copper shook his head, but Scootaloo piped up. "Just...don't come home hurt, Dad. I...I've seen all of that I can take..."

Ouch...that stung! I walked over to Scootaloo and hugged her from behind as she sat in the chair. "I'll be careful, sweetheart. You don't need to worry about me, but thank you all the same."

Scootaloo turned around and hugged my neck very tightly, almost to the point of pain! Almost! I did have to break the hug after a few minutes of this, though. Applejack and Copper were both chuckling a little; I rolled my eyes at them while Scootaloo wasn't looking. After breaking the hug I could see her face again...and that made me sad. She was honestly pretty worried about me, and that was not good!

"I'll be fine, Scootaloo." I leaned forward and pressed my lips into her forehead for a moment. After that, I rubbed Copper's head and got a kiss from Applejack. With a wave to the family, I was off. Now I'm far past ready to get this over with. It does not do my heart any good seeing my little girl fear for me like that!

Hmmm, it's still pretty early...hope Twilight is up.

* * * *

As soon as the sun had just barely risen into the sky, Dash was getting the buck out of that farm. She didn't make it out immediately, though. Lavender stopped her at the front door.

"In a hurry to leave, Ms. Dash?" She once again seemed to stand with an unusually strong authoritative air about her.

Dash was getting tired of being intimidated by her ignorance of what these ponies were capable of. She didn't falter this time, and held her head up high. "I am, a little. It's past time I get things settled here and return home to my family."

Lavender seemed perturbed by this. "Oh? Surely you make enough being a weather pony to longer live with your parents."

"Not that kind of family. I have a lover and adoptive children." Dash was starting to get a little aggressive with her speech. The unpleasant event and the horrific sounds had forced her to pep herself up through the night until she fell asleep again. She had long since readied herself mentally for a confrontation.

Lavender's eye twitched at this. She took a step forward, seemingly towering over Dash as she peered down her nose at her. "A lover? A mare, I presume?"

It was Dash's turn to twitch. "Why does every pony always assume that!? It is a male, thank you very much!"

"Hmph, you would be better off without. Surely he doesn't...satisfy you." Lavender was getting closer with each sentence, and Dash was starting to lose nerve.

"Not that is any of YOUR business, but I'm very happy with him!" Dash was coming up with a plan of escape as Lavender continued her very methodical advance — Dash would step back a little and lead Lavender further and further from the door, zipping around her once the gap was large enough.

"I am making it my business. A fine mare such as yourself deserves the best. Stay a while...and I'll show you the best." Lavender reached out and put a hoof under Dash's chin, making her flinch uncomfortably.

With a deep breath Dash looked into Lavender's eyes and gave her the truth. "I've had the best, and you won't ever be it!" Lavender reared back in disgust, and Dash seized this moment to fly out the front door. She took to the air and stopped only when she was several dozen feet high.

Lavender had stepped outside and called out to Dash. "If you want to know what really happened here, you'll change your mind, Ms. Dash. You will soon find that my offer is more than appealing." With that foreboding statement Lavender went back inside.

Dash was left feeling dread consume her soul. She cursed her loyalty to her job again and again. All she wanted was to leave this wretched place and go home! It took her nearly thirty minutes to vent all of her frustrations, and then she got back to work. Unsurprisingly, the unknown southwestern farm was starting to sound better and better as the primary choice for temporary housing. Surely they couldn't be worse than the others!

Chapter 131: Still welcome?

Scootaloo and I left for school shortly after Dad left. It was unsurprising how little I'm in the mood for it today after getting so little sleep and not getting to see Sweetie Belle. Sometimes I wonder if how much I like her can be interpreted as being even just a little bit creepy. I know it definitely isn't normal, but I wouldn't like her any less either way. It just makes me think.

Anyway, Scootaloo and I didn't really talk. She was worried about Dad, and I was worried about how she was going to take the news about Sweetie Belle. We parted ways silently once we got to school, and I made my way to the end of hallway classroom.

Mr. Citrus wasn't there this morning though...odd. My assignments weren't there either. I figured he might just be running late, so I took a seat there and waited for him.

....

....

....

....

What the buck is going on? It has been nearly thirty minutes! Did they just forget about me!? Groan! I'm nowhere near patient enough for this nonsense today! I got up and made my way down the hall looking for a teacher. As I walked past Ms. Cherilee's classroom, she stepped out.

"Oh, Copper! I was just coming to get you."

"Really? What for?"

"Sweetie Belle's big sister Rarity stopped by a little bit ago to inform me that Sweetie Belle has left with her parents to Canterlot. She was the reason for your...improper behavior, so we had to keep you in that back classroom. However, since she isn't here anymore, you can return to my classroom now. Permanently, I should add. You weren't told, but you already tested out of any material Mr. Eraser teaches. Now come inside. I've got a desk ready for you."

Well...blah. I always thought I would be happy to get out of that boring classroom, but I just don't honestly care anymore. No reason to refuse the offer, though, so I just nodded my head and followed Ms. Cherilee inside.

Scotaloo and Applebloom were holding two letters, one each, and they gave me a somewhat dirty look as I took my seat in the far back corner, farthest from the door. Great...now my sister and only other friend in the world are mad at me, Sweetie Belle is gone, and...some pony stuck gum under my desk. Perfect.

* * * *

Twilight wasn't up just yet when I arrived, so I went ahead and bought that shovel. Heh, I'm glad I wasn't buying any trash bags too! HA! Stupid jokes aside, while making my way back to Twilight's, my memory kicked on.

"How...did that egg situation with the princess turn out?" I muttered to myself.

She was definitely back from giving the egg to the Princess, but...she didn't come talk with me about it. That led me to believe one of two things had happened. Either it had gone very poorly and Twilight didn't want to tell me about it, or it had been such an indecisive meeting that there was nothing to speak of. I'd find out soon, though; she just started turning on her lights. I would give her a little bit before asking to enter. It seemed a little rude to ask her to be sociable just after waking up. Granted, I did remember that her just-woken-up face was pretty cute. Well, pretty much any pony ever is cute, with a few exceptions, of course.

I was basically sitting just outside and to the right of Twilight's door. This seemed like as good a time as any to just defrag my brain. It didn't take me too long, but I thought about all sorts of things. I thought about the egg and Sasha some more; couldn't help but think about Dash; and then thought about Copper, wondering how he was going to take all of the Sweetie Belle business in the long run. The list went on and on, but I ended up being interrupted by Spike when he stepped outside to get some air.

"Hey, Coal! What are you doing sitting out here?"

Heh...he had on his "Dude, that's creepy" face. It made me laugh. "I need to talk with Twilight again. I arrived when I could tell you two were just getting up, so I decided to wait in order to give you some time before being bothered."

"Are we ever going to convince you that you aren't a bother?" Spike crossed his arms and tapped his foot at me, smirking.

"Someday, I'm sure."

"Hey...what's with the shovel?"

Poor Spike; he is now giving me a rather...unsure look. I must just make every pony everywhere assume the worst. I mean, can you believe that? When something MAY go bad...everyone is going to immediately start calling the WORST? It makes me feel a little bad that so few have faith in me. (...*wink*)

"Just needing it for some work I'm doing, Spike."

It was at this point that Twilight started calling out to Spike. He responded by yelling back in at her. "Coal is here for you, Twilight!" He turned to me and said, "Come on in, dude."

I followed Spike inside to find Twilight looking a little...uneasy. She was sitting on the floor in the middle of the room waiting for me. That "sheepish" smile of hers was present as well.

"Twilight? Is uhh...everything going alright?"

She leaned straight up and sporadically flailed her hooves about. "Of course! Things are great...heheh!"

I raised an eyebrow at her, and once again she smiled...and that stinking squeak! Where does that come from!? Wait! Don't get distracted by the cute! Focus, Coal! Focus!

"Right, so uhh...how did the egg situation pan out?" Heh...pan.

Twilight didn't seem to notice, but she did answer honestly, I presume. "Princess Celestia was very interested in it, and she...decided to keep it."

"What? Keep it? Like...your wording here is what's confusing me, Twilight. The way you said it...leads me to believe she is keeping it as a..."

"Pet. Yes. You know of Philomena, right? Phoenix are very intelligent creatures, so it is already a little unusual for the princess to have one as a pet; but...she enjoys things like that."

Well! Learn something new everyday! "Glad that is handled...I guess." I was about to ask Twilight for the favor, but Spike was still in the room. Curses...time to be stupid! I can't believe I'm about to do this...oww...my pride. "Oh fair Twilight, your constant assistance in so many of my endeavors is greatly appreciated! I shall now express myself in the expected way!"

I wasn't looking at Spike, but I heard him fall over. Oh god...what has possessed me? No use going back now! I walked over to Twilight and brought her into a very exaggerated hug.

"I'm uhh...just going to go start breakfast." Spike walked away very quickly and entered the kitchen.

Twilight was staring at me a shocked expression. "Coal!? What has gotten into you!?"

I leaned forward and got very close to Twilight's ear to speak. "Shhh, calm down, Twilight. I just want to know if you have a spell that will make finding gems easier. I'm going to be getting Spike's gift today, and I don't want him catching on."

Twilight let out an obvious sigh of relief and shook her head at me. "You're ridiculous, Coal." She then spotted my shovel at the end of the room. "I'll enchant your shovel to react when it's close to a gem. Thanks for doing this, by the way. I know Spike will appreciate it."

"That reminds me...think of anything you would like?" Note: I'm still holding Twilight. Why? Cause I'm a brony, and damnit if I can't control it sometimes! Damnit!

"I've thought of a few things, but they'll have to wait until you have more free time."

...Buck! Now I'm scared! "They uhh...wouldn't happen to be...magic-related, would they?" Twilight's head is right next to mine, so I can't see her face...but I heard that freaking squeak again! Oh lord have mercy! What fresh hell is in store for me now!? "*sigh*...for you Twilight...fine. Just...don't do anything that is going to give lasting mental or emotional scars, thanks."

She giggled some and agreed. After that, we broke the hug and she did her magic thing. I wanted some Legend of Zelda music to play when I picked up the shovel, like the music when you open a large chest and obtain an item. God, I'm such a nerd! You have received enchanted shovel! Do-do-do-doooooo

"Thanks, Twilight! Out of curiosity, when does the spell wear off?"

"It shouldn't."

"Seriously!? You can cast magic that makes permanently awesome things like this!?"

Twilight just giggled at me some more. "You've been here nearly five months now. I'm surprised you still get worked up over stuff like this."

"You're right, and when you're right...I look like an idiot. Why am I always so impressed? Ahhh, who cares!? Thanks again, Twilight. I'll uhhh...try to look forward to what you have in store for me later."

* * * *

"Everything alright there, Sweetie? Did you keep yourself up all night from how excited you are!?"

Sweetie Belle was leaning against the carriage door looking rather...disinterested in everything. Her Father noticed this and started talking to her. They had just gotten into Canterlot, and were about fifteen minutes from home.

"I'm fine, Daddy. I did end up having a hard time falling asleep though. *yawn* A nap sounds really good about now..."

"You say that now, but I think once we get out and about you'll wake right up!"

Despite naturally being in a sour mood due to moving, Sweetie Belle was trying hard to not let her displeasure show. "Yeah, you're probably right." She gave her Father a big smile before resting her head again.

Not much later they pulled up to a very extravagant three-story manor, and Sweetie Belle had to

admit it looked nice. The house was white with an assortment of different shades of blue here and there for the trim. It didn't have a porch, but it did have several steps leading up to the front door.

Sweetie Belle looked around and took note of the new block she would be living on. Each house was equally nice and large. There weren't any ponies walking around at this hour, but each home looked to be occupied.

Her parents paid the driver and he set their stuff on the curb. Sweetie Belle's father turned to her and with a big smile asked if she was ready to see her new home.

With a soft smile and a nod of her head she replied. "Sounds good, Daddy."

* * * *

Dash spent hours on the clouds this day, and she debated with herself whether or not to check out the last farm the entire time. At one point, Pine spotted her in the clouds, and he started calling to her in his usual chipper tone.

"Ms. Dash! How good to see you again! I was somewhat worried that you may have had a rough night when you didn't return yesterday, but you look even more beautiful than you did before!"

Dash rolled her eyes at this and responded with a gentle wave of her hoof.

"Why don't you join every pony and me for breakfast! I'm sure you must be starving!"

Breakfast did sound good, but the safety of being so high up was just as tempting. It took her a few minutes to succumb to her needs, but she did eventually. Dash flew down and gave Pine a very tired smile. His was huge and seemed to be bursting at the seams with joy.

They walked together back to the farmhouse, where Dash found every pony sitting in a large room eating very quietly. For whatever reason, Dash noticed that Crimson wasn't around. This made her uneasy, but she wasn't sure why. Without telling her where they were going, Pine led Dash into a back room where a nice looking meal had been prepared...clearly for two.

"Is there a reason we are eating so far away from every pony else?" Dash was getting that same fearful feeling she had time and time again since arriving here.

Pine smiled and took a seat with a shake of his mane. "Just wanting to get to know you better, Ms. Dash! You are the one we all have to thank for single-hoofedly saving us from that horrid storm, after all. Preparing something special for you is the least I can do!"

The food did look very appetizing, and Dash hadn't eaten all that well the last few days. She reluctantly sat down and started eating with Pine. Dash felt he simply watched her eat for nearly five minutes before he started. This sent chills up her spine, but she did her best not to come across as being anything less than appreciative. Her mood lightened somewhat when she thought about how polite she was forcing herself to be since arriving here. She was always so casual around town due to every pony knowing each other, and this huge change in behavior had gone unnoticed till just now. This made her laugh a little, and Pine seemed to almost lose himself to her. Dash noticed this, and her laughing quickly ceased.

"Ms. Dash..."

"Y-yes?"

"I have...grown rather fond of your company. Even after this nasty snow business is taken care of, would you stay here? I can promise you that you'll never want for anything here."

Pine was leaning across the table a fair ways as he spoke, and Dash's whole body was seizing up in discomfort. "I can't do that. I have a family to return home to...."

For the first time since meeting him, Dash saw Pine's expression change into clear displeasure. His eyebrows lowered, and he leaned back in his chair. "I see. That is very disappointing, Ms. Dash. I don't suppose there is any way I can change your mind?"

Dash got up from the table and shook her head. "There isn't. I-I should be going...cloud probably needs moving now, after all..."

Pine stood up and walked over to Dash, very slowly. He didn't seem to be aggressive, so she didn't feel the need to run immediately. He put a hoof on her shoulder and shook his head. "Do give it some thought, Ms. Dash. I know you'll be happier with me." With that, Pine walked out and left Dash standing there feeling confused. He spoke very pleasantly, but she got that same sense of dread from him as she had from Lavender.

After shaking herself back to attention, Dash immediately made her way out of the farmhouse. Every pony she passed was blatantly staring at her. They didn't wear any expressions; they merely followed Dash with their eyes as she made it to the front door. She opened it to leave, but quickly jumped back with a yelp as Crimson was standing just on the other side.

"I do hope you'll pay us another visit, Ms. Dash. We do enjoy your company."

* * * *

Author's notes: I'm sure some of you are wondering how much longer the Dash arc is going to simmer before things come to a boil. Well, we are getting there, but...I did say this was going to

be "adventurous". That will come more into play when Coal finds out about, well...everything...yeah...

Chapter 132: The Fourth

Author's notes: New cover image! I be a happy man! "[inoeital](#)" (Or Isaac) made it for me! He is the author of "Not the Afterlife I Signed Up For" (he writes and draws!? JELLY!), and an awesome dude to boot!

Well I've got egg on my face! HA! More egg jokes! I was on my way to the mines when I realized I had NOTHING to hold the gems in. So I did end up buying a bag! Shovel plus bag equals kind of freaked-out Honey Dew! I just had to tell her what they were for! She laughed it off afterwards, but it definitely looks bad!

After that awkwardness was handled, I made my way outside of town to the mines. They are south of town and to the west several miles. I got the directions from Applejack, and they were spot-on.

The whole trip down there takes nearly three hours, I'm spending that time reflecting. Not on everything that has happened around me, but on everything that has changed about me. I look back at myself when I first arrived, and...it doesn't even seem possible anymore. Back then I was such a damn...well...stupid kid! I had my moments, but they were few and far between in my opinion. I'm still my own biggest critic, but I don't hate what I've become. I'm definitely still me, but I'm a me that I like a heck of a lot more! And I have all the girls to thank for that. Day in and day out, I've experienced the best and worst life has to offer. Well...maybe not the WORST, but definitely the best. Of course I'm thinking back to the...intimacy, but what makes that so great isn't how good it felt, although that was a plus; it was the feeling of closeness I had to my girls. I was always really jaded toward the thoughts of sex back on Earth. Now I know how wrong I really was. Nothing compares to that feeling I get when my loved ones are in my arms, and our bodies are one — but I'm focusing too much on just one thing that has changed.

I used to be such a blooming coward, too! Never would I have had the confidence to walk alone through the untamed outskirts of civilization to go to an area that could very possibly be infested with creatures wishing me harm. The Diamond Dogs probably won't be that bad if I see any, but I should stay on my guard.

Anyway, now I'm doing it like it's just another chore! I've done more growing up these past five months than I did my entire life on Earth! And I'm still only a twenty year old kid! How did it come to this!? I'm living in fucking Equestria! I'm a father of two, and I have two lovers! This isn't normal! This is crazy! This is the best possible thing ever!

Twilight talked about how I should be used to all of this by now, but that is just impossible! Everything I ever knew was shattered in the blink of an eye! I can remember exactly how I

perceived the world back then, and it is nothing compared to how I view it now! I KNEW that I was going to drive home that night and repeat that routine again and again for the rest of my life. I KNEW that my fondest wish for life here was never going to happen! I KNEW that I was the scum of the earth and that I would never amount to shit! And now I don't know WHAT to know!

I could honestly wake up tomorrow and find that everything that has happened is nothing but a dream. I could be comatose in a hospital bed after just barely avoiding death from the car crash! I've considered that. I've considered that everything that has happened here could be my subconscious living out its fondest wishes for life, love, and adventure! But I can say I KNOW at least one thing about that: if that were true, if none of this ever truly happened...I know that I wouldn't ever go back to being that worthless punk that I used to be.

Do I honestly believe that I'm dreaming? Fuck no! I've felt too much here in every meaning of the damn word to ever doubt it, but at the same time...I have to prepare myself for anything! ANYTHING! An Ursa Major could go rampant through Ponyville tomorrow and destroy everything I love! Nothing is beyond possible at this point, and that is a terrifying fact. I've been here a mere five fucking months, and I don't think I could honestly recall all the SHIT that has gone down! Case in point: Copper. He is me, and at the same time he isn't me! He was never born, but he lives as if he were a perfectly normal pony! And it all started with a simple request! "Simple" being relative, of course.

God, I'm in the weirdest mood now! Getting reflective and thinking of all these "what if's" really gets to a guy! I guess the main thing I should always remember is to live each day like the next may not come. I've heard the phrase "live each day like it may be your last" at least a hundred times, but only when your world has been completely destroyed from underneath you and everything you ever KNEW has been PROVEN wrong will anyone truly understand that.

It's funny to think that I now have so many lives that depend on me. I'm a dad...a lover...a friend...somebody who matters to others. It is so uplifting, but at the same time I'm feeling so humbled. I wasted so much of my life hating others and hating myself. I've blamed all my problems on one thing or another when I could have spent all that time improving myself. I could have done so much, but I didn't. It took all of this crazy shit to make me into what I am now. That is why I'm humbled. It took the impossible for me to finally wake up and get over myself. I don't honestly know who to thank for all of this, but if anyone...anything out there is responsible...thank you. Thank you so much!

* * * *

Well, that was a boring day! It was somewhat nice to be in a normal class, but I got chewed out at lunch for not telling Scootaloo and Applebloom about Sweetie Belle leaving. I'm not sure if the letters said something about my knowledge, but it doesn't matter. Sis and Applebloom weren't too hard on me. They stopped pretty abruptly when I threw out the comment about missing her.

Anyway, it wasn't until after lunch did things get interesting. Apparently there were some budget cuts introduced, and Ms. Cherilee was just informed of them over the lunch break. She told us about them, and I was scared she would be leaving at first. I know she gave me a mountain-size helping of grief over Sweetie Belle, but that's her job! I'm not so foolish that I can't understand that. She is also very nice. When she teaches...it's almost as if I can't believe she is capable of being stern. Even when some pony acts up, she doesn't get nasty about it. Granted, Ms. Cherilee does set them straight, but I'm thinking about this too much!

The actual effect of the budget cuts was to force another class to join ours. Their teacher was being transferred to another town, so Ms. Cherilee would teach both classes. There were about a dozen kids in Ms. Cherilee's class, and we were told that another dozen would be joining us. The afternoon classes were going to be spent outside, and we were expected to meet and greet with the other class. It sounded fine and all, but I was still in no mood for it. Well, I shouldn't be such a baby about things. I'll behave, and time won't move any slower than if I didn't behave.

Our class was led outside, the other class waiting for us. I've seen most of these ponies around, but I've never talked with any of them. I'm...not very popular around here. Well...I think the word is infamous; most others don't like me. It doesn't bother me any, though.

Scootaloo and Applebloom go talk to a group of three fillies. They all seemed nice enough, but I did notice something: most of the ponies from the other class were fillies. Hmm...not sure if I want. WOAH! Where did that come from!? *sigh*...darnit Dad.

ANYWAY! Every pony was talking to some other pony with the exception of this one unicorn filly. She looked really nice and sociable, but she just wasn't talking with any pony. I say she looked sociable because she was smiling and seemed to be having a good time. She had a very light purple coat and a light blonde mane. I noticed she didn't have a cutie mark, and then I noticed Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon snicker at her. The filly noticed this too, and her mood soured. I can't stand those two! They are so mean and unkind for no good reason! Because of this, I went over to talk with her.

"Hi, I'm Copper. It's nice to meet you."

She looked a little unsure about me at first, but she did eventually seem to lighten up to me. Her eyes were a slightly darker yellow than her mane...almost orange.

"Hi, my name is Dinky, nice to meet you too."

Heh, for whatever reason the name "Dinky" made me think of her as having a bubbly personality. I wonder why. "So how are you feeling about joining our class?"

"I'm going to miss our teacher, but I'm sure Ms. Cherilee is just as nice!"

"She is. We've not always agreed on everything, but she is very good at what she does."

"Yeah...I know about that. The whole school knows about what happened, and why you've been in the back room for so long...sorry. I'm sure you don't want to hear all of that. I just tend to say whatever comes to mind."

"Don't worry about it, Dinky. It's really my own fault. I hope knowing what I've done doesn't make it harder for you to be in the class, though."

"No, you're nice. Umm...sorry about Sweetie Belle moving. I know you really like her...."

"How do you know about that already?"

"I heard those ponies over there talking about it."

She pointed to Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon talking with a couple of other fillies. They spotted Dinky's gesture to them and marched over looking indignant.

Diamond Tiara stepped the closest and took point in confronting Dinky. "Talking about us, are you? Why don't you let us in on what it was about, blank flank?"

"I-I was just telling Copper where I heard about Sweetie Belle moving...."

"Oh I'm so sure! Is that the best your little brain could come up with? You probably get that from your wreck of a mother...."

"Don't talk about my mom like that!"

"Humph! I only say what every pony else knows, or can you not understand that?"

THAT'S IT! I got in between the two and stared down Diamond Tiara. I'm not a great deal taller, but I flared my wings out to make myself look bigger. "You need to leave! There is only so much bitch I can stand in a day."

Every pony in earshot gasped at that. I've developed a nasty habit of swearing from somewhere. Silver Spoon stepped forward and got right in my face next to Diamond Tiara. We stared each other down for nearly a minute before Ms. Cherilee was informed, quickly breaking it up.

Thankfully she took my side in the matter, though she did give me an earful about swearing. The classes were dismissed after that. No pony was really going to socialize anymore.

I flared my wings again and got ready to take off, but Dinky stopped me. "Copper, wait!"

"Yeah?"

"Th-thanks. It was really nice of you to stand up for me like that. Even if swearing was a bit much...."

"Well, maybe so — but it is the truth! I can't stand those ponies! You probably don't need me to tell you that, though."

"Mmhmm, so I guess I'll see you later."

"Yeah. I'll see you tomorrow, Dinky."

With that I took off for home. I'm going to get busy with those trees again. Heh, I made a friend today. I wonder if Sweetie Belle has made any new friends.

* * * *

"Really, Daddy? Going in when half the day is already over seems a little weird."

"Don't worry, Sweetie! You're just going to be shown around the school building. It'll only take a few hours at the most."

"Ok, that isn't too bad. Is my first real day tomorrow?"

"Sure is! I hope you'll be able to get over your excitement to sleep tonight!"

"Yeah...me too."

Sweetie Belle was walking with her father down to her new school. Her father had spoken with the principal while he was in Canterlot buying the house. Thus, Sweetie Belle was to be shown around the school building and walked through her schedule. The school in Ponyville had done a lot of growing in this past year, but it still operated under one teacher per class. The Canterlot schools could afford to hire teachers trained for specific subjects, and that meant Sweetie Belle would be moving between classes at the end of each hour.

The school building was a twenty minute walk from home, but the sights and sounds of Canterlot kept her fairly entertained the whole trip. There still weren't a lot of ponies at this hour, but there were some. With all those distractions, Sweetie Belle didn't immediately notice that they had arrived at her new school.

It was the largest school building that she had ever seen. The main section was three floors tall,

and it took up the entire block. The shape of the building was also a bit perplexing. There were many towers that looked to be the size of individual rooms coming up from the roof, the tallest one about eight floors high. The towers were dense enough to make the school look interesting from a distance, but they were far enough away from each other that the building looked somewhat silly up close.

Sweetie Belle looked into the ground floor windows and see several ponies looking back at her. This just made her all the more nervous. One filly waved, and Sweetie Belle's hopes lifted instantly. Her father noticed this and gave her an encouraging pat.

"See!? I told you things would be wonderful here! There is so much I want to say to you, Sweetie, but let's wait until after we get the tour of the school."

"O-Ok...sounds good, Daddy..."

She had no idea what her Father was talking about, but she didn't have much time to dwell on it. The principal came out and greeted the two. She mostly spoke with Sweetie Belle's father, but as they were starting the tour, she spoke to Sweetie Belle.

"We expect every student to take part in at least one of the many after-school programs available here. Is there anything that interests you, Sweetie Belle? We probably have something that you'll enjoy already!"

"Oh, well...I like to sing."

"Oh my, that is wonderful! Remind me to introduce you to the music teacher at the end of the tour!"

Sweetie Belle was really starting to like it here. Every pony seemed nice, and there was a lot to look forward to. Maybe things wouldn't be so bad after all.

* * * *

The day crawled on as Dash tried to stay focused. The snow on the farms had melted at this point, but now Dash had to allow time for the ground to dry. She spent her time sitting on the cloud and trying to get past all the unbelievable things she had gone through. Ponyville had its problems, but it couldn't compare to this place.

Dash's curiosity now rested on the fourth farm. How did it compare to the other three? She wanted to know, but at the same time, she didn't. That farm was her last hope, though. She would most likely become ill if she tried to sleep outside at night, due to the huge temperature drop. If nothing else, they would probably be willing to house her for at least one night.

With great reluctance, Dash forced her way to the farm. The farmhouse was very simple in design, and it had a more homely feel to it. It was second in size only to Lavender's farm. There was a mix of earth and unicorn ponies, male and female working the land. They seemed to be behaving as one would expect ponies in tough times to behave. Some were looking very tired and worn, but many of those were trying to stay optimistic. The stronger ponies seemed to be helping the weaker ones as they struggled with their workloads.

Dash remembered why she was going through all of this as she watched them. Even if they were horrible, creepy, or...creepier, they were still ponies — and they needed her help.

One of the workers spotted Dash in the sky, and he waved up at her while shouting his thanks. She responded with a gentle wave back, but stopped when she noticed an enormous earth pony stallion beckon her. He was mud brown with a white mane and stood nearly as tall as Coal did as a pony. This pony was very muscular, though. His muscle proportions were closer to that of Big Mac, so it was no understatement to say that he was the single largest pony Dash had ever seen.

It took Dash a moment to stop gawking at him, and she flew down to him momentarily. "H-hey there...I'm Rainbow Dash."

The pony cleared his throat and spoke in a voice that was all too...young. "I'm Small Mountain, but every pony just calls me Tiny." His age was masked by his size, but his voice betrayed him. He couldn't be but twelve or thirteen years of age. He wasn't much younger than Dash, but his voice still hadn't matured.

Dash chuckled a little at this, but Tiny was all too serious. This made her uneasy, but she thankfully wasn't getting any creepy vibes from any pony yet. "How have you been enjoying Colten, Rainbow?" Dash shuffled nervously at this, and she couldn't bring herself to respond immediately. Tiny noticed and dipped his head. "You don't need to answer. I take it you're already familiar with the other farms." Dash nodded. Tiny continued, "I'm...sorry you had to meet them first. They have dealt with the difficult times in...less-than-desirable ways."

Dash finally found her voice, but the only things on her mind were questions. "What caused all of this? Why are all the others so..."

"Horrible? Disgusting? Frightening? Pick whatever word you will; they are all true. Let's take a seat, and I'll tell you what I know. Unfortunately, I don't know much. I can tell you how everything got started to some degree, but I was pretty young at the time — and most ponies kept me in the dark."

"I'd like to know whatever you can tell me. Lavender has been the only other pony to claim she knows what is going on, and I can't really go back to her."

"Yes, I understand. It pains me to see what she has become."

Tiny was looking off into space as he spoke, and his face betrayed his desire to mask his feelings. "Was...she close to you?" Dash asked delicately.

With a heavy sigh, Tiny turned back to face Dash. "Yes...in a way. It is a private matter though; I'd rather not speak of it. Let's worry about what I can tell you though."

Tiny led Dash onto the porch, and they took a seat in silence. They watched the ponies work for a few minutes before Tiny started. "Things weren't always like this...it actually used to be pretty nice around here. Every pony knew each other, and life was very enjoyable, despite being so hard. This was back when the older ponies were still around."

"What happened to all of them anyway? Lavender is the oldest pony here...or so I'm told."

"Because food was limited for the longest time, no pony was allowed to have children. This changed about twenty years ago, but it lasted for a long time. Every pony's parents here were fairly old to be having foals, but the town knew they had to. If they waited much longer than it would have been impossible for various reasons. Since they were so much older...they couldn't handle life here when...the problems started." Tiny's speech trailed off as he thought back to his past.

Dash noticed this and tried to comfort him. "It's all right...you don't have to tell me about the older ponies. Just...what are these problems?"

"Things started off small, but they can only be called small because of everything that has happened. The first problem I can remember is that the food started to run low again. So many families wanted children, and they took advantage of being able to again. A single fight broke out over some damaged crops, and it just snowballed from there."

"That doesn't explain much. Why is Onyx's farm so cruel, and why is Pine's farm all unicorns? And Lavender's being mostly female...?"

"You're jumping ahead, Rainbow, but I guess those things have been bothering you the most. Well, they..."

As Tiny was about to explain to Dash what had been going on, the two ponies spotted Lavender walking up to them. All of the working ponies quickly made as much room possible for her, and Tiny gawked at her. Dash could only watch in a mix of curiosity and horror as Lavender gestured for Tiny to come to her. He did so without hesitation, but his movements were slow. They walked out of earshot, and talked for several minutes. Lavender looked back at Dash out of the corner of her eye every few minutes, but Tiny never took his eyes off Lavender.

At one point, Lavender flipped her mane over Tiny's face, and Dash shuddered as he seemed to swoon at it. It wasn't until Lavender walked off and Dash tried to pick up the conversation when she learned what must have just happened. Tiny wouldn't say anything more, and he shyly went back to work.

"Great...what do I do now?"

* * * *

Author's notes: Ok...I'll say this now, I was in a weird mood all day today! You'll understand that soon. Anyway, NO! Coal is NOT going to wake up to find all of this to have been a dream. I want to make that clear now! Secondly...thinking about that as an ending...made me wonder what could possibly be worse. To find out it was all a dream...just seems like a huge middle finger to anyone that cared about the story, so...I came up with something WORSE! A part of me wants to write it as a bonus chapter, but DANG it is messed up! If anybody wants it, I'll write it. Otherwise I'm just going to go apologize to my pony poster for a few hours after having come up with it! (psst! That's why I've been in a weird mood if you didn't catch that) Toodaloo!

Bonus Chapter: Bad Ending

Author's notes: This is the "worst possible ending ever" that I mentioned in the last chapter's closing notes. Only read this if you're curious. This ISN'T the real ending, and is only made for the sake of doing so. This is probably the WORST thing I could ever do to Coal, and I am a total MONSTER! It isn't very long for a reason, and that is...I didn't want to drag it out. I feel bad enough for doing this as is...let his pain end, damnit!

So I finally make it to the gem mines, and get to work. The area is pretty barren like the show depicted. Mostly just rocks, rocks, and more rocks. Great...now I'm thinking of filly Rarity's horn dragging her to a rock. How...does that even work? I've never heard of anything like that since coming here...weird.

Well anyway...

Coal!

"Holy shit, what!? What the fuck was that!?" This voice just came out of nowhere! I'm looking around for the source, but there is nothing here!

Coal, do not look for me. For you will never find me.

"Ok...it has finally happened. I've gone insane...yay me...heheh!"

I wish that were the case. You are completely in your right mind, for I have allowed it.

"Ok...so...I just got done thinking about all the weird shit that could possibly happen to me not too long ago, so...I'm just going to roll with this. Who are you? And what is going on!?" This is messed up! And...why does this voice sound so familiar?

I am the...Author, Coal. I'm afraid I have some terrible news for you.

"Author? What are you talking about? Terrible news? This is just too weird...and you're not making any sense..."

Coal, look behind you.

"Huh? Well, alriiiiiiiiiIGHT! THE FUCK IS THAT!?" There was a statue of me made of solid gems! "WHERE THE FUCK DID THIS COME FROM!?"

I'm sorry to tell you this, but Coal...your life isn't what you believe it to be.

"I...have no idea what you're talking about! Just spit it out! Why is all of this happening!?"

Very well then. Coal, you're a fictional character I created. Your entire life has been nothing but my fingers on a keyboard. Near everything that has happened to you since you arrived has been read by others for entertainment. Sadly, they have grown bored of you. All good things to come to an end it seems, and the blow to my creative ego has ruined me for continuing this story. It's coming to an end, and it will never continue.

"No...YOU'RE LYING!"

Am I? How do you explain that statue then? I am the Author...I can do anything I want. This is my world that I made for you. I'll do with it as I please.

"No...no...this...can't be happening! I was with my family this morning...I felt them! I've felt everything since I arrived! This can't be a dream!"

This isn't a dream, Coal. This is fiction. I'm sorry, but you only felt those things because I willed them to be.

"Why...why are you doing this!? If what you say is true, then why couldn't you just let it end!? My whole life is a lie! Everything I've ever known and loved is just a BIG FUCKING LIE!"

I'm so very sorry. I'm not doing this to torment you, Coal. I want to do something for you. I'm afraid I no longer have the will to write this story a proper ending. I've loved this story, and all the characters in it for so long...you all deserve a real ending. Sadly, I can't do that. I will let you choose your eternity though, Coal.

"Wha...what do you mean?"

Before I close the cover to this book forever, choose what you want the final page to rest on. If you want to make love to your lovers once more, I'll let it be so. If you have a wish or dream that you would like fulfilled, I'll make it so. Search your heart, and tell me what it is you want.

"Why!? WHY!? I THANKED YOU! YOU'RE MY CREATOR!? I THANKED YOU FROM THE BOTTOM OF MY HEART FOR ALL OF THIS! WHY CAN'T YOU LET ME CONTINUE TO LIVE!? YOU'RE JUST GOING TO EVERYTHING BE FOR NOT!? JUST BECAUSE MY LIFE ISN'T FUN TO YOU!?"

Coal...knowing the truth, do you still wish for it to continue?

"YES! I mean...no, but...this...THIS ISN'T FAIR!"

I'm so sorry. I'll allow you some time to think if you want, but do choose quickly.

"No, wait...I...I know what I want."

Then tell me, and it shall be.

"If all of this is going to end...let it end with my family in my arms. I want to hold them for my eternity..."

I'll make things easier on you, Coal. Rest your mind, and I'll let the Narrator do that work for you.

"What? I...just...don't say things like that. I...can't handle anymore..."

With his world once again shattered around him, Coal collapsed to the ground and cried. He thought of everything; every laugh, every tear, every smile, every frown. He thought of his experiences, and all the memories he made with his loved ones. The truth that they never really happened, and were only made so that others could enjoy them...nearly broke his soul. He doubted he even had one, but...there was nothing more he could compare his pain to. The Author willed the world around Coal to change, and he found himself back in his home.

All of his family was there. Applejack, Rainbow Dash, Scootaloo, and Copper. Each wore a look of untold fear and confusion.

"Coal!? What in tarnation is goin on!? Ah was at the farm, but...now Ah'm here!"

"This doesn't make any sense! I was in Colten, and...WHAT IS HAPPENING!?"

"Daddy! I'm scared! I was talking with all these new friends I made at school, and..."

"Dad...why...why are you crying?"

Every pony stopped and stared at Coal upon hearing Copper's question. Their hearts dropped as Coal got up and embraced all of them.

"Shh...it's going to be alright. I...I love all of you so much! I'm so sorry!"

No pony could move. Not a single one could breathe. They started crying, but they didn't know why. With a heavy heart the Author wrote the final words of this story, and ended it with tears in his eyes.

The world around Coal grew black, and as he took in his final breath...he relished in the feel of his family. May you enjoy your eternity, my friend...you deserve it.

Author's notes: I think it is pretty clear as to why I find this so much worse than the "it was all a dream ending". I just broke my character. In every single sense of the word. I don't think I'll ever come up with anything half as bad as this in the future. Characters we know and love could die, but...at least they were real. Take it easy everyone. I'm going to wash out my soul after staring at my new cover image for a while. Now I'd honestly feel guilty as hell if I ever ended this story. Who the hell am I to say their life should end? I'm just the author, not the hero.

Chapter 133: Conflict

A moment in the day and life of Coal Buck the person.

Female Manager: "I'm feeling so old lately."

Coal: "Yeah well...I'm feeling older. I'm twenty, but it feels like I'm an old fart!"

Female Manager: "Wait until you're thirty and wake up stiff."

Coal: "Uhhhhhhh..."

This has been a moment in the day and life of Coal Buck the person.

* * * *

I'm surprised how much I don't miss a lot of the comforts Earth had. With that said, I do miss MP3 players and the such. They would have made this long-ass walk so much nicer. I had finished my mental comparison of old me to the current me nearly thirty minutes earlier. With nothing else to do, I just sang as I made my way to the mines. Of course I sang all the MLP I could remember, but I'd forgotten some of the lyrics to Winter Wrap Up. If that had happened to

me on Earth, I would have listened to that song at least three dozen times until I knew it by heart again. Funny how I'm actually going to be living that in not too long. I'm not sure exactly when it happens, but December is already halfway over now.

Hmmm...I wonder how ponies celebrate the new year. Wait...they have booze here! Oh. My. Gawd! I want, but I don't want! Well great! Now I'm laughing like a fool at the thought of all the girls being drunk off their flanks! Drunk AJ is adorable, but I could see some of the six being...weird drunks. Something tells me...Fluttershy is a mean drunk. It would just be so ironic...oh dear...I'm dooming myself now!

With the thoughts of drunk ponies running through my head, the rest of the trip flashed by quickly enough. I found myself in the crappiest place I've ever seen in Equestria. Seriously, at least Pinkie's rock farm had a farmhouse. This place was as barren and unpleasant to look at as it got. Best get started, then!

I wasn't entirely sure how this was going to work, but I figured the shovel may work like a metal detector. I pointed the end of it in front of me, and slowly waved it back and forth over the ground as I walked. For whatever reason, it was actually fairly warm here. I wasn't not sure why, but it got a little too hot for my coat. I threw it against a rock and made a mental note of where it was for later.

It took me about twenty minutes before I found my first cluster of gems. The shovel would shake back and forth on its own when close enough. Thankfully I was still able to use it to dig, but it made for a funny feeling. Anyway, I found five gems in the first cluster. I wasn't a gemologist, so I wasn't entirely sure what I had there. There were two red, one blue, one green, and one yellow. They looked pretty enough, but I knew I needed to get a lot of them. I could get with Twilight and sort through for quality later.

That was how I spent the first two hours: moving from spot to spot looking for gems, finding some every once in a while. I knew they weren't worth nearly as much here as on Earth, but...wouldn't it be a kick in the ass if I could make more money doing this than spa work? Hmm...that reminds me. I wonder how that business deal that suit proposed to Aloe and Lotus worked out. They didn't tell me anything about it on the last day I worked, so maybe things didn't pan out well.

I was now on my third hour of being here...I think. I was having to go by the sun, and I've never been great at it. I probably should have thought ahead and packed a lunch...this was going to be a long day. It wasn't a big deal, I guess. Heh...I almost tried biting into a gem. There was this really nice looking deep green one, and it just looked...pretty nice! I laughed at myself for nearly ten minutes after smelling it for "flavor!" Oh, me and my stupid shit!

My bag was almost full now, but...I just wasn't satisfied. It felt too easy. Like...this wouldn't mean much to Rarity and Spike. I had used to be so close to both of them, but lately, my life had been

too busy to enjoy their company properly. Granted, I loved my life and spending all my time with my family. It was just that...well...I loved every pony here so much! It felt wrong not getting to see them. I almost never saw Fluttershy or Pinkie Pie. Heh...and on Earth they had the same voice actress. Wait...so did Applejack and Dash...hooooooy! Weirding myself out now! Better stop!

I decided I'd dump these gems by my coat and get back to looking for more. I'd just gather the best-looking ones at the end and stick the excess in a hole for later. I made it back to where my coat was and dumped the gems behind the rock. The pile was about three feet high with a diameter of about five to six feet at the base. It was a pretty good size for a pile of gems — although I was looking for that one special gem to complement the others. Surely there was something rare enough that would make my feelings clear if I gave it away.

I got back to work, but...damnit...of course something would happen. OF COURSE SOMETHING WOULD HAPPEN! I spent another three hours refilling the bag, and I came back to the pile...and it was gone. Every single gem was gone. Good golly god...they even took my coat. Well that was just a kick in the ass! It was at this point that I heard minor snarling behind me...oh, fuck me sideways. I turned around to see a Diamond Dog, but...not one from the show. This...was...a big-ass Diamond Dog! He stood nearly six feet tall, which made him just a few inches shorter than me. He had a light brown coat, and he appeared to be shaped closer to a...golden retriever maybe...hmmm. He looked a lot nicer than the ones in the show, anyway. He stood there looking confused and aggressive for a few minutes before I spoke to him.

"Uhhh...hey? Mind calming the buck down for me?" I wasn't in the best of moods for this right now. I had just gotten ripped off...maybe by this guy.

He snarled some more before taking a step closer. "You walk on two legs like us, but you no look like any Dog I've seen before."

Is that what they are to each other? Just dogs? Makes sense, I guess. It isn't like they have the conventional ones around here. WAIT! Now my mind is full of fuck! There are Diamond Dogs and normal dogs in this world! I've seen Winona around the farm...granted, she doesn't do much. Anyway! Diamond Dogs just look somewhat...anthropomorphic, so...did sometime in the past...a normal...oh god, my fucking mind! I'm such a dirty fuck sometimes!

"Grrr...don't speak? Stupid creature..."

"Oh no you didn't. I'm not in any mood for this crap right now, Goldie. Why don't you just go back from where you came from, and just leave me be."

"How...did you know my name, creature?"

"OH you have got to be shitting me! Really!? Sometimes I think this world has a really messed

up sense of humor! Ok...so...where do we go from here, Goldie? My name is Coal, and I'm here gathering gems as gifts for a couple friends of mine. It isn't like I had my name on them or anything, but...do you know what happened to the pile that was here? If you took them...just keep em. I would request that the coat taken be returned though. It's pretty comfortable here, but I'm not walking three hours in almost below-freezing weather because my coat got jacked."

I realized I was probably talking too much for this guy. He just seemed to...stalk around me. Similar to how a creature would if it were preying upon another, but...if he tried anything I'd set him straight.

Goldie got right up into my face at one point and started smelling me. If it weren't for the fact that he kind of reminded me of a dog my brother used to have...I'd probably tell him to back the hell off. Right now, though...it was kind of all I could do not to scratch his ears. I was a dog person...and he was a dog.

"What are you? Me have never seen something like you before."

"Well I haven't had this conversation in a while. I'm human. A creature from another world." It was at this point that he stuck his nose really close to my ass, and I felt a ton of snark just boil over. "The world was called you are too damn close, and I lived in the town of back off."

I think he got the hint. He jumped back and growled at me some more before noticing my gem bag. It was funny watching his face contort as if he were trying to come up with a way to get the bag from me. If I had my coat, I would just up and leave now, but...damnit, it would suck to have to walk home without it.

"I'll give you some of these gems, if you'll return to me the coat that was sitting here earlier."

"Me thinking you'll give me the whole bag...if you don't want me to takes it!"

I couldn't help it...I just started laughing! "Do you have any idea who you're fucking with? I have put up with stuff so much worse than an ass-licking biped since coming here, so you'll have to forgive me if you don't compare. My offer still stands, but my patience is wearing thin."

At this he full-on growled at me before whistling. Four other Diamond Dogs came out from behind the rocks around me, and I just dropped the bag at my feet. I'd have rather not fought, but I wasn't going to let them do as they pleased, either.

I cracked my knuckles and tapped the shovel in my hand. It was at this point that the BEST BAD LINE EVER came to me. I just had to say it! "Bring it on. By the time I'm done with you guys...they'll call you the Bloodhound Gang." HOLY SHIT THAT WAS SO BAD! HAHA! Did I mention I was in a weird ass mood earlier?! Cause I am!

* * * *

This is getting easier! I've been working on the second tree ever since I got home, and it's coming along pretty well! I'll hopefully have it done by tonight!

I wondered what Dad was going to do with all of this lumber, or what he is going to have ME do with it. I didn't get a whole lot of time to think about it, though...there was a wolf further in the forest looking at me! What was it doing so close to the house? It wasn't fully grown, but it could hurt Scootaloo or AJ if they didn't see it coming! I...I'm going to solve this problem!

The axe was too heavy to fly with, and I was going to need speed for this. I dropped it and shot after the wolf. It growled at me but took off further into the forest. This wolf was so fast! I wasn't able to fly as quickly as I liked because of all the trees in the way, but I was still going pretty dang fast! I wasn't sure what I would do if I caught it, but scaring it off might be enough in itself. I'd tell Dad about it later, and he'd surely know what to do!

The wolf led me all through the forest. It jumped over fallen trees and seemed to take the most confined routes! This beast is smart — I'm having a hard time keeping up with it! It finally came to a stop in front of a really big cave. Great! It HAD to be a cave! I've had all of those I can stand for a lifetime! But something isn't right...it isn't running anymore.

"What are you doing here, child?"

Oh...Luna...that was a big wolf! It was taller than Dad! It had stepped out from within the cave and now stood over the other wolf. Wait...IT TALKED!

"Y-you can talk!?"

"That I can. Now I ask you again, what are you doing here?"

"W-well..." Could I really tell it the truth, that I was going to...I didn't know what I was going to do! I just needed to say something! "I-I saw th-that wolf staring at me near my house. I thought it may hurt my family, so...I was trying to get rid of it." STUPID! THE TRUTH WAS PROBABLY NOT THE WAY TO GO HERE!

"You are not the first I have met to come to the conclusion that my family is a threat. This child is no threat to you or your family. She was merely curious of the constant noise coming from your home."

This was too weird! How was he talking, and why was he so big!? "Okay...umm...if you don't mind my asking..."

"I can speak because I have been cursed by Nightmare Moon. That is also why I am so large.

Now, I have a question for you. That home you are staying at belongs to...a friend of mine. Do you know of the...human who lives there? Coal is his name."

"Th-that's my Dad! How do you know him!?"

"Oh...curious, how is he your father? You are much too old to be his child, for he is but one himself."

Ok...this wolf didn't seem to be mad at me, but...I knew I should try to be smart about this. "I don't mind telling you, but does this mean you aren't mad about me scaring your...daughter?" I couldn't believe it was a girl! Why did that make it so much worse?

"I will forgive you. No harm was done, and she enjoyed the chase. What is your name, child?"

"Copper...yours?"

"My name is Rafe. Your father was the one who gave me that name, if that interests you."

"Really!? You said he was your friend, but...he hasn't mentioned you before...."

"Our meeting was less than pleasant. I had to forgive him for a much greater act, but he showed me kindness, so it was not difficult. He probably still feels guilty and does not wish for his family to know of his regrets. I will ask you again, though: how is it that he came to be your father?"

"It's kind of long, and...almost unbelievable. I have the time if you do...."

"I have all the time in the world, Copper."

"Ok then, well...it started with my Dad wanting to better himself..."

* * * *

The trip to the school lasted a lot longer than expected. Sweetie Belle was introduced to the music director and he just adored her singing voice. It wasn't until after dark did they finally get out of there.

Sweetie Belle's father didn't seem to mind at all, but she was constantly wondering what it was he had to tell her. It had been in the back of her mind all day.

It wasn't until they arrived home that he even mentioned it. "Well, Sweetie, why don't ya go wash up and I'll help your mother with dinner. Then we'll have that discussion."

"Yes, Daddy."

Sweetie Belle had no idea what it would be over, but she doubted it could be anything major. Her parents didn't know about Copper, and that was the only thing in her life that could potentially upset them. She washed up and joined her parents at the dinner table a few minutes later.

The house was already fully furnished with many decorative items everywhere. From the front door it opened into a large hallway that went throughout the ground floor. One could go either left or right from the entrance. Going left led to the kitchen and two bedrooms further down. Going right led to the dining and living rooms, and the staircase past those rooms. The second floor was slightly smaller with three bedrooms and two baths, and the third floor was one large room. The house's interior was white with hardwood flooring. There were numerous pictures that adorned the walls. Some were family pictures; others were pictures Sweetie Belle didn't recognize.

The dining room connected to the kitchen through a single open space. It looked like you could put a door there, but there was none. Sweetie Belle was able to watch her parents cook as she thought over her day. It had been full to the brim with one strong emotion or another, and this left her mentally drained. She forced herself to not think about Copper, still hoping that he would be able to get away on the weekends. Instead, she tried to keep her spirits up by thinking of how nice the school looked. Even if things weren't perfect now, that didn't mean she couldn't try to make the most of it.

Her parents finished up shortly after, and they chatted away through their dinner. Sweetie Belle's parents were investors, so they didn't have a job per se. They had a lot of free time and told Sweetie Belle stories of some of the things they'd done. This made Sweetie Belle forget her worries for a while, and she just enjoyed a nice meal with her parents.

However, after the meal, her father sat beside her, making things stressful again.

"I know you must not have a lot of faith in us, Sweetie, and I'm sorry for that."

"What do you mean?"

"We keep leaving you with Rarity too often. I feel we haven't been good parents to you, and your mother and I want to make things right."

"Daddy?"

"Sweetie Belle, we've decided to stop all of this moving around business. We want you to stay with us from now on. Like a regular family. Is that what you want, Sweetie?"

In one fell swoop, Sweetie Belle's hopes of someday returning to Ponyville shattered. She knew

it could still happen, but...only when she was old enough to live on her own. Seven years...seven long and very painful years. She wanted to say no, but...she loved her parents and didn't want to upset them. With a heavy heart, she looked at her father and smiled.

"Yes please, Daddy."

* * * *

"I've had it!" Dash raged, pacing back and forth on the cloud she was currently occupying. The entire stay had worn her patience past the breaking point, and she couldn't take it anymore! Every attempt she had made at being sociable or trying to figure out what was going on ended almost as soon as it began.

Before leaving the last farm, the farm head stepped out and offered Dash a place to stay. He had a mossy green coat and a darker green mane. His name was Evergreen, and Dash may have chuckled if it weren't for the fact that she was already fuming at that point. She stayed friendly during their chat, and having a seemingly normal place to which she could return did give her some comfort.

Dash came to the decision to just say buck it about trying to fix things. She would finish her job and get out of there immediately after. No pony seemed to want her help, and she was tired of trying to give it.

The work day went by as slowly as any other. By the end of the day, the ground was looking somewhat dry, but Dash had her doubts that it would be enough to start melting the snow over the town. She considered manually moving some snow, but it would be a nightmare and a half. It would ultimately not affect much, anyway.

When night fell, she flew back to the fourth farm, but there were no signs of any pony anywhere. She slowly walked up to the farmhouse while being very mindful of her surroundings. The door was locked...and Dash felt a chill run down her spine. She knocked a couple of times, but no pony answered.

"It's awfully cold out here, Ms. Dash. Why don't you come home with me and get warm."

Dash spun around with her heart beating out of her chest. It was Pine...and Crimson was right behind him. "N-no thanks...I'll just sleep in the clouds. It isn't that bad out tonight...heh."

"I wasn't asking, Ms. Dash. Crimson, if you would."

"You owe me for this, Pine."

CRACK

With a flash of her magic, Crimson immobilized Dash. She was still completely awake, but her body wouldn't respond. All she could do was watch as Pine smiled down at her with a wicked grin.

"We do enjoy your company, Ms. Dash. I think you'll enjoy staying with us."

* * * *

Author's notes: I'm writing a very special one shot for a friend of mine today. It is looking to be pretty large, and that means I may not get another chapter out today. I'll try to get back to at least one chapter a day after this. It feels like I've been missing a lot of days lately!

Chapter 134: Lost Hope

Stupid jokes aside...this was a bad situation. I was surrounded by five Diamond Dogs, and I wasn't too sure I could handle this. They were at least unarmed, and I had this shovel. It was probably the main reason they hadn't attacked me yet. They were spacing themselves out around me, though. This felt all too familiar to the wolf incident. I doubted these guys would go down as easily, though, and I knew that I had almost died against the wolves.

Part of me didn't want to do this, but...I had to if I wanted to make it out of this as soon as possible. I made the first move. I believed one should take out the weakest in a situation like this, so I swung the shovel into the smallest Diamond Dog. I felt like lurching when he yelped and flew back several feet. The others snarled and started to attack, but I had already recoiled the shovel and brought it towards the second Dog. With a disgusting crack, the shovel made contact. The Dog passed out immediately. Things were feeling too easy; a moment later, I changed my mind about that. I was in an awkward position after hitting the second Dog, leaving me wide open for a blow straight to my gut.

It was an unbelievably strong blow that made my knees buckle. I didn't have time to focus, since Goldie took this chance and slammed straight into me. This sent me flying straight into a nearby rock, knocking all the air out of me on impact. I swore under my breath, looking up to see the three remaining Dogs advance on me. The shovel had flown out of my hands when Goldie hit me, and now I was left unarmed and bruised. It wasn't the worst I'd experienced, but this wasn't something I'd ever get used to.

The Dogs snarled at me with smug looks as I tried to stand back up but fell back down. My sense of balance was still out of whack, my vision spinning. I was seriously in a shitty situation right now, and the only way I could think to get out...was to be more vicious and cruel than they were. I knew they weren't trying to kill me, so...using this kind of force was going to make me feel guilty later.

Much to my fortune, they weren't very smart. Goldie took point and got ahead of the others. He grabbed the top of my head by my hair and lifted me up to his level by it. It hurt, but I wasn't going to stop him...yet.

"Pathetic creature! Where did all that big talk gAAGH!"

I had jabbed him straight in the throat. He let go of me gasping for air. The other two Dogs saw this and reacted quickly enough. I barely had enough time to dodge the first as the second hit me in the arm. It stung like hell, but it wasn't a serious enough blow to hinder me for long. The second attacker received the blunt of my counter as I put all of my strength into a kick. I was wearing work boots, so when it connected with the side of his chest...he collapsed onto the ground. Goldie still hadn't recovered, so it was just me and this last Dog.

He was the second largest of the group, shaped similar to a Doberman. He growled at me and lunged for my throat. I brought my palm up against his jaw when he was close enough, and it nearly shattered his teeth. The Dog fell back screaming in pain. The sight of it rolling on the ground holding its mouth with tears in its eyes made me feel like the worst kind of person. I hate fighting so much...

I completely forgot about Goldie until I heard him right behind me.

THWAK

...

thud

* * * *

"And I've been me ever since." Rafe and...whatever the girl wolf's name was just listened patiently during my entire story. It didn't take too long, but at the same time, it felt like it took forever. There was still a fair amount of sun in the sky, though, so it wasn't too late at least.

"That is an incredible story, Copper. I can see a lot of Coal in you now, but you are your own individual. It seems we have both been forever changed by Luna...in one way or another."

"Yeah...I guess you're right." Rafe...was a lot like me in a way. Without Luna he would have just died a normal wolf a long time ago and I never would have been born. I didn't honestly want to know how it felt to live as long as he had. I was glad that I'd be able to live my life, but I didn't want to outlive my family.

"You are troubled, Copper?"

"Huh? Well...a little. Nothing to worry about though."

"I see. I do have one other question for you though."

"Yes?"

"What has been that monotonous chopping sound coming from your home from time to time? It woke me and in turn my child long ago."

"OH! I'm sorry...I've been trying to chop down some trees for my dad. I'm not yet very good at it, so it takes a while. I'll stop if you want me to..." I'd rather not stop, though. What could I do to get stronger if I couldn't do that?

"I take it there is a cause for this."

"I...w-want to be stronger..."

"Oh? For what reason?"

"Well...I've always been a burden on so many lives. It's time I grow up and better myself, so I asked my dad for any way to improve myself. He figured good hard work was a solid idea."

Rafe seemed to be thinking really intently about things. It was at this point that the little wolf got comfortable enough to walk over to me. For whatever reason...I really wanted to pet her. I think I really like dogs...I don't know why. She took a few steps forward and stopped when she was right in my face. I wasn't scared, though. It didn't feel like anything bad was going to happen. She sniffed me a few times before starting to licking me! A part of me was still really turned off to licking after all that time with Sasha, but this didn't feel nearly as bad. It was kind of gross, but at the same time, it was kind of nice.

"It seems my child has taken a liking to you. She didn't much care for Coal, so I wonder what makes you different."

"Maybe 'cause I'm a pony?"

"It is possible, but I have my doubts."

"Hmmm...OH! I know! Maybe we both smell a little like Luna's magic."

"That...is a very possible thought. You are a smart child, Copper. Hmm, I think I would like to help you."

"What? Help me how?"

"I will make you stronger. So that you may take more pride in yourself."

"R-really!? Why though?"

"I have but one child left, and she likes you. You are the son of the man who was willing to...give me something very dear to make up for a wrong he committed. I enjoy your company, and you are not frightened by mine. I can tell your desire is pure, so I shall help you if it is your desire."

"Y-yes! I'd love that! I'm curious, though...how are you going to help me?"

"You aren't ready for my help yet. It was difficult for you to keep up with my daughter, after all. She'll be the one to help you until the day you have surpassed her."

"Not to be rude, but I could only not keep up with her because of the trees. I think I'm a pretty good flier as is...."

"You misunderstand what I'm asking of you. Catch her by hoof, and you'll be far greater than you are now."

"Oh...wow...that sounds really hard."

"Is it too much to ask of you?"

"NO! I'll do anything to better myself!" This girl wolf seemed really smart. She stopped while we were talking, and was now looking at me with determined eyes. She needed a name. Hmm...wait...why did I know this name? "Can...I give your daughter a name?"

"It seems only fitting."

"Then it'll be Ula. I believe it means wolf power. I'm...not sure how I know of that name though..."

"It is probably just another...gift from your father."

"I seem to only notice them in times like these..."

"Better to have when you need than to lack it."

"So...what do we do now?"

"It is late, Copper. Return home for now, and come back whenever you want to try your hooves against...Ula."

This was so exciting! "Thanks, Rafe! I will!" With that, I took off home, but I didn't fly. I wanted to run as fast as my hooves could take me, but...Ula came up right next to me.

"Going to follow me home?"

She shook her head and took off ahead of me! Oh no she didn't! She was trying to show me up! Heheh! We'd see about that!

* * * *

The night was not pleasant for Sweetie Belle in the slightest. Her parents were overjoyed to know that she wanted to stay, that they thought she wanted to stay. Her heart went out to every pony she left behind, and she chastised herself for being too weak to tell her parents the truth. The only hope she had was that Copper might get to visit, but it was still only Monday...five days to go until the earliest he could come. This was all hypothetical, of course. There was no way to know if he would even be allowed, and that thought put her in a worse mood.

Sweetie Belle went to her dresser and pulled out the pictures of her and Copper. It was just last night when these pictures were taken, but it felt like an eternity since.

"Watcha got there, Sweetie Belle?"

"Daddy!?" She quickly hid the pictures behind her back and turned to face her father. He had stepped into her room silently to say goodnight, but he'd ended up catching her at a bad time.

"Well, that is awful curious, don'tcha know? Is that something you shouldn't have?"

"N-n-n-no! I-it's nothing!"

Sweetie Belle started to sweat furiously as her father stepped closer to her. He was usually very soft as a father, but he became serious when he had reason. He extended his hoof and looked down at his daughter. "Let me see it, Sweetie Belle."

This was too much. It had been a long day and she couldn't handle this. Her father wouldn't falter, though, so with tear-filled eyes she slowly set the pictures on his hoof. He took one look at them...and burned the pictures with his magic. Sweetie Belle gasped as the charred remains were dumped in a nearby wastebasket and her father turned to face her.

"Go to sleep. We'll talk about this in the morning."

He left after that, and Sweetie Belle immediately ran over and stared at the remains. She

couldn't cry...it hurt too much to cry. It just couldn't be real. Sweetie Belle stood there for nearly an hour. Near the end of the hour, reality hit her, and she trotted over to her bed and sobbed into her pillow. The first night in her new house was going to be a very long one.

* * * *

Pine levitated Dash's frozen body back to his farm with Crimson right behind him. She was somewhat annoyed at this turn of events.

"Couldn't try to convince her to stay the easy way. It just HAD to be like this. I sometimes think you should take part in the joining, Pine. It would help you with that disgusting personality of yours."

Pine wasn't fazed in the slightest by Crimson's words. He was smiling as big as the moon at the thought of the helpless form of Dash before him. "Yeah, but I don't want to be like the others! What fun is that? No...I'll be able to have a lot of fun now. Don't worry, Crimson. I won't break her. She'll choose to help us by the time I'm through."

Crimson sighed and picked up her pace a little to look at Dash. Dash was doing her best to stay strong, but every word was making her ever more fearful. She prayed to Celestia and Luna for help, but in her heart she doubted it would help any.

"I'm somewhat unsure of this, Pine."

"Really? Why is that?"

"I get the feeling that something is going to interfere with our plans here."

"Oh please! You could handle whatever bothered us! You are a prodigy, after all."

"I may be strong at magic, but...what would you do if something willing to die for what it believed wanted you dead?"

"Huh? Where is all of this coming from?"

Crimson hesitated for a moment and said, "The stars."

Pine sighed. "You're too enigmatic, Crimson. Well...you've always been that way, but this is too serious for me! Let's hurry up! I can't wait to get started with our dear guest here!"

Dash forced her eyes closed to hold back the tears. This monster was going to do untold things to her, and no pony knew about her troubles. She spent the rest of the trip trying to strengthen

her resolve. She refused to give up. Pine noticed the change in her face, and he brought her down closer to him.

"What a brave face, Ms. Dash! You're really prepared aren't you!? I'm impressed with you! I knew you would be perfect for this!"

If Dash could have spoken a word, Pine would have been informed of all the obscenities she had in her vocabulary. He just laughed at the evident rage she wore, and he licked her cheek making Dash want to wretch.

"Now now, Ms. Dash, there will be plenty of time for that kind of emotion later! For now, let's just enjoy the buildup!"

Crimson shook her head and took control of Dash from Pine. "Aww! What gives!?" he whined.

"I'd like to talk with her for now, Pine. These feelings aren't going away, and I want some answers."

Pine let out an exasperated groan but didn't argue further. Crimson levitated Dash in front of her as she continued walking with Pine towards the farm.

"Now, Ms. Dash...is there anything out there to save you?"

Dash thought of Coal, but didn't even attempt to try and talk to Crimson. How dumb was this pony, really? To ask if something could save Dash just seemed absurd! It wasn't like she would honestly answer!

"Coal, huh? He seems like a strong individual. He must be the one who's giving me all of these premonitions." Dash's eyes got wide and she screamed through her forcefully closed mouth. Crimson let out a soft laugh at this. "Your thoughts betray you, Ms. Dash. I'll look forward to meeting this...human."

Chapter 135: Twisted

Well this is just fucking perfect.... *sigh* I had woken up to find myself deep underground...I think. I was in a partially mined-out tunnel; my arms and legs were chained to the end of it. Since I was at the end of a tunnel, my field of view was pretty small. I could see some Diamond Dogs pass by the entrance from time to time, but that's about it. I had started counting how many different dogs there were, and I was up to twenty-one. I was so beyond fucked!

Augh...man...my head is killing me! Damn it...I just couldn't wait here for whatever they were going to do...or not do. Good god, they could just leave me to dehydrate. This was not good at all...but what the hell could I do!? If I started pulling at all of the chains, I was going to start

sweating, and then I'd just die faster if I couldn't escape!

"Hmm, the creature is awake." Oh...fuck. One of the dogs noticed my movements and came to either taunt and or torture me. "Stupid creature. Thinking you could win against us."

Screw this dog, but...I figured I had better play along. "Yeah, you guys sure showed me. Now I'm trapped who knows where and no pony is ever going to save me. My life is over, and I have nothing more to do in it. Woe is me and all my failed endeavors." I said all of that in a shitty-ass monotone, but this dog was so clueless that he bought it.

"Kehkeh, we are going to make use of you, creature. Me shall inform Goldie, and you will be fitted with the collar."

With that, he walked away, leaving me wondering What in the buck is "the collar!?" If these guys had gotten smarter somewhat after the Rarity incident and gotten better...slave equipment...I'm doomed. Heh, I wasn't going to give up that easily, but this was still going to be a nightmare!

Goldie came around the corner with this ugly-looking metal collar in his hands and a really nasty bruise on his throat. Yikes...I really effed him up there. I'd have felt worse about it if it weren't for the fact that I was currently tied up. Goldie didn't speak a word to me, and I almost worried that I had permanently damaged his voice box. That would make me feel like such a creep! He fitted the collar on me without even looking me in the eyes, and...he pulled out a remote.

Oh. My. "GGGGGGRRRRRGGHHG!!! FUCK YOU! GAAAAAAHHH!!!" Fuck! Okay...I'm really fucked now. Goldie undid my binds and I just fell to the ground. My whole body was seizing up, and I couldn't control my movements. "GNNNNNNNAAAAAH!!! Would you stop thaAAAAAAHHHT!!! Kuhn Kuhn! F-fuck you...."

"Lay off that, Goldie. We won't be able to use the creature if you don't stops."

"Grrr! The creature made me hurt! Me wants to make creature hurt more!"

"Creature will hurt plenty from work. Unless you want to do creature's work then."

"Grrr...no. Get up, creature!"

....

....

"Gah! You made creature pass out again, Goldie! Throw creature in the mines and make creature work when creature wakes."

"Yes..."

* * * *

Coal's body was dragged across the jagged rock floor and thrown into an incomplete mining tunnel. It still had plenty of potential for gems, but Diamond Dogs tend to get lazy.

Coal didn't wake for nearly three hours after that. His body screamed at him when he tried to stand up. He wondered how many volts this damn collar was sending into him. It had to be under 200 because he was still alive after being shocked so much. Coal chuckled to himself as he thought about how stupid he was for spending any time at all over something so trivial. He leaned against the tunnel wall and tried to collect himself. Unfortunately he didn't get much time; another Diamond Dog spotted him and put him immediately to work. He tried to protest, but this dog had a controller as well.

Coal cursed the Dog under his breath and picked up the pickaxe thrown at him. He spent hours bringing the axe against various points in the tunnel. It became an insult as he started finding deposit after deposit of gems. In a way, the dogs loved him for it, but they didn't love him enough to allow him time to stop. For a short time, he considered trying to escape as Rarity had done, but with this collar...they would shut him up pretty quickly. Part of him was happy about not being forced to do that though. Even in the worst of times, he still had some pride.

By the end of the day, his hands were bleeding from swinging the pick so much, but he didn't complain. They actually gave him some food and water, but that only insulted him more. He now relied on them to keep him alive, so he had to force himself to produce results if he wanted to live. Not an hour went by when he didn't curse the Dogs and looked for any way to escape. He figured his best bet would be at night, but his body couldn't hold out anymore.

As soon as they told him to stop and he was led into a cage to sleep in, his hopes for escape diminished. With every possible method of escape closed to him, Coal collapsed to the floor and slept. It was hard and jagged, but he didn't care. His entire body was on fire from being worked to the bone. There was only one thing on his mind as he allowed sleep to take hold.

"S-sorry, Scoots...."

* * * *

Not good! Not good at all! Dad is really late getting home, and the girls are starting to worry. AJ is taking it better than Scootaloo is, but I can tell she is still really worried.

I got home after Ula kicked my flank in a race. It didn't bother me though. It's just one more thing

to work towards in my book! We parted ways after she...scoffed at me I think. This wolf is really smart! She has a personality and all that! I'm rather impressed. Well, I was, until I discovered how upset every pony was.

We're sitting on the couch together enjoying the warmth from the fire. AJ is holding Scootaloo to try and comfort her. When she started rubbing her back, Scootaloo managed to fall asleep. I saw a few tears fall as she closed her eyes, and that worried me. AJ took her up to bed and joined me on the couch again shortly after. I have to try and comfort her. Hopefully I can do a decent job of it.

"It'll be fine, Mom. I'm sure Dad just got really busy! He has been known to get carried away, after all...."

"Heh, yer probably right, Copper. Mmm...it's late, sugarcube. Let's hit the hay fer now. Ah'm sure Coal will be back soon enough."

No she isn't...AJ looks really scared, but I won't make this harder on her. "Ok. Sleep well, Mom."

* * * *

Sleep didn't come for Sweetie Belle until she had shed the last of what tears she had. Her pillow was soaked all through the night, but it had dried by sunrise.

She felt disgusting as she woke up to the sound of her father's voice the next morning. Sweetie Belle knew he was going to talk with her about the pictures before school today, so this was going to be a long day.

Sweetie Belle dragged herself out of bed and took a few minutes to tidy herself. Thankfully, her father didn't object to this. He merely waited with a neutral expression downstairs at the dining room table. Sweetie Belle wanted to take her time with things to put off the talk, but at the same time, she just wanted it to be over with. Heavy-hearted and fearful, she descended the stairs and joined her father.

Her mother wanted no part in it after being told about the situation. She felt many of the same emotions as Sweetie's father felt, but she trusted him to handle things.

Sweetie Belle avoided looking at her father as she sat across the table from him. He didn't force her to look at him while he spoke.

"I have a lot of questions here. Do you want to tell me what has been going on while you were in Ponyville, or should I just start asking?"

"His name is Copper, and...he is very important to me."

"How did this happen? The last time we saw you, you were still just the most innocent of fillies. When did this boy change that?"

"That isn't fair, Daddy..."

"Not fair? Not fair!? Sweetie Belle, what isn't fair is finding out your little girl is with a pony much older than her. You know he is just using you, don't you?"

"He isn't as old as he looks...he is just big for his age...."

"Mmmm...even if that is true, I can't be happy about what I saw. How far have you gone with that colt?"

"..."

"Answer me, Sweetie Belle."

"A-as far as you saw. We took those pictures during my last night in Ponyville...it was going to be something to remember each other by. I-it was very important to me, and...you ruined it."

Sweetie Belle was starting to tear up again at this point, but her father had too many questions and concerns to stop at this. "When did you two get so close? And did Rarity know about this? If she did, then why didn't she stop it? There is too much I don't know about this, Sweetie Belle; I need you to tell me everything."

"D-Daddy please! Don't do this! I don't want to tell you all of what's happened! If you can't take my feelings for Copper, then you can't take any of that!"

Her father brought a hoof up to his eyes and rubbed them to calm down. "Finish getting ready for school, Sweetie Belle. Be prepared to tell me everything else by the end of the day. I'm writing a letter to Rarity right now about this. I am your father, and I deserve to know what my little foal is getting into."

Sweetie Belle wanted to protest further, but she didn't. She went back upstairs and half-heartedly finished preparing for school. Her first real day was about to begin, and she was past ready for it to end.

* * * *

Dash was brought into a far back room in the farmhouse. As her captors stepped through the

door, Dash saw where she would most likely be staying. Her heart dropped.

It wasn't anything elaborate, but it would do the job. On the floor, there was a foot-long chain connected to a D lock on one end and clasps on the other. There were two sets of these, spaced about a foot apart. Hanging from the ceiling were more chains connected to more clasps, a wheel at the other end. It was pretty clear how the clasps were going to be used, and Dash grimaced at the sight.

"You should feel proud, Ms. Dash! We haven't had to use these for a guest in a long time! Well, I've never gotten to use them! These were a bit before my time."

With his omnipresent perkiness, Pine levitated Dash between the two sets of chains and clasped her in. He let go of his levitation, and Dash fell to the floor with a grunt. Her body was still under the affects of Crimson's spell, so she was unable to resist as Pine turned the wheel, tightening Dash's restraints.

When the bottom set of chains were pulled taut and Dash's body was stretched as far as possible, Pine locked the wheel in place and marveled at the sight.

"Oh, such a wonderful time we'll have! Crimson, would you be a dear and undo the magic on our guest here? Oh, wait a moment! If we do that, she'll wake up every pony with her screaming. Let's find some kind of gag first!"

Crimson sighed and shook her head. "Just clean up after whatever you do in here. I don't need the smell leaking out into the rest of the farm."

"Oh Crimson! I'm not getting into that yet! Ms. Dash here needs a lot of prep work before that kind of fun can start!"

"You're disgusting, Pine."

"Oh, please! It isn't like this is the worst thing I've ever done!"

"Don't remind me. You seem to forget just how old I am. You're lucky the elders are dead; otherwise, they would lock you up for being such a creep."

"Pshaw! You're the only pony that knows about my...hobbies! Now would you be a dear and grab that gag please? I'd love to get started!"

Crimson rolled her eyes and left to fetch a piece of cloth to use as a gag. She returned with it soon afterwards. She placed it in Dash's forced-open mouth and tied it behind her head. With that, Crimson canceled the magic, which gave Dash control again.

Dash flapped her wings madly while trying her hardest to swear at the two monsters before her.

"Such a fighter! Has this room been soundproofed yet? I'd hate to have my fun interrupted."

"You're a unicorn too, Pine. Do I really need to baby you?"

"Please?"

Crimson sighed. "Fine. Enjoy your fun! I'm going to bed. Wake me and I'm putting a stop to this."

"Don't worry, Crimson! I'll be extra careful not to break the magic on this room by accident! I'll pay extra special attention to where I'm casting it!"

Dash was screaming with as much anger and rage as she could. She wore herself out trying her hardest to break free from her bonds. Her entire body ached, the strain on her joints starting to take its toll. Crimson left during this, but Pine stayed. He watched the entire thing with a smug look on his face while finding himself enjoying the sight more and more. Dash saw this and had to force herself not to cry. It was so disgusting. She averted her eyes to make it easier on herself.

Pine stood up and walked right up to her. "It is a shame I can't move this lower shackles any. I'd love to see...more of you."

Dash growled at him, her hate growing more by the second. Pine made the unfortunate mistake of rubbing his body along Dash's side, putting his head right behind her. She took the chance and brought her wing down right against the back of his head. He was knocked out cold, but Dash was still stuck. With nothing else to do, she took this moment to attempt rest. It was a long and difficult process; her shoulders were screaming in discomfort from all of the weight encumbering them. All she could think to do was to try to ease herself. She flapped her wings to alleviate some of the pain, but this meant she couldn't sleep.

Dash kept this up the entire night, and it wasn't until morning that Pine woke up.

"Oh my...well, I've got egg on my face! How clever of you, Ms. Dash! It seems I'll have to tame you before we can have our fun." Pine was about to tell her his plans, but Crimson entered the room to fetch him.

"It's time for the joining. You need to be present. Hmm? You didn't seem to do much last night. Finally get some self control?"

"Our dear guest knocked me out with her wing. Well, drat! I guess our fun will have to wait, Ms. Dash! What a shame, too! Don't worry, though...I'll think of a lot of fun we can have during the

day. Look forward to it!"

With that, Pine followed Crimson out of the room and locked it behind him. Dash hung her head and took this moment to let out all of her fear and frustrations. She couldn't bring herself to drop her guard while he was still in the room, but now that she was alone...it all came out.

Her grieving lasted for no more than ten minutes, but her tears had collected on the floor beneath her. She stared down at it, and prayed it would evaporate before Pine came back. Dash didn't want to give him the satisfaction.

* * * *

Dad didn't come home this morning. Scootaloo was looking so tired after getting up that AJ didn't tell her immediately. Scootaloo asked where he was later into the morning, but all AJ said was that he was very busy. She sent us on our way after that. I don't think Scootaloo bought it, but she didn't argue.

I know Dad didn't come home because I checked on AJ before she woke up. She was alone, and she appeared to be having a really bad dream. It was hard leaving her there, but I knew it would only cause her more problems if she knew I knew.

The school day went by just as slowly as I expected. Dinky started joining us at lunch, but Scootaloo still wasn't talking at all. It made things a little awkward, so the rest of us didn't really talk either.

By the end of the school day, Scootaloo was far past ready to get out. The bell went off and she shot out of the school, heading for home. I wasn't ready for that, and it took me a few minutes to catch up.

I ran right beside her the entire way home. When we arrived, we saw AJ just now leaving the house.

"Mom?"

"Copper, Scootaloo...stay at the house tonight please. Ah need ta' take care of...some stuff."

I didn't want to say anything...I just knew what it had to be. But Scootaloo spoke, and it made my blood run cold.

"Dad didn't come home...did he?"

AJ wouldn't look at us, she just told us to go inside as she walked towards town. Scootaloo

started tearing up as she ran inside. I wanted to cry, but...I have faith in Dad. He'll be okay...I know he will.

* * * *

"We have a new filly joining us today, class! Please come in, dear!"

Sweetie Belle went to school like it was any other day. Upon arriving, she reported to the principal, who then led her to the homeroom class picked out for her.

The teacher was a very friendly middle-aged mare. She had a grey coat and an off white mane. Her cutie mark was an assortment of school supplies.

Sweetie Belle stepped into the classroom and looked at all the faces watching her. She forced a smile before introducing herself.

"Hi, every pony. I'm Sweetie Belle, it's...nice to be here."

"How marvelous! Your seat is the empty one in the corner, Sweetie Belle. I do hope sitting in the back won't bother you at all."

"I'll be fine, thank you."

Sweetie Belle kept her head up as she made her way to the back. She found herself lucky for once. Being able to sit in the back meant she didn't have to try as hard to hide her feelings. She looked out the window for a moment and remembered the feeling of Copper flying her around. Sweetie Belle had never liked heights before then, but now it was almost all she could think about.

The entire day went by quickly enough as she got used to her new setting. The other classes seemed friendly enough. Some teachers were nicer than others, but there were no major differences. Since it was her first day, Sweetie Belle wasn't all that comfortable talking with many new ponies. She would smile and be friendly, but she would do nothing more.

It wasn't until she joined the afterschool choir that things started to look up. The director had her sing by herself first, but she got nervous and ended up freezing up, some of the other members snickering at her. This put her in a sour mood and she stopped caring.

An hour later when it was over, the director got onto her for not putting "heart" into it. She didn't argue, but she was getting very angry with all the crap she had taken the past couple of days. Her father picked her up before she snapped, though. He lectured her all the way home after the director mentioned her behavior.

It wasn't until they got home and her father immediately started talking about the morning that Sweetie Belle finally snapped. She spun around and glared at her father. He couldn't believe the look on her face, nor would he believe the earful he was about to receive.

Chapter 136: Disgusted

Author's notes: I'm not sure how many of you try to follow the time continuity between each segment, but I'll tell you now that each sections "end" time is roughly the same. I say that because I did things a little differently than the norm for half of this chapter. Everyone will know what I'm talking about soon enough.

I have no idea how long I've been here. I woke up an unknown amount of time after being thrown into this cage. It's been a long time since I've felt this pathetic. Locked up after being made to obey orders...I'm just pathetic. If only I weren't wearing this stupid collar...fuck. Crap...I don't have the right mindset to escape from this! It's because my stupid body is giving out on me! These damn hands...I can hardly feel them right now. This is so damn frustrating, and there is nothing I can do about it! I hate feeling so fucking weak! God, this pisses me off! These fucking dogs...potentially making my family worry...if they found out about this...OH NO! Twilight has that tracking spell...SHIT! If they come down here and get fitted with these collars too...OH FUCK THAT NOISE! I can't take that chance! No more fucking around! I'm getting my sorry ass out of this damn situation!

I picked up a rock and threw my personal safety to the wind. I brought it down again and again against my collar. I could feel my skin being cut as the collar became jagged. I could only hope it doesn't go off!

Gah! This fucking hurts! I'm so close, though! Ahhh! SHIT! *cough* F-finally...I...did it. Sh-shit...there is blood everywhere. I-I better not have fucking cut something major. I'll just...rip some of my shirt off...okay...tie it around my neck now, there th-that's a little better. D...damnit...now it's hard to think. Just...have to stay calm here. Think of the positives...the collar is off. I can hopefully get out of here before the girls come in. Now I just need them to unlock that damn cage door.

I hid the remains of the collar and sat back in the darkest portion of the cage. It seemed to take forever, but a Dog finally came up to let me out.

"Time to work, creature! Wake up!"

I pretended to be asleep against the back wall. There was a rock in my hand, and I was ready to use it. Just step in here, you fuck. If it means getting out of here before the girls worry more...I'll be a fucking monster.

"Stupid, creature!" Please don't bring out the remote before you open the door! "Grr...making me have to shake you awake!" YES! That is too much excitement for what I'm about to do, but damnit I don't care anymore!

The dog came into the cage, and once he was just close enough...*THWAK*! I took his keys from him, and tried to get the fuck out of there!

The cages are in the back, and I have no idea where I'm going! I need a damn weapon! This rock is probably not going to work for long! If I can just keep from fighting too many of these dogs at once...maybe I can do this!

I saw a single dog in the corridor after the cages. When he wasn't looking, I snuck behind him. *THWAK* I was glad these guys were thick-headed. I didn't know how long he'd be out, though, so I knew I needed to hurry and get the fuck out of there! I hadn't been paying attention to myself, but as I walked away from the second dog, my legs nearly gave out underneath me. The combination of exhaustion and blood loss was really fucking with me!

"Well...fuck...." I managed to drag myself further by bracing myself against the wall, but after turning a corner...I found myself looking at three possible routes. "This feels familiar...." Heh, even when I'm fighting for my life, I still think about the dumbest shit. I was thinking about how this felt similar to Sasha's cave. The middle had led to her chambers, so I was going to try the right one this time.

For once, luck seemed to be on my side. I passed by their kitchen and managed to get myself something real to eat. They had brought me food when I was collared, but it was slop at best. They didn't have running water down here, but there were several barrels of clean water; I used my shirt as a rag to get myself cleaned off. Sadly, a lot of blood had already stained my shirt. Best get changed in a hurry once I get out of here. I was surprised those first two Dogs couldn't smell my blood. Hopefully this would be enough to prevent that from happening.

After taking care of that mess, I continued down the tunnel. I was feeling somewhat better now that I had some real fuel to run on, but my neck was still throbbing.

....

....

FUCK! The very next fucking room past the kitchen is the god-dang barracks! I'm sure they don't call it that, but it sure as hell looks like one! Oh? Hohoho...this is going to be something else. They have a barrel of wooden swords in the corner, as well as some rope. A thought is forming, and I'm praying it will work.

There had to be at least a dozen dogs in this room, and I had to be very careful. There were just

as many swords, and I needed all of them for this to work. I tied them together with the rope, and then I hauled them back out the way I came. I stopped at the kitchen once more and grabbed a bottle of liquid that smelled like alcohol. I went past the splitting tunnels towards the cages again, dumping all but one sword into a pile. I checked the second dog I knocked out, and he was thankfully far enough away that this should work.

I poured the alcohol on the pile of swords and lit it with a nearby torch. My plan was to draw attention this way so that I could escape through another. I hoped the lack of blood wasn't affecting my thinking.

With the last sword in hand, I made my way down the left path, and it was nothing but a dozen different mine shafts! I figured I might as well try the middle route now. The smoke was starting to travel along the top of the cave, so a lone guard came to investigate. He never saw me, and I disposed of him the same way as I had the other guards. If they didn't wake up...that's three down.

The adrenaline is starting to kick in, and I'm feeling better. Guilty, but better. Now I remember why setting a fire was a good idea. The smoke will look for the nearest escape route, so I can just follow that. I knew there was a reason I did that...I think. God...I can hardly think straight right now. The smoke is flowing mostly down the middle tunnel...of course it would. Is that ironic? I have no idea....

I start down that tunnel and come into another set of mining tunnels — dozens! Unfortunately, there wasn't enough wood to burn for the smoke to stay thick in this area. It just started to dissipate, and I'm feeling shit out of luck — even more so when I hear yelling behind me. Either one of those dogs woke up or some came down from the barracks. They don't have anything like an alarm, so it isn't like the whole colony would be informed. I just seriously need to get the fuck out of here, now!

Before I could choose a tunnel, another dog ran up behind me. I had stepped out of the way of the opening, so the dog couldn't see me. I waited 'til he was just around the corner and swung my sword at him as he ran past. The opposing momentums collided, resulting in one of the most disgusting crunches I'd ever heard. I hit the dog square in the nose, and it started bleeding as he fell over. Panic set in as I thought I had killed him, but then I noticed he was breathing through his mouth. With a mixture of guilt and relief, I pulled him behind some stalagmites. I guess this is a lime stone cave...that, or this world just doesn't follow certain Earth rules. I'm going to go with the latter.

More yelling echoed down from the tunnel, reminding me of the urgency of the situation. I chose a random path as the yelling started getting closer. It took everything I had to keep running as my whole body screamed at me for being so stupid. I was lightheaded and sore, but I couldn't stop!

As the end of the tunnel came into view, so did another dog...it was Goldie. He spotted me coming and snarled as he pulled out the remote. I wanted to try to psych him out, so I stopped running as soon as I saw him ready it.

"Don't move, creature! Escape ends here! Drop sword and turn around!"

Why isn't he pushing the button? He seemed awfully trigger-happy with it before. No matter...he is alone, and I'm not stopping here.

I pretended to give up hope, stumbling to the side. It felt disgusting to lure him like this, but I was through taking chances. I would do anything to get out. He took the bait as I exaggeratedly tried to keep my head up. Unfortunately, he was smarter than I thought. He threw a punch aimed right at my gut, and I just barely had time to dodge.

"Grrr! Faking creature! I'll punish creature for disobedience!"

"Kiss my ass. Heh, actually don't. You're probably disgusting enough to do it."

That really pissed him off; he charged me almost instantly. I knew he would focus on my sword, so I decided to try faking him out one last time. I had just enough time to throw it into my left hand and point it out in front of me. His eyes went straight to the sword, and he ran forward, knocking it from my hands. What he didn't see, though, was my right fist flying straight towards him. I hit him across the jaw, and he collapsed onto the ground. He had cut up my left hand pretty severely as he swiped away the sword, but I didn't notice. Aware that it was the cruelest, most disgusting thing I've ever done, I stomped him into unconsciousness. It only took three good stomps, but each one made me hate myself more.

As soon as he was out, I picked up the sword and continued my trek out of the mines. I ran into resistance twice more, but I needed to fight only one dog at a time. The first dog managed to injure me pretty badly, so I was now dragging even more. It felt like forever, but I finally saw light at the end of a tunnel. As I neared the exit, though...the sound of dozens of dogs behind me came echoing down. I had just made it...and now I was going to fail. My body was past the breaking point, and I gave up hope. My legs gave out from underneath me, and my mind went foggy. The ground was mostly dirt here, so it was cool to the touch. It honestly felt amazing. I think I'm starting to hallucinate too. Heh...there's Applejack...I guess I have gone crazy.

"Coal!"

Wait...is...is this real? "AJ?"

I-it is real! Oh my god, it's real! Applejack ran forward and lifted my head into her chest. The dogs were so close, and now Applejack was here! I couldn't let them catch us!

"Shh, it'll be all right, Coal. Ah've got this taken care of."

"Wh-what are you saying!? Get out of here! I'm one thing, but I couldn't live if anything happened to you!"

"Hush yerself. Just sleep, Coal, 'n' trust me."

"A-AJ..." I didn't see what happened next. Her body was so soft...and her embrace so comforting.

* * * *

Applejack had run straight to Twilight's after parting ways with Copper and Scootaloo. She started off somewhat slowly, but as her worries grew, so did her speed. By the time she reached Ponyville, Applejack was running as fast as her hooves would take her. She burst in through the front door, startling Twilight and Spike nearly to death.

"Twi! Ah need yer help, now!"

"Calm down, AJ! What happened!?"

"Coal has taken way too long in gettin home from the Diamond Mines! Ah think somethin has happened! Can ya use that magic again?"

"O-of course, AJ. Let me get the gem...."

Spike wasn't sure what to say in this, so he stayed quiet and watched. Twilight levitated the gem out of the chest she stored it in, and she cast the magic. The image came into view just in time for the girls to see Coal knock out the third dog near the fire.

"Oh Celestia!" Twilight reared back in horror at the sight of Coal. He had dried blood all over his shirt, and he was clearly disoriented. Applejack simply stared in horror. A moment later, she was up and running out of the library towards the mines. Twilight yelped as Applejack shot off, but she quickly collected herself. She ran out after Applejack while yelling at her to slow down.

"Wait, Applejack! This is serious! We need to think things through!"

Without slowing down, Applejack turned back to yell her response. "No can do, Twi! He needs mah help now!"

Applejack could be as stubborn as a mule, which Twilight knew from experience. She let out an exasperated sigh and then yelled, "Then I'm coming with you!"

"Ah don't want ya gettin hurt over mah affairs! Ah'll take care of this from here!"

"You're not doing this alone! I'm sure my magic will be enough to give us the edge!"

Spike stepped out of the library and watched his friends race off at breakneck speeds yelling back and forth at each other. He had seen Coal's condition, and Spike started to feel nauseous as he stepped back inside to lie down. Was this important enough to write to the princess about? He couldn't think about it very long; Pinkie Pie burst inside moments later.

"Spike! Where is Twilight!? We've got a major problem! Like a super-ultra-mega-notfunatall-problem!"

"You know about Coal?"

"Coal!? What happened to him!? Wait, no! Don't get distracted Pinkie! It's Dash! My Pinkie sense went off! She is in a lot of trouble!"

"What!? How much trouble!?"

"I don't know! The last time this happened was when she failed her sonic rainboom!"

"Augh! There is too much happening! Twilight ran off with Applejack to save Coal from some Diamond Dogs...."

"What!? No pony hurts my friends!" With a flash of pink, Pinkie was racing at her improbably high speeds towards the mines.

Spike thought back to the last encounter they'd had with the dogs and quickly left for Rarity's.

Upon arrival, he quickly burst in, scaring a client of Rarity's.

"Spike!? What are you doing!? I have no time for games right now...."

"Coal is in trouble with the Diamond Dogs! He has apparently been gone for a while, and Twilight used her magic to see where he was, like before! We saw him badly hurt and knocking out one of the dogs! Twilight, AJ, and Pinkie are running down there now to help!"

Rarity leaned back in surprise but collected herself quickly enough. She turned to the client and apologized with a tip of her head. "I'm very sorry, darling. I promise I'll make things up to you!" With that, she ran out of the boutique, Spike right behind her.

"Wait up! I can't run that fast!"

"Oooh!" Rarity levitated Spike onto her back as she galloped off towards the mines. All of the fuss had caused a lot of commotion around Ponyville, and rumors started spreading almost immediately. No pony knew what was happening, but many new tales about Equestria's human were born then.

Pinkie caught up to Twilight and Applejack quickly, inadvertently making them stop running in surprise. "Girls!"

"Ahh, Pinkie!? Where did you come from!?"

"From your house, silly!"

"AUGH! We don't have time for this! Coal is in trouble 'n' he needs our help!"

"I know that! I'm coming to help too!"

Applejack and Twilight were unsure of how she knew, but they figured it was just a Pinkie thing. They had been stopped long enough for Rarity to get into earshot.

"Wait! I'm coming too!"

"Rarity!?" each pony yelled out in confusion. When they saw Spike on her back, they realized what must have happened.

As soon as Rarity joined the group, each pony gave a determined nod and raced down to the mines. Running as quickly as they were, it didn't take them nearly as long to arrive as it has taken Coal. When they arrived, every pony immediately started looking for a mine shaft.

Twilight stopped for a minute to think. She hadn't brought the gem with her in the immediate panic with Applejack, so she couldn't use that to check on Coal. The others were looking around frantically, but it was a losing battle. With each passing second, things could be taking a turn for the worst, and Twilight couldn't come up with anything to help! She didn't know a tracking spell, because when would she ever need one?

Thankfully, moments later, Applejack heard noise coming from the other side of a sizeable plateau. She ran around it to find Coal collapsed near the exit. Applejack immediately called out to the girls, and they responded immediately.

Applejack ran forward to help him as the girls started to catch up with her. "Coal!"

He was so out of it. She lifted him up and rested him against herself, noticing the dogs quickly advancing upon them. Coal told her to leave, but she had complete faith in her friends.

"Hush yerself. Just sleep, Coal, 'n' trust me."

"A-AJ..." With that, he passed out in her close embrace. The others caught up just in time for the dogs to surround Applejack and Coal.

"Ya'll best not take one step closer iff'n ya don't want me ta' buck ya inta next week!"

Twilight didn't give them a chance to respond as she threw them against the walls with her magic. She stepped forward to get a better look at Coal's condition. The wound on his neck had started bleeding again during his escape, but he didn't notice. It was disgusting to behold, and Twilight felt her rage grow. With her horn glowing and her eyes turning white with righteous fury, she voiced her rage while magical discharge shone around her.

"Why is my friend so badly hurt!? Did you not learn your lesson the last time!? Answer me!"

The others were somewhat shocked at the incredibly violent look on their friend, but each felt similar anger after noticing Coal's wounds. Rarity levitated Coal off of Applejack, and they both left immediately to get Coal some emergency help. Spike took the longest to catch up and joined Rarity and Applejack when they came out with Coal.

Pinkie stayed with Twilight. She was a little worried about how things might go...for the Diamond Dogs.

* * * *

Sweetie Belle had taken all that she could take, and her father was going to bear the release of her pent-up frustrations!

"You have no idea of anything! You and Mom left me time and time again, and now you suddenly care!? You're my father and I love you, but you are the dumbest kind of stallion! Do you really want to know why Copper is so important to me!? It's because he not only saved my life, not only has been a great friend, but also cares about me and loves me! He has been there for me whenever I needed him, and he has done more for me than you ever have! He makes me happy, and you have no right to tell me that what we have is wrong!"

Sweetie Belle couldn't hold back anymore. Even though her father hadn't judged or said as much as others had, he was going to receive ALL of her anger.

"I'm so tired of every pony telling us that we're too young, or that it 'just isn't right!' Why is it so wrong to all of you!? I'm not a big pony yet — I know that — but that doesn't make my feelings any less important! Copper has been so considerate of me and my feelings, and I love him! If

you can't accept that, then just send me back to Ponyville!"

Her father nearly choked right then and there. Sweetie Belle's face was red from all the screaming, and she had been stomping again and again to punctuate her points. Her mother had heard everything from upstairs, and she too was starting to have a panic attack. Neither parent could honestly believe the level of emotion Sweetie Belle was pouring out. It took her father several minutes to digest everything, but what he heard only raised more questions in his mind.

"H-he saved your life..."

"Yes! I fell off a cliff and he saved me! He couldn't save us both, so he crashed right into the ground! It took hours for help to arrive, and we did our best to comfort each other until then! It hurt so much seeing him like that, and he has only done more for me since!"

Sweetie Belle had let out all of the anger she had. Her throat stung as the yelling took its toll on her. She collapsed onto the ground and sobbed into her hooves, still holding too much grief to contain.

This time, it took her father longer to recover, but once he did, he scooped up Sweetie Belle and cradled her in his hooves. She knew it wasn't fair to say all of what she did, and she feared she had gone too far. Thankfully, her father knew it was just venting, but even though it was...those feelings did come from somewhere. He couldn't bring himself to willingly give up his daughter again, so he decided on the next best thing.

"Sweetie Belle...if you would let me...I'd like to meet this colt."

Between her sniffles and sobs, Sweetie Belle spoke only a single word of disbelief. "R-really?"

"Any pony that means this much to you...must be something, don'tcha know? I'm sorry I burnt those pictures, Sweetie; it was just too much too soon for me. Will you forgive me?"

"D-Daddy...of course! I'm sorry for yelling at you! It's just been so hard leaving every pony!"

Her father started fearing the worst. He wasn't ready to give up his daughter again. They had just gotten back together...it was just too soon, but he would do what was best for his daughter. With a deep breath, he asked Sweetie Belle the single hardest question he ever had. "Do...you want to go back to Ponyville?"

Sweetie Belle was shocked to hear this. Would he really let her return? He wouldn't ask that if he wasn't serious; she knew that much. She wanted to return, but...she also knew it wouldn't be right. Her parents needed her, and she knew it. Sweetie Belle thought about it, but she couldn't bring herself to just up and leave her parents. She did, however, come up with an alternative.

"Can...can I live in Ponyville over the summer?"

The relief her father felt couldn't be compared to anything. His daughter loved him enough to stay, and he knew she was staying for him. "Of course, Sweetie Belle. I'd still like to meet this colt long before then, though."

Should she tell him? Everything else was already out in the open, so...this should be too. "He...he can already fly, and...he is hoping to get permission from his Dad to visit me on the weekends..."

Had he heard this at any other time, he may have been surprised. Right now, though, it didn't bother him at all. "Then I'll hopefully meet him soon. I love you, Sweetie. Thank you for forgiving me."

With all her pain and anger gone, Sweetie Belle found comfort in her father's embrace. She nuzzled into him, and he heard her muffled reply through his coat. "I love you too, Daddy."

This moment would have been all the more perfect for every pony if they had heard Sweetie's mother faint upstairs upon hearing about how her daughter fell from a cliff. They'd find her soon enough, but for now things were peaceful.

* * * *

Time was an unknown for Dash now. She had been suspended in the room for what felt like days without so much as a peep from Pine — or Crimson. Dash had already spent most of her energy trying to make things easier on herself. Instead, she had brought pain upon herself all the sooner.

It had been far too long since Dash was given any form of sustenance, and her body was begging for some. Was this how Pine intended to break her? By forcing her into worse and worse states of need and desperation until she would willingly obey him? The thought of prostrating herself before him made her sick to her stomach.

This continued all day. From time to time, ponies could be heard outside the door, but Dash didn't have the strength to cry out to them. She tried once, but upon hearing herself, she stopped. Her pleas were muffled through the gag, and they came across as unbearably weak and pathetic. Dash also honestly doubted they would help, even if they did know. Surely, they were all loyal to Pine, so why even bother?

When Dash heard someone unlocking the door, she had no idea of what to expect. As the door swung open and Pine stepped in carrying an unusual looking device, Dash's started to panic.

"Good! You're awake! Well, you should be, it has only been a few hours, after all!"

Dash's eyes widened. Only a few hours? Had so little time really passed? She had never been patient, but this was just unfair. Pine noticed Dash staring at the device, and a sly smirk appeared on his face.

"Want to know what this is? It's going to take care of that fighting spirit of yours!"

Dash panicked as he placed the device against her stomach. It was unlike anything she had ever seen before, and she had no idea of what to expect.

"It's a marvelous little device, really. Its fuel is unicorn magic, which it converts into something...applicable. I'm not so great with magic, but tools like this make anything possible!"

With that ominous statement, Pine fed the device minor amounts of energy, and it came to life. It sent waves of energy into Dash's body, disrupting her control.

Pine hadn't closed the door all the way behind him, so the soundproofing magic didn't kick in. Crimson stepped up to close the door when various sounds attracted her attention, but before she did, she heard a mixture of pain and shame coming from inside.

"Such a disgusting stallion..."

Chapter 137: Pity

Author's notes: As a fair warning...things are getting grosser. I do my best to only imply, but it doesn't take a genius to figure out some of what has happened. And I'll say this now before there are at least a dozen comments over it. No, Dash was not raped in this chapter. Well, that's all I have for you guys tonight. I'll see ya'll tomorrow with more updates!

With the added strain of keeping Coal afloat, it took much longer for Rarity, Applejack, and Spike to get him to the hospital. By the time they arrived, it was already dark out, and temperatures were far below freezing. It wasn't until they stopped in the lobby to call for help that Applejack realize just how cold Coal's body was. If it hadn't been for the fact that her friends and some other ponies were around, she would probably have broken down right then.

The doctors came in shortly after that and took Coal with them. Applejack was left feeling unsure of what to do next. She wanted to stay, but...the kids needed to know the truth now. She decided it was best to tell them, but of course she dreaded it. Being honest could be such a burden sometimes.

Twilight confronted the dogs for answers, but with each passing second she didn't get one, the magic that forced them against the tunnel walls got stronger. At one point, Pinkie had to try and

calm her friend's rage, for it seemed that she might actually kill them at this rate.

"Twilight, please...th-this is too much..."

It took Twilight a moment to even consider stopping, but she knew it was the right thing to do. She dropped the magic holding the dogs, and they all fell with painful yelps as the bruises they had received from the invisible source throbbed. Twilight stomped the ground and threatened them with worse if she didn't get answers.

Among the dogs were a couple of the five original ones that jumped Coal, and Twilight nearly flipped upon hearing their excuse. It was over gems...over stupid bucking gems! Hearing that one of her dearest friends was once again put through hell in a world he openly claimed to love more than any other over something so trivial made the fire in Twilight burn all over again.

She told them to bring everything they took from Coal to her immediately, and she demanded to speak with the dog in charge of things. If he wasn't brought to her, she threatened to make each dog present answer twice over for him.

Pinkie was past the point of being scared now. Never had she seen Twilight this upset, and she did her best to calm her friend. Once Twilight had ceased her yelling, Pinkie came over and threw her hooves around Twilight her body shaking somewhat. This didn't immediately calm Twilight, but it did calm her eventually.

With a calming heart, Twilight apologized to Pinkie, but she refused to change her mind about talking with the leader. Pinkie didn't argue; she only asked that Twilight not freak out again. Twilight wouldn't promise that, but she did promise she would at least try.

Before Pinkie could try again, the alpha was brought to Twilight. He was surprisingly a much older-looking dog, but he was very large. In height, he was a little shorter than Goldie, but in mass he seemed far greater. Twilight didn't so much as give him a second to speak, instead barraging him with threats and demands.

"I don't care what the circumstances are! You will never harm another pony or creature here again! If I ever so much as hear that any one of you has been less than perfect, I'm collapsing every last tunnel in this Celestia-forsaken place!"

The dogs present started growling to themselves at being ordered around in this way by a pony. They weren't in any situation to argue, but none of them took her words to heart. With a wave of his hand, the alpha agreed without a single word of protest. Every dog and pony present gawked at his cooperativeness, and Twilight couldn't help but feel somewhat guilty.

Shortly thereafter, the fruits of Coal's labor, his shovel, and his coat were brought to Twilight. She freaked out at the sight of his coat and then remembered that humans didn't have much in the way of natural defenses against extreme temperatures. She took hold of everything by

levitation and immediately ran back to town, Pinkie right behind her.

It wasn't until they were out of sight that Goldie joined the group of dogs near the entrance. He was bruised but otherwise all right. "Grrr! Are we going to listen to pony!? Alpha can't be serious!"

With a flick of his wrist, the alpha dog struck Goldie against the cheek, sending him flying with unreal force into a wall.

"It is that kind of temper that gets Goldie into these messes, and don't doubt Alpha again. Let pony think we will listen. We are Diamond Dogs, and Alpha is your only master."

With that, the alpha dog walked back down the tunnel to return to his prior activities. The others looked at each other and snickered. "No pony orders dogs around for long."

* * * *

Scotaloo stopped crying an hour after starting. I had just been sitting on the couch while she let it out. Part of me wanted to go up there and comfort her, but at the same time, letting it all out helps. Shortly after her crying stopped, she joined me on the couch.

"Feeling better, Sis?"

"Shut up, Copper...."

"S-sorry...."

"Huuuh, no...it isn't your fault. You haven't been around for a lot of what Dad has been through. He seems to have the absolute worst luck ever!"

"What do you mean?"

"It...it would take too long to remember everything. It just seems if something can go wrong for him it will, and I'm tired of it!"

I'd never seen Scotaloo like this before. It was honestly pretty unnerving. "Even if he has been through a lot...he has always made it out Ok..."

"Don't get me wrong, Copper. I'm not doubting Dad will get out of whatever problem he is in...I'm just so tired of seeing him hurt! It doesn't matter if it has been months or years. You just don't forget going through such horrible stuff..."

"W-we don't know if it's that bad..."

"Doesn't matter...cause it probably is that bad..."

Cripes! This was depressing as buck! I didn't think there is anything I could say to make her feel better, so I just tried to be a good brother for her.

We stayed on the couch together for a while. Nothing more was said; we just took comfort in each other. I'm not sure how long we were there, though, because AJ stepped inside with a tired look on her face before either of us thought much about the time. Scootaloo perked up immediately; but I knew what AJ's face meant....Scootaloo was right, it was that bad.

"Did you find him!?" Scootaloo jumped off the couch and got right in front of AJ.

AJ just put a hoof on her head on rubbed it slowly. "Yeah...we did. It's just...he got ah little roughed up again. He'll be fine, but he has ta stay at the hospital tonight."

Scootaloo's ears dropped at this, and she immediately jumped into AJ. It was honestly such a sad sight to see them looking so hurt. I had to look away. I didn't want to ask it, but the answer was always no if you didn't ask.

"Can...we visit him?"

AJ seemed to flinch at this. Oh, Luna...it must be pretty bad.

"Ah...Ah'm not sure, ta be honest. Ah ain't lyin when Ah say he'll be fine, but..."

Scootaloo let go of AJ while she was talking. She stood there for a moment, but then shot out of the door! What!?

"Scootaloo! Get back here right this instant!"

AJ was yelling at her to stop, but she wouldn't listen. I took off after her, but I honestly wasn't sure what I should do! AJ looked exhausted, so she was having a hard time keeping up with Scootaloo, who wasn't tired. I could very easily stop Scootaloo, but...I don't think I should. Sorry, AJ...'cause I want to see Dad, too.

It didn't take us long to get there, and thank Luna we were in a public place. I was certain that AJ was going to be furious with us later. Scootaloo ran straight up to the counter and asked the nurse where Coal was being kept. The nurse hesitated, but Scootaloo kept barraging her with questions. After a moment, the nurse pointed down the hall and told us it was the last door on the right.

AJ now bursted in, but Scootaloo and I were already running down there. I felt terrible at the thought of all of this possibly disturbing other patients, but it was too late to stop now! We made it to the door, and...it was an operation room. The red light was on, and that's when it finally hit me. Dad must have gotten really hurt. That...just can't be! He didn't get all that hurt when fighting Sasha, right? He is too strong to be hurt, right!?

AJ caught up with us at the door, and she was probably going to yell at us until she saw our faces. I don't know what I looked like, but Scootaloo looked heartbroken.

"P-please don't make us leave, AJ. I-I want to stay here for D-Dad..."

That did it. Hearing Scootaloo plead to AJ made me lose my composure. I bit my lip to keep myself from sobbing, but it was too hard not to cry. AJ didn't say anything; instead, she just scooped us up and held us. I buried my face into her, and Scootaloo did the same.

A nurse came over with a blanket shortly after, and I could tell it was going to be a long night when AJ tucked us, but not herself, in. I'm not sure how long I watched AJ stare at the operating light, but I didn't get to see it go off. My eyelids grew heavy, and I fell asleep a little after Scootaloo.

* * * *

Sweetie Belle's mother was found and woken up about ten minutes after the conversation ended. Her mother was past livid with what she heard until she got the rest of the story. She was more...open about it, to say the least, bombarding Sweetie Belle with questions pertaining to the more...tender moments.

Knowing that her mother didn't mind was a relief, but the entire situation was more than uncomfortable for Sweetie Belle. She did laugh a little at how her mother was acting more like a friend than a parent at this point. At least there was one pony who didn't seem to have any problems with her and Copper's relationship.

Their talk lasted until dinner; by that point, Sweetie Belle was far past ready for it to end. She ate in silence as her parents discussed what Copper must be like based on what Sweetie Belle told them. It was embarrassing, to say the least; granted, it was comforting.

That day had started out as one of the worst days Sweetie Belle could remember, but it thankfully ended on a high note. She was tucked into bed and wished sweet dreams. Upon snuggling into her pillow, she fell asleep hoping for those sweet dreams to be about her special some pony.

* * * *

"Whoo! What a day! I haven't had that much fun in a long time!" Pine stepped out of the holding room feeling elated. Dash had been put through constant torture, her entire body convulsing as Pine used his device to continuously feed energy into her. Pine loved the sight, and ended up spending his entire evening being entertained by Dash's resistance.

Crimson was coming to get him just as he was stepping out. She caught a glimpse of Dash on the other side, and it was clear she had been through hell.

"Pine...do you have any intention of making Ms. Dash WANT to stay? She can't partake in the joining because she is a pegasus, and I'm not going to even attempt mind control again."

"Yeah...it did get messy last time, didn't it? No matter! I have everything planned out!"

"...well, out with it."

"Ah ah aaaaah!" Pine shook his hoof at the unicorn. "What fun would it be if you knew everything!?"

"I don't care to know everything, Pine. I care to know that you aren't going to break her before we can make use of her. Don't forget about that human, either."

"What about him?"

"Ms. Dash would make great leverage with him. Could you imagine having control of Equestria's only human?"

"Ooooooh! I love the way you think, Crimson! How did you get to be so smart!?"

"Don't flatter me, Pine. It doesn't make me happy, coming from you."

"Ouch! Such cruel words! Saying such things to your only friend! I should feel so hurt!"

"...but you don't...."

"Correct! And do you know why!?"

"...Ms. Dash?"

"Ms. Dash! Oh she put up such a wonderful front as I got to play! I almost can't believe she managed to stay awake during all of that! Such a shame, really. I was going to let her down some and have MORE fun! Guess I'll just try again tomorrow."

"Do you ever wonder why I find you so disgusting?"

"Not really, but I don't care either way! I'm going to have all the fun I want with that lovely pegasus! It's only a matter of time until she gives up and does whatever I tell her to do!"

"So that's your plan. You intend to break her mentally..."

"Great, isn't it!? Breaking bodies is sooo easy, it just gets boring! Breaking wills, on the other hoof — now that is always special!"

"Has she been given food or water? She will up and die on us at this rate."

"Oh! I knew I forgot something!"

"Auugh, for the love of...never mind. I'll take care of it this time. You just get out of here. I think you've done enough for one night."

"Awwww! But I want to stay and see if she'll try and scream at me!"

"Get out of here, Pine!"

"Fiiine!"

With that, Pine wandered off, muttering about new things to try with Dash later. Crimson entered the room to inspect Dash's condition, and she quickly gagged at the sight. Dash was covered in sweat and tears, but the worst thing was the smell. There was no ventilation in the room, so everything was stagnant. Dash was barely awake at this point, but she did notice through tired eyes that there was another pony in the room again.

"Can you hear me, Ms. Dash?"

Dash could hear the voice, but she couldn't understand anything by this point. Crimson took note of this and found a little compassion in her soul. She left for a few minutes and returned, now levitating a large tub of water behind her. Crimson cleaned both Dash and the room before leaving once more to get some food and water.

Dash was hardly aware of the situation. Hours upon hours of being tortured with the device had dulled her senses and mind. Crimson undid the gag around Dash and started feeding her. Crimson had to be slow with her, but Dash had eventually taken in all she could. With some of her physical needs met, she passed out once more.

Crimson noticed bruising starting to form around her shoulders, her own weight stretching her

body. As one final act of pity, she undid the upper clasps and let Dash sleep on the floor. For one added bit of precaution, she sent a large surge of magic into Dash's wings. They would now be useless for quite some time. With a final shake of her head, Crimson went on her way once more. She didn't approve of his methods, but as long as Pine achieved proper results with Dash, it would be acceptable.

Chapter 138: Escape

Author's notes: Well this has been a weird night! I took two separate one to one and a half hour naps yesterday before and after class, and I usually don't for just this reason! I've been awake all night! Oh well, it just means you guys get another chapter all the sooner! Cause what else am I going to do in the A.M.!? What else would I do? Nothin! Cause writing be boss! Heh, hope ya'll enjoy the chapter!

"Wake up there, sugarcubes. Ya'll need ta' be gettin home 'n' cleaned up fer school."

"Huh?...what? Seriously, mom?"

"Seriously, Copper. Iff'n it makes ya feel better, ya'll can check on Coal now. He is still sleepin', but he's lookin' fine."

"Yeah...that sounds good. Hmm? Where is Scootaloo?"

"She woke up on her own ah little while ago. Ah'd imagine she is still cuddlin with Coal some."

"The doctors didn't mind?"

"Heh, ya'll have surely seen that girl's pout face. They couldn't say no iff'n they wanted to."

"Heheh, good point."

yawn It's a big relief to know that Dad is all right. AJ said he doesn't look too bad, but I wonder if she was talking in a relative sense. Like...a "he looks fine, considering what happened" kind of thing. Dad has been moved to one of the recovering rooms down the hall. Huh...his name is the only one on this room's list. I wonder why he gets his own room. It's big enough to hold three, and the room across the hall only has one other pony in it. Why is it that he seems to get special treatment? Heh, well it could be the fact that he is literally the only of his kind here. Would that make him an endangered species? According to Scootaloo, he does always seem to be in some kind of danger. I'm a little surprised that I can make jokes at a time like this.

AJ and I stepped inside to see Scootaloo squeezed between Dad's arm and body. She looked pretty comfortable, to be honest.

"Did ya fall asleep again, sugarcube?"

"Mm mmm. I'm just enjoying how calm Daddy's heartbeat is. *sniffle* I think he's fine...."

"He sure is. We've got ourselves ah fighter there. He'd not go out so easily."

"Hey Mom...what did happen to Dad?"

AJ suddenly looked very uncomfortable. "Ah'll...Ah'll answer yer questions after school today. Ya'll need ta' git down there."

Scotaloo let out a long sigh in response. She leaned up and gave Dad a quick kiss on the cheek before shuffling out of the room. I took one last look at AJ, but she sent me on my way with a wave of her hoof. I wish Dad had been awake. At least, then I wouldn't be wondering when he was going to come to. This was going to make today a very long one.

I end up looking back inside one last time, and...AJ's face betrays her earlier confidence. She looks so...I-I'd better go.

* * * *

Twilight and Pinkie parted ways at the library. Twilight didn't pass the girls and Coal on the race back to Ponyville, so she knew that they must have already gotten Coal to the hospital. She decided the best thing to do was just to call it a night and check on Coal in the morning.

Spike had long since fallen asleep after getting back, and Twilight felt the need to hide all the gems she had gotten from Coal. Thinking back to the fact that Coal went through all of this over petty greed made her anger boil all over again. Before going to bed, she stopped and stared at the spot Coal would sleep when he had stayed here.

"Everything used to be so simple." She ran her hoof over the spot and let out a pained sigh. "I wonder how things would have gone if...no. Best not think about that."

With a heavy heart, Twilight went upstairs and crawled into her bed. Luna's moon was shining very brightly tonight, and Twilight found herself staring at it. She let her thoughts trail off as she lost herself to the soft glow. This peace of mind ultimately brought upon her sleep and hopes for a better tomorrow.

* * * *

"H-huh? Wha..." Dash woke up in the middle of the night to the throbbing of her own body.

"O-ouch...wait...am I...ugh, dangit!" For a moment, Dash thought she had been freed from her confines, but she soon noticed it was only her forelegs.

Dash's body was screaming in discomfort as she tried to bring herself to stand. It took all of her willpower, but she finally succeeded. "This is really going to hurt..."

Preparing to take off at maximum speed, she hoped to free herself from the second set of clasps, but she soon discovered her wings wouldn't respond to her commands. The realization of the severity of her condition came when Dash taking a step forward. She looked at her shoulders to find them a dark and sickly blue. The fact it could be seen through her coat was evidence of how serious this was.

Panic started to set in as Dash tried her hardest to get the clasps undone. She pulled and pulled and pulled, but it only made it hurt more and more. It wasn't until she pulled hard enough to cut herself that the clasp inched down ever so slightly.

Dash knew what it would take to get out, but it took her nearly ten minutes to work up the courage to do it. She spotted the gag that had been used to silence her, and she decided to make use of it. Biting down on the gag, Dash pulled with all her might to free her back legs, but it just wasn't happening. She couldn't afford to quit, though, so she reluctantly decided to try one leg at a time.

Each second was becoming worse than the last as Dash refused to give up. The only sounds that could be heard in that room were the muffled cries of Dash and the gentle dripping of blood onto the floor. It felt like an eternity, but Dash had only been pulling herself out for ten minutes. She wasn't aware of how she even had the energy to do this, but she didn't complain. Well, she did complain — but not about that. With a final tug and a scream, Dash got one leg free from the clasp. She collapsed onto the floor and let herself rest for a moment. Tears were falling, but only from frustration. Dash was determined to get away, and this pain was nothing compared to what she felt Pine would do later.

The second clasp took longer, but she finally succeeded. With that freedom also came the end to her adrenaline. It now took everything she had to simply stay awake. Her back right leg had gotten it the worst, so Dash decided to tie the gag around it to attempt to stop the bleeding.

It was now time to get out of this Celestia-forsaken place, but without the of her wings, Dash had little confidence in the matter. With her heart beating out of her chest...she slowly opened the door. The farmhouse was completely silent as Dash stepped out, moving slower than she ever had before. The first thing she noticed was the window immediately to her left, and the second thing she noticed was that the sun was coming up...and this was a farm. Dash's eyes widened as she opened the window and climbed through. She didn't realize that she was on the second floor until it was too late; she fell straight down with her hooves over her mouth to muffle the scream that followed. It seemed the universe wasn't too cruel, as Dash landed into a very muddy section of ground. It knocked some of the air out of her, but she wasn't too harmed from

the fall.

The mud clung to her body and made her attempt at escape all the more difficult. The added weight was forcing Dash to move past her physical limits, and she collapsed many times as she ran. There was only one place around that she honestly felt would be safer than this town, and ironically enough...it was the Everfree Forest.

* * * *

Waking up in a hospital bed...oh, the memories. How many times is this now? Four times? I've lost count. Wait...how did I even..."AJ!"

"Coal!? Yer awake!"

I remember AJ holding me as I passed out and called to her out of reflex. She had been just outside the room when I did. AJ ran over to my bedside and climbed up onto me. The girls have done this a lot in the past...is this normal?

My thoughts are interrupted by the sight of Applejack's angry tears falling onto me.

"Ah'm so glad yer okay, but Ah'm so mad at ya Ah can hardly take it!"

"Mad at me? What did I do?"

"Ya got hurt! Again! Yer ah big feller, so stick up fer yerself more!"

This is not what I need right now. Let's see if I can't move this conversation away from me being a weak bitch. "How did we get out of there?"

"Twi' came in and cleaned up. Rarity levitated ya back ta' town fer me and dropped ya off here."

I can't believe how pathetic I am. A pony six years younger than me had to come to my rescue...again! This is so fucking frustrating! AUGH! Damn it! My neck still fucking hurts! Huh...more of that fake skin stuff. I need to see if I can't start carrying this crap around with me. It seems to close up wounds really well.

Applejack is still glaring at me with angry eyes. I know she isn't angry AT me per se, but I'm having a hard time looking at her. She isn't stopping, so I guess I'd better start apologizing. "Sorry, AJ...."

"Ya better be! Scootaloo 'n' Ah were worried sick about ya! Ah hated em at first, but ya'll need ta start takin' those swords with ya or somethin'! Ah can't take seein' ya like this! Ah just can't..."

This is salt on an open wound, to say the least. I was beaten, humiliated, beaten some more, and humiliated again, and now I'm being told how much I suck for it. I know that isn't fair to Applejack, but this just isn't right. Part of me wants to get mad, but I'm keeping my cool. I know Applejack can be very hotheaded, and I couldn't rightly say I love everything about her if I can't put up with it when it's directed at me.

She seems to get more and more frustrated with me the longer I stay silent. Just what can I say, 'Sorry for suffering at the hands of others!?' It would be a lot easier to justify getting mad here if Applejack wasn't still crying on me. I just wish she would hurry up and get all of this out of her system.

"Yer such ah pain in the flank, Coal..."

"...I know..." I sighed.

"Ya make me and yer kids worry all the time..."

"I-I know..."

"Ya make life so hard so often..."

"I-I'm s-sorry..."

I wonder if this has happened to me before, and that's how I developed all of my self-hate. 'Cause I'm having a very hard time not thinking I'm the biggest piece of shit ever. Applejack's continuing to cry while she sits on my chest and rests her face against my cheek.

"Ah'm so glad yer all right...Ah love ya so much, Coal. Please stop doin' this ta me..."

This is going to hurt to say, but it needs to be said. "...wish I could. I didn't go down there intending for this to happen; it just did. I never want to upset you, AJ. I just don't control everything. Please don't hate me for this. I'm sorry, but...this could happen tomorrow for all I know..."

Applejack started holding me tighter and tighter as I spoke. I put my arms around her and rubbed her back as she slowly got control over her emotions. The tears stopped flowing, but her face was still damp from them.

"Ah'm sorry, Coal. Ah know it isn't yer fault, but...it's just too much sometimes..."

"Sorry I'm such a pain in the flank, AJ."

"Don't give me ah hard time too, Coal. Just...tell me ya love me, and hold me for ah while."

"I love you so much, AJ. So very very much...."

* * * *

"Now I know I forgot something important! Hmmm...." Pinkie Pie was walking towards the hospital to check on Coal. She was tilting her head back and forth in an effort to remember whatever it was she forgot, but it just wasn't coming to her.

She arrived at the hospital in time to see Twilight talking with the nurse behind the front counter.
"Hiya, Twilight!"

"Oh, hi Pinkie."

"Coal all right?"

"I was just asking the nurse about it now."

Pinkie stepped next to Twilight, and they both turned their attention to the nurse.

"Well, as I was telling Ms. Sparkle earlier, Coal is fine. There were a few complications with treating him, but nothing major when we discovered them."

"What were these complications?"

"Well, Ms. Sparkle...Coal had small bits of metal embedded into him. Our lead surgeon had to be very careful when removing them. We're learning more and more each time he comes in, but a lot of what we learn is distressing." Twilight wasn't sure what the nurse was getting at. Pinkie was tilting her head back and forth again trying to understand. "I mean to say...his body is...unique."

"Unique? Well, he is the only human here..."

"I don't mean it like that, Ms. Sparkle. Coal's body has started becoming...rather receptive to magic."

"What do you mean receptive? Did something happen!?"

"Calm down, Ms. Sparkle! I just mean that what would normally take a lot of magic to do on a pony...isn't nearly as difficult to perform on Coal."

"So...you're saying he is easily influenced by magic. As in, if I were to, say, levitate him, he would be lighter than a pony of equal weight?"

"Something like that, yes. We aren't completely sure what has caused this, but we believe continued exposure of high-level magic would be the cause."

"Is...this going to be a problem for him?"

"It depends, Ms. Sparkle. A spell meant to ease pain would be much more effective, but..."

"If he were to be on the receiving end of a spell meant to do harm..."

"It would be much worse, yes."

"This is just bizarre...I need to write to the Princess about this. Well, it can wait until after we check on Coal. May we, nurse?"

"Of course. He is in the third room on the left."

"Thank you."

With that, Twilight and Pinkie made their way to Coal's room. Pinkie had felt left out during the whole conversation, but she figured she would make up for it by getting to talk with him. They poked their heads around the corner to see Applejack atop Coal...kissing him...hard. Their eyes got wide and they immediately got out of there!

The nurse saw them running back down the hallway, and she asked them what happened.

"Don't go into his room!" Twilight's face was red as she spoke, and the blush wasn't going away any time soon.

Pinkie just stood there for a moment before she started giggling.

The nurse gave the girls a confused look as she spoke. "Why shouldn't we go in his room?"

With a big smile, Pinkie answered for Twilight. "He's bobbing for Apples!"

Chapter 139: Catching On

This is no time for school. I swear I've become the worst kind of student! I can never focus anymore! Something is always going on that causes some form of distress or another! AUGH!

Scotaloo is having just as hard a time today, too. Applebloom and Dinky could tell something

was bothering us, and they asked us about it at lunch. Scootaloo wasn't really in the mood to explain, so I took it upon myself to fill them in. Applebloom was upset, but she didn't seem surprised. I guess Dad really does get into a lot of trouble around here. Dinky, on the other hoof, seemed really surprised. She is really good at asking questions! Her questions lasted all through lunch, and she even started up again after school! A lot of the questions were about things before my time, so I couldn't answer them. Dinky started asking MORE questions about why I couldn't answer and how I'm so old while Coal is so young. It's too early in our friendship to tell her how I came to be! I had to basically tell her that I really need to check on Dad. She didn't seem bothered by it, so I got out of there in a hurry!

Because of my talk with Dinky, I didn't get out of school for the longest time. Scootaloo had already made it to the hospital when I arrived. I made my way to Dad's room to find him surrounded by nearly every pony! Rarity, Pinkie Pie, Twilight, Applejack, Fluttershy, and Scootaloo were there. They looked really serious...and Scootaloo was hitting Dad while crying...what is going on?

* * * *

Dash had to make it across three farms, including Pine's, to make it to the forest. She couldn't run straight there because the town center was buried. She made it through Pine's and Tiny's farms with relative ease. It was past sunrise when she reached Onyx's farm, and there were several ponies already out and about working. Dash didn't want to be seen, but she had to get into the forest as soon as possible. She took the road between Tiny's and Onyx's farm to get along the southern edge. From there she would make her way to the forest. It was as good a plan as any; unfortunately, one of the workers spotted her. He hadn't forgotten how Dash had yelled at Onyx, and he yelled at her as she passed. She was trying her best to stay composed and hide her incredibly poor physical condition.

One pony noticed blood dripping from Dash's back legs as she walked, and he ran over to satisfy his curiosity. Once he was close enough to get a better look at Dash, he fell back in shock. Dash didn't know just how bad she looked, but it was horrifying, to say the least. In an unusual act of kindness, he offered her assistance after calming down, but Dash refused. She didn't stop walking during any of that. Granted, it wasn't so much walking at this point. The other pony told Dash he was going to get others for help, and he wouldn't listen to her pleas for him to stop. She gritted her teeth and ran as fast as her legs could carry her as soon as he was far enough away.

Other nearby ponies were alerted to Dash's presence by this, and they started running after her. Dash couldn't think straight at this point, and every pony looked like an enemy. Her bleeding was only getting worse the more she ran, but she couldn't stop. The edge of the forest was so close now, but so were the voices behind her. The voices were getting closer and closer...one of them belonged to Onyx. Dash looked back to see him charging at her with incredible speed.

"Just leave me alone!" Dash pleaded as she turned her attention back to running. Her cries didn't go unheard, but they only sparked more curiosity about the situation. Onyx was the only one to keep up with Dash even in her condition as she pushed herself even further. The only things keeping her in motion were her sheer force of will and the fear of being caught.

Dash finally made it into the forest, but Onyx was now only a few yards away. Dash knew she would be caught if she didn't do something, but she had no idea what! This edge of forest was close to a swampy area. There was muck everywhere, and by a stroke of luck, Dash spotted a small, flooded-out den. She managed to jump in and quickly covered herself completely in the muck. Her hope was that Onyx wouldn't be able to see her if she camouflaged well enough. It was a long shot, but she just couldn't outrun him anymore. If he found her...it was all over.

"Come out here! I know you can hear me! What the buck is going on!?"

....

"Fine, just you try and hide! I'll be back with the others. We'll figure out what is going on one way or another!"

* * * *

It was time for Rarity's and Fluttershy's usual spa day, but the spa was indefinitely closed; renovations were taking place. Aloe and Lotus were there talking with several other ponies, neither of whom the girls recognized. Apparently, they had struck a business deal for expansion because of all the business that Coal attracted. They would have to close down until the renovations were done.

"That's actually very good timing, darlings! Coal is in the hospital due to an...incident. The extra time off will do him wonders."

"Oh, thank goodness! We worried he would be upset with us for not telling him!" Aloe didn't think carefully about her immediate reaction, so Lotus thought to ask the important question.

"How is he doing? I'd rather him be angry at us than hurt..."

"He should be fine! In fact, since the spa is going to be closed, I'm thinking I'll go check on him!" Rarity stopped for a moment and turned to Fluttershy. "That is, if you're okay with it, darling!"

"O-of course! I'm worried about him too..."

Aloe stepped back up again, taking Lotus's place. "Please send him our regards. We can't leave

at the moment, I'm afraid."

"Of course, dears! I look forward to when you finally reopen!"

With that, Rarity and Fluttershy made their way back to the hospital. No pony had told Fluttershy about the incident, but she had managed to control her shock in the presence of Aloe and Lotus. Now that she was alone with Rarity, she allowed her concerns to spill over.

It didn't take long for Rarity to explain, but Fluttershy became misty-eyed by the end of it. "I hope he is all right..."

"Coal has been through worse, Fluttershy. I'm positive he'll be back to his usual self in no time!"

* * * *

Twilight and Pinkie grabbed a late lunch together. It had been a while since just the two of them had done anything together; things were pleasant. Knowing that Coal was fine...more than fine made their worries dissipate quickly enough.

Pinkie was still rocking her head back and forth, trying to remember what was so important before.

"Something bothering you, Pinkie?"

"Ohhh, there was something important I needed to tell you, but now I can't remember it!"

"Important? Like...party important, or..."

"Parties ARE important, but this was much worse!"

"And you just can't remember what? How do you forget something like that?"

"I don't know! All this rotten stuff with Coal made me forget..."

Pinkie was looking a little dejected as it was clearly bothering her. Twilight pondered for a moment, eventually figuring that she would just try to jog Pinkie's memory. "Was it about one of our friends?"

"...wait...wait...WAIT...YES! RAINBOW DASH IS IN TROUBLE!"

Twilight's first thought was along the lines of "that didn't take long," but her secondary reaction was shock at what she had just heard.

"What? How would you even know that?"

"My Pinkie sense went off yesterday! I meant to tell you sooner!"

"Let me guess...you don't know how bad it is?"

"Come on, Twilight! The last time this happened, Dashie failed her sonic rainboom, and Coal had to save her!"

"Huh!? When did this happen?"

"Before Dashie and Applejack started sharing Coal..."

"Wait! You know about that?"

"You do too?"

"Yeah...I walked in on them in bed together the day I accidentally turned Coal into Copper... (Chapter 76, people! How did nobody catch this!?)"

"Heheh, they thought they hid it so well!"

"We're getting ahead of ourselves, Pinkie. Are you sure Rainbow is in trouble?"

"I'm more than sure, I'm Pinkie Positive!"

Twilight groaned at this, but did her best to take Pinkie seriously. "So...any ideas on what we should do? Rainbow is really far away..."

"Hmmm...do you think we should tell Coal?"

"I...I don't want to, but...I know he'll be furious if something happens and he could have prevented it. We...have to tell him..."

"Twilight...you know he'll probably leave immediately..."

"I-I know, but...I just...I have to do what he would want me to do. Even if it makes him do something stupid again..."

"Maybe we should use the gem spell again first. I don't know how much trouble Dashie is in, so it may not be too bad..."

"That's a good idea, Pinkie. I've got a spare gem at home, so why don't I just meet you at the hospital?"

"Okey-dokey-lokey!"

With that, they went their separate ways. Pinkie bounced off to the hospital, and Twilight made her way to the library. She grabbed a single blue gem and then made her way back to the hospital. She entered Coal's room to find that Rarity and Fluttershy were there along with the others.

"Hi, girls...all paying Coal a visit?"

"Yes, darling. Now...Pinkie tells us that Rainbow may be in trouble...is that what the gem is for?"

Coal was looking dead serious, and he seemed to be releasing an aura of silent rage that made the air hot around him. "Twilight...please cast it."

"Coal...please calm down. Yer in no condition ta be gettin this worked up..."

"I'm sorry, AJ...but Dash is already late getting home. Please Twilight, cast it."

It took Twilight a moment to compose herself, but she did as Coal asked. He would be used as the possession like the others had before. Her horn's light lit up the room, and the image took shape over Coal's bed. It was impossible to tell what anything was for the longest time. It just looked like a swamp. Coal was getting frustrated with this, and started clenching his fist in anger.

"Where is Dash!? She isn't here Twilight, something must have gone...w...wrong..."

As he spoke, Dash's form became visible, shifting inside the hole. It was impossible to make out just how bad her condition was, but Coal leaned up and took a long, hard look into Dash's eyes. The others were just now seeing Dash inside the hole, and each had their mouths agape in shock.

Coal finally leaned back and put his hands over his eyes. "Sorry, Applejack...I'm going to be gone for a while."

"Coal...ya can't just..."

"I think the universe wants me to. The spa is closed indefinitely, and I have so much anger to burn off. I think figuring out what in the buck is happening to Dash will get that out of my system."

Applejack's eyes watered, but she didn't argue further. She just buried her face into Coal to muffle her growing sobs. Rarity and Fluttershy were feeling guilty for giving Coal the perfect excuse to leave, but they weren't honestly mad at him.

Twilight stepped forward and put a hoof onto Coal to get his attention. "You aren't in any condition for such a long trip...it'll take days for you to be better..."

"I don't care. I'm not going to let my lover suffer like this." Fluttershy was the only one in the room to gasp in shock. The others gasped more at the fact Coal said that. "I'm tired of hiding it, AJ, so I'm not going to anymore. AJ, Dashie, and I are in a relationship together. We have been for some time, and it has been working out very well. So I hope each of you will forgive me for taking Dash's...situation more than personally."

Twilight wanted to confess she already knew, but she figured it wouldn't matter at this point. The others shuffled nervously as Coal stared off into space for a moment.

"Twilight...would you be willing to do me a huge favor?"

"Y-yes, Coal?"

"Commission a healing potion from Zecora. I'm going to go home and prepare for the trip."

"Coal..."

"Daddy, no!" Scootaloo arrived just in time to hear Coal talk about leaving. She ran up and jumped onto Coal, crying her heart out. "You can't! You just can't! You'll get hurt again! I just know it!" Scootaloo started beating Coal's chest as her frustrations grew too large.

This lasted for several minutes, and it was still happening when Copper arrived. "Dad? What's going on?"

Chapter 140: It Begins

"Are you going to participate this time, Sweetie Belle?"

"Yes, sir..."

"Excellent! Now, every pony, take your places!"

Sweetie Belle was back in choir after a rather pleasant day at school. Again, there wasn't much interaction with others...up until choir practice ended. A group consisting of three colts and two fillies approached Sweetie Belle before she had gathered her things for the day.

The fillies were earth ponies, one colt was a pegasus, and the other two colts were unicorns. The first filly had an off-cream coat with a teal mane and a cutie mark of a string of musical notes. The second filly had a deep blue coat with a black mane. Her cutie mark was a microphone. The first unicorn colt had a white coat with a half-black, half-red mane, and his cutie mark was a single sixteenth note. The other unicorn colt had the same white coat with a black and red mane, but the mane colors were inverted. His cutie mark was two thirty-second notes, crossed. The pegasus colt had an orange coat and a red mane. His cutie mark was a heart wrapped in musical notes.

They stepped up to Sweetie Belle and introduced themselves one at a time. The off-cream filly's name was Aria, and the second filly was Lyric. The two unicorns were twins; their names were Pitch (the one sixteenth) and Frequency (the two thirty-seconds). The pegasus colt's name was Brio.

After introducing themselves to Sweetie Belle, they started behaving friendly enough and asked her questions. She was a little hesitant at first, but she soon enough came to enjoy the company. They talked for nearly an hour before Sweetie Belle noticed the time.

"Oh! I best be getting home. My parents were expecting me home after practice. It was very nice meeting all of you!"

Pitch and Frequency did a perfectly synchronized bow for Sweetie Belle before wishing her a pleasant evening, also in unison. "Have a wonderful evening, Sweetie Belle."

The two fillies rolled their eyes at them before sharing their goodbyes as well. Brio was the last one to say goodnight, and he did so with a very energetic backflip. This made every pony chuckle a little. Sweetie Belle walked home that afternoon feeling uplifted. Her parents knew about Copper, she had made new friends, and things were looking to be all right. Maybe this really wouldn't be all that hard, after all.

* * * *

Pine was humming himself a little tune as he got up and around. His thoughts were of what new fun he could have with his favorite pegasus.

"I'm thinking today I'll take off the gag...oooh, her pretty voice is going to make this soo much more enjoyable!"

Upon cleaning up, he made his way down the hall and to the left where Dash had been. He stopped as he noticed the door...and window were open. Pine's eyes widened as he ran into Dash's holding room. The first thing he saw was the lack of Dash; the second was the blood on and around the clasps.

"She still had the energy to escape!?! If I weren't so angry I'd be impressed! CRIMSON!!!!" Pine ran out of the room and made his way to Crimson's room. He burst in through the door and was immediately thrown to the floor by magic.

"It's too early for this nonsense, Pine! What has you so worked up?"

"Keh! M-Ms. Dash escaped!"

"..."

Pine looked up to see Crimson's eyes burning with rage and another emotion he couldn't put his hoof on. "C-Crimson?"

"We lost the first pegasus...we aren't losing this one! Gather every pony for the joining; we're finding her immediately after!"

"R-right!"

Pine quickly followed Crimson's order, gathering all of the ponies into the large empty room in the basement. Upon finishing, he ran back upstairs to get Crimson. She was already making her way there at a much quicker pace than normal. Pine was about to say something, but Crimson forced his mouth shut with a flash of her horn. "I don't even want to hear your voice today, Pine! Do you understand me!?"

Pine nodded, and Crimson released the magic. They stepped down into the basement, and Crimson stood in front of the mass of unicorns. Her horn began to glow as she readied the spell used to maintain order in the farm. Each unicorn's horn glowed with a much weaker light, but the sheer quantity of unicorns present made their combined light glow brilliantly. Crimson's light grew brighter and brighter until the entire room was filled with a bloody red. The light took on the form of individual strands that latched onto the other unicorn horns. It enveloped them until their own lights took on the same color and properties as Crimson's. The entire process took about ten minutes, but the effects would last for a little more than a day. Once the light faded and Crimson returned to normal, she began giving out the orders.

"We are looking for Ms. Dash! She is to be found at all costs! It'll take far too long to receive another pegasus, and they'll surely become suspicious if another one gets hurt or goes missing! Failure is unacceptable, and it will result in private discipline from Pine! Am I understood!?"

There was a collective "Yes Ma'am" as the entire congregation marched out of the basement and onto the farm grounds. They formed a circle around the farm house and then faced away from it. A second later, each unicorn shot off in mad pursuit of the missing Dash.

"What is going on out here!?" Lavender stepped out of the farm house to the cries of her workers as a wave of unicorns nearly trampled over them. "Is Crimson finally making a move? Every pony inside!"

Without a second thought, every single one of Lavender's workers ran inside the farmhouse and began implementing the lockdown procedures. Every window and door was barred except Lavender's door on the deck of the top floor. From there, she watched as dozens of unicorns rampaged across the farms. "Curse that damned foal! I thought we had more time...."

"Onyx!" Pearl was crying out for help as she was nearly trampled again and again as pony after pony nearly ran over her.

Onyx had just organized a search party for Dash when this started, and he was already in no mood for this.

"That's it! I've had enough of this shit for one day! If they don't wear our colors, then buck them senseless!"

After giving his orders, he made a break to Pearl's rescue by ramming into every unicorn who got into his path. Their original orders were only to find Dash, but with hostility came backup orders. After picking themselves up, they took hold of Onyx and broke his body. This happened before any other pony could follow his order, so they were spared his fate.

"Onyx, no!" Pearl ran over to his bleeding form and wept as his body convulsed in pain.

"B-bucking, Crimson...."

"Shh. Please don't talk, Onyx *sob* s-save your strength...."

"Don't start that, Pearl. You know how I feel about showing weakness."

"I don't care! J-just don't die on me!"

It wasn't until after the waves of unicorns had made it past Onyx's farm that his workers came out to his aid. He was unable to move on his own, so he was transported inside as carefully as possible. Once he was brought to what few medically trained ponies they had, Pearl made a break for Tiny's farm. She believed Crimson was making her move; as much as she knew Onyx hated to do it, Pearl was going to ask for help.

Tiny's farm was also being overrun with almost mindless unicorns as friends and loved ones weren't as lucky as Pearl had been. Many were trampled into unconsciousness, unable to get out of the way in time. Tiny, much larger than them, managed to work his way through them to assist those fallen. He knew what would happen if he opposed them, and couldn't take that risk.

"Tiny!"

"Pearl!? What are you doing here!? Get out of here before Onyx catches you!"

"He was badly hurt by Crimson's puppets! We need your help! Crimson is attacking!"

"No...she isn't...."

"What!? How do you explain all the unicorns, then!?"

"Look at them! They're searching for something! Just get every pony inside and don't come out until they're gone!"

"R-right!"

With that, Pearl made her way back home as Tiny aided the wounded. Crimson and Pine watched all of this happen from the top of their farmhouse with a telescope, and it was all Pine could do to follow his order. He gave Crimson pleading eyes as he prostrated himself before her.

"Augh...fine. Just stop looking so pathetic."

"Yay! I can't believe how easy this is! Why haven't we just killed all of them if it's this easy, Crimson!?"

"I don't care to kill them, Pine — just to have them obey me."

"Awwww, but they won't ever listen to us! They're all too stubborn!"

"If we had control of the weather around here we would have control of them. I'm tired of playing this game, Pine. It's time they all submit like they are meant to."

"Does that mean!?...."

"Only if we can capture Ms. Dash. If she informs others, the Princess will be breathing down our necks in no time. No matter how unified we are, we can't hold off the Royal Guard with our numbers."

"Well, that just isn't fair! Why can't we control everything!?"

"Give it time, Pine. I haven't given up just yet."

* * * *

"Good timing, Copper. You need to hear this as well." What is Dad talking about? I just got here, and...he looks so angry.

"Dad...?"

"Dash is in some kind of trouble, and I'm leaving to go help her."

"What!? B-but what are we going to do without you!?"

"AJ has control of my savings, and I shouldn't be gone that long. You'll be fine, Copper. All of you will."

AJ is looking really upset, though not nearly as upset as Scootaloo is. Dad is trying his hardest to comfort her, but she just won't stop crying! What is going on here!?

"We should take our leave, darlings. This is a family matter, after all...."

"O-oh y-yes! S-sorry to intrude...."

"B-but!"

"Don't be difficult, Pinkie...we need to let Coal handle things the way he deems best."

"Okey dokey...lokey..."

Rarity, Fluttershy, and Pinkie leave, but Twilight stays behind. She doesn't look so much mad as she does...determined.

"Coal...I'll get you that healing potion, on one condition."

"Yes?"

"I'll be coming with you."

"Twilight...you know I can't risk you getting hu—"

"This coming from the man who couldn't even handle a few Diamond Dogs? No, Coal. You need me, and you know it."

Oh, Luna! Dad is looking pissed! I've never seen him look so bucking scary!

"Twilight...I'll tell you right now...I'm tired of being a burden just as much as you're tired of it. I don't know what is going on with Dash, but I know something is causing it. And if I find out something is intentionally harming her...I'm going to take care of it. Do you understand ME, Twilight?"

"Yes. Gather what you need and meet me outside of town in four hours. That should give me enough time to prepare and get you that potion."

"Coal...bring Dash back safe, all right?"

"I will, AJ. Take care of yourself. Copper, you're the man of the house while I'm gone. I expect nothing but the best from you."

"Y-yes, sir."

"Good."

This is unbelievable...Dad has never looked this...hateful before. Dash must be in serious trouble for this to be happening! Dad forces himself out of bed, and he nearly falls over! Scootaloo's worn herself out, and AJ is comforting her.

"Let's do this, Twilight."

"Don't ya'll do anythin stupid, all right? Ah'm countin on ya ta make all of this up ta me when ya get back, Coal...."

"I will. Copper, Scootaloo, AJ...I love all of you, and I'll see you soon."

"I love you too, D-Dad...." This isn't right! This just isn't right! I-I-I need to do something here, but what!?

* * * *

Curse this fucking body of mine! Curse my fucking dependencies! I can't believe I'm letting Twilight get involved in this! What choice do I have though!? Damn it!

Four hours...that sounds like too long, but it took me nearly an hour to just get home! AJ, Scootaloo, and Copper didn't follow me, though. I'm not sure where they're going to wait, but I hope I can say goodbye to them once more before I leave.

Okay...I'm taking my blades and my walking stick. The lantern...I'll be taking that rope from the

shed, too. I'm sure that could come in handy. It isn't really possible to bring along food or whatever, so I predict a lot of foraging in my future. Let's see...wasn't there something I had to do today? Oh, hell! Those animal houses are done. I'll just leave a note for Applejack, I guess.

...That's about all I can do here. I make my way to the meeting point, taking me nearly an hour and a half, so it'll be about an hour before Twilight arrives. I arrive to find that Applejack is already there waiting for me. Oh buck...this is going to be difficult.

"Hey, AJ. Where did you send the kids?"

"They're stayin with Fluttershy fer now...."

She looks to be a combination of pissed and worried. That is dangerous coming from a woman, and I should know! "Sorry I'm such a pain, AJ...."

"Me too, but Ah know ya only do what ya know ta be right. Ah'm expectin another date like before once ya get back, though."

"You got it." I sat down next to her, and pulled her into my lap. I brushed her mane and kissed her head the entire time we waited on Twilight. Applejack returned as much, if not more, affection to me. I'm so lucky to have her....

When Twilight did finally arrive, she levitated me a large vial of purple liquid immediately. "Zecora said that will burn, but you'll be in top form after taking it."

"Thanks, Twilight." I give Applejack a quick kiss, and then I stand up. If this is anything like last time...I don't want Applejack on top of me for this. "Well...down the hatch!"

Chapter 141: Frustrations

Author's notes: I was once again doing a lot of thinking over my story at work today, and one thing kept popping into my mind. I've always loved stories that have the readers pick roads or actions the character will take, and that got me thinking about the one time I have done that so far. I thought about it a lot, and I think I came up with the biggest change between the "yes" and "no" roads for the three way relationship. Had Coal said no...Copper never would have come to be. The whole incident started with Coal fainting upon Dash's comment about the "adult" material of them. That wouldn't have happened if that relationship never started. Wow...that really puts that decision into perspective for me! How vastly different would the story have been if "no" won? Immensely it seems. Well, that's my weird thought for the night. Hope ya'll enjoy the chapter!

AJ ended up asking Fluttershy if she would be willing to watch us for a while. I'd like to be a little angry that she wants Dad to herself, but at the same time, I know why. It's easy to forget

sometimes that their feelings for each other are how I feel about Sweetie Belle. When I look at it that way...I'd want to say goodbye one-on-one, too.

That may not be the only reason...Scootaloo is looking a little sick from working herself up, and Fluttershy is treating her. Scootaloo is lying on her back on Fluttershy's couch, and Fluttershy is dabbing her with a damp washcloth to cool her down.

"Copper, if you wouldn't mind...would you go into the upstairs bathroom and fetch me the red box on the cabinets?"

"Sure will, Fluttershy."

It has been too long since I've seen her. We got pretty close for a while, but life always seems to lead ponies in different directions. I don't think Fluttershy's bunny likes me too much. He keeps giving me funny looks as I sit around. I tried talking to him at one point, but he keeps doing all these really weird motions before running off. Such a weird animal.

Anyway, I bring Fluttershy the box, and she pulls out a thermometer for Scootaloo. "Oh no...do you think she is really sick?" I ask, worried.

"Oh, umm...I'm not sure. She may have just worked herself up too much...."

"Can't say I blame her...this whole situation feels like a nightmare come to life..." *sigh* I'd better stop talking like that. It seems to make Fluttershy worry, and she has her hooves full. "Mind if I go for a quick flight to clear my head?"

"Oh, well...does Applejack mind if you do that at this hour?"

"Hmmm...to be honest, I'm not entirely sure. I usually go through Dad when asking to do something."

"I-I'm not sure then...."

"Don't worry about it, Fluttershy. I'll just try to get some sleep."

Hmmm...that's somewhat disappointing, but I can't say it was too surprising. Since the couch is in use, I think I'll just get comfortable on the rug. *sigh* Easier said than done. There's just too much going on for sleep! Best not make things harder on Fluttershy, though. Augh, I hope you know what you're doing, Dad....

* * * *

Holy...god...this sucks! I'm not nearly as hurt as I was the last time I took one of these, but it somehow is just as bad! I love this fucking tree! It is the only thing keeping me standing right now! If I wasn't in such HUGE AMOUNTS OF PAIN, I'd probably make a tree joke about Fluttershy.

The worst damn part is that I'm having to make it seem like it isn't too bad. I don't need the girls worrying any more than they already do! Easier said than done, though! This must not be the same kind of potion, because the way it hurts is completely different! Last time, it primarily burned in my chest where the wound was, but now it was dispersed throughout my entire body! The worst part came when my senses became incredibly dull! I couldn't see, hear, smell, taste, or even feel the damn tree I was clutching for support! But of course I would be able to feel my internal pain! I guess I should say I couldn't feel anything touching my skin, because I was feeling a lot of something inside! Applejack could have been trying to comfort me right now, and I wouldn't even know it! My body wanted to thrash around as each beat of my heart sent new waves of fire like heat through my body. At one point, even my ability to think left me. I was nothing but a panting husk of a man, clinging to a tree as if my life depended on it!

The pain seemed to last longer than it really did, though. It felt like forever, but it only lasted around ten minutes. I let myself slide down the tree when it was over, and I almost hate admitting it...but I felt awesome! I was out of breath, but my whole body just felt light! My senses slowly came back to me as the world once more came alive. I could hear the sound of the tree limbs straining in the wind. I could smell the clean, fresh air. I had taken a seat on a small rock that I didn't even know was there at first, but threw out from underneath me as my sense of touch came back. When my sight returned to me, the first thing I saw was Applejack trotting over and holding me. Her face didn't show signs of worry; instead, it showed signs of relief. I put my hand to my neck, and I couldn't feel anything to suggest that there had been a gash there just yesterday.

My last sense was brought to my attention as Applejack leaned up and kissed me. It surprised me somewhat at first, considering Twilight was standing just a few feet away. She did turn away when she realized that I was uncomfortable for her, and I appreciated the gesture. I turned all of my attention towards Applejack, and I returned her love as much as I could. We had already said everything we needed to say, so we spent our last few minutes together putting our mouths to different use. I love this mare so much, but I think she forgot about Twilight when she started moaning into me. We were just kissing, so even I was a little confused. My eyes flickered to Twilight, who looked to be shifting her weight uncomfortably.

It wasn't until I felt tears falling onto me that I realized what was happening. She was trying to get the most out of this as possible, and that cut me deep. It was an unspoken implication, but to me, it felt like she was kissing me for the last time. The feeling of knowing you put your loved ones through hell and back is a mortifying experience. I'd apologize to Twilight later — I threw my reservations to the wind and kissed Applejack the way I would have had we been making love.

Hopefully, she just wanted to send me off with a sweet memory. I just couldn't stand the thought of her worrying about me THAT much! Did my family really have so little faith in me? I guess they should; my track record was less than...reliable. Every second of this honestly made me hurt more, so I put a stop to it shortly after it started.

Applejack kept her eyes closed, tears falling silently. It was all I could do to leave her there, but it was past time. After one final kiss, I stood up and called to Twilight.

"Thank you for being so patient, Twilight. I'm ready now."

"N-no, no...I understand. B-bye, AJ..." Applejack stopped Twilight from leaving for a moment and whispered something into her ear. "Of course. I'll be happy to, AJ."

I wanted to know, but at the same time, if it was whispered, then I wasn't meant to hear it. "I love you, AJ. I'll see you soon."

"Be safe, Coal...you too, Twi'...."

"We will. All right, Coal...let's get on with this."

* * * *

Dash stayed in her hiding spot for nearly ten minutes before she worked up the courage to try to get further away. She didn't get the chance, though. The sound of hooves on the ground and mush soon filled the forest. There were dozens from what Dash could hear, and she quickly started to panic. In an act of desperation, she kicked the entrance of the hole; it collapsed around her. She wasn't buried, but that wasn't the problem. The air supply was very limited, so she could only hide in there for so long before she'd need to climb out. Worse yet, she was having to fight herself to stay awake. If she fell asleep now, she would most likely suffocate. To top it all off, the sounds of hooves was now so dampened that they could be right outside her hideaway and she'd never know. It turned into a waiting game — how long Dash could stay in the hideaway versus how long it took for her pursuers to finish searching her area.

It felt like an eternity. Each second, the air inside grew thinner as Dash felt her head grow light and her strength diminish further. The point came where she HAD to dig her way out, but she feared the worst. Using what energy she had to spare, Dash dug her way out of the pile of mud and into the open air. She let out a long gasp as she breached through, quickly rearing back in fear at the thought of giving her position away. Luck was on her side, however, as there were no ponies in sight. There were hoofprints all over the area, and Dash's pupils shrunk as she realized just how close she had come to being found.

Her body was screaming at this point. The wounds in her legs throbbed as she climbed the rest of the way out, and her eyes watered from the pain. It was nightfall now, and Dash really needed water and a safer place to sleep. She was only about four hundred feet from Onyx's farm. Dash once more tried to get her wings to move, but it was impossible. She couldn't even feel them anymore. Through gritted teeth and force of will, Dash made her way deeper into the forest. The weight of the mud clinging to her body was unreal, and Dash seriously needed to try to get it off. Unfortunately, it clung tightly to her mane and coat; unless she could find a body of water, it wasn't coming off any time soon. Dash had only felt more disgusting once before in her life, and recounting that memory put this situation into greater perspective. This was truly the most horrific and brutal time she had ever experienced. Not even being violated and as helpless as a filly could compare to the weakness she felt now. With teary eyes, she softly said the names of every pony dear to her, praying to Celestia for strength. She stumbled over an exposed root and couldn't fight it anymore. Dash wept; her helplessness made her hate herself.

The frustration of being so prideful but now reduced to nothing more than a broken version of her past self made her rage boil over. With swears filling the air, Dash picked herself up and continued her trek into the forest. When she was well again...Pine and Crimson were going to pay dearly for this humiliation.

* * * *

Twilight and I made our way out of town just as the sun was setting. No time like the present, and neither of us had any intentions of sleeping much tonight. With AJ pulling all of my focus earlier, I hadn't really noticed Twilight's preparations. She wore double saddlebags, and she had an additional smaller bag strapped to her back right leg.

"What all did you pack, Twilight?"

"Several things. I brought along a book filled with information about wild fruits and plants we can eat; I also brought the gem used for scrying Rainbow. I brought along parchment, ink, and quills in case things become too much to handle and I need to write to the Princess. There are also a few...emergency items, as well."

"Can't tell me?"

"It's better if you don't know...."

"Yikes...if you're going to say that...it must be bad."

"I don't like to leave anything to chance, and Coal...."

"Yeah?"

"I just...want to apologize for being so hard flanked with you earlier...."

"Don't. You're right, Twilight...I can't really do much of anything without getting hurt."

"Th-that isn't what I mean! I have magic to help me; you have to work with nothing more but what tools you have available!"

"Twilight, really...it's all right. I'm not mad at you, and you don't need to try and make me feel better."

"Coal...please...you're reminding me a lot of your...older self."

"Sorry...." Well, this got unpleasant in a hurry! It was true I was in a shitty mood, but I couldn't blame Twilight for it. Welp...best do what I had to...sorry in advance. "Twilight...."

She wasn't looking at me anymore. She kept her head down as we walked, but I could still see the hurt in her eyes. "Y-yes?"

"I love you, you know that?"

"What!?" Now she was looking at me. I knew that would get her attention.

"You're honestly my best friend, Twilight. And what you did today was be honest with me. That's what a good friend does, and I'm truthfully not mad at you anymore for it. Yes, you crushed my pride — but it had to be done. And...thanks for coming with me. I know you'll keep me in line and...help me when I need it."

"Coal...."

"I'm seriously very envious of you, Twilight. Ponies come to you for help all the time, and you solve each problem like it's nothing. Every pony has faith, confidence, and trust in you. I doubt you have ever disappointed a pony who needed your help in your entire life. You are honestly what I should strive to be: the embodiment of reliability, and a wonderful individual to top it off."

I lay things on thick, but sometimes it's the only way to get my point across. I wasn't exaggerating, either. I loved every pony, but no pony could compare to how much I relied on Twilight. I just hoped I won't be a burden for her in this.

"Coal...please...let's...just stop for a while. I-I need to take care of some things...."

"Okay...I'll just sit under this tree. Let me know when you're ready."

"..."

Maybe I went too far. It must be a burden to know that others have such great expectations of you. Sorry, Twilight...it seems I can't do anything right today.

* * * *

"Hey, Fluttershy...thanks fer watchin' Copper 'n' Scootaloo fer me."

Applejack had stayed behind and watched Coal leave with Twilight for as long as she could see them. Once they were out of sight, she'd let out a soft sigh and made her way to Fluttershy's. During the entire trip, she had thought of everything that could go wrong and how there was nothing she could do about it if anything happened. Applejack couldn't let her fears be known to the children, though, so she had forced a brighter mood onto herself by thinking of several good memories with her family. With those thoughts lifting her heart, she had arrived at Fluttershy's before she knew it.

Fluttershy smiled. "It was no problem at all. Scootaloo is feeling a little under the weather, but Copper was very helpful and patient with it."

"That's good ta hear. Ah should be gettin' em home now, though."

"Well...you can stay here tonight...if you want. Copper and Scootaloo are already asleep, and I have an extra bed...."

"Thank ya, Fluttershy. Ya'll have been ah great help in this."

"No no no! I'm just glad I could make things easier on you. Are you doing alright?"

"Ah'm fine. Twi' is with Coal, and Ah know between the two of em...nothin will stop em."

"I'm glad. Now, umm...why don't you use my shower...if you want...."

At that point, Applejack realized something: she and Coal had kissed in such a way that...she reacted. Her cheeks turned red and she hid her face under her hat. "Th-thank ya kindly! Ah'll take ya up on that!"

* * * *

Hmmm? Oh...AJ is here. *sigh* I've been trying to sleep for what feels like hours now. I just have too much energy! It is killing me not being able to work it out! AJ and Fluttershy are

talking...I'll just wait until they're done to ask AJ if it's okay to fly a bit.

....

....

What is Fluttershy talking about, and why is AJ looking embarrassed now? Her coat and mane are a little messed up, but...not much else. Oh well...I'll ask when she is done with her shower.

I figured I might as well just get up now; no use trying to sleep if I just couldn't. I waited until AJ went upstairs to the bathroom before I got up, though. Fluttershy took a seat on the couch next to Scootaloo, and she started rubbing her head with the cloth again.

"So...is she sick?"

"Oh, Copper! You startled me; I thought you were asleep."

"Couldn't, really...just have too much energy."

"I'm sorry...oh, and yes. Scootaloo has a small fever."

"Oh no...I didn't know it was that bad...."

"She'll be fine, Copper. You don't need to worry. I'll take good care of her."

"I know you will. I'm just...too emotional right now...."

"...Come sit with me, if you don't mind...."

"O-okay?" What was Fluttershy thinking? I crawled up next to her at first, but she rested my head against her chest. "Fluttershy?"

"Hush now, quiet now. It's time to lay your sleepy head...."

Oh wow...this is nice. Mmm...maybe I can sleep. Thanks, Fluttershy....

Chapter 142: Deceit

Well...I've done all the soul-searching I can do for a while. What in the buck is Twilight doing? She wandered off into the brush about five minutes ago, and if she isn't back soon then I'm going in after her.

"S-sorry about that, Coal...."

"No problem...ready to take off?" Well, that worry didn't last long. She stepped out looking...kind of...off. Not sure why, but it hopefully shouldn't matter. What WAS she doing? Ugh, it is probably best I don't bother her about it.

"Yeah, and about that...there is another reason I'm coming with you."

"Oh?"

"Colten is very far away, and it would take way too long to get there by foot. So I'm going to teleport us as much as I can. It'll cut down on the travel time."

"I see...I take it you can only go so far?"

"Yes, that would be correct."

"And I also take it...you'll be pretty worn out after casting the magic...."

"I'll manage."

Ohh, good grief! She'll manage...grooaaan! Is this girl going to be selfish even once in her life?

"So...do you want to do that now?"

"I don't see why not. Take a seat and I'll ready the spell."

"Kay...."

Why do I have to be....Oh...well...this is kind of awkward. Twilight is kind of sitting in my lap. Well, whatever. Not like she hasn't before.

"R-ready, Coal?"

"Sure am. Let's get on with this."

"Ok...I'll try to take us as far as possible...."

Wait...just how tired is Twilight going to be after th...

....

....

...is!? HOLY SHIT THAT WAS AWESOME! One second we're sitting down on the road, and

now...we're on a road surrounded with huge trees that go over the path...great. They are so freaking tall that they have started growing in what looks to be almost unnatural ways. The trees on the left lean to the right overhead, and vice versa with the trees on the right. It makes a canopy overhead that gives me the sense of being in a tunnel, except for very minute amounts of moonlight that seep through. Regardless, I can hardly see crap!

"How far did we end up going, Twilight?"

....

"Twilight?"

"H-huh? Oh! Umm...w-we should have moved up several dozen miles."

"Are...you alright? Your voice is a little..."

"I-I'm fine...let's just k-keep going."

"..."

Twilight gets off of me and immediately started walking. She looks to be alright...I think. Maybe I'm just being overly sensitive. I get up and started walking next to Twilight. I turn on the lantern so that we can actually see where we are going! The tree line is fairly dense on either side of us. It honestly looks like a void. This path has the thinnest amount of foliage overhead, which means being off the path...there would be almost literally no light at any given time. The sun could be immediately overhead, but nothing would going to make it to the forest floor. This place is giving me the creeps. Best try and take my mind off things.

"Hey, Twilight? Where are we exactly?"

"This should be the Forest's Throat. It got the name from how the trees have grown over the path."

"...That sounds creepy as hell."

"I've been meaning to ask...what is hell where you're from?"

"OH! Damn! Uhhh..."

"It's alright," she giggled. "You don't really need to tell me."

Yikes! I was not ready for that! "Thanks, Twilight. I'll just tell you that it's the worst kind of place."

"I see...so why is it used as an expletive?"

"The same reason you would say something like 'Oh Celestia.' Her name holds power, so depending on the context it can relay that power in the form of strong emotion. Like saying 'damn' doesn't have the same effect as saying 'damn.'"

"I see...."

Despite the earlier unpleasantness, it's nice getting to talk with Twilight again. I think I'll try and keep conversation going. "So...what can you tell me about this town Dash was sent to?"

"Colten...there isn't much to say, really. It's a small town but a very large farm. They don't trade, though, except among themselves — so not much news gets in and out. I'm afraid it is one of the few places I just couldn't find much about."

"Oh, well, thanks anyway, Twilight." This is giving me a bad feeling. A town with almost no outside contact? Wait...how did they even call for weather support? Something isn't adding up here. Well, now I'm not sure what to talk about. We keep walking for about an hour. I'm still feeling amazing, and Twilight is...stopped in the middle of the road? "Twilight?"

"Hey...Twilight! You all right?" I put my hand on her...and she toppled over. "TWILIGHT!" Huh...Oh...THANK GOD! The girl just fell asleep. Man...that spell must have taken a lot out of her. Why didn't she tell me, though? I wouldn't have gotten mad. No harm done, I guess.

"Holy fuck!...What...was that?" We're on an open path in a forest...surrounded by trees...and I just heard some noise...Oh god. Wait...Twilight wanted to just keep going...Oh shit! What lives in this fucking forest!?

I pick her up and carry her on my back like I did for Dash in the past. Why in hell didn't she tell me this place would be dangerous!? Wait...I already know why! Cause I would worry for her! FUCK! This is not my fucking day!...night!...whatever!

There is no end in sight to this fucking tunnel! And there are sounds of I don't know what the fuck everywhere! I've only come across a few different kinds of wildlife since getting here, but there are all kinds of animals in the show. Granted, the ones seen were mostly tamed by Fluttershy. My only real encounter with wild animals were those wolves, and that didn't turn out all that great!

"Mmm...C-Coal?"

"Oh thank god...Okay Twilight, I'm not angry at you, but why didn't you tell me this place was dangerous?" I need to hear it from her. I'm not going to calm down otherwise.

"I...I'm sorry...I know you're in a hurry, so I just thought..."

"That's all I need to hear. You were only trying to make the trip faster...good enough for me."

Heh, this girl is adorable! She puts her hooves around my neck and goes back to sleep. Wait...she went back to sleep...oh hell, errr...I mean...buck. Don't panic, Coal! You only have an unconscious pony sleeping on your back, and you're in a place you have never been...hearing the sounds of countless...you know what? Fuck it! Not even going to think about it...for now.

....

....

Okay...I've been walking with Twilight on my back for HOURS! There is still no end in sight to this freaking path! Not once have the noises stopped, and I'm starting to get pretty tired. Stopping to rest on the ground is not a good idea, either. Thankfully, there is one tree on the path that has a few lower branches. I doubt I'm going to find anything easier than this, so I had best make use of it. With Twilight on my back, I climb up the tree and stop when we are about fifteen feet off the ground. There is a somewhat large limb that I can sit on, and there's another limb nearby for support. I have to move Twilight to my chest, but I think we can stop here for now. Unfortunately...I did have to leave my supplies on the ground. Can't rightly climb a tree with a walking stick and blades strapped to ya when you're carrying some pony. I did hang onto the dagger, though. Need something to defend us with...just in case.

Heheh, even though this is pretty stressful...Twilight makes me laugh. She talks in her sleep sometimes. I never knew before because we always slept in different parts of her house, so this is new to me. Hmm...I have a feeling my sleeping schedule is going to be effed by the end of this trip. Oh well...best get some sleep while I can. On the same token...falling asleep may be a bad idea. I'll just try and rest.

"Mmm..huhmmm..."

I guess this girl's mind never stops rolling, even in her sleep. It does not look like she is sleeping all that peacefully, either. "Don't worry, Twilight. I may not be able to do much, but I'll never let you get hurt." I pull Twilight up my chest a bit and rest her head under my chin. The sounds of creatures can be heard from every direction, and now I know I won't be resting at all. "I don't care if whatever is out there can understand me or not, but...don't you dare fuck with me."

* * * *

Mmmm...huh? Oh...I fell asleep after all. Fluttershy is really talented. Huh, voices? Ahh, Fluttershy and AJ are talking in the kitchen. Wait, what time is it? Today is a school day, after all....

"Morning...."

"Good morning, Copper. Did you sleep well?"

"I sure did; thanks for singing the lullaby."

"Oh, it was no trouble."

Fluttershy sure is nice. AJ is being awfully quiet, though. "Mom?"

"Come here fer ah bit, Copper."

"O-okay?" Woah! Oh...ohhh, okay. AJ must still be pretty upset. She picked me up and started hugging me. *yawn* Oh my...what is with these mares and putting me to sleep? "D-don't I have school today?"

This made AJ stop nuzzling me, but she didn't put me down. "Yeah...ya do. Scootaloo isn't goin' today, though. Ah guess yer on yer own fer today."

"That's fine. I brought my books here from the hospital, so I'm ready to go whenever."

"Ya got ah bit...mind iff'n Ah just keep huggin ya?"

"Nope...love you, Mom."

"Love ya too, Copper."

* * * *

Dash had been on the move all night. She wasn't able to cover much distance, but she did get out of the immediate range of the farms. Now was the most dangerous time, though. While focusing on getting further away, she hadn't focused on where she was going. She was lost, hurt, alone, and very nostalgic.

"Heh...doubt Coal is going to show up and help me this time...."

With those depressing words, Dash stopped to rest. She hadn't eaten anything in far too long, so she had to resort to the most primal form of food: grass. It wasn't much, and it tasted awful — but it would have to do for now. Anything to make the pain in her stomach go away. With that much taken care of, she now needed a source of water. While eating the grass, she realized that there were minor amounts of dew clinging to them, and desperate times call for desperate measures.

Dash spent what felt like hours going around and trying to get any water she could off of the flora that filled the forest. Her body went somewhat numb in places as the constant movement agitated her wounds, so this task soon became harder. When her thirst was sufficiently quenched, Dash found a lush section of tall grass, promptly collapsing into it. She couldn't sleep immediately, and she once more thought of her family and friends.

"...hate being alone...."

* * * *

"C-Crimson...we...we couldn't fi—GAHK!"

"Pine...I am not going to put up with this anymore. You WILL find her, and you will bring her back. If you don't, I'm going to make you implode."

The waves of unicorns returned after several hours of searching. All were made to partake in the joining once more after Crimson spoke with Pine. He and Crimson were now in her chambers, conversing over what the next course of action should be.

"I-I'm sorry, Crimson! I-I-I'll find her! I promise!"

"Enough of your groveling! I swear, if you weren't...forget it. My patience is at its limit here...."

"W-well...maybe some pony saw her leave?"

"You mean from a different farm?"

"Yes! If some pony did, we could would know where she went. If they didn't, she probably went south to southeast into the mountains."

Crimson paused. "No...she wouldn't go there."

"H-how do you know?"

"I nullified the use of her wings, so climbing over the mountains would be almost certain death in her condition. She would most likely stay on the ground...and try to hide some place we wouldn't expect...."

"Y-you aren't really suggesting..."

"I am. I want you to take half of the farm and scour the forest."

"B-but if she is really in there...she could be anywhere! How would we find her, and what of the creatures!?"

"Don't spread out, and they won't bother you, although you'll need to be swift and thorough. A flightless pegasus can't do much in the way of defending itself, especially one in the condition our dear friend is in. As for finding her...fetch me my book on morphing. We're not going to find her; she'll come to us."

"W-why would she do that?"

"Heh, I'm thinking it is about time Dash is reunited with that human of hers."

Chapter 143: Rough Start

Author's notes: Sorry this one took so long. Work kicked my flank and I crashed when I got home. I'll try to be quicker with the update tomorrow.

I am far past concerned at this point! Twilight and I have been surrounded by god knows what for nearly five hours now. This poor girl must have really worn herself out with that first teleport. I still have her head under my chin, but I've started getting more defensive with her. My left arm is over her body and turned up along her back; my right arm is across her body, holding the dagger with the point upwards. The noise has never once stopped, but I have yet to see anything!

The sun came up a while ago, and I'm thankfully still wide awake. That potion must have given me a boost to energy on top of healing me. I know I'll need her eventually, but this is the exact kind of problem I knew would happen if I didn't do this alone. If it were just me, I could run and hide as needed. Granted, I probably wouldn't have covered nearly this much distance without Twilight.

Oh...shit! There is something in the tree...oh, god. I tighten my hold on Twilight while leaning up some more. I'm trying to hide as much of her body as possible, but it is starting to make her uncomfortable — so much so that she ends up waking.

"C-Coal? W-why are you holding me like this?"

"Don't move, Twilight. There is something in the tree...."

I feel Twilight flinch in my grasp. "You...were just going to let me sleep?"

"Do you find that hard to believe?"

"Coal...you...nevermind. I'll take care of whatever it is." Twilight forces me to let go of her, and

she starts looking around. I stay crouched, but I get onto my feet while staying on the limb. If anything jumps out, I'll be ready!

Twilight seems pretty calm despite all of the noise around us. I wish I could be more specific about what kind of noise this is, but I can't honestly tell! I'm thinking I hear all kinds of different creatures!

"Let's just go, Coal. Whatever it is isn't going t—AAAAAAHHH!"

"TWILIGHT!" A black form shoots past my field of view and takes off with Twilight! I immediately jump down and grab my shit! With my lantern and sword in hand, I follow Twilight's screams for help. This fucker is taking her so damn deep into the forest! I'm having the fucking hardest time keeping up!

"Release her now! I'll fucking kill you if you don't!" I don't know why I'm yelling! Whatever that thing is won't listen to me regardless of what I say! I think Twilight managed to calm down as the beast ran away with her, because I can see signs of her charging magic! "Fuck it up, Twilight!"

I doubt she can hear me over all the fucking noise! The deeper we get, the more I hear this disgusting clicking! What the fuck is going on!? Eventually I see a flash as the forest is lit up by not only my lantern but also Twilight's magic.

I make my way to Twilight's location, and I find her to be alone. "Twilight! Are you all right!?"

"I-I'm fine! Geh..."

"Wait...turn your body to me."

"I said I'm fi—"

"SHOW ME WHAT HAPPENED!" Twilight wasn't listening! I reach out and forcefully make her face me as she continues to protest. "Damn it!" Whatever carried off Twilight did so with its mouth! Her body is pierced in several places by half-inch-deep holes!

"I-I'll be fine! It isn't that bad...."

"The fuck it isn't...damn it! Just damn it!" This is not fucking good! The noises are getting closer!
"Twilight...you don't have the energy to teleport yet, do you?"

"I c-can t-try!"

"Not good enough! You know if you do or don't, and you clearly don't! Just stay under me, Twilight!"

"No! I can help t—MMF!" I took off my coat and put it around Twilight. The air is freezing here, and that could seriously cause problems for her! "C-coal! Aaauh! W-what are you doing!?"

"You're wounded, so the cold is going to penetrate you more easily!" That was only part of the reason. The main reason is that I can't have Twilight trying to play the hero when she is hurt! I'm standing over the bundled-up Twilight with the lantern beside her on the ground, and my hands are occupied with my sword in one and the walking stick in the other.

I'm constantly looking around for movement, but we are surrounded by nothing but darkness! I can't see anything outside the radius of light from the lantern. Thankfully it still shoots off light much further than one would expect, so nothing is going to get to us before I see it.

I was seriously not expecting to face this much trouble so soon after starting this. I'm hoping this is the last dangerous place we have to walk through. I'll be damned if I can't stop anything more from happening to Twilight!

* * * *

Gah! School is so boring! I get done with my work too quickly, and then I have nothing to do for what feels like forever! I'm still in the back row, but Dinky is right next to me. I haven't done it before, but maybe I'll try to talk with her quietly once she is done.

Hmmm...Sweetie Belle...geez. With Dad gone...I probably can't go visit her this weekend. Not only that, but with Scootaloo being sick, AJ is probably going to need more help. I'm sorry, Sweetie Belle. I hope you won't be mad at me. Heh, I doubt she would.

It really stinks that I can't race with Ula after just getting to meet her! Part of me wishes she could talk. She is definitely smart enough, and I bet she has a lot of cool stuff she could share with me. I mean, what is cooler than living with a giant ancient wolf? I'd love to hear his stories as well! That is probably the most amazing thing about living so long: getting to see and do so much. But...I'd never want that for myself. Outliving every pony would make me a jerk again. Glad I'm over that...mostly.

Well, shoot! I tried to start talking with Dinky once she was done, but Ms. Cherilee didn't approve. She didn't tell me to stop, but she gave me a look that said enough. I...I'm thinking I should talk with her after class. It's about time I said some things.

Well, planning on doing something only made the day go slower! It gave me time to work up some courage though. The bell went off and every pony was dismissed.

"Want to hang out, Copper? Heh, we could go play in the packing room at my Mom's workplace!

They have so many packing peanuts that it makes for great fun!"

"Hahah! That sounds like a blast, Dinky, but I have a few things I need to do. Then I'll need to get home and check on Scootaloo."

"Oh...I understand. Some other time then?"

"Of course!"

"Great! Give Scootaloo my well wishes!"

"Will do!" I hate having to say not now, but this is important to me. *sigh* Give me strength, Luna....

All the students make their way out of the classroom, but I stay behind. Once Ms. Cherilee and I are alone, I walk up to her desk. "Ms. Cherilee...."

"Mmm? Oh, Copper! Is there something I can help you with?"

"No...I just...need to say some stuff to you...."

"Oh?"

"*sigh* Ms. Cherilee...I just want to apologize for giving you so much trouble a while back. I'm still not sorry for my feelings, but I'm sorry I made life difficult for you. I hope you can forgive me...."

"Copper...." Well, I've said it. It is out of my hooves now. Once an apology has been made, there is nothing more that can be done. I just have to hope she forgives me and not be upset if she doesn't. "...heh. You're a much sweeter colt than I give you credit for."

"Ms. Cherilee?" I haven't been looking at her this entire time. I like to think I'm pretty confident, but not when I feel like the bad pony. Maybe it wasn't a good idea to bring up old wounds like this, but they've been bothering me a lot lately! I finally look up at her, and she's giving me the nicest smile....

"Copper...as a teacher, I can never accept what you had with Sweetie Belle."

"Have," I correct nervously, "if you don't mind...."

"Yes, what you have. Anyway, as a pony...now that I've had time to relax...I have to agree with Applejack. You two were...are pretty cute together, and I hope you're doing all right with her move."

"I am...and thank you. I won't bother you anymore...but thanks again."

"Not a bother at all, Copper. Have a wonderful evening!"

Well, I'm feeling a lot better! It's a nice feeling when your conscience is clean. I grab my books and fly home immediately after finishing with Ms. Cherilee. It doesn't take me long, and I arrive to see AJ sitting on the front porch.

"Hey, Mom...something going on?"

"Nothin', sugarcube. Ah'm just enjoyin the fresh air...."

She is thinking about Dad — I know it. That distant look and the slight downward tilt of the corners of her mouth...that's worry if I ever saw it. I quickly put up my books, and I see Scootaloo sound asleep in her bed. I immediately rejoin AJ on the porch and crawl under her hooves.

AJ is sitting on her side, so her legs are tucked in along the side of her. I squeeze in between her front legs and bury myself into her. She doesn't say anything, but just start rubbing her nose against my forehead. Spending my evening doing nothing doesn't sound all that fun, but I'll do anything to make things easier on AJ. Please come home soon, Dad. AJ needs you so much....

* * * *

"Genius! You are a genius, Crimson!"

Crimson had turned Pine into Coal after going over the spell. It would change him completely until he willingly broke the magic. Until then, he couldn't cast any magic of his own. He no longer had a horn to channel the magic into the atmosphere, after all.

"Calm yourself, Pine. The disguise will not do you any good if your behavior blows your cover immediately."

"Well, what do I do?"

"I only received a few memories of this human while in Dash's mind. I can tell you he is a very...physical kind of individual. You could probably pull it off if you just wouldn't speak...hmmm, got it."

Without a single word of warning, Crimson magically threw Pine against the wall and began using her magic to strike his borrowed body.

"AUGH! C-Crimson! W-why are you doing this!?"

"You are going to be playing the part of a prisoner. I'm going to have you bound and gagged, and then I'll have a single unicorn escort you through the forest. They'll call out to Dash offering a deal, to which I'm sure she'll accept. If you play your cards right...you may even get to enjoy some of Dash's body. I know how badly you have wanted that."

Now, Pine understood everything. He would be made to look completely pathetic, and then he would play on Dash's love and sympathy to not only find her but also potentially exploit her.

"Th-that is brilliant! AUGH! I-I c-can never thank y-you enough! URG!" he gasped through the pain.

Crimson found herself chuckling at the praise she was receiving for wounding her assistant. "Such a disgusting stallion. Hmm...it's almost a shame to damage you in this form. The human is much easier on the eyes than your groveling flank."

"Ouch! Such cruel words! AAAGH! Hah...hah...hah...a-are you done?"

Pine was now covered in various bruises and cuts. Nothing serious, but it was convincing enough. Crimson forced herself to stop; this was getting too enjoyable. "Yes...I believe we are. Now don't fail me again! I have half of the farm waiting outside. Inform the yellow mare of my plan, and she'll have you prepped."

"I can't wait! I can only imagine how Ms. Dash will react once she sees me! Heheheh...."

A thought was forming in Pine's mind. The prospect of exploiting Dash's feelings was becoming all too great a temptation. If he could earn not only sympathy but thanks from Dash...maybe he could get more out of her. A smile formed on his face. Never had a smile so evil befallen Coal's form — but the one Pine now wore gave even Crimson a chill. As Pine mused over what he would do, another thought came to him.

"Crimson...what if the real human shows up?"

"Already thought of that. If he shows up, I know it will be because he is looking for Dash."

"Yeah...?"

"And he'll find her."

"What!? What are you talking about!?"

"Calm yourself, fool! If he arrives looking for her, I'll keep him company."

"Wait...you don't mean...."

"Hah, I've always wanted to try my hoof at acting."

Chapter 144: Fooled

Author's notes: I know plenty of you are more than ready for Pine and Crimson to get their...comeuppance, but that isn't happening all that soon. We are getting closer, but remember that Coal and Twilight are still pretty far from Colten. I'll try to make the climax chapter an extra special one to make up for the long buildup. I just don't like to rush things. (I'm sure most of you just went "Well, Duh! Obviously!" at that.)

The situation was grim at best. Coal was standing over a wounded Twilight, and they were both surrounded by they don't know what.

"Twilight...did you get a good look at...whatever took you?"

"I-I didn't..."

Coal began mouthing off obscenities; he had no clue of what to do for escape. When he originally chased after Twilight, he did so without much care. The path he took was littered with broken low hanging limbs and destroyed plant life. It wouldn't be difficult to make their way out of the forest along the same route, but that was only assuming they could get away.

"I-I'm so sorry, Coal! I should have taken your concerns more seriously! Th-this is all my fault...."

"Don't start with that! I need you, Twilight! Please don't start panicking!"

"R-right."

The stand off went on for hours. Twilight was tired, and the added warmth of Coal's coat managed to allow her some rest. Coal had been on the defensive all night, and he was now doing so in a much more demanding situation. The effects of the potion were still going strong; Coal's body didn't show any signs of fatigue. Even the freezing air wasn't causing much damage. The problem lay in the fact that his mind had been going for nearly two full days now. His judgment was impaired, and there was little patience left to help him.

As the hours continued to tick on and not a single creature showed itself inside the radius of light, Twilight came up with an idea.

"W-what if they are weak to direct light?"

"Then we've just wasted hours of time. Okay...Twilight, I need you to stay completely alert while I try something."

"Y-yes!"

Coal hadn't brought along a pack, because he didn't own one. Thus, all of what he'd carried had been strapped to him in one way or another. The rope he brought along had been wrapped around his body, but now it was time to put it to use. He tied the ends of his coat up, so Twilight wouldn't be able to fall out. Then, he tied Twilight to his back.

"C-Coal!"

"Do you have enough energy to levitate the lantern overhead? We need the light not to be obscured."

"Yes, I can do that much."

Twilight's horn glowed with her usual purple light as it wrapped around the lantern. She brought it over their heads as Coal gathered his remaining items and began slowly making the trek back out of the forest.

Hissing and screeching could be heard from every direction as the creatures became enraged.

"I almost can't believe this is working, Twilight..."

"P-please hurry, Coal. I-I don't want you to worry, b-but I-I can see their eyes..."

"Brace yourself."

In a second, Coal went from fast walking to maximum-speed running. Twilight was pulled back and forth at an uneven pace as Coal maneuvered along the same path he had originally taken. The path was made all the more difficult due to his earlier charge. One wrong step and he could come falling forward due to the debris.

The only pack Twilight had on her was the one strapped to her leg, so it was necessary for them to backtrack to their tree and reclaim the rest of her items.

Coal didn't realize just how far Twilight had been originally taken until he started thinking about how long it was taking them to get out. It felt like he had been running for nearly twice as long as before, and nothing was putting him any closer to escape.

The lantern hit a branch and momentarily swung, putting Coal's front in darkness. Coal and

Twilight heard a single creature jump from a tree moving directly towards Coal, but in this case...the attacker had made the mistake. Coal had been paying very close attention to how much light was ahead of him, so when it no longer completely surrounded his body, he was ready. With a thrust of his sword into darkness, he heard the death shriek of whatever kind of beast was stalking them.

The lantern swung back into position, but the creature was nowhere to be seen. The only sign that it had even been there...was dripping from the end of Coal's sword: a viscous black liquid was very slowly falling from the end of his blade.

"Coal!? Are you all right!?" Twilight screamed; her position wouldn't allow her to see what had just transpired.

"Yeah...I'm fine." Coal had to force himself to continue running at that point. He would talk big game, but actually killing anything never settled well with him.

When he was younger, Coal had accidentally caused the death of a rabbit. He was six years old at the time, but the memory has never left him to this day. It was one thing to threaten, but it was another to actually do it. These creatures aren't evil — they just want their next meal. How many lives depended on the one that he just ended? This was the question running through Coal's mind as he and Twilight finally made it through the forest and back onto the path.

Coal slid the walking stick between Twilight and his body, picking up the pack that was still thankfully under the tree. The screeching and wailing continued as Coal once more made a mad dash down the path. The light wouldn't extend into the tree line, so Coal ran right down the middle to offer the most distance from the forest surrounding them. The sounds of claws and straining limbs could be heard every few seconds as the creatures would jump along the trees to keep up with Coal.

The sunlight shining through the top offered only the smallest amount of light to the scene, so the lantern was still their lifeline. Realizing this, Coal's defense mechanism to escape horrible situations with the use of comedy came forth. "I swear to god I never even liked Amnesia!"

"What!? What are you talking about, Coal!?"

"I have no bucking clue! Just humor me!"

"I don't know what's going on!"

"Me neither! If only I had a dresser drawer these things wouldn't be able to see us!"

"AUGH! Have you gone crazy!?"

"Well, I have spent a lot of time in the dark!"

Twilight gave up. She had tried to be strong here, but her added confusion towards Coal's behavior was just too much. Twilight turned herself, and rested her head on Coal's back while trying not to sob. The pain from her wounds wasn't too great, but the uncertainty was weighing down upon her. Thankfully, Coal picked up on this and reeled himself back into seriousness.

"Don't worry, Twilight! I'm not going to let anything more happen to you! I'll bet my life on it!"

Coal didn't hear it, but Twilight mumbled out a response. "That's exactly what I'm afraid of...."

* * * *

"Thank Celestia!" Dash had continued her trek in the forest and finally came upon a small body of water. She first drank to her heart's content, and then she promptly got herself cleaned off. She had to be very careful with the wounds on her legs, since they had never been given proper time to heal. They stung relentlessly, but they couldn't continually stay caked with mud.

Once Dash stepped out of the water, she inspected herself more closely. It was clear she had already lost weight, and her coat had lost a lot of its sheen. She looked sickly, but she simply felt exhausted.

She allowed herself time to dry off by once more trying to sleep. It seemed she was having to do a lot of that lately. Without proper intake, she had nothing to run on; plus, her body was used to a large food intake due to her constant exercise. This resulted in Dash only being able to travel short distances at a time without rest.

With her body cleaned and her thirst quenched, however, she did finally find restful sleep for once. The cold air felt great as it gently blew over the exposed parts of her body. She once more rested upon tall grass and found comfort in the softness it provided. It couldn't compare to a cloud or the feel of being in her lover's arms as she slept, but it would have to do for now.

Sadly, her sleep didn't last long. There came the sound of voices, and Dash began to panic. She had no idea where she had been going, and she could have ended up closer to the farms all over again! Her first instinct was to climb a tree, but getting down unscathed would be the hard part. There was a thick growth of tall plants a few yards from her current position, and Dash figured that would be better than nothing. She crouched down and tried to get as much cover over her as possible. It took her several minutes to calm down, but once she did, the voices became understandable.

The voice was saying that...it had the human...what? Dash couldn't believe her ears. It started off as curiosity, but as she sat there thinking...it became horror. How do they know about Coal!?

How did they get him!? What the buck is going on!?

Dash slowly crept out of her hiding place to finally get a look at what was going on. There was a single unicorn...leading a badly wounded Coal. He was bound and gagged and was being dragged around by the unicorn. Dash's entire body seized up, and she started to panic. There were a million questions running through her mind, but her eyes weren't playing tricks on her. Coal was really there, and he needed help.

She watched and waited for just the right moment. It came when the unicorn had turned its back to Dash, and she shot out of the brush at her current top speed. Unfortunately for Dash, the unicorn was prepared for this. He readied his magic as Dash realized just how badly she bucked this up. What happened next surprised the unicorn to no end. Coal threw himself atop the unicorn, and that gave Dash enough time to buck it into unconsciousness.

As soon as the unicorn was out, Dash turned her attention to Coal and immediately undid his bindings. "Coal! How did you get here!? What happened to you!?"

Once Coal's hands were freed, he put one to his throat and winced as he rubbed it.

"No...they even took your voice!? Why!? It d-doesn't matter for now! I'm so glad you're here! It has been horrible!" Dash threw herself into Coal, and began crying into him. "I've missed you so much!"

Coal put an arm around Dash and another on the back of her head. Dash couldn't see it, but a wicked grin formed as he held her.

* * * *

I'm feeling so toasty. AJ fell asleep holding me a little while ago, and I think I dozed off for a bit, too. Part of me wants to get up and move, but another part is just so comfortable.

I decided it was probably best to get up, if only to check on Scootaloo. AJ must have been really tired, because she didn't wake up as I crawled out from her embrace. The first thing I did was check on Scootaloo. She was fine, sound asleep in her bed while holding onto her plushie. The second thing I did was bring out a blanket for AJ. I never got the chance to put it on her, though, because she was now getting up.

"Hey, Mom. Sleep well?"

"Mmm? Y-yeah...sure did. *yawn* How long have ya been up?"

"I just got up a minute ago."

AJ nodded in response. She still looked pretty tired. It was probably just her mind; I could sympathize. Just thinking back to never being able to get real sleep for days was reminder enough of how tired the mind could get, even if the body wasn't.

"Well...Ah best check on Scootaloo."

"Already did that. She is still sound asleep."

"Th-thank ya, Copper. Yer such ah good colt."

AJ stepped over to me and gave me a quick kiss on the head before going inside. I was glad I could make things easier on her. Well...now what should I do? I couldn't work on the trees, because that would wake up Scootaloo. It was probably too late to hang out with Dinky too. I wonder if...

"*bark! bark!*"

"Huh!? Ula!? What are you doing here!?" Ula came running around the house and stopped right in front of me. She was doing that panting thing dogs do when they're excited. Ula ran up to me and started pushing me around. It was pretty clear that she wanted to play. "Heheheheh! Calm down! Let me just...."

"Copper! Get back, ya darn beast!" AJ came running out at the noise, and started rearing back and stomping in front of Ula to intimidate her. It didn't really work, as Ula just put me in between her and AJ.

"It's fine, Mom! This is Ula. She is...my friend."

"What!? Copper! Don't ya know ah wolf when ya see one!? Coal was almost killed by wolves once!"

"U-Ula isn't like that, I promise! I met her the other day, and we got to run around in the forest toge—"

"In the forest!? Copper! What in tarnation is wrong with ya!? That is no place fer ah colt, or any pony fer that matter!"

"Mom! Please! It's safe! I doubt Rafe would allow anything dangerous near his daughter...."

"Wait...Rafe? H-how...do ya know Rafe?"

"I...met him the same day I met Ula. You know him too?"

"Ah've never met him, but...Coal kind of informed me of him...."

"Then...you understand that he and Ula aren't a danger?"

"Ah...Ah don't know, Copper. What is she even doin here?"

"Well...I think she wants to play...."

AJ just sat onto the porch and groaned. She rubbed her eyes with her hooves for a few minutes before speaking again. "Yer definitely Coal's boy. Ya'll both have the best intentions, but...damnit, ya'll always stress me out!"

"I-I'm sorry...."

"Copper...Ah'm not sure how Ah feel about this, but...Ah trust ya. Iff'n ya say this friend o' yers isn't dangerous...Ah'll believe ya."

"Does that mean...?"

"It is gettin kinda late, so...be back in ah few hours."

"Thanks, Mom!" I ran up and gave AJ a big hug before running around back with Ula. Once we made it to the forest, Ula took off! "Oh, no you don't!" This was exactly what I needed: getting to let loose and run to my heart's content! I hope things are going this well for Dad and Ms.

Twilight!

Chapter 145: Moonlit Night

Author's notes: Well...I decided to push things along just a bit. This chapter's Coal segment was originally going to be in two parts, and there would be a Sweetie Belle segment; but I changed it a bit. The end result is things progressing a little more quickly. As a fair warning...this is a bit of a gross chapter. Just sayin...

This isn't good! Fuck my life, this isn't fucking good! Twilight is freaking out back there, and those...whatever they are aren't going away! I just have to keep running until we get to the end of this fucking...tree tunnel, whatever! After that, Twilight's wounds can be taken care of. Why did this have to happen at the first fucking teleport!?! If magic relies on the physical and mental condition of the user, then we're fucked for time! I hope Twilight stocked up on those potions! Shit! I should have mentioned that! Okay! Seriously! Once we're done with this crap, I'm getting the damn recipe and instructions! I don't care how much it costs! Those are too damn useful!

These damn creatures are really starting to piss me off, too! I feel bad killing one, but damn it,

they are starting to ask for it! I'm really starting to get worried for Twilight, too! She keeps rubbing her face into my back, and I have no idea why! I just can't think straight anymore!

HOW LONG IS THIS FUCKING PATH!? I've been running as fast as my legs can carry me forever! I should be impressed with my endurance, but I'd give that up to just get the fuck out of here! The sun is still somewhat high in the sky, but I can't be completely certain where it is. It could be one or six in the damn afternoon, for all I know! Twilight hasn't said a word for hours now, and it is really concerning me!

"Twilight, are you okay back there!?"

"Y-yes...I'm fine. H-how are you?"

"Heh, peachy keen 'n' all that, mate!"

"Heheh, yeah, you're fine."

"How are those bite marks doing?"

"They aren't too bad. It just stings a bit...."

Why can't I ever trust these girls? Twilight says she is fine, but all I hear is her trying to be brave for me. Let me just calm down and try to analyze this shit for once. I only looked at them for a moment, but she had two sets of at least eight punctures at about half an inch deep on her body. They are on her back and her side. That would also suggest the beast has a large jaw, but this isn't about that thing! A pony's body is more muscular than a human's, so she may honestly not be too hurt. The main thing to worry about is an infection. The inside of my coat isn't sterile, but it isn't like I'm rolling around in mud, either. It's just shit like this that makes me realize just how unprepared I really am for this! When this is done and over with, I'm getting myself fucking trained! I'm going to learn how to forage and treat wounds, and I never did look into learning some carpentry...christ!

Huh? YES! OH THANK GOD IN HEAVEN, YES! There is the fucking exit!

"We're almost out of this place, Twilight!"

"Oh, thank Celestia...."

"Twilight?...T-Twilight?"

She passed out. Wait! She passed out! The lantern fell into the middle of the path, and I hadn't stopped running yet! I was just at the edge of the light when I stopped. I-I could see their eyes. They were red and focused on me. They...don't have pupils. H-how...do they even see? Maybe

they can't, and...they are tracking us in other ways. Good lord...this is horrifying. I carefully backed up and picked up the lantern and continued making my way out. I wasn't running now, though. This potentially fatal incident made my heart nearly jump out of my chest! I kept the lantern up high, and at a brisk pace, I made my way out.

Once I neared the exit, the creatures' hissing and screeching stopped. Their eyes disappeared from view, and I could hear the sounds of their claws against bark as I got further and further away. Twilight and I had made it out...finally.

It opened up into a huge expanse of land. There was tall grass everywhere, and various wildflowers of all colors littered the ground. There wasn't a single tree to be seen for miles, and this relief nearly made me collapse. Now that our lives weren't in danger...I could feel the aching in my legs. Carrying Twilight and coping with all of this stuff just wore me the hell out! There was a small hill up a ways, and that looked to be the perfect spot. I forced my way over to it and then carefully set Twilight and everything else down. She was still sound asleep, but she didn't look to be resting peacefully. I untied the coat from around her and looked closely at her wounds. They really weren't that bad, but it pained me to see Twilight hurt.

It was awfully rude of me, but the situation called for it. I opened up Twilight's pack and began searching around for anything that could help. Much to my surprise...there WERE some potions! Sadly...I couldn't tell what each did. They were in much smaller vials, and there were two sets of four different potions. Each a different color. There were red, blue, yellow, and purple. I assumed the purple to be the same kind of healing potion I had taken the previous day, but I didn't want to take any chances. I kept the coat over Twilight as I searched, but it became clear from her whines that she was getting cold. It was pretty damn chilly, but I figured my body temperature had gone up from all the exercise. Thus, I'm actually not feeling that uncomfortable. Twilight clearly was, though.

If I wasn't already madly in love with the two most amazing mares ever...this may have been a little weird for me. I organized all of our various items near us, and then I crawled under the coat with Twilight. I got onto my side and pulled her up while resting her head on my arm. After doing that, I moved the rest of her body along mine and put the coat over us. Her body was fairly cool to the touch, but it thankfully warmed up soon enough. The gentle breeze blew across my exposed face as my eyelids became heavier and heavier. For the first time in what felt like forever...I was finally able to relax. The rhythmic rising and falling of Twilight's chest was the only thing I was aware of. It didn't take long for the serenity of the moment to bring me past the bridge of sleep as Twilight's mumbles were the last thing I heard.

* * * *

Twilight awoke with a start as her dreams kicked her back into the waking world. It took her a moment to realize where she was, but the sound of light breathing above her was all she

needed.

"Thanks, Coal..." It almost didn't feel right, but Twilight wanted this. She buried her face into Coal's chest and let out a contented sigh as she did so. The sun had gone down by this point, and that made the moment more peaceful. That was...until the familiar sound of hissing and clicking could just barely be heard.

Twilight stood upright immediately, which knocked off the coat, and saw dozens of...forms pouring out of the forest! The only source of light was the moon, and its light was dim at best. The forms were hardly visible at this distance, but the sheer number made the change noticeable. Her first thought was to shake Coal awake, but...a thought came to mind.

"Coal would hate me if he knew what I was going to do...please don't wake up."

Twilight pulled the coat over Coal and ran down the hill towards the creatures. When there were but a few hundred feet separating them, Twilight calmed her heart and readied her magic. With each passing second, the creatures got closer and closer, but Twilight stood steadfast. She raised her head up high and sent out a strong wave of magic over every creature. Their bodies were lifted high into the air, and Twilight struggled to keep each afloat.

"I-I'm so sorry for this...b-but it's the only way!"

With a heavy heart, Twilight put added pressure onto the heads of each creature...and snapped their necks. This would be an incredibly difficult task if Twilight had been in good condition, so once it was over, it left her drained of everything she had. She fell to the ground and panted heavily as her body burned from spending too much magic. Every little twitch made her want to scream out in pain as the recoil took effect.

It took several minutes, but...she eventually heard faint clicking again. Her eyes widened as the sound grew louder and louder. There were more of them...and she was helpless. With tears in her eyes, Twilight tried her hardest to call out to Coal. It came out as nothing more than a pitiful gasp as her body refused to obey her commands. A single form appeared over her, and she was able to get a good hard look at it.

The beast was fairly large. Larger than a pony, but not by much. It had skin as dark as any black she had ever seen. Its eyes were small, but they were a piercing red. Its body was difficult to describe. It walked on four legs and had two claws on each foot. It didn't have fur nor a tail of any kind. Its head was a simple round shape, but it had ears that stood upright like a fox. The body itself looked to be very muscular, but the shape was impossible. It lurched forward, giving it the appearance of having a hump, but the hump would constantly bend and flex as the creature moved.

The single beast was soon joined by another...and another...and another. Each stood over

Twilight one at a time. They seemed to almost be enjoying this, as if helpless prey were funny to them. Twilight closed her eyes and prayed for it to be quick.

"GET THE FUCK AWAY FROM HER!"

A shout came from a few yards away; Coal had finally come to. Twilight's eyes shot open, and she saw the beasts turn their attention to the direction from which the shout originated. They each disappeared from view as they ran towards Coal.

The pain was still very great, but Twilight managed to stand upright. What she saw...could only be used as the definition of hell. No, Coal was not losing. In fact...he was butchering them. With his short sword in his right hand and his dagger in his left, he cut through beast after beast, their death rattles filling the night air. Twilight was lost in the sight. The creatures were fast, but Coal seemed to be moving two steps ahead of them. His blade would find its way through the chest of one, his dagger slashing away at another. A single beast jumped into the sky directly over him, but Coal jumped back as the beast landed on the body of a fallen companion. It slipped for only a moment as its footing was interrupted, and Coal took that moment to step forward and give an upward kick straight to the creature's head. A sickening snapping sound could be heard as it flew upwards and came back down to the ground.

The fight lasted for a minute at most, but it felt like an eternity to Twilight. Coal was yelling out with each swing, thrust, and blow he delivered. It sent a chill down Twilight's spine to see her friend...looking to be a much greater monster than any of those creatures. After the last creature fell, Coal threw down his blades and ran over to Twilight.

"Twilight! Are you all right!?"

She couldn't move. Coal reeked of blood the second he got close to her, and she yelped as a cloud moved to allow the moonlight to shine upon him. His entire body was covered in the evidence of his victory, and his eyes were aglow with rage and concern.

"Why didn't you wake me!? You could have been killed!"

Twilight was brought back to attention, but she whimpered as Coal got even closer. He had never appeared more horrifying, and yet Twilight knew it wasn't his fault. "I-I'm sorry...I just...."

"You what!? What made you possibly think going alone was a good idea!?"

Coal's concern and bloody rage, coupled with his exhaustion in every sense of the word, had finally come pouring out as anger. He wasn't trying to be hateful, but he was past the point of controlling himself.

Twilight curled up and wept into her hooves. This silenced Coal but not his rage. He stood up

and looked around, if only to figure what had happened. He noticed various darker spots along the field, and he stepped out to inspect them. Coal gasped in shock as he came to understand what they were...Twilight had killed dozens of these things herself.

"Tw-Twilight...h-how did you do this?"

It took her a moment to respond, but even when she did, she didn't get up. "I-I had to! I know you don't like killing things, but there was no other way! They were too close!"

Coal fell to his knees and shook as he realized what happened. She didn't want him to hate her for making a tough call. He punched the ground again and again as regret and guilt washed over him. Coal cursed his horrible temperament, quickly making his way back to Twilight.

"I'm so sorry! Please forgive me, Twilight! I-I-I-I...."

He hung his head...and sighed as he realized Twilight had passed out again. Coal reached forward to pick her up, but he stopped as the moonlight lit up his hand. It was covered in now-dried blood. If it weren't for his overwhelming guilt and concern for Twilight, he would have most likely lost his stomach.

"H-how...did I do this? This is...just...horrible." With no way for him to clean up, Coal wiped off his hand on his pants before moving his coat over Twilight once more. He kept her in sight, but didn't sit near her. Thinking back, Twilight and Applejack had both been able to smell blood on him very easily. Surely Twilight could do that now.

There would be no rest tonight. Especially for Coal's conscience. "Is this real? I mean...is this really Equestria? How can such...horrible things keep happening here? This...isn't the world I wished for...." Coal closed his eyes and hugged his legs while resting his head on his knees. He thought about what he had done and what he possibly would have to do. It wasn't until the sun rose and Coal had time to calm down that he found peace of mind. "This...may not be the world of dreams, but it is my reality. I can't let what I've done ruin me, and it's time I live up to this shit. I'm not a monster. I'm not a bad person. I'm only doing what I can. This may not be a perfect world, but I'm going to live and love it, regardless."

Twilight didn't wake up for several hours. It wasn't until a little before noon that her eyes fluttered open and she stood up. For a moment, she had forgotten everything, but that ended as she looked over to Coal. In the direct sunlight...he looked more like a monster than ever.

"C-Coal...."

Coal had had all the time he needed to calm himself, so he already had enough control to say what he needed to say. "Twilight...I'm sorry I yelled at you. I know why you did what you did now, and I only hope you can forgive me. You were doing what you thought to be right, and I couldn't

be mad at you without being mad at myself."

Twilight stood there for a moment calmly, but that changed quickly enough. Her eyes began watering again, and she knew what she wanted here. With a flash of magical light, all the blood that was caked onto Coal disappeared in flash of light. He had no idea what had just happened until Twilight ran up and into his embrace. She, too, was feeling immense guilt for what she had done, and she needed the comfort. Not only that, but knowing Coal...he could only be taking this harder than she was.

It took him a moment, but Coal wrapped his arms around Twilight and did his best to comfort her. "Thank you, Twilight. You protected me honorably, and I'm sorry that I didn't do the same. I don't know what you're feeling, but I hope you know how thankful I am for you. You're a better friend than I could ever ask for."

Twilight let out a small sigh, but she smiled as Coal continued to stroke her mane. "You too, Coal. You too...."

* * * *

"And that is pretty much all of what has happened! It was a nightmare! I mean...who does this!? What kind of pony would treat another pony like this!? B-but I shouldn't be the only one complaining. Coal...you're looking pretty banged up. I wish you could talk...I want to hear you again. You can always make me feel better...."

Dash brought Coal over to the body of water she found earlier, and she started getting him cleaned off. He seemed to be loving every second of Dash using her wings to gently wipe away the sweat from his face. Her wings still weren't working, so she had to manually dip them in the water with her hooves to make use of them.

"I'm not sure what to do now, though. I thought that I was going to be alone in this forest for a long time! I was just so mad at those two for doing this to me. I planned on getting better and bucking them into a pulp! B-but...now that you're here...I just want to go home. I miss every pony so much...."

Dash was running out of steam again, and she crawled into Coal's lap to rest. "Y-you don't mind, right?" Coal shook his head. "Th-thanks. I'm sorry...I know you love me still, but...I feel kind of bad for hating so much. You always forgive...but...I still want those ponies to pay! I'm making sure Twilight informs the princess as soon as we get back! I-I hope you don't think less of me for this...."

Coal didn't move for a moment. He sat there with a hand on Dash as he leaned back a bit and pondered.

"Coal?..." Dash looked up at him with pleading eyes. "Y-you're really not thinking I'm evil here...r-right!?"

A small smirk formed on Coal's face as he leaned forward and kissed Dash. She was enjoying it somewhat at first, but after a moment she had to push him away. "W-wait, Coal...I-I think we better not."

He tilted his head and raised a palm in confusion. Dash didn't want to say it, but...it didn't feel right. It came across as...dirty and...unloving. Something was just really off about it, but she had no idea what.

"I-I'm just really tired is all. M-may I?" Dash rested her head on Coal, and tilted her face up at him.

The smirk returned, and Coal gave a gentle nod as he began rubbing her back. Once more, something felt wrong...he wasn't doing it the way he usually would, and...it just wasn't as soothing. Coal had long since learned the most effective ways of making Dash feel better in this way, but he wasn't doing that for whatever reason. She let out a soft sigh and laughed to herself a bit. Who knows what he has been through? He is probably just tired, Dash thought. With small amounts of reluctance, Dash closed her eyes and finally managed to find sleep.

Once Dash was out, Coal's smirk disappeared and was replaced with a scowl. It was faint, but he couldn't resist speaking any longer. "Sleep well, Ms. Dash. You're going to need it."

* * * *

Ula and I played for a few hours, and it was great fun! I say play, but it was more like I got my flank handed to me! Keeping up on hoof is just so hard! I get worn out a lot faster this way, too.

It was getting close to time to go inside, but Ula and I were just out back of the house enjoying the night. I didn't want to go inside just yet. She was letting me rest my head on her chest as we both looked up at the stars.

"I love the moon, Ula. Would it be insulting for me to assume you like it too? Being a wolf and all...."

She is incredibly smart. I almost couldn't believe it when she looked at me and shook her head.

"Wait...do you seriously understand every word I'm saying?" She nodded. "Th-that is amazing! How is that...wait...did...did Rafe teach you?" Once more, she gave me a single nod. "Well...that doesn't make a whole lot of sense, to be honest. You don't need to be able to understand ponies

to speak with your dad. I wonder why he did that...."

Ula didn't seem to care. She just rested her head on the ground and let out a small yawn. It did reveal her many incredibly sharp teeth to me though, but for whatever reason...it didn't bother me too much. Probably because they just didn't compare to Sasha's...ugh...bad memories.

"*whine*"

"Huh? Oh...I'm fine, really." Ula didn't believe me. She started licking my cheek again, but it wasn't playful like before. It almost made me feel the same way as when AJ nuzzles me, so...I guess motherly...almost.

Speaking of AJ, she walked out the back door and saw us lying together. "Hey, Copper...evenin', Ula."

"*bark!*"

"Heheh! I think that's her way of saying hello."

"Ah figured. Did ya'll have ah nice time?"

"Sure did! It was just what I needed to relax a little."

"Ah'm glad. Well...it's kinda time ta' call it ah night, sugarcube. Ah'm sure Rafe is ready fer Ula ta' get home, too."

"Yeah...you're probably right." I leaned up and gave Ula a quick hug before we parted ways. It was a little sad for her to go. It was nice having a friend I could talk with who wouldn't freak out at all the weird stuff I'd gone through. At least...that's the way it felt.

AJ and I made our way inside and called it a night after she hugged on me some more. She even went so far as to tuck me in and nuzzle me goodnight.

"Goodnight, Mom."

"G'night, sugarcube."

This turned out to be a pretty good day. Hmm...would have been better with Sweetie Belle, though...

Chapter 146: Resolve

Dash slept much longer this time around. Coal might have been acting a little off, but having him

there did give her some peace of mind. Ultimately, though, it was her stomach that woke her. It had been days since she had properly eaten, and it was becoming far too much to handle. Dash opened her eyes to find that she was in a different location. Coal wasn't holding her anymore; she had been placed on the grass. There wasn't any way to tell where she was now, because it all just looked like dense forestation.

"Coal...?"

No immediate response came. A minute passed, and Dash called out again. Things were starting to get worrisome, but just as Dash was about to start panicking, Coal came out of the brush.

"Oh...thank Celestia. Coal! Where did you go!?...S-sorry. I'm still pretty...freaked out...."

He of course didn't say anything back, instead unclasping his hands to reveal several berries. Coal knelt down next to Dash and put the berries in front of her.

She stared at them for a moment, eventually looking back up at Coal with enormous gratitude. A thought occurred to her, though, and she had to voice it.

"What about you? Aren't you hungry?" Coal merely shook his head and gestured once more for Dash to eat. "Th-thank you so much...."

Dash had to wipe away newly formed tears — her appreciation was too great. The berries didn't taste wonderful, but they were much better than grass. They didn't last longer than grass, though, but Dash still savored the weight she felt in her stomach. Coal sat there in silence as she finished eating the berries. As soon as she finished, she tackled him.

Dash kissed him heartily, and yet...that same unpleasant feeling returned. She didn't stop this time, however, telling herself that it was probably just her nerves getting to her.

Once Coal started getting more forceful, however, Dash began having concerns again. He got atop her and seemed to be looking at her with lust...rather than love. It was unfamiliar to her, but once more she stayed silent. Coal leaned down and forcefully kissed Dash to the point of pain; he wasn't being mindful of his weight. In the past, he had always done everything he could to make sure she was comfortable, and he simply wasn't now.

Dash had to force her eyes shut as his advances began getting more and more unpleasant. It just didn't feel right, and she had no idea why! Her heartbeat quickened when she realized Coal was going to go further. She wanted it to stop, but at the same time she wanted that feeling of peace she had always experienced when they were close — but it just wasn't happening!

It wasn't until Coal threw off his shirt that Dash saw something that made her blood run cold.

Whatever this...thing before her was...it was not Coal. It didn't have the few small birth marks Coal did. Dash's eyes grew and her pupils shrunk as a realization came: Crimson and Pine are unicorns...and they already know about Coal....

Dash pulled herself out from under this thing and stood up, shaking. She had never felt more dirty and guilty at the same time. Dash spat on the ground once and then immediately took off.

"DAMN IT!" Pine dropped the act and let go of the magic. It took a moment for his form to return. When it did, he started blasting beams of magic at Dash.

Dash recognized his voice, and she nearly began gagging at the taste in her mouth. She ran and ran and ran some more, but never did she stop to notice the pain returning to her body. All she could manage was whispering apologies to Coal...the real Coal.

Pine couldn't keep up. Dash hadn't come close to recovering, but the rest she had received aided in her escape. His normally cheery mood was all-too-quickly souring the further she traveled, and Pine began shouting curses into the air.

Dash didn't pay them any mind. Escape was the only thing she could focus on. The distance between her and Pine grew more and more until Pine lost sight of her altogether. He stomped the ground again and again out of rage. It took him a moment to catch his breath, but he swore he would have his way with the mare one way or another. For now, though...he had to report his latest failings to Crimson.

It took Dash nearly two hours to realize she wasn't being followed anymore. Her mind had started to become fuzzy, and her shoulder hit a tree by accident. She lost her balance and rolled forward several feet. Dash thought Pine was still after her, but she couldn't get up. She passed out while crying.

Dash didn't wake for several hours. The late afternoon long since run its course, and the late morning greeted her. She rolled onto her back and stared up into the sky. The sunlight was shining almost directly upon her, forcing Dash to close her eyes. The warmth of the sun was the only thing keeping her from wanting to give up right then and there. Yes...she had escaped Pine, she knew that now — but it didn't offer her any real peace. How long? How long was this nightmare going to continue? How many more tricks did those monsters have prepared? So many questions filled Dash's mind as the thought of giving up became more and more appealing.

Dash may have given up if a cloud had not moved over the sun and revealed a tree bearing red fruit. The sight moved Dash to more tears. It seemed as if the world itself didn't want her to give up, and that frustrated her to no end. Every time something started becoming a little easier for her, something else came along to make it even worse than before.

It almost hurt to admit it now, but Dash wanted to live on, to be held and to hold again, and to know the peace and joy of her family and friends. She thought back to all of her accomplishments...and she found new resolve.

"I'll beat this! I'm going to win and get home to claim my prize!"

* * * *

Scotaloo didn't come to school today, either. She was feeling a little better, but really it was still too soon. Since I'm not going to be able to visit Sweetie Belle this weekend, I'll probably spend it getting Scotaloo caught up again, and I'll hopefully get to play with Ula some more.

The whole day today, Ms. Cherilee has been a lot friendlier. Her smile seems bigger, and she seems to be having a really nice time. I'd like to think it's because I made her feel important by apologizing, but...I doubt it. That kind of smile...hmmm...methinks something more is behind that.

The school day ended, and I figured I would suggest hanging out with Dinky today. Well, I would have, but she left pretty quickly. I guess something important must have been going on.

I've been thinking: I really need to get some guy friends. All of my closer friends are fillies. Not that there is anything wrong with that, but sometimes I don't want to have to feel reserved. I can't talk to fillies about the same stuff I would talk to a colt about! Unfortunately, though, there aren't any that want to be my friend. I haven't talked about it much, but my reputation is something awful around here. It doesn't upset me like it would have used to, but it really starts getting tedious. I'm not trying to please every pony here; I'm just doing what I think is right. I've made mistakes and done things different in the past, but I've moved on from that. Why can't every pony just accept the new me? I say that, but...I did go off on Diamond Tiara not too long ago. Sheesh!

Well, whatever, I guess. Ms. Cherilee gave me extras of the assignments to give to Scotaloo, and I left shortly after that. On the way out, I saw Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon talking to this older-looking colt. That, or maybe I should call him a young stallion. He wasn't fully grown, but he was definitely older than us.

The three of them gave me some dirty looks, but I just rolled my eyes and took off. I'm past tired of stupid confrontations like that. At the same time though...I sometimes feel like...I want to fight. I mean...lately...my body has been aching for a challenge. Maybe that's why I'm so anxious to try and get all this energy worked out of my system, because part of me is worried I'll start getting short-tempered or something.

Hmmm...why am I flying? I should be running right now. The added weight will be good practice.

Waking up every morning feeling completely restored is amazing. It's by far the best side effect I've discovered to date. *sigh* I've been getting these really weird feelings the last few nights. Nothing has come of it yet, but while I look at the moon...I just feel...different. Not bad, really, but...just very different.

It didn't take me long to get home despite my running instead of flying, so the first thing I did was check on Scootaloo. She was sitting at her desk working on yesterday's homework. I figured it best to not bother her right now. There was a note on the dining room table that said AJ would be out until tonight. She left us some dinner in the fridge. I hoped she was doing something uplifting.

I made my way out back after grabbing a quick snack; and sure enough...Ula was at the tree line, waiting for me.

"Hey, Ula! I've got a question for you. Do you have anything to do while I'm at school?" She gave me a rather timid look and shook her head. "Is something the ma....Oh...." It was faint, but...I could smell it. Ula must hunt while there is nothing else to do.

"I-I'ts all right. I know that's just what wolves need to do. I'm not bothered by it...."

She didn't seem to believe me, but it would be all right. "Ready to lose for once!?" Ula perked up at that and quickly dashed off into the forest. "Awwww, come on! Ya stinking cheater!" Heheh! I love my friends!

* * * *

Things were a little awkward for a while with Twilight. I held her for nearly thirty minutes; it seemed she was taking her actions more harshly than I ever had. There were so many bodies...it looked like a war zone. God...I feel bad even saying that, but it's true!

It was past time to move on from this place, so I picked Twilight up and put her on the other side of the hill. I just wanted to get her away from the carnage. After that, I returned to reclaim my blades, but...they were looking stained at this point. The once-beautiful shine was now a disgusting black. I'm wanting to ask Twilight if she could remove the blood from them like she did with me, but I can't bring myself to ask anything of her.

As I walked back up the hill, I could see Twilight opening a small jar. "What is that, Twilight?"

"It's a salve I got from Zecora. I kept it in my leg pack...."

Oh, come on! She had something to treat her wounds all this time, and I never knew it! *sigh* I could have made her feel better all the sooner. "Any reason you didn't mention it to me?"

"I just didn't want to use it right away, but I'm thinking I really need to...."

She had it on her hoof, but she hadn't used it yet. She was looking around for something...not sure what. "Something the matter?"

"I want to use as little of this as possible, so I'm looking for an applicator."

"Oh, well, I'll do that for you."

"Y-you don't need to. I'm sure you're tired of all this gross stuff...."

"Maybe so, but you know I'll do anything and everything for my friends. So sit back and relax, and tell me if this stuff stings before I use it."

"Thanks...and it does sting a little...."

Great! I get to help and hurt Twilight at the same time. BAH! I tried to be quick, but Twilight kept flinching each time I would apply some salve over each puncture wound. "S-sorry...."

"Mmm...it's fine...."

sigh This is stressful as hell. Twilight was clearly not getting over this any time soon, so I knew I had better not talk about it. After getting the salve applied, I took off my shirt and tied it around her waist.

"Coal! You don't need to do that much!"

"No, I don't, but this will help. Don't worry about me getting cold, either. I'm feeling pretty dang awesome, all things considered."

"AUGH! Why do you do this!? WHY!?"

"Woah!? What are you talking about!?" Twilight was looking pissed!

"Why do you get mad at us for trying to help you, even though you'll literally give us the shirt off your back?"

"Heheh! Is that all? That much should be obvious...."

"It isn't! It bothers all of us, Coal! Please take this seriously!"

"I'm sorry, Twilight! That's just how I am! I've got plenty of reasons to put your lives over mine —

and like it or not, that isn't ever going to change."

Twilight just doesn't understand. My actions are a mix of plenty of things. The fact that I'm a lot older already means I should take responsibility and shoulder the brunt of hardship in these times. This is going to sound bad, but another reason is simply that they're girls. I was always raised to be chivalrous, and it has been a lot easier to be that way since coming here. I know that isn't really proper anymore on Earth, but fuck it! I'm in Equestria, and I doubt these ponies are going to look at me like a sexist because of it! And finally, my own personal feelings for them play the biggest part. These girls will never understand how much they honestly mean to me; I'd gladly die for any of them.

Twilight didn't like my answer, but we didn't discuss it anymore. We just gathered our things and got to walking.

Chapter 147: Work and Play

Author's notes: The title of the chapter that is going to contain the climax (not the aftermath per say, but the main conflict) is going to be "Unlocked". I'm not going to say why, but I will say...you're welcome...and I'm sorry. So I'd recommend coming back to the story once you see that chapter out if you don't want to put up with the cliffhangers. I know some of you are ready for this arc to finish up, but this is the best I can do for now.

"Crimson is going to kill me!" Pine made his way back to the farmhouse with his tail between his legs. He just knew that this was it. Crimson would have had enough, and he would be done away with. His fear of being found was the only thing preventing him from running. She might beat him for this, but he knew she would torture him if he tried to flee.

Crimson was once more in her bedroom. She was sitting calmly on her bed looking at a book, but there was something different in the room. A small orb was resting on the bed in front of Crimson. She heard Pine enter, and she looked up at him with a blank stare.

"Yes?"

"C-Crimson...I-I-I—"

"Failed. I know."

"What!? I-I mean h-how do you know th-that?"

"It has become painfully clear that you aren't the most competent of ponies, so I took a few precautions this time."

"R-really? D-does that mean I'm not going to be...punished?"

Crimson sighed. "No...for once, things are going according to plan, so I won't punish you."

"Oh thank you, Crimson! I promise I'll repay your kindness!"

"Let me finish. I'm not going to punish you, but I'm only giving you one more chance to do something right. I know what you did in the forest, and it is clear to me that your priorities lie in your desire to buck Dash."

"H-How do you know about that?"

"It goes back to my precautions. I placed a tracking spell on you, and I watched you with this orb as you tried to have your way with her — after you went against the plan and helped her escape just to get some of her favor, of course."

Pine was speechless. He simply stood there, gawking, as the orb slowly came to life, revealing Dash fast asleep on the ground. Pine began gesturing about, trying to find his words, but Crimson cut him off with a sharp glare.

"When you came into contact with Dash, I transferred the spell to her. We can track her with this, so your actions for once didn't hinder my plans."

"N-not to question your wisdom, b-but if you had a spell like that...w-why didn't you use it before?"

"Why would I place a tracking spell on a captured prisoner? I'm not going to assume that she'll just get away! Not only that, but this magic takes constant energy to work. Dash is several miles away at this point, and keeping the magic on her is a chore. I'd rather not be forced to do this."

"O-of course, I completely understand! C-can I do anything to make you more comfortable!?"

"You can begin by stopping behaving like such a sniveling coward! What I wouldn't give for an assistant that isn't a buffoon! Hmmm...that reminds me...I had a few more...premonitions earlier."

"What were they about?"

"I believe I'm going to have my chance at a better assistant after all. Start preparations, Pine. We're going to be having guests soon."

* * * *

"*pant* You're too fast, Ula..." I could keep up with her, but I wasn't entirely sure if she had even been running at top speed! She hardly even looked tired. Ula seemed to be laughing at me a bit as she curled up around me. Her coat was really soft and warm, and it made me really sleepy. "Mmmm...I wish you could talk...."

She gave me a funny look. It didn't last very long, though; soon, she rested her head again with a distant stare.

"Not that your being unable to talk makes spending time with you any less enjoyable. It's just...I feel like you're the only one who wouldn't judge me for what I've been feeling lately. I...I've been getting these...violent urges. I'm starting to get a little concerned with myself. There is plenty in my life that I don't approve of, but there is so much more that makes me happy! Why are my feelings and wants starting to become so sporadic? I hope you don't think I'm weird for this...."

Now I really wish Ula could talk. She started rubbing her nose against my forehead. It was pretty cold to the touch, but it did make me feel better. We stayed there for a while. We had spent the entire evening running through the forest, exploring all sorts of neat areas. I say "exploring," but we just kind of ran past or through. Now the sun was just about to go down, which meant it must have been a little after seven. Kinda sucks the night comes sooner in the winter, but at the same time...I love Luna's moon. Something about it just fills me with energy as I stare at it. Ula likes it too, I think. She let me rest on her chest as we both simply look up at it.

Ula began howling at it, causing me to chuckle a little. She then shot me a dirty look. "What? Is howling fun?" With a roll of her eyes, Ula went back to letting out these long cries. It wasn't crying, but it sounded kind of sad.

CRASH

"What in Luna's name was that!?" Ula and I shot up immediately at the sound of this huge crash. It sounded like a tree fell over or something! I was starting to get defensive, but Ula just shot off into the forest towards the noise. "Ula! Wait!"

I ran in after her, but I decided to use my wings to help me keep up. I would give a quick flap to propel myself forward short distances each time there was enough room for me to do so. This made keeping up with her rather easy, but she wouldn't stop running no matter how much I questioned her! She did FINALLY stop at a small stream. The water was falling from a cliff just about a dozen feet high, and Rafe was standing at the top.

"Rafe!? Was it you who made all that noise?"

"Copper...no, it was not me. It seems there was a disturbance in the forest a few miles away from ours. The creatures have become restless, and it appears there are some making their way towards this land. It has been a long time since I have had to purge this land of threats."

"You...purge this land? Does that mean...you deal with the larger threats around here?"

"Yes, I do. Why do you think so few dangerous beasts make it past the forest? I have run out of challenges lately, though, so I have grown...complacent."

I can't believe this. I've never seen Rafe look so...energetic. He looks similar to how Ula does when we're playing. Knowing why he is so excited...should be frightening, but...I just...want to be there. "M-may I...watch?"

"Hmm? You wish to see me fight?"

"I-I do!"

"Copper...let me get a closer look at you."

"Umm...all right...."

Rafe jumped down in front of me, and he stared straight into me! It felt like he was looking into my very soul! His eyes seemed endlessly deep, and I found myself feeling humbled by them. He did eventually stop, but he looked very serious again.

"Copper. I think it is best you try to calm yourself. You're...feeding the beast, so to speak."

"I-I'm what!?"

"When I was first given this curse by Nightmare Moon, I went through a period of...difficulty. Your time is coming, and at this rate, I'm afraid that it'll be nearly impossible to manage."

"Wh-what do you mean!? I-I'm not cursed!"

"No, but you were fed the same kind of magic. Your reaction will be different than my own, but the signs are pointing towards it being similar. Control your desires, or you may end up hurting those around you."

"I-I don't know what you mean! The only desire I've had lately is to fight...oh...nononono! That can't be right! It just can't! I've gotten past the results of the merging! I'm better now, honest!"

"Calm yourself, Copper! Your strong emotions are only going to make it worse when it happens, and it will happen! I suggest you inform your family and tell them to set up certain precautions."

"Precautions...what...should I tell them?"

"I can't tell you when it will happen, but you're going to change. The dark magic in your body is going to release, and your mind will be affected. You won't be yourself, so you must be kept under constant supervision. I am inclined to suggest being locked up for a time. You don't want to run loose, Copper."

"I-I...can't believe this..." What the buck is this!? I'm going to change? Into what!? Why does this have to happen when Dad isn't here to help!?

"It'll be all right. If you wish...I'll inform your caretakers after I deal with the intruders."

"You mean...explain to them specifically what's going to happen? Is there a reason I can't know? You've been talking...rather vaguely about all this...."

"Trust me when I say you don't want to know the specifics of the change. I assure you it will only be temporary, but there will be lasting effects. Mine is my neverending growth. If I live for another thousand years, I'll be much larger. There is no way to know exactly what will happen to you, but it shouldn't be anything less than beneficial. You do wish to be strong, as I recall...."

"I do, but...not like this. This is just...too much too soon! Why didn't Luna tell me this would happen!?"

"She most likely doesn't know. To my knowledge, the cursed beasts were Luna's first magical creations. We were sent out to follow her orders after our births, and each of us went through the change independently. Mine lasted three days. I knew of others whose changes lasted for hours; others' lasted for nearly a week. She most likely never became aware of what had happened. I believe it to be a side effect of our bodies acclimating to the magic contained within us. Unlike unicorns, we simply weren't meant to contain all this magic."

"So...she simply isn't aware? Am I...her second creation? I don't know what to think about this...I...I think I need to talk with her."

"That may be for the best, Copper. Now it is getting late, and I must hunt. Return home, and if you wouldn't mind...let Ula stay with you tonight. She does not need to be put in danger's way."

"Y-yes...and thank you, Rafe."

He turned around and ran off into the forest. Ula started to go after him, but I got in her way. "I know you want to go with him, but...it's best if you listen to him. I've gotten in the way of my dad before, too...it isn't a good thing."

She didn't seem happy about it, but she didn't protest it anymore. Ula looked back plenty of times as we walked towards my house, and it was starting to depress me. "He'll be fine. I doubt anything is bigger than him."

She still wasn't satisfied. I guess Rafe is really old, but he'll surely be fine. We got home and I sneaked her upstairs to my room. I'll probably have to clean up in the morning, but I let her sleep in my bed too. I've always enjoyed getting to hug while I sleep, and I think Ula liked it too. *sigh* What is going to happen to me? Am I going to become a monster? How can Luna not know about this stuff? Well...I guess she isn't omniscient. Still...it just sucks, but I'm focusing too much on the negatives again. Hmm...for once...I'm glad Sweetie Belle isn't here. On the same note...it looks like I'll be going to Canterlot, after all. AJ probably won't mind after she hears about all of this...I hope.

* * * *

Twilight has been incredibly quiet since we started moving again. I think I really did piss her off with my unsatisfactory answer.

"Let's stop for now, Coal. I want to check on Rainbow."

"Yeah, that sounds like a good idea."

We had made it past the long stretch of flatlands by this point, and we were now traveling through a normal looking section of trees. They weren't tall, and thank god, we could actually look into the forest and see stuff. I almost wanted to ask Twilight if she was ready to teleport us again, but I didn't want to make her feel obligated. Anyway, we sat down and Twilight readied her magic. I noticed something about the gem — it was a different color now than when Twilight first used it. The outer layer was a clear black...somehow. I could actually see through it, but the center was the same color as Dash's coat. I'm not a complete moron, so I would assume that the change in colors represent both Dash and myself. Granted, my name is Coal, but I'm not sure how I feel about my involvement in the spell turning the gem black. Dash's makes sense...it is her coat's color, but mine...why does it change like that? Something about it just...gives me a really bad feeling.

Twilight cast the spell and that same projection-like effect took place. It started off as a thin beam shooting upwards a couple feet from the gem, and then it spread out into a sphere. From there, the image formed. It didn't take as long as before, but the sight was less than pleasing. Dash was sitting in a field with several red fruits, but that wasn't what disturbed me. She had clearly lost weight...and there were really dark rings around her back legs.

"Twilight...focus on her back legs, please."

Twilight did so without comment. I leaned forward closer to the projection to try to get a better image, and I got my answer. It was dried blood....

"We need to go, Twilight. I'm not certain what has happened to Dash, but she has clearly been hurt."

Twilight almost seemed to be looking through Dash, as if she were looking at something I couldn't see. It took all of my patience to allow Twilight time to inspect whatever the hell she was inspecting and finally acknowledge me.

"Y-yes...you're right, Coal. Once we pass this forest, there will be a very mountainous path we would have to traverse. I'll teleport us past that once we reach it."

"Thanks, Twilight...."

With that, we got back on our way. I had mixed feeling about all of this. I wanted to hurry more, but at the same time, Dash didn't seem to be in that much trouble. She had food, and she thankfully didn't appear to be hiding anymore. Her weight loss was what worried me more than the wounds, though, and the fact she hadn't flown home yet. I just wasn't sure what to believe....

"Coal...I'm a little curious about something. Would you mind if I asked you a personal question?"

"Anything to take my mind off things for a while. Ask away, Twilight."

"I know you're with both Applejack and Rainbow, but...does that actually work out well?"

"We think so. The hardest part is not being allowed to give Dash any affection unless we're at our house. Ponyville knows about Applejack and me, but I'm not sure how they would react if they knew about Dash."

"I see, but...do they really not mind? They've always kind of been friends and rivals, but the whole concept of that relationship is just...confusing."

"It's really my fault to begin with. I couldn't get over the feelings that had grown while I was with Dash once my relationship with AJ started. Apparently, Dash had the same problem. Really, the only reason this works is because AJ is incredible."

"Hmmm...so you would say things have been working out well for every pony?"

"I'm happy, and the girls are happy with it. Copper and Scootaloo know about it, of course, and they both adore AJ and Dash. AJ is more the caregiver, and she receives a lot of the affections. Dash is more the role model, and they really look up to her...literally at times, heh. Anyway...I've never been happier with them, and I'd like to believe they feel the same way."

"Coal...I...mmm...nothing."

Something seems to be eating at Twilight. I hope knowing about this situation doesn't bother her too much. I'm sure we'll always be friends, but I'd hate to lose her respect...if I have any.

We continued walking for another hour or so before hitting the mountainous path Twilight mentioned earlier. I sat down at the edge of it and motioned for Twilight to join me. She seemed somewhat amused by this, but she crawled into my lap all the same. With that ever-familiar glow of purple and white, we flashed over miles of land — except, this time...we didn't come out on the other side...over land.

SPLASH

"Bwaa! Brrr! This is freezing, Twilight!" I was holding Twilight so that she wouldn't get wet, but my lower half was in the edge of a small pond.

"Hahahahahaha! You should see the look on your face!"

"You're lucky you have items in that pack of yours that would be ruined by water. Otherwise I would throw your happy flank straight in here."

"You don't have the guts for that! The sight of a pony cold and wet would make you too guilty!"

The girl was getting cheeky with me! "Oh, it is on!" I tossed her packs onto dry land, and she eep'd as I stood up.

"C-Coal! Y-You wouldn't!"

"Hey...course not. I don't have the guts!"

SPLASH

"Bwaaaa! Coal! This is freezing, you big jerk!"

"Hahahahahaha! You should see the look on YOUR face! Priceless!"

"Oooh!"

Her horn flashed. "Woah woah woah! Put me down!"

"Oh, I will!"

SPLASH

"Gah! You're lucky you're cute!"

"Heheheh!"

sigh It's nice to see Twilight laugh. We dragged our sopping wet selves out of the pond, and Twilight dried herself with magic. "You have got to be kidding...."

"Nope!"

And then she just started walking down the road. "I'm going to have to drip dry...aren't I?"

"Eeeyup!"

Oh dear lord. Heheh...hahahahahaha! Worth it!

"Hey, Coal...."

"Yeah?"

"Thanks. Now hold still, and I'll get you dried off."

Ahhh...I think we needed this. Throwing our stresses to the wind, and enjoying life — if only for a little while. As soon as we get Dash back...I think we should all spend some time together. It's past time for some fun and relaxation.

* * * *

Sweetie Belle has been simply enjoying her school life for the last few days. Her new friends have been very nice, and they've even spent some time around town together. Today, though, Sweetie Belle couldn't wait to get home. It wasn't likely, but Copper might have gotten permission to come down after school. It was Friday, after all.

Her friends stopped her before she left, though. They were pretty curious about what was going on.

"What has you in such a hurry today, Sweetie Belle?" Aria asked, breaking away from the group.

"Oh! Umm...heheh, well..."

Lyric noticed Sweetie Belle start to turn a little red, and she decided to tease her. "Oh my! It seems our friend has got herself a date! We shouldn't keep her...." Sweetie Belle didn't say anything. She just twiddled her hooves uncomfortably for a moment. "Wait...do you?"

"N-no...well...maybe..."

"What!?" Pitch and Frequency had been talking to Brio but were listening in somewhat silently up to that point. They both ran over and eyed Sweetie Belle up and down. "Really!?" They spoke every word in perfect unison. "Not to be mean or anything, but you're the youngest among us! We still haven't asked Lyric and Aria out yet!"

The girls rolled their eyes before turning their attention back to Sweetie Belle. Aria was a little more reserved than Lyric, so she stayed quiet while Lyric asked the questions every pony wasn't confident enough to ask.

"So what's he like? Is he from around here? Do we know him!?"

All eyes were once again on Sweetie Belle, much like they were on her first couple of days. These were her new friends, and she didn't want to upset them — but this was a little uncomfortable. "He, umm...isn't from here, so you wouldn't know him..."

Brio stepped up looking a little complaisant. "Is he from your old home in Ponyville?"

"Mhm."

Lyric was getting frustrated with so little information. "Well, come on, Sweetie Belle! I'm dying over here!" Aria nudged her in the shoulder to calm her friend down. "R-right. Ummm...you don't have to tell us...if you don't want to."

Aria gave Sweetie Belle a reassuring smile as she spoke. "Lyric is right. We understand if you're still a little reserved with us. Heh, we did only meet a few days ago, after all."

Sweetie Belle was starting to feel a little guilty. It wasn't like these ponies would judge her for it if they were so interested. So with a deep breath, she readied herself. "His name is Copper, and he is a pegasus. We've known each other for a little while, but before I left, we would spend all our free time together. He is actually what made leaving the hardest..."

Brio, Frequency, and Pitch might not have been the most sensitive of colts, but they could tell when a very touchy conversation was coming on. They dismissed themselves to let Aria and Lyric handle this one.

"So what can you tell us about him?" Lyric was reeling her excitement back a bit, but she simply loved this kind of talk.

"Well...he is pretty grown-up looking for his age, and...he is very nice. I'm not sure what all to say..." Scootaloo and Applebloom hadn't been too big on this kind of discussion, so Sweetie Belle had no idea what Lyric was looking for in description.

"Hmm...what does he look like?"

"He has a red coat and a white and azure mane, and umm...his wings are really big."

"Well, that's pretty neat." Lyric wanted to ask the more...personal questions, but each time she was about to, Aria would give her another little nudge.

Aria did think of something, though, and she figured it probably wouldn't be too much to ask. "Is he taking a train to visit? You did say he was from Ponyville and all...."

"No; he can fly."

"What!?" the girls burst out in unison. Lyric picked it up after that. "How old is he!? It would take an adult to make that flight...."

Sweetie Belle wasn't sure how to answer this question. In reality, Copper was barely over two months old. So what would be the best way to answer this? She needed to respond soon, though, so she decided on the best answer.

"He is my age...a little older, but not by much. We were in the same class after all...."

This talk went back and forth for nearly twenty minutes before Aria finally got Lyric to stop pestering Sweetie Belle. They said their goodbyes as Sweetie Belle rushed home. The first thing she wanted to do when she and Copper got the chance was to get some new pictures taken.

* * * *

"These are delicious!" Dash was eating the fruit she had found with gusto. Their sweetness was unlike anything she could remember, but that was probably due to her not eating properly in so long.

The pulp was soft and a little messy, but it was too good for Dash to care. She ate nearly ten pieces of the fruit before finally collapsing. This feeling was just what she needed. Dash rolled in the grass for a minute, enjoying the warmth the sun beamed down against her. Part of her felt she should get up and start trying to make her way home, but at the same time...her wings were still not responding. No matter how much she focused on them, they wouldn't move.

"Maybe I should wait here until I can fly again...."

Dash wasn't one to think ahead much, but the peace of the moment gave her the will to try.

"Kay...I'm in Everfree...I think. I haven't come across any animals except birds, so this is probably safe enough. If I tried to walk back...I'd have to get out of the forest. Those two may be waiting for me to do that, too. *sigh* Don't really have a choice, I guess. At least I have some food now."

Dash rolled onto her stomach and relished the sun's warmth on her back. The combination of the soft grass, the warm sun, and finally having a full stomach made this the first restful sleep Dash had experienced in a long time. She didn't want to count the time with Pine disguised as Coal; just thinking back to that almost brought her out of her comfortable state. The last thing Dash thought of before she fell asleep was how thankful she was that the fruit took Pine's taste out of her mouth.

* * * *

The following morning, Pine and Crimson were discussing their plans while regarding the farm.

"That human should arrive here within a few days. I want Dash to be in our control by then."

"Should I pick up where I left off with Ms. Dash?"

"No. We're going to have a new bargaining chip to bend her to our will."

"The human?"

"Yes. I'm curious to see what kind of being he is."

"Is...is he really going to replace me? If...you can control him...."

"Yes. You are an idiot and a failure. I'm tired of putting up with you. I'll allow you to skip out on the joining so long as you don't cause any problems."

"Crimson, please! I have been nothing but loyal to you!"

"Loyal? You helped Dash escape just so you could have a chance at rutting with her. You're only loyal when your desires don't conflict."

"But what is going to stop the human from having the same problems!?"

"Simple. We'll have Dash, and he'll obey us if he doesn't want her harmed. I'd rather not kill her, but controlling the only human in Equestria could be just as beneficial as a skilled pegasus, even if I would have to change my plans."

Pine was looking rather dejected, but he came up with a few thoughts that just might save him. "If you were to kill Dash...what would stop him from turning on you? I could still be useful! I'll just watch over Dash, and...."

"Pine, Pine, Pine. You have so little faith in my abilities. All I need is for the human to submit to me once, and I'll have him for as long as I want."

"Wh-what about Ms. Dash?"

"Once the human is under my control, she'll submit to make sure he isn't harmed. I'll take control of her as well, and from there I'll work on something more permanent."

"Permanent? I take it your mind control takes constant magic too...."

"It does for non magical beings, but there are so many prerequisites that have to be met for it to work. It gets tiresome. I'll take control of the two, and then I'll see if I can't lock away their wills, or something along those lines."

Pine was only useful to Crimson up to the point of capturing Dash, and he knew it. If he didn't come up with something to keep himself useful...he would most likely be done away with. There was no way Crimson would let him keep his mind if there was no benefit from it. Time was of the essence, and Pine's was running out.

It came to him in a flash — another chance for him to stay useful. "You know, Crimson...no pony can torture like I can...."

"Your point?"

"Even after you have control of the human, Ms. Dash, and then the weather...do you really think every pony is going to obey you?" Crimson didn't respond. She simply stared off into space. "I'll break them for you! I'll make them obey you!" Pine got onto his knees and began kissing Crimson's hooves. "I'll do anything for you! Please don't do away with me!"

"You are so pathetic...but do have a point. Fine. Capture Dash and bring her to me, and I'll forgive you of your past failures. From there, I'll make use of your...talents as need be."

"Thank you, Crimson! I promise you won't regret this!"

Pine ran out of the room and immediately started working up a squad of unicorns to retrieve Dash. Crimson had given him the orb that would allow him to track Dash's every move, so he was just about ready for his most important order to date.

Crimson watched from the window as Pine, shortly after leaving, led many unicorns across the

farms and towards the forest. As he disappeared from view, Crimson climbed onto her bed and stared at the ceiling. "Now...how best to greet our human friend?"

* * * *

"Thanks fer lettin' me stop by, Rar'. Ah was needin ta' kinda...get away."

Applejack had initially planned on spending the day around town just to clear her head. She ended up running into Rarity, though, and they made a day of it. Granted, Rarity was going on about things Applejack didn't care too greatly for — but her company and that old sense of peace made it a wonderful evening.

"Not at all, darling! It feels like forever since we got to spend any time together! We simply must do this more often."

"Ah reckon yer right. Ah did leave the young'uns ah note, but Ah best be gettin now. Ah don't want Copper worryin' none."

"I understand. Do have a wonderful evening, Applejack."

"Ya'll do the same."

With that, Applejack started her way back home. She had to look on the positive side of things to keep her spirits up, but thankfully, there were plenty. Yes, Coal was far from home, but Twilight was with him. They'd watch out for each other and come back with Dash, safe and sound. She had Copper and Scootaloo safe at home, and they weren't giving her any trouble.

It was very late when Applejack finally made it back home. She had been walking rather slowly while thinking about everything, and that didn't help her time any. The house looked fine at first, but Applejack noticed something move from behind the house. She leaned forward while squinting her eyes to get a better look, but it had already moved.

"Somethin' was there...."

Applejack didn't like this. She straightened her hat and ran back there, but she hit something large and soft as soon as she rounded the corner. Her eyes widened as she looked up to see Rafe standing there, looking amused.

"That is some welcome you have. I'm not sure how your mate would approve, though."

"R-R-R-R-Rafe!?" she spluttered. "Is that you!?"

"You know of me? Good. That saves me much explaining. I'm sure you're curious about why I'm here, so I'll get straight to the point. I'll need you to calm down, though."

Applejack was at a loss for words. She had learned of Rafe during one of her visits into Coal's mind, but meeting him like this at night was something else entirely. He wasn't giving her any reason to doubt him, but it still took her a few minutes to calm down.

"All right, not that Ah ain't happy ta' meet ya er nothin', but what are ya doin' behind mah house so late at night?"

"I just need to give you a warning about Copper."

"Copper! D-did somethin happen ta' him!?"

"Stay calm, please. No. Copper is fine for now, but he won't be in a short while. I don't know all of what Coal has told you about me, but I am a cursed beast of Nightmare Moon. Copper has received the same kind of magic through Luna, although there is no malice behind it. Shortly after I came to be what I am, I went through a period of change where my body finished acclimating to the magic. Copper is going to go through this as well, and we both believe talking with Luna is the best thing to do."

Applejack was somewhat skeptical. Copper had been well for so long. He was growing up to be a very well-behaved colt, so something like this just didn't make too much sense.

"How are ya sure about this? Are there signs er somethin'?"

"You would know better than I would. Think back to his time with you. I know it has been short, but you've surely noticed various oddities about him."

"Well...he has been growin' an awful lot, and...it seems he gets better after bein' hurt just overnight. Ah...Ah guess there have been signs of this. Th-thank ya fer tellin me this, Rafe, but...can ya tell me what's gonna happen ta mah boy more specifically?"

"During my change, I behaved like a different being. My personality, thoughts, and actions were all different. At the same time, though, they were all my own. Copper showed signs of pent-up aggression with me tonight. I believe his change is going to reflect those urges in some way."

Applejack was concerned, but she could actually do something this time. "Thank ya, Rafe. Ah'll get Copper, and we'll take ah train up ta Canterlot tomorrow. We'll talk with Luna then."

Rafe nodded once as he was about to leave, but he stopped, remembering something. "Ula is staying with Copper tonight. Don't be surprised to see her somewhere in the house. The reason for this is complicated, and you have more important things to worry about. Good night...." He

paused, looking at her quizzically.

"Applejack."

"Good night, Applejack."

Rafe took his leave back into the forest, and Applejack immediately ran upstairs to check on Copper. She found him and Ula sound asleep together, burying their heads into each other. Applejack let out an amused sigh and went to check on Scootaloo. She was sound asleep in bed, looking to be feeling better. Applejack then trotted over to her bed to turn off her desk lamp, giving Scootaloo a quick kiss on her forehead.

"Yer the only one in this family not givin' me all kinds ah headaches, sugarcube."

Chapter 148: To Canterlot

Author's notes: Guess what is getting close! That's right! Coal and Twilight are going to arrive in Colten very soon now. It may take me longer to get out chapters once I reach that part in the story though. For good reasons! The chapters should be fairly long! Yay, for long chapters!

As a side note: If you happen across any typos, I'd appreciate it if you would quote them. I have an editor now, but I still don't do pre-readers. That's because it would take longer to get out the chapters, and I know most of you enjoy the daily updates. So I will always appreciate any assistance anybody is willing to give!

Honestly...as long as Dash is all right...I'm glad this is happening. It has been forever since Twilight and I got to spend time together. She is by far the best friend I've ever had, hands down! Well...in her case, hooves down, heh. I can't rightly give the title of "friend" to Applejack or Dash, because we are so much more than that! So I hope it isn't weird of me to praise Twilight like this.

"What are you thinking of now, Coal? You're getting that silly grin again."

"Oh...you know...stuff."

"Ugh. Why must you be so difficult?"

"Cause you're cute when I'm teasing you."

"Mmheh! Are you ever going to stop picking on me?"

"Sure...when the time calls for it. There isn't much to do now, so...guess I'll just entertain myself the only way I can — by seeing what the best reactions I can get out of you are."

"Hmm...I think two can play this game."

"Oh?"

"Yeah...sooo...been with both of them at once yet?"

"WWWWHAT!?"

"Hahahahah! See? I'm going to win at this game!"

"Why you little...mmm...no...I couldn't...."

"Couldn't what?"

"Say what I just thought of. I don't think your innocent little heart could take it!"

"Oh, please! You just couldn't come up with anything."

"...Challenge accepted. I'm a little curious about something, Twilight."

"...yeah?"

"Do unicorns have stronger libidos? You're all rather horny...."

"Oh ha ha ha! That was terrible!"

"I know it! And you love it!"

"Hmph. You're one to talk. You did have me change your part, after all."

"Ouch! Low blow! Literally!"

"Hahahahah! Ahhhh...you're fun."

"Heh, you too."

This is more like it. Getting to enjoy a few lowbrow laughs with a friend. Shame it takes a serious situation to allow time for this. I hope every pony else is doing all right. It's hard to get more reliable than Applejack, so I'm sure they're fine.

Twilight and I have been walking for about four hours since the whole pond incident, and the sound of our stomachs alerts us to the fact that we haven't eaten in a good while.

"I'm thinkin' it's time we perform a little side quest, Twilight."

"Is that your way of saying we need to get something to eat?"

"Do you really have to ask?"

"Heheh, not really. Let me just check my book and I'll find out what we can eat around here."

"Sounds like a plan..." I guess. I'll be honest...eating leaves does not sound all that appetizing. I've eaten nothing but fruit, and, from Applejack's influence, veggies. Dear god almighty...I am the pickiest damn eater you've ever met, and I'm being forced to eat food I wouldn't so much as give a second glance back on Earth. I've never been this healthy in my life, but I would do almost anything for some kind of variety! Of course, I can't say that, cause the girls will assume I'm missing meat. Which...I really am. Protein was something I never lacked back on Earth, but it is a hard thing to come by here.

"Anything striking your eye, Twilight?"

"Hmmm...it would be easier if I had something to reference with. We should probably look for something first, and then I'll be able to tell if it's edible or not."

"Can do." I waited for Twilight to pack up her book, and we stepped into the tree line. I couldn't believe we were stepping into another damn forest-like area so soon, but...what could we really do? We had to eat, and this was the only place where we'd find something. I was looking up high, and Twilight was looking along the ground, so we were at least being efficient about it. She found some mushrooms, but they turned out to be inedible. I ended up finding a tree that had some red fruits on it, and Twilight said they were fine to eat — but man, were they sweet! I mean, one bite into these things and I nearly lost my mind! They were so sweet that Twilight's face scrunched up as if they were sour. I couldn't laugh at her, though, because my face was scrunched up just as much! We didn't stop eating them, but it was somewhat difficult.

After we ate, Twilight said she was feeling up for another teleport. I was a bit skeptical, though. "You're not forcing yourself, right?"

"What if I am? You're not the only one allowed to go past their limit for the sake of their friends."

"Really? Give me a break, Twilight! Won't you suffer from some kind of...magic backlash if you spend too much?"

"Where did you get that idea? A unicorn only has so much magic to spend at a time. Either we can cast the magic, or we can't. The only difference is that if we spend more than a comfortable amount, we end up making our bodies tired as well. And if that happens...well...you can just

carry me again."

"Heh...I guess I could. Well...I trust you, Twilight." I hoped she knew what she was doing. We got into our usual seating situation and Twilight cast her magic. Thankfully, we landed on solid ground this time.

"So how are you doing, Twilight?"

Twilight didn't answer.

"You fell asleep...*sigh*...guess a little hard work never killed anybody."

I moved Twilight to my back and continued towards Colten. The land was all starting to run together for me, so I wasn't really enjoying the scenery very much. It was just more grasslands, more trees, and some occasional wildflowers. The mountain we skipped would probably have been the most interesting location so far.

"WOAH! Twilight!?" *sigh* THIS GIRL! I SWEAR! She is nuzzling me in her sleep! That freaked me out more than it probably should have. I'm just a little on edge lately. What with my...going berserk on those creatures? It just doesn't make a whole lot of sense to me. I literally went into a rage when they were over Twilight. The fact that I wasn't thinking about anything while butchering them...is what really gets me. Honestly, though...I probably wouldn't care if Twilight hadn't seen it. This poor girl is lucky she isn't having nightmares. She is probably sensitive enough for it. Man...I remember the simple days where her biggest concern was getting a friendship letter to the princess. Granted, I wasn't here for that, but still. I...I hope my presence here hasn't somehow brought on more evil into this world. I don't think I could forgive myself for something like that.

"Mmm..."

Heh...Twilight is pretty cute when she sleeps. Hell...she is cute anyway. All the girls are...*sigh*. I can't wait to see my girls again. The first thing I'm going to do when I know Dash is all right...is to remind her how much I love her.

* * * *

"Copper, ya'll need ta' get up."

"Mm...M-Mom? *yawn* Something going on?"

"We're takin' the train ta' Canterlot today. Ya'll need ta' send Ula home and get cleaned up ta' leave."

Copper's mind now returned to him. He realized that he had been sleeping on Ula's side for the entire night, and she had been wide awake long before he was. Ula didn't want to leave before Copper had woken up, though, so she had pretended to remain sleeping until it was no longer needed.

"W-wait...did Rafe tell you...about what's going to happen to me?"

The uncertainty in Copper's eyes was all Applejack needed to make her want some comfort. She leaned over the bed and nuzzled Copper, an action that he returned.

"He sure did, sugarcube. Now Ah don't want ya worryin 'bout this none! Ah'm sure Luna will be more than happy ta' take ah look at ya. It kinda bugs me some that she hasn't checked up on ya, but Ah guess that would mean she didn't have confidence in her work."

Copper wasn't sure what to say to that. He was immensely thankful to Luna, and for whatever reason, he felt she had already checked on him, although it was just a feeling. As he was thinking about it, though, another thought came to mind.

"What about Scootaloo? Is she coming?"

"She is feelin' better, but it wouldn't be ah good idea fer her to come along this time. Ah wanted ta get her ta stay with Fluttershy, but she said she'd be fine here."

"Are you sure? I mean...."

"I'm fine, Copper." Scootaloo walked into the room with a lot of bed mane going on. Her eyes didn't look nearly as bad, but she still seemed rather tired. "You get your...whatever it is taken care of, and I'll see you when you get back. Hey, you should stop by Sweetie Belle's while you're there. I'm sure she'll like that."

"R-right. I'm glad you're feeling better...."

"Yeah...me too. Well, I'm going back to bed. *yawn* Later...."

"Sleep tight, sugarcube." Applejack turned her attention back to Copper and started pushing him a little to get him out of bed.

"Okay, okay...I'm getting up."

The next hour was spent sending Ula on her way home and gathering a few items for the trip. Applejack and Copper made their way to the train station, and they boarded shortly after arriving.

"Are you sure Luna won't mind our sudden visit, Mom?"

"Ah certainly hope not. It would take too long ta' send ah letter without Twi' here, so this is the fastest way fer now."

"Sorry for this...I know you have a lot on your mind already..."

"It ain't yer fault, sugarcube — and even if it was, I'd still love ya."

"Mom...do...you really mean that?"

"What are ya talkin 'bout? Course Ah mean it!"

"It's just...I know it's my fault that your life is a lot harder than it used to be, and that...I'm not really your..."

"Hush yerself right there. None ah that matters, Copper. Yer mine whether ya like it or not."

"I-I do like it. I love you too, Mom."

The trip didn't take long after their talk. They spent the remaining time on the train hugging each other. The train arrived, and they left the station shortly after noon.

Applejack had been in Canterlot plenty of times, but this was Copper's first experience. He hadn't been allowed out of the castle during his treatment; he hadn't even stepped out to leave — he had been teleported home, after all. The huge buildings and large housing, made from the finest materials, could be seen everywhere. It was so vastly different from anything Copper had ever known, so he gawked at just about everything.

"Yer jaw is gonna fall off at this rate, sugarcube."

"Th-this place is just so big! How do ponies not get lost!?"

Applejack just laughed and jostled Copper's mane with her hoof for a moment. "Ah guess ya just get used to it. Ah agree this isn't really my kinda place, but it's nice ta' visit."

"So...should we head to the castle now?"

"That's probably fer the best. Ah know the way, so don't worry about us gettin' lost." Applejack gave Copper a little nudge as she said that, and he chuckled a little at it.

Despite the severity of the situation, they were trying to stay in high spirits. With any luck, Luna

would know of the best course of action.

They walked silently down the streets, making their way to the castle. Copper's head was going from side to side as each new sight filled him with curiosity. There were buildings and stores here for just about anything, but all of them looked very expensive. He started to understand his place in the world when he considered just how well-off Sweetie Belle must be to live here. Doubts crept into his mind as he realized something: they were just kids now, but what was he going to do when he got older? His grades were fine, but he had no idea what he wanted to do with his life. He had no goals besides self-improvement, and he had no interests besides his friends and family. Those were great things to have, but they wouldn't earn him any favor with Sweetie Belle's parents. Copper could see it now: someday he gets to meet them, and they ask what his plans for the future are. His response: he has none. Just thinking about it put a bad taste in his mouth.

"Ya'll doin' all right, Copper? Ya look like ya ate ah bad apple."

"I'm fine...just thinking about stuff."

"Care ta' enlighten me?"

"Well...it's kind of...silly I guess. At least for now...."

"Anythin buggin' ya ain't silly. Iff'n it is big enough ta make ya worry, then it is worth talkin' 'bout."

"Okay...well...I have no idea what I want to do when I get older."

"Ya mean like ah job?"

"Yeah. I don't want to do just anything, but at the same time...there isn't anything I want to do."

Applejack started contemplating it. There was an easy answer, but she didn't know much about the field of work. "Well...ya'll could talk ta Dash about what ah weather pony does when she gets back."

"I guess I could. That doesn't sound so bad, actually...."

"There ya go! Ah'm sure ya'll would be happy with anythin' that lets ya fly around."

"Hehe, you're probably right."

It had been a long while since Copper had last been able to spend time with Applejack like this. He had to admit that there usually was a silver lining to every bad situation.

The rest of the trip to the castle went by rather quietly. Copper would occasionally ask a question about something he saw. A funnier one was a specialty clinic for improving a stallion's...yeah. Applejack thought of Coal, and it made her laugh. Copper never got an answer, but part of him almost didn't want it after Applejack's reaction.

The castle came into view, and a sense of nostalgia came over him. "I forgot how big it is...been a while since the last time I was here."

"It sure has, sugarcube."

They casually strolled up the steps, and a sense of what could only be described as dread began filling Copper. The sight of the guards reminded him of all the rather...disapproving looks he had received during his original stay. Word travels fast in the castle, so most ponies knew of how Copper came to be. He didn't care at the time, but now, the thought of being judged for something he could not control made him somewhat disheartened.

The guards watched as Applejack and Copper came up the steps, stopping in front of them. They recognized Applejack immediately, but their eyes widened as they slowly recognized Copper.

One of the guards had been assigned to watch over Copper's treatment room during his stay, and he still remembered the cold icy stare that youth would give every pony.

Applejack stepped up and greeted them respectfully before asking if Luna was in. The guard who knew of Copper was the one to respond.

"Princess Luna is currently sleeping in her quarters. I'm afraid you will have to come back another time if you wish to speak with her."

"Ah don't want ta' be difficult, but it's kind of an emergency...."

"Either it is, or it isn't. We aren't going to wake the Princess for something that simply may be an emergency."

Copper was getting a little annoyed. If Luna knew it was him, surely she wouldn't mind speaking with them. "If any pony were to tell her that Copper is here with a problem regarding his...situation, then I'm sure she wouldn't mind. I don't want to wake her any more than you do, but I desperately need her help."

Copper was keeping his tone in check, but his body language was showing his impatience. His wings were jittering, and he was having a hard time staying still.

The guard wasn't going to change his mind on the matter, but an element was here, so he

decided to try to be a little more helpful.

"Princess Celestia is in the gardens behind the castle. I would recommend speaking with her."

"Th-thank you." Copper dipped his head to be polite, but he was still feeling a little put-off. Celestia was the most powerful being in this world, but even she couldn't solve his problem. He thought about it, musing if maybe she could balance out Luna's magic with her own. That could work...or it could cause even more problems.

Applejack led Copper behind the castle while he was still deep in thought. Thankfully, it wasn't hard to find Celestia due to her size and colorful mane. She was sitting near a bed of flowers deeper into the garden, and Applejack used this moment to bring Copper back to attention.

"Ah know Ah don't really need ta say this, but do try n' be polite. Princess Celestia is the only chance we got at the moment..."

"I know." Copper didn't want to admit it, but Luna was the only one he believed could honestly help him. He came up with possible solutions, but none of them felt like they would work. At this rate...it was likely he would have to be contained as a last resort.

* * * *

Crimson was starting to get anxious at the thought of her plan's success. Too long had the others been free to do things their way. They simply weren't smart enough to understand that order is the best way to run things. Lavender was a fool for thinking comfort and lack of aggressive males would solve anything. Onyx was just a blowhard who only knew how to work hard. The fourth farm was the oddest in a way, though. They felt that each pony contributing was enough. Tiny wasn't the head of the farm, but he took it upon himself to make sure no pony was working harder than they could. Crimson just couldn't understand that. If they were so useless...why keep them? Her own situation betrayed her, though. Pine could be useful, but more often than not, he wasn't. She started getting that old feeling...though she had forgotten what to call it.

There was a small chest under her bed; inside it was a picture. It showed Crimson as a much younger foal, along with three other ponies, Pine one of them. She didn't dwell on those thoughts for long, though. There were more important matters at hand.

Crimson wasn't sure if she should try to be diplomatic with another farm. It wasn't likely to work due to the recent stampede-like search conducted by her unicorns. At the same time...they surely must know they stand no chance against her. They were farmers, simple stupid farmers. She considered herself to be far superior in every way. Why then, didn't they submit? If it were not for the fact that this land was useless if she didn't have numbers to work it, she would have

taken them out of the picture long ago.

Her thoughts were interrupted by very promising news. She had placed another tracker on Pine before he left, and it was now confirmed that he had done his job properly for once. Dash was once again in her possession.

Chapter 149: Over the hill

"Let me go, you sorry excuse for a stallion!"

"Now, now, Ms. Dash. You've given us a lot of trouble, so be a good little mare and submit this time. We aren't letting you get away again."

"Buck you! You can go—MMFHH!"

"Goodness! Such a mouth you have! Once we're someplace quiet...I think I'll enjoy letting you...run your mouth."

Dash was past the point of feeling like a victim. She had been relaxing in the sun when Pine and several other unicorns showed up at once. There was no chance for escape. They arrived silently, so Pine had enough time to properly focus in order to levitate Dash. She was at their mercy...again. Her body was still sore, but after this latest lucky break of finding food, Dash had more than enough energy to struggle and curse through her forcefully closed mouth.

Pine was accompanied by a dozen other unicorns who took formation around Dash to prevent any eyes from seeing her while they walked through the other farms. There were several ponies staring at them, but not a single one knew Dash was with them. The group arrived at the farm, and Crimson was outside waiting for them.

"Good to see you again, Ms. Dash. You gave us a lot of trouble by getting away. Don't expect it to happen again." Crimson was pleased but simultaneously furious that Dash had gotten away. It was a failure on her part for being merciful, and she now knew not to make that same mistake again. "Pine, take her to the room. I took the liberty of installing some more...efficient restraints."

Pine's face lit up with a huge grin as his imagination went wild with possibilities. "Yes, ma'am!"

Crimson gave a sly smirk to Dash before facing the other unicorns. "The rest of you are to get back to work. I want this place looking perfect for our soon-to-arrive guest."

Dash was then taken into the same room she had escaped from before, but this time, she knew there would be no getting away. On the wall across of the door were several straps and a large clasp mounted against it. Dash's midsection was gripped by a very strong metal clasp, and her limbs were tied down by very resilient straps. She couldn't even budge from this, but there was

a single upside — the added clasp around her stomach would prevent strain from occurring in her shoulders. This would at least make her confinement somewhat less painful.

"How marvelous! You look positively delicious up on that wall! You're even up high enough for me to comfortably...savor you." Dash's mouth was still forced shut from Pine's magic, but her eyes were aglow with rage. "Hmmm...I wonder if the soundproofing is still on...guess we'll find out!" Pine closed the door, and undid the magic restraining Dash.

"You sick bucking pervert! If I weren't tied down, I'd bucking beat you senseless!" Dash was shaking her head back and forth while pulling as hard as she could against the straps. She knew it probably wouldn't change anything, but she couldn't control her temper anymore.

"Ouch! Such nasty words! Please do say more....I loved the taste of that filthy mouth of yours!"

That stopped Dash's yelling, but she bit her lip out of frustration and ended up breaking the skin. Her earlier resolve to get home was quickly changing to a desire to make Pine pay for this!

Before Pine could go any further with his taunting, Crimson stepped inside, looking rather pleased with the situation. "Isn't it good to be back, Ms. Dash? This room just isn't the same without you."

"Buck you! Why are you doing this!? I've never done anything to any pony! I was just doing my bucking job!"

"You were just unlucky; that's all. It didn't have to be you, but that doesn't matter now. We have you in our control, and that's all that matters."

"I am NOT in your control! I don't care what you sick bucking foals have in mind for me, but I won't stop fighting you!"

Pine stepped back from Dash, and Crimson stepped closer. Part of him wanted her to leave so that he could play, but another part wanted to see how Crimson would react.

"I believe you, Ms. Dash. It is fairly clear that you'd let yourself die before willingly helping us."

"Then why are you doing this!?"

"Because...we don't have to torture you anymore. The key to your cooperation is making its way here now." Dash didn't say anything, simply glaring at Crimson with spiteful eyes. "Aren't you curious? He is your lover, after all."

Dash's anger instantly turned to concern. "W-what...?"

"The human is on his way here now. It shouldn't be too much longer, and he'll be knocking on every door, surely looking for you. That's the only logical reason for him to come all the way out here, anyway."

"D-don't you bucking touch him...."

"Or what? You're going to swear at me some more? You aren't in any position to be giving the orders, Ms. Dash. If you don't want me to break his mind and bend him to my will, you'll submit to me."

"Y-you won't be able to! He is stronger than that!"

"Maybe so, but...what about you?"

"...n-no...."

"Yes. I'm sure he would do anything to make sure his loved one doesn't see harm. Tell me...do you believe he would submit if it meant you stayed safe?"

Dash began to shake. The one thing she loved and hated about Coal so much...was just how willing he was to do anything to protect any pony. He would submit...that much, any pony who knew him could guess.

"Heh, your response tells me all I need to know. He must be very sweet. So tell me again, Ms. Dash...will you submit?"

Dash didn't respond. Instead, she turned her head to the side and gritted her teeth. She didn't want to believe it. Nothing could be worse than this! It took everything she had, but Dash forced herself to stay hopeful. It was a bluff, and yet it was her last resort.

"H-he may submit for me, but only if I wanted him to. He'll say no if I tell him to...."

"I don't buy it."

"What do you know about him? Just that he is the only human here? You know I'm not even his only lover...he could afford to lose me...."

Crimson's eye twitched. "That is a pretty bold lie."

"Is it? Why don't you use that filthy magic of yours to look into my head again. I'll show you just how happy he can be without me."

Dash thought of the time she had peeped on Coal with Applejack, back before their relationship

together had even started. Crimson took the bait, and she reared back once she saw it.

"You see!? I'm just an extra! Your plan is worthless! He'll get here, and he'll leave just as quickly!"

Crimson was still disgusted by the images, and she didn't have the will to argue. Pine stepped forward and struck Dash across the cheek. "Don't you dare speak that way to Crimson!" He struck her again. "I'm going to make you regret upsetting her!" Once more.

This continued for another half-dozen strikes before Crimson stopped him. Dash's cheeks were red and bleeding in places. They stung unmercifully, but it couldn't compare to the pain she had already endured.

"That's enough, Pine. I still have my doubts, but...I'd rather there be plenty of her to beat in front of this human, just in case. Leave her alone tonight. We need to get our stories straight for his arrival, anyway."

Pine was hesitant at first, but he made sure not to argue this time. He might have earned more of Crimson's favor with his actions. He certainly hoped so, anyway.

Dash was left there to brood of what was coming, but only one thing kept escaping her lips. "Damn it, Coal...."

* * * *

Twilight is still sound asleep on my back. The poor girl has started having those nightmares I was worried about. Applejack has had nightmares before, and...I know what always stopped those for her, so...may as well try with Twilight. I basically just move her to my front and cradle her. I somehow manage not to wake her while doing so. It takes a few minutes, but thankfully her discomfort starts to fade. *sigh* I can't help but stroke her mane as I walk. I can't help but feel responsible for putting Twilight through this. If I knew I could freak out like that and take care of those beasts myself...it would have been better to do this alone. Twilight is mature, but she is still just a child. All the girls are...great...now I'm making myself feel like a creep because of the age difference again. At the same time, though...I know I'd do it all over if I had to. I may be a creep, but I'm a loyal creep...heh...that's a stalker, isn't it? *sigh* Good lord....

"Hmm...huh? C-C-C-C-Coal!? W-w-w-why are you holding me like this!?"

"Awww, come on, Twilight! If you aren't going to sleep like a baby, then I'm going to hold you like one! Heh, you were having a nightmare. I just wanted you to calm down."

"Oh...th-thanks, Coal...."

"Something the matter?"

"Umm...well...would you mind...if I went back to sleep? L-like this?"

RED FLAG! I'm an idiot, but...is she...no. No...no...no...I'm just an idiot. You're just over-thinking this, Coal. "Naw...you go back to sleep, Twilight."

"...thanks..."

Man...this girl is just too cute for my own good! Her normal look sometimes comes across as...I don't even want to say it! I'm sure she just needs more comfort! Surely! *sigh* On a completely unrelated note, I'm somehow not tired after carrying Twilight for hours. Dash is lighter, and I remember just how much like shit I felt while carrying her. Maybe these potions do add up!

Oh, great...a freaking hill. A steep one, at that! Okay, Twilight...hope this doesn't wake ya! I started running to work up some momentum, and it helped get me over pretty effectively. And hey, Twilight didn't wake up. Wait...is that...IT IS! Finally! Colten is just a few miles away!

* * * *

I'm feeling rather nervous now...I mean...Celestia is right there! I've seen her before, but...I was a different pony back then. Now...she just...looks really amazing. Luna is probably the only pony I've ever met who can compare to how incredible Celestia is! Well...that makes sense, but...it's more like the feeling I get from them. Somehow, just thinking of Luna gives me energy, and Celestia gives me a similar feeling. It...it's really nerve-wracking!

Applejack walked right up to her as if it weren't a big deal, but I had to force myself a little bit.

"Oh my! Greetings, Applejack...and hello to you too, Copper."

Applejack bowed before saying anything, but I was just too mesmerized to move. I-I can't explain it! It's like her presence just looms over me! I feel so small...

"It is ah mighty great pleasure ta' see ya again too! Ah wish it were under better circumstances, though..."

"Oh? Is something the matter, Applejack?"

"Y-yeah...it, uhh...it's rather hard to explain. We've been warned that Copper is goin' ta' go through...some changes due ta' Luna's magic. They aren't goin' ta' be pretty, and...we really need help."

"I see. I'm curious about how you came to this information, but it can wait until Luna has been informed of your arrival. I'd love to help directly, but I'm afraid my sister's magic and my own don't work well when opposing each other."

"Thank ya very much, Princess! This means an awful lot ta' us!"

"Y-yes...thank you..." Copper added quietly.

"Not at all, my little ponies! This is the least I can do."

I'm glad she is friendly...I don't know what I would do if she were stern. She led us back into the castle and down several flights of stairs. It didn't take me long to figure out that we were going into the basement! Luna sleeps down here!?! I guess that makes sense. She rules at night, but sleeping during the day would be hard — so she comes down here to sleep.

We were walking down cobblestone steps with the same style of cobblestone walls. Torches were placed every few feet to light the path, which was only a few feet wide, just barely tall enough to contain Celestia. I don't do well in confined spaces like this...not since that cave incident.

"AH! What was that!? Something just ran across the ceiling!" I'm freaking out here! What is going on?

"Oh! Heh, don't worry. That was just Kriss. She hatched from the egg Twilight brought me."

"O-okay...if you say so. What is she doing down here anyway?" Applejack has a really weird look on her face right now. It's making me more nervous.

"She rather enjoys dark, cramped places like this. At least, I assume so. Every time I carry her out, she just scurries back here. She seems to enjoy it down here, so I let her be."

"M-makes sense...I guess...."

We kept walking in silence from then on, but I could hear the clicking of claws on stone. That...thing is following us. I wish I got a better look at it. We arrived in front of a carved wooden door that depicted the night sky, and Celestia used magic to open it.

It was pitch black inside, but with a little more magic, the room was lit up. The walls were a dark purple, and blue tapestry lined them. There was a picture of Luna and Celestia together on the wall, and there were various decorations spread out. Luna was sleeping on a canopy bed that was the same color as her coat, and the canopy itself was stitched to look like the night sky. This whole room is themed to look like the night, and I honestly find that rather funny. Luna is

the second oldest pony in existence...and her room has a theme. I can't help but think that it's rather...cute.

I've noticed something else...I'm not half as nervous around Celestia now. It's like...just Luna being here makes me feel stronger. I wonder if that's the magic in me reacting to her.

"Dear sister. You have guests that need you."

"Mmm...not now, Tia...we are tired..."

"Heheh, it's Copper, and he is in the room."

"What!?"

Oh my...Luna with bed mane...I...I don't even....

"Sister! W-why didn't thou wake us sooner!?"

"Sorry ta' drop in on ya like this, Luna, but..."

"There is a problem with...the magic I absorbed during the merging."

"A problem? The process was a success, was it not? Thou even appears to have gotten over the trauma. What is the problem?"

"Ok...well...do you remember everything that happened while you were Nightmare Moon?"

Luna appeared insulted by this...oohh, dear. I hope I didn't offend her.

"We do not wish to, but yes...we remember."

"Do you remember the cursed beasts?"

"H-how...does thou know of them? We thought they all...."

"All but one, and he is a friend of mine. Apparently, each of the cursed beasts went through what he calls "the change" shortly after they were made. And it seems...it's going to happen to me too. He told me that I would most likely become a completely different pony for a time, and that if I don't get help...I'll...."

"Say no more, Copper. We shall help thou, again."

"Th-thank you so much! How can I ever show my appreciation!?"

"We already know how, but that can wait, for now we must examine thou again. Dear sister, dear Applejack, we ask that our privacy be given."

"Ah...Ah understand." Applejack didn't like hearing that at all, but it seemed that she wasn't going to argue. She just hugged me really tightly before leaving with Celestia.

Now that Celestia isn't here...I'm feeling different again. I-I feel...really good. Like...it doesn't make sense for me to feel this good.

"Are thou ready?"

"Huh? Oh! Yes I am! Out of curiosity, though...how do you want me to repay you?"

"We will tell thou in good time. Thou shouldn't worry over it. Now, remain still, or this may sting."

* * * *

Author's notes: TOUCHDOWN! NEXT CHAPTER! Coal and Twilight have finally made it! How is Crimson and Pine going to react to Twilight? What is the change going to mean for Copper? And what in the buck is Luna planning!? Find out the answers in the next installment of Drago...My Second Life!

Chapter 150: Unlocked - Part 1

Author's notes: Finally! This monster of a chapter is done! I've broken it into two parts that I'm calling one chapter. I know some of you wanted a single huge one, but this makes things a little easier for those that need a break. Anyway, I've got a bit that needs saying, but it can wait until the ending notes of part two! Hope every finds this chapter worth the wait!

Should I wake up Twilight for this? I think I'll wait. I may seem less scary to these ponies if I'm gently cradling a sleeping mare. Heh...that sounds weird even in my head!

Wait a sec...there is still a ton of freaking snow in the town! Ok...something HAS got to be going on! Dash may be a little lazy at times, but she works her flank off when it matters! There is no way she would shirk her duties like this! I guess I should stop by the closest farm around. I believe that would be the southeast farm.

I managed to see Colten from the top of the hill, but there were in fact several miles separating us still. It was actually getting pretty dang late, and there were still several miles to go. It was hard to do, but it was time to take a rest. They're farmers, so I'm sure they're in bed by now. I sat under a tree and leaned back a bit to make things more comfortable for Twilight. She has been

sleeping so soundly after waking up earlier. I hope she can still sleep through the night. It'll be a long one otherwise.

"Mmm...h-hey, Coal..."

Well...I just doom myself, now don't I? "Hey, Twilight. We're a little ways away from Colten now. We'll arrive tomorrow, so why don't you try and go back to sleep."

"It'll be kind of hard...I've been sleeping all day after all."

"That's true. I'm not all that sleepy yet, so we could talk for a while I suppose..."

"Mmm...sounds nice."

RED FLAG! Ok...I'm more than a little unsure about things now! Twilight is on her side against me, and she is rubbing the side of her face against my chest a bit. Now my shirt is still wrapped around her wounds, so...this is pretty dang close!

"Coal?"

"Y-yeah?"

"I...have...have you ever wanted to say something, but...you were scared of the answer?"

"...yeah. Plenty of times. My rule is the answer is always no if you never ask, but...sometimes it's better not knowing."

"Coal...I...I want to say something to you..."

Oh god...please don't let it be what I think it is! "Y-yes?"

"I...I think I...I think I love you..."

Why god? Why? This...can't be happening. Twilight is my best friend, and even though I love her too...it just isn't like that. Not only that, but...I'm already happy with the two greatest mares ever. There...is just no way this can end well.

"I'm not saying I want to be the third mare in your life, Coal. I just...I don't know. You came out of nowhere and invaded my life. We've gotten so close, and I...I'm happy when I'm with you. I know you don't feel the same way, but...I wanted you to know."

This hurts...a lot. I haven't hurt like this in a long time. "Twilight...I...IMM!"
NONONONONONONONO! THIS ISN'T HAPPENING!

....

"S-sorry...I...I better go!"

"N-no! Just...calm down, Twilight. It's alright. I'm not mad. Just...please don't do that again." Damnit...Twilight is crying now. I feel like such an ass.

"I-I'm so sorry! I-I-I've just put up with these feelings for so long, and I..."

"Shh. It's alright, really. Rest your head, and just relax. Let me do the talking for a little while."

"*sniffle* A-alright..."

Twilight rested her head on my chest again, and I stroked her mane while her sniffing calmed down some. I don't want to do this, but it's time for me to be a man, damnit.

"Twilight...you're a wonderful mare. Forget that you bear an element, forget that you're Celestia's prize student, forget that your skill in magic is near unrivaled. You are simply one of the greatest ponies I've ever met, and I love you dearly...as a friend. More than just a simple friend, yes, but a friend all the same. I don't want you to think I couldn't love you as something more, but the truth is I'm past happy with AJ and Dash. I occasionally feel like a jerk for having two mares, but they always reassure me that I'm their jerk." Twilight giggled a little at that.

"And...I can't help but feel that you only feel this way because I'm the only male you really know other than Spike. You have to admit that your social experience with the opposite gender is lacking somewhat."

"I don't care about that. It isn't like my feelings for you are just because you're a guy. I've...had these feelings for a long while now..."

"W-when?"

"Promise you won't get mad?"

"You know I won't. We need to talk about this, and it'll help me if I can understand this."

"It...was after your welcoming party. When you returned back to the library after leaving that night, and...you slept next to me. I-I woke up that next morning, and...you were so close. I...I kissed you, and...I-I'm sorry. You must think I'm awful..."

I remember that morning. I felt...really good for some reason that day. I guess now I know why. "You're not awful, Twilight. I know you don't want to hear this, but...you're just a young mare

after all. Here comes a being out of nowhere constantly praising you and saying all these things...this is honestly my fault. It seems I played with your heart, and...I'm the one that should be sorry. Not you..."

"Don't...don't try to turn this on yourself, Coal. You've given me plenty of reasons to feel for you, but...maybe we should stop talking about it. You and I both know that nothing is coming of this. I just hope you won't feel uncomfortable around me now."

"Never. You're my most cherished friend, but don't tell any pony else I said that. You know I hate playing favorites, and yet there is no denying I'm closer to you than any pony other than my lovers. My life wouldn't be nearly as good without you in it. I just want what's best for you, and I guarantee you that it isn't me. You probably wouldn't be able to put up with me at home."

"Heh...we lived together for a while, Coal. I think I could manage..."

"Twilight..."

"I know, Coal. It's just that...even though you're saying no...I don't think my feelings are changing anytime soon. Do you know what I feel right now?"

"I-I don't..."

"Safe, cared for, and like I matter. You give me these feelings, and that's why I...love you. Not because you're the only guy I know well, but because you make me happy...even when you don't."

"Heh...that doesn't make any sense..."

"I know. What I mean is...I'm happy right now. Even though my feelings won't ever be returned to me, and I'm sure our relationship is going to suffer for this...I'm still happy that you care about me. Even if it is only as a friend..."

"Our relationship isn't going to suffer for this, Twilight. I won't let it. At the same time though...I don't want you to love me this way. It's only going to hurt you..."

"No it won't, Coal. You just don't understand a mare's heart. That's fine though. Just hold me, and I'll try to sleep some more."

"I'm so sorry..."

"Don't be..."

* * * *

"O-ouch! Th-that does sting a bit, L-luna..."

"Quit fidgeting, and it won't."

"I'm trying, but it hurts."

"We are almost done. Just stay still a little longer."

Luna is currently sending in waves of magic into Copper's body to discover the changes that have occurred since the last she saw him. This has been going on for an unknown amount of time, as there is no way to tell time in this room.

It lasted for a while longer, but Luna did eventually finish. Copper let out a sigh of relief and took in many deep breaths to calm down. It was an invading experience, but he tried to be as pleasant as possible. He didn't want to offend his benefactor after all.

"So...did you find out anything?"

"We found many things, and we are afraid there is no easy way to say this..."

"W-what d-did you find?"

"Thy body has developed many oddities we are afraid. It is only a problem, because we were not aware this would happen. We are not sure what all is going to happen to thou."

"I-I see...does...that mean you can't help prevent this change that's going to happen?"

"We can not. Thy body became this way due to our magic, and adding more would only worsen the effects."

"Ok...thanks for trying, Luna. I do appreciate your time. S-sorry for waking you..."

"Please wait, Copper."

"Y-yes?"

Luna was feeling very guilty due to not being able to help Copper. The main reason she couldn't was the magic in his body had become too much engraved in him. He would never be able to cast magic, but a magical well had grown; and it did bring along a few changes. Luna could simply drain the magic, but that would only end up prolonging his suffering. It would recharge on its own, and "the change" would take place all the same. It felt wrong to just send Copper on his

way, but at the same time...she couldn't let him leave. The magic in him was close to bursting forth, and that means his change is very close.

"We would like thou...to stay with us in the castle. We may not be able to stop the change, but we can help thou through it."

"You...really mean that?"

"We do."

"Thank you...that means a lot to me. You're sure I won't be a burden to you?"

"Not at all. We have not had company like this in a long time. Thou are the only one that feels comfortable enough to talk with us somewhat casually. It is a nice change of things."

"I'm glad you feel that way, but umm...I do have a question."

"Yes?"

"How long?"

"...any time now..."

"C-can I talk with AJ real quick then? She needs to know what's going on, and...I'd like to see her once more before I...you know..."

"Of course, Copper. Come. Let us not tarry."

Luna led Copper out of the long tunnel like basement, and up into the somewhat darkening castle grounds. Night was just around the corner. Copper had no idea it was this late, and began to worry if Applejack was still even around. They asked a nearby guard who informed them that she was getting somewhat impatient, and was asked to wait in the garden.

"Heheh, that sure sounds like Mom."

"We are glad that thou has such a loving family."

"It's all thanks to you. That reminds me...when are you going to tell me what I can do to thank you?"

"Let us speak with Applejack first. Then we may discuss it."

Applejack was sitting with Celestia in the same location they met up originally. Applejack shot

upright as soon as Copper came into view, and she ran up while lifting him into a tight hug immediately.

"Ack! M-Mom! Y-you're squishing me!"

"Just put up with it, sugarcube! Ah was gettin awful aggravated waitin fer ya'll. Did ya'll come ta ah solution?"

"I-I'm afraid we can't prevent it...we can only prepare for it..."

"Oh, Copper..."

"It's alright. Luna has offered to let me stay here, and she'll watch over me. That is...if you don't mind."

Applejack looked up at Luna with a look of both appreciation and uncertainty. "Ah trust ya ta' take good care of mah boy, Luna. Ah leave him in yer care..."

"Do not worry, fair Applejack. We shall make sure Copper gets through this. Thou has our word."

"Th-thank you. Ah guess...Ah better be gettin home then..."

It was at this point that Celestia stood up and walked over to Applejack. "Come, Applejack. I'll have you teleported home. It is the least I can do."

"Thank ya, Princess." Applejack turned back to Copper and nuzzled him once last time before leaving. Copper watched as Celestia and Applejack got further and further from view. A single tear fell from his eye, and he turned to Luna for support.

"Thanks again..."

"Do not worry, for it shall be taken care of. Come, join us while we raise the moon."

* * * *

"Now, Sweetie Belle...you shouldn't be up this late."

"I know, but..."

"Don't let it get to you. I'm sure he just couldn't get away. If nothing else...we can visit Ponyville next weekend."

"R-really!?"

"Yes, really. It is pretty clear this is important to you, and I'd like to meet this colt, don'tcha know?"

"Thank you, Daddy!"

"Now then, since that is settled you should get to sleep. There may not be any school tomorrow, but you wouldn't want to sleep away your weekend."

"Yes, Daddy."

Sweetie Belle had spent Friday evening, and all day Saturday lounging about waiting on Copper. She found herself scooting along the floor as she got more and more impatient, but stopped when she thought of how Copper would probably react. He would laugh, and then probably hug on her a lot. These thoughts made her smile, but miss him all the more as well.

She entertained thoughts of what they could do together through the night. Sweetie Belle would introduce him to her parents, and surely they would love him. After that they would get new pictures taken. From there...it didn't matter what they did. As long as it was done together, then it would be perfect.

Sleep didn't come quickly for Sweetie Belle that night, but thankfully when she did fall asleep...her dreams were filled with her hopes becoming reality.

* * * *

"Ah can't believe Coal, and now Copper r' both gonna be gone. At least Ah'll get ta' spend time with Scootaloo now."

Applejack arrived in Ponyville square after being teleported back. The trip home was a long one, but filled with constant thinking. It had been a few days since Coal and Twilight left, and now Copper was leaving for an indefinite amount of time as well. It just didn't seem right that all of this was happening so close to a day where every pony would celebrate closeness, Hearth's warming. Tomorrow was the 22nd, and so it was only three days away.

Applejack arrived home to find Scootaloo lying on the couch while reading from a textbook.

"Hey there, sugarcube. Still workin hard Ah see."

"Yeah...not much else to do when you're the only pony here."

"S-sorry about that. Ah hope ya know it ain't cause we don't want ya involved..."

"You don't want me involved, but I'm not mad about it. This is a big deal I'm sure, and if there isn't anything I can do...why get mixed up in it?"

"Scoots..."

"I know this is adult stuff, Applejack. I'm just kind of tired of being out of the loop."

"Ya know...yer right, sugarcube. Ya'll were the first to join this family, and ya deserve ta' know what's goin on."

Applejack climbed onto the couch with Scootaloo. Scootaloo put down her book, and Applejack pulled her in close. Scootaloo rested her head on Applejack's lap as she began speaking.

"Copper isn't in danger of bein hurt any, but he is goin through some...changes..."

* * * *

"He is close, Pine. I'm sure he'll be here by tomorrow morning."

"I'm so excited, Crimson! Your plan is finally going to be completed! Just one more night to go!"

"Yes...I must admit that I'm somewhat excited as well. It has been a long time since I've gotten to bend something to my will..."

"So...what should we be expecting? You don't think he'll come straight here, do you?"

"Most likely not, but he'll surely come knocking on our door soon enough. I'll deal with him from there. You'll be playing the part of the farm head again for me until we have him where I want him."

"Yes, ma'am!"

Pine was beyond ecstatic knowing Crimson still had uses for him. He was dismissed to sleep for the night after their talk, but he had other ideas. While being as quiet as he could, Pine entered Dash's room.

"H-huh? What the buck are you doing here!?"

"Just wanted to tell you a few things that you may find interesting."

"Oh yeah!? I doubt that!"

"Heheh! Your human friend is arriving tomorrow."

Dash didn't respond verbally, but her pupils shrank as a chill ran down her spine. "Y-yeah? So what!?"

"Crimson is too young to catch lies like yours, Ms. Dash. I felt the way you kissed me after all. Mmm...I may just make this easier on you if you do that again."

"Go buck yourself!"

"*sigh* As much as I love that voice of yours, the constant insults are getting tiresome." Dash's cheeks were red and had small bits of dried blood here and there. Pine noticed this, and figured he may as well work his own brand of magic again. "Shame you had to lose your cool with Crimson. That pretty face of yours got all dirty. Let me just clean that for you..."

Pine put his hooves up the wall and leaned up to Dash's face. She tried to pull away, but she couldn't move far. He came up and licked her cheeks, and relished Dash's taste.

Dash wanted to bite his tongue off, but knew it wasn't likely to work. "I hate you..."

"I know, but that only makes me want you more. I can't wait for that human to show up. If you don't cooperate, Crimson is going to let me have my way with you in front of him."

"N-no! Anything but that!"

"Then I suggest you give me another taste. Open your mouth."

"P-please...don't do this, please!"

"I said open your mouth, or would you prefer if I tasted your other lips?"

Tears began to form in Dash's eyes as she did this, but she had no choice. With great reluctance...she obeyed. Pine took the moment and seized complete control of her mouth with his as Dash's tears began to fall. He didn't hold back, and took his time with her. It was disgusting and violating, but Dash couldn't resist. It lasted for an unclear amount of it as Dash was trying her hardest not to completely lose control of her emotions.

"Ahhh...your words are bitter, but your mouth is so sweet."

"*cough* y-you're disgusting..."

"Doesn't matter. I may be disgusting, but I'm the one getting to have you all to myself. Sadly, it is late, and tomorrow is a busy day. Do wet those lips of yours for me, I'll be back for them soon enough."

As soon as Pine was out the door, Dash began spitting and gagging up as much as she could. The taste started to go away, but the shame sure didn't. Sleep didn't come for Dash that night. The sound of ponies getting up and moving about was Dash's alarm. She had spent the entire night fighting back tears as her fears were once again taking hold.

"*sob* D-damnit, Coal! P-please...don't get caught in this..."

* * * *

Twilight and I ended up falling asleep shortly after our heart to heart. It was a pretty unpleasant wake up to be honest. We woke up at the same time, and ended up staring at each other silently for nearly five minutes.

"W-we should get moving, Twilight..."

"right..."

The entire walk down to Colten was completely devoid of any conversation. It was clear things weren't going to be normal for a little while, but I wasn't going to let our relationship suffer for long because of this. The first farm came into view, and we could see several workers out and about. They were really hauling flank too! I don't think I've ever seen ponies work so hard!

"What do you think has them in such a rush, Twilight?"

"I don't know, but...I don't really like it."

She can say that again. Those ponies are looking...seriously overworked, but...they also look like hard bastards. I know it isn't nice to judge, it's just all the signs here are pointing to a very unpleasant situation. Oh well...best try and be friendly.

Twilight and I walked up to the nearest pony, and asked them about Dash. He just gawked at me before taking off into the farm house. He got every other pony to do the same by drawing attention to me. The farm went from busy to dead in just a matter of seconds!

"Oh you have got to be kidding!"

"Maybe you should wait out here while I talk with them, Coal. That is a rather expected reaction

to seeing something like you for the first time."

"Really? Surely I'm not the biggest or weirdest thing this world has to offer!"

"No, but...every pony else knows about those things. No pony here knows anything about you. That can be pretty scary."

"I guess...well alright Twilight. I'll just take a seat against the farmhouse, and you can handle the social work."

Twilight nodded in agreement, and then went on with the plan. I could hear her knock on the door, but then nothing else for several minutes. Finally an answer came followed by some more talking. I heard the door close again...but no Twilight. What in the...kay. She went inside with them. They are moving up to the second floor...but I can't understand what they're saying still. Hmm? Their voices are clearer if I move to the back of the building...I wonder why. Oh! Man that is tacky! One of the windows is busted, and that's the room they're talking in. I can finally understand them.

I could hear Twilight say something, but the first voice I could understand belonged to a young mare. "After that she was seen running into the forest. Our leader tried to get her to stop, but she refused."

"Is there anything else you can tell us? My friend and I are going to be searching for her soon, but we need a little direction as to where she may have gone. Not only that, but I really want to know why all of this is happening. If she wasn't staying here after her initial arrival, then where was she staying?"

"She spent one night at the farm directly north of ours, but was seen spending most nights at the farm northwest. I...I wouldn't recommend going there though..."

"Why not?"

"Those ponies are evil. They'll do anything to get their way."

"Not to doubt you, but are you sure they're not just difficult? I've met plenty of bad ponies in my life, yes. I just haven't ever met any that I felt were honestly evil."

"Th-they're basically a cult. I promise you they won't help you. They'll only..."

"Pearl!"

Woah! Who is that? That guy sounds pissed! And what the buck is all of this evil nonsense? An evil pony? No way!

"Listen...I'm afraid I need to get back to treating our farm head. I hope you find your friend."

"Right, thank you for your time."

Hmmm...not much obtained there. Twilight stepped out a few minutes later, and we met up then. "I could hear the conversation being held in the upstairs room, but it didn't sound like you got any useful information."

"Not really...it was almost like Pearl was scared to tell me anything."

"I take it that's the name of the pony you talked with. What really gets to me are those comments about evil ponies. I don't think I could ever believe such a thing."

"It does seem pretty far fetched. It would have been nice if they told us why they thought that way."

"So...what should we do now? The farm that they claim to be evil is the one that had the most contact with Dash."

"That's probably the only place we'll get answers."

We both kind of shrugged and made our way there. I'm honestly a little curious about this place now too. What makes it so evil?

The farms are huge, but Twilight and I have gotten used to walking at a brisk pace. We arrived there within a few minutes, and...it seemed normal enough. There were ponies out and about working, but nothing here screamed of evil.

As we were walking up to the farmhouse, a green pony with brown mane stepped out of the house. He first gave us a look of...excitement maybe? But it quickly changed into a rather confused look. The guy seemed to snap out of it quickly enough, and then walked over to us.

"Hello there! I'm Pinewood, but every pony just calls me Pine. My my...I can't say I have ever seen a creature like you before! If you don't mind my asking...what are you?"

Hey hey...this is more like it! A pony that isn't scared to death of me on the first meeting! "I'm Coal, and I'm a human. Long story short, my friend Twilight here brought me from my world by mistake. I love it here, so I decided to stay."

He seemed really happy to meet me, but when he turned to Twilight...I don't know. It was like he was going over a million things in his head at once.

"Good to meet you too, Ms. Twilight."

"Y-yes...good to meet you..."

"Whelp! I'm sure you both wouldn't come all the way down here to our little farm town without good reason! Is there anything I can help you with?"

Twilight was the one who spoke up this time. She seemed to almost be in a hurry. "Yes. We are looking for our friend, Rainbow Dash. We were told that she has spent most of her time at this farm."

"That would be correct! Granted...she left a couple days ago, I'm afraid. She ran straight into the forest while every pony was sleeping. I'm a little worried she may have gotten mentally ill from the crash."

Hmm...something isn't making much sense here. "I'd be very surprised. That mare is as tough as they get. Thanks for your time, Pine. But if you aren't sure of where to find her...we best be trying elsewhere."

"I understand, but I'm a little worried for the both you. You're both looking...very tired. I'd be a terrible host to what few guests this town gets if I didn't offer you a chance to relax a little."

"That sounds nice, but..."

My talk with Pine was cut off by the sound of a filly screaming in terror! It was coming from around back of the farm house, and I took off for it almost immediately. "Oh my god!" There was this wolf standing right over a crying filly that couldn't have been older than Scootaloo! "Get the buck away from her!"

I drew my sword and charged at the wolf. I could hear Twilight gasp when she finally caught up with me.

"Crimson!" Pine yelled out as he too saw the wolf.

The wolf turned its attention to me and started trying to attack. It wasn't nearly as fast as those beasts I fought the other day, so needless to say...I ran it through rather easily. The wolf died almost instantly, but not before letting out a disgusting gurgling sound. I wanted to be mad about this, but that filly was sitting upright now staring at me.

She had an incredibly white coat. Her mane and eyes were the richest red I've ever seen. I believe Pine called her Crimson. That makes sense. She was still very upset and started crying into her hooves. I threw down my sword and ran over to her. She looked up at me as I kneeled down, and surprised me when she jumped into me while crying into my chest.

"Thank you! thank you thank you thank you!"

Crimson's sobbing wasn't calming down any. It was really starting to make me hurt too. I can't stand a pony crying, let alone a little filly who could have just been...better not think of that. I lifted her up and cradled her like I would do with Scootaloo.

"It's alright. You're safe now."

Pine and Twilight ran over after their shock passed. I think they were shocked...I don't rightly know.

"Crimson! Oh by Celestia! Are you alright!?"

"*sob* I-I'm fine..."

She looked up at me while I held her, and...dang. Those eyes looked straight through me. Not even Copper's eyes were this piercing.

"L-let me take you inside, Crimson."

"Uhh...Crimson...you kind of need to let me go in order for Pine to do that."

"I-I'm sorry...I-I'll try and calm down..."

Twilight is being awfully quiet during all of this. A filly almost got eaten! Her reaction is a little disturbing.

"How about I carry you inside at least?"

"*sniffle* Th-thanks..."

Ok...I think I'm falling in love with this filly. Platonically of course! Even in my own head I say stuff that could easily be misconstrued. She isn't scared of me either...probably only because that wolf was scarier, and she keeps nuzzling me.

Pine leads us inside and we're taken up to this rather nice looking room, and I lay Crimson down on her bed.

"Th-thank you again..."

"Coal."

"Thank you again, Coal. S-sorry for causing you trouble..."

"Don't worry about it! It was my..." *THWAK* "pleasure? What was tha...TWILIGHT!?"

Pine was levitating a brick, and he just hit Twilight over the head with it! "What the fuAAAUAGH!" Oh god! What is this!? It feels like those damn shock colors the Diamond Dogs used!

"I can't believe there was another with him, Pine. That could have seriously messed up our plans."

"I know! Such a pretty one too! If I can't have Ms. Dash, can I at least have her?"

"Th-the f-f-fuck is g-going on!? AHHGH!"

"Shhh. Just sleep for now, Coal. Oh, and thanks once more for saving me."

Thud

* * * *

Neither Coal or Twilight woke for many hours. Twilight was kept under constant surveillance by several unicorns, while Coal was tied up and watched by Crimson.

Pine took this quiet moment to go inform Dash of the developments. "Oh, Ms. Dash..."

"Go away..."

"Not even going to yell at me? Are you starting to warm up to me!?"

"Never..."

**sigh* You're not being very talkative today! And yet we have so much to talk about! Guess who is tied in Crimson's chambers? Go on! Guess!"

Dash hung her head while letting her tears fall. The room was silent except for infrequent splash of a tear hitting the floor. "Please...don't hurt him..."

"I am so jealous of that human. He gets two mares!? How does one get so lucky? Funny how that other mare joined him..."

"WHAT!? AJ is here too!?"

"AJ? Who is that? No, Ms. Twilight has joined us."

Dash's eyes got wide as hope began to grow. If any pony were to ever be underestimated...it would be Twilight. "She isn't his other lover...just a friend."

"Oh...well then maybe she hasn't been taken yet, hmmm. I do love your taste, but I'm not the only one to partake of it. Maybe I should have some fun with Ms. Twilight then..."

"Don't you touch her!"

"Why shouldn't I? Unless...you would rather take her place..."

"I-I...fine. Do what you want with me...just please don't touch Twilight..."

"Aren't you the loyal one!? I'm so happy I could just..."

"Pine."

"Crimson? Awww, we were just getting to the good part!"

"The human is coming to. I'm bringing him in here so we can get started."

"Oh goodie! This is going to be so much fun!"

Crimson left and returned shortly with Coal being levitated behind her. His head was bobbing side to side as consciousness was slowly returning to him. Dash started crying again as she saw him. It was all she could do to not scream out for him, but she knew it wouldn't change anything.

"Uhh...where...what..."

"Welcome back to the waking world, Coal. I hope you enjoyed your sleep."

"Crimson? What is...DASH!? What the fuck is going on!?" Coal's eyes wandered over to Dash who was still strapped onto the wall. Their eyes locked, and Dash offered Coal the most pained smile he had ever seen. "D-dash..."

Pine was getting annoyed with things, and decided to have a little fun. "How nice! The two lovers get to see each other again! Now why don't you be a good human and watch while I show you how to really enjoy a mare." Coal's mind wasn't with him at first, but once Pine started leaning into Dash's mouth, his mind returned with burning rage. Yet...it didn't come out as loud or uncontrolled. Coal spoke in a simple monotone, but malice was dripping from every word he spoke.

"I have no idea what is going on, but if you so much as touch Dash with your filthy hooves...I'm going to break you. Do you understand me? I'm going to make you beg for mercy as I slowly snap each bone in your worthless fucking body."

A cold swept over the room. No pony expected the sheer amount of hate Coal was emitting. Dash's skin began to crawl as she saw Coal's eyes. They weren't evil, but at the same time they were. Pine was even taken back at first, granted it didn't last long.

"B-big words for one in such a situation! You aren't capable of making good on your threats! S-so just sit back and..."

"You don't understand me, Pine. You have a choice to make right now. Get away from Dash, or die. Don't think for one second that you'll get away with this. Kill me even, and I'll come back from the grave to fucking torment you every second of the rest of your life."

Crimson was getting a sick kick out of how much Pine was being made to squirm. She had her fun though, and was ready to get back to her plan. "I'm somewhat surprised at you, Coal. I never would have expected one to hold me so lovingly would be capable of such words. You sure know how to make a filly feel safe."

Coal wanted to lash out at Crimson, but...his conscience wouldn't let him. She was just a child in his eyes, and he couldn't bring himself to harm her. Coal tilted his head to look at her, and she smiled as his face contorted revealing the frustrations he had with her and himself.

"Not going to threaten me? How kind of you. Granted you're foolish for it, but kind all the same. Now. We have a deal to make with you, Coal."

"Y-yeah..."

"We'll let Dash go, if you'll submit to me and become my servant."

Coal didn't even have to think about it, but a thought did occur before he spoke. "Twilight too. Let them both go, and...I'll do whatever you want. Oh, and Pine better back the fuck off of Dash, or no deal."

"Splendid! You heard him, Pine! Leave Ms. Dash alone."

"B-b-b-but..."

"None of that, Pine. A deal is a deal, and we'll let them go...after you submit to me, Coal."

"Fine...do what you will..."

"Coal! Please don't! I-I'll be fine!"

Coal couldn't bring himself to argue with Dash. He just looked up at her and smiled. "I love you, Dash."

Tears raced down Dash's face as Coal hung his head in defeat.

This was all happening too fast for Coal to comprehend everything. Dash was in hellish trouble this entire time, Twilight is God knows where, and now he is being forced into servitude. Coal was on his knees with his hands tied behind his back, as well as his legs bound together. His head was down, but Crimson lifted it up and made Coal look at her. His eyes were glazed over as he had already locked himself away to avoid the world. It was a defensive habit he grew into when things became far too much to handle. There was nothing he could do, so why even bother?

Dash watched in horror as Crimson's horn began to glow that same loathsome red. She placed it upon Coal's brow as her magic seemed to crawl onto him. His expression didn't change, but soon his eyes began to become heavy as he was slowly put into a trance.

Crimson was needing to find and control the metaphysical will inside of his mind. Its form could only be guessed at, but it would most likely take on the appearance of Coal's self image. Not his physical self image, but how he perceived himself to be as a person. Crimson found herself in a different part of Coal's mind. Instead of a hallway with doors, it was somewhat like a maze. There was no sky, but the space surrounding this part of his mind was completely black; but somehow there was visibility. The ground was nothing more than what appeared to be a dirty path, and the walls looked to be aged grey stone.

There were a few oddities spread across the area. The closest one being a statue representing Coal's previous self images. There was him as a child, a teenager, and a young adult. It went in that order from left to right. Each wore an expression that pertained to the primary emotion he felt during that time of his life. The child wore a slight smile, but the teenager wore a hateful frown. The young adult was neutral. No strong emotion one way or another. On the base of the statue under each representation was a plaque with writing on it. The words were illegible, due to what appeared to be moss growing over them.

Time did not flow in this space as it did outside. Crimson could spend hours in here, but it would be minutes to every pony else. She studied her surroundings briefly before choosing a random path. It ended up being a dead end, but she noticed something more. Each dead end would have a picture of varying sizes, depicting one of Coal's character traits. The larger the picture, the stronger the trait. The picture she saw represented Coal's stubbornness. He was depicted as being solid stone as a twister tried to carry him away.

Crimson moved on from this path, and tried another. Coal's will would be somewhere along these paths, but she didn't know where. The next path she took was more like a tunnel, but the tunnel turned vertically the further she went through it. At one point it felt as if she was literally walking upside down, but felt normal when she stepped out the other side.

"And I thought Pine had problems..."

Crimson was starting to become unnerved by all of this. She had been through other minds before, she had to do this for the wolf not too long ago; but his mind was simple. Coal's mind seemed to be a representation of unbalance. The paths she could now take each had a road of different color: one was red, another being blue, the third was green, and the last was yellow. They were all dead ends, and she knew that because they only went on for a few feet each. There was something at the end of each path though, and Crimson's curiosity got the better of her. The first path she took was the red one. It led her to a simple button on the side of the wall. The curiosity was too great, and Crimson pressed it.

The wall spun around, revealing the most violent images of Coal's life in the form of collage. Each of Coal's fights and major conflicts since arriving in Equestria were there, but also a few from back on Earth. Those were the most unpleasant to behold, if only because they were visually the most alien. Crimson reared back in horror at first. She found herself becoming more and more disturbed as she couldn't bring herself to look away. The sheer level of violence was not something she was accustomed to. She had done and seen plenty of violent things, but they weren't of a physical nature per se.

It took her a moment, but she ran off the path and back into the center. She planned on going back through the tunnel, but that path was now blocked by chains going over the entrance. Four different strands of chains, each the same color as the paths. The red chains crumbled and faded into dust as she stared. The answer was obvious...she would have to go down each path and see what horrors lie.

The second path was the blue one, and it too had the same button at the end. With great reluctance, Crimson pressed the button and waited as the wall spun around. This path depicted the most depressing moments in Coal's life. Most of them were from Earth, but there were some from his time in Equestria. The most prominent one being when Coal tried to return to Earth. It showed Coal turning away from every pony he knew with Ponyville in the background.

"I never needed to know this much about Coal. This wasn't likely to be easy, but I can't believe his mind is guiding me, and not the other way around."

Crimson sighed while back tracking to the start. The green path was her next choice, and she knew it had to represent something. What would it be? With great reluctance she pressed the button, and a collection of the sickest things Coal has ever seen appeared before her. Crimson nearly lost her stomach at the most stomach wrenching depictions of violence, and perversion.

Many of these things Coal only came across during one of his various internet escapades, but you can never change what you have seen.

Crimson ran off the path almost immediately and fell to the ground while choking and gagging. Her own mind was being put to the test as every continued discovery made her come one step closer to giving up. Those thoughts weren't entertained for long, but they did occur.

The final path...the yellow path. Crimson could only assume it would be something even more horrible than the last, but her fears weren't needed. For the images presented to her this time, were those of Coal's happiest moments. There was one very noticeable thing though...each was a moment from his time in Equestria. All the others had a mix, so even Crimson knew this said a lot about him as a person. Several of the images were sexual in nature, so Crimson didn't linger.

The way back was now open, but she felt the land shake before she could leave. The four paths merged into one, and it appeared to be a normal road to take. It was the same dirt road with the same grey stone walls.

"Am I going to have to go through this every time I want to advance? What would I have seen had I taken a different path before? I better find you soon, Coal. I'm going to make you pay for putting me through this!"

Crimson swallowed her pride and made her way down the newest path. There were more statues of various things as she walked. Some depicted moments in Coal's life, while others depicted beliefs. Those were the most obscure, and Crimson didn't honestly know what they meant. One such statue was Coal looking away from a portrait of his birth family. He believed to be scorned, and now no longer feels welcome. Crimson didn't understand this one simply due to the fact she had no idea that was Coal's family. He was in his updated Equestrian appearance, while they were depicted as normal humans.

Her search took her through path after path, and several more frustrations. Each ending with more of Coal being revealed to her in one way or another. She saw the best and worst he had to offer in the span of hours, but again...mere minutes have transpired outside of this space. Crimson's long search may have finally come to an end, as she spotted a "living" figure in the distance. It was humanoid, but due to a large hooded cloak hiding its appearance...Crimson wasn't sure what it was. It stood nearly eight feet tall, but was unusually thin.

The figure seemed to faze about as it went from one statue to another. It would stare at them for a while, and then move on. It moved incredibly quickly; but due to its several pauses, Crimson had time to catch up.

"Halt! Name yourself! What are you?"

The cloaked figure spoke in the voice of a child. It was so vastly different to its appearance,

Crimson reared back in surprise.

"I am Coal, but he isn't me. No longer are we one, but we are the same."

"Don't play me for a fool! Reveal yourself!"

The cloak fell to the ground, and once more Crimson was shocked by the sight in front of her. Inside that incredibly large cloak, was nothing more than a little boy who stood no taller than three feet. He stood on the ground like a normal being would, so Crimson was left wondering how the cloak stood so tall.

"Wh-what are you?"

"I am innocence known and forgotten."

"Dangit! You're not the representation I need!"

"Why have you entered this place? You're disturbing Host."

"Host?"

"Coal's will, my will, or our will. We are all one, but we are all separate."

"*sigh* I don't have the patience for this. Tell me where the will is!"

"He remains at the heart of this place, as he always has. I warn you though...he isn't in a good mood."

"I'll take my chances..."

"You're going to let it out if you continue."

"Let what out?"

"..."

"I said, let what out!?"

"..."

"AUGH! Enough of this!"

Crimson stomped off in a huff at the sudden silent tone of the representation. She believed the

heart must mean the center of this place, so with that in mind she tried to levitate herself up to get a better view of things. She berated herself for not thinking of this sooner, but alas...it did not work. She reached the same height as the walls, but hit an invisible barrier that kept her from rising further.

"This is unbelievable!"

She had no idea how much more she was going to have to go through, but the only thing she was thinking was that all of this better be worth it.

* * * *

Copper stayed with Luna throughout the night. Luna told him stories of her past exploits coupled with light retellings of her time as Nightmare Moon. The common pony only knows the brief version, but in fact Luna's time as Nightmare Moon lasted far longer than the story would lead one to believe. Copper was so enthralled that he completely lost track of time. The night came and went before he was even made aware how long they had been talking.

Luna retired to her chambers, but Copper couldn't sleep for whatever reason. He thought it may be another sign that his change is getting closer. The magic is surfacing, and thusly energizing him. It was only a theory, but it was all he had.

A single guard was ordered to follow Copper around, and take control of the situation should he change. It was the same pegasus guard that he and Applejack had spoken with earlier. The guard cursed his luck. He didn't hate Copper per se, but he didn't like him either. This colt was nothing but an abomination to life. It didn't matter if he was real or not now. His simple existence is an insult to nature.

Copper could feel the guard's eyes peering into the back of his head. They were outside once more; casually walking through the maze. They were alone, so Copper decided to voice his displeasure with the guard's constant staring.

"It's really annoying the way you won't take your eyes off me."

"That is my job. I'm to make sure you don't cause any problems should you change."

"I'm pretty sure you don't have to literally watch me all the time to stop me if that happened. You are a Royal Guard after all..."

"Hmph, hardly. That is a common misconception. Royal Guards are the ones who are sent out to guard large cities. I'm but a Castle Guard. I get to protect the princess more closely, but at the same time I don't. There isn't a soul alive that could challenge them. I'm really only here to

guard the castle from the wondering tourist. There is hardly anything royal about it."

"Yikes...you sound pretty bitter about it."

"I've said too much as it is. I'll ask you not to repeat what has been said."

"I wouldn't even if you hadn't asked me. I'm not going to get a pony in trouble for something as simple as not liking their job..."

The guard wasn't sure of what to make of Copper. He wasn't nearly as cold as he used to be, and his entire presence was different. That may be highly related to the magic in him, but it was any pony's guess.

"So umm...what's your name? You already know I'm Copper..."

"...Raze."

"That's a pretty cool name. So...what made you want to be a guard?"

"Just because I'm watching you, doesn't mean you have to talk to me."

"Well...I'm a little bored to be honest. I can't leave the castle grounds, and it isn't like I have any pony else to talk with. Talking is at least something we can do..."

"...I wanted the respect of my peers."

"Respect?"

"Yes. I thought being a guard would be fulfilling, and it is in a way. I'd be happier if I wasn't stuck with the lowest branch of service, but it's better than nothing."

"Lowest branch? You watch over the entire castle! That sounds like a pretty big responsibility."

"It would be if the princess weren't nearly as strong as they are. With both of them here...guards aren't needed. If anything were to show up that could challenge them though...we would be nothing more than burdens."

"I don't think so. I'm sure the princess would worry about you, but every pony could be useful...even in a really bad way..."

"You're probably thinking the same thing I have. We could offer them time to prepare their magic while we throw ourselves at the enemy."

"Yeah..."

"That is the price we have to be willing to pay though, so it doesn't bother me. Admittedly it sounds horrid, but it isn't likely to happen."

"Still...I'd do it if it meant I'd save the ponies I care for..."

"Copper...you're a pretty good colt."

"Th-thanks, Raze. Mind if I ask you a question?"

"Go ahead."

"Why do the guards all look alike?"

"The armor we wear is enchanted to give us this appearance. It's a safety measure to prevent any enemies we may face from knowing who we really are. Luna's guards have a different model. I'd imagine you'd like them."

"I probably would."

Copper and Raze spent a few more hours walking through the maze until they were tired of being lost. Copper suggest they have a little race to the castle, but Raze wasn't so sure.

"It would be highly unprofessional of me."

"You'd have a lot of fun!"

"It isn't really proper..."

"Hey, I won't force you, but I promise you'll enjoy it. If you don't like the way your job is all the time, then why not do something different?"

"I...well...you have a point. Fine, but don't complain when you lose."

"Me lose!? You obviously don't know who my teacher is!"

"Heh, it doesn't matter. You're still a young colt after all."

"Look at these wings! Come on! On three, let's do this!"

Raze grew a sly grin. He was growing to like Copper well enough, so he decided he would take it easy on the kid. He wasn't the fastest guard, but they had to go through a lot of training in the

academy. It has been a while since he has flown competitively, and yet he wasn't worried.

"One!"

"Two."

"THREE!"

On three, Copper shot off like a bullet leaving Raze coughing up a cloud of dust. It took him a moment to realize what just happened, but he took off as soon as his mind returned to him. All the running with Ula has given Copper great take off speed with the addition of his legs. His max speed hasn't improved in a while, but it was still impressive. Raze was just slightly faster though. Even with his head start, Copper lost the race by a little under two seconds.

"Awww! I was so close!"

Raze was a little out of breath, and a lot shocked. He stared at Copper with disbelieving eyes. Copper wasn't tired or out of breath in the slightest. He just frowned a little while kicking at the floor.

"So close...oh well. I'm sure I'll win sometime! Anyway, thanks Raze! That was a lot of fun!"

"Y-yeah...it was."

Raze didn't want to admit it, but that short little race was indeed the most fun he had in a long while. A few nearby maids saw the two, and ended up giggling a bit. Raze hid his face for a moment, but Copper was as oblivious as he could be.

"Raze? What are you doing?"

"N-nothing!"

Copper looked around Raze and saw the maids huddled together whispering amongst themselves. A realization hit him, and a sly smile grew. "You're embarrassed! Heheh! I guess even guards are weak to cute mares."

"Kid! You are far too young to be talking that way!"

"What? They're pretty cute. Not as cute as my filly friend, but still."

"Oh yeah...you have a filly friend."

"I do! She is the nicest, sweetest, cutest, most talented filly I know!"

Raze reared back a bit at Copper's reaction. He clearly wasn't kidding, but that made Raze chuckle a bit at him.

"Jeez, kid...you got it bad."

"I know... *sigh*...."

"Something bugging ya?"

"Yeah...she lives here in Canterlot, but I can't visit her. She moved here last Monday, and I haven't seen her since."

"That sounds pretty tough, kid."

"Yeah, but...I know I shouldn't see her any time soon. Especially since I'm going to change soon..."

Raze was hating to admit it, but...Copper was just a normal colt thrown into a really bizarre situation. He would never be normal per se, and yet he is. Guilt started to wash over Raze as he thought back to his earlier opinion on Copper.

"Listen, kid...I want to say something."

"Y-yeah?"

"I just wanted to say that...I'm s..." *Thud* "Copper!?"

Copper's pupils grew huge instantly, and he fell over. His whole body convulsed on the floor as he started foaming at the mouth.

"By Celestia! It's happening!" Raze turned to the maids who were now starting to panic. "Go get the Princess! Tell her Copper's change is starting!"

They nodded in response, and took off shortly after calming down. Raze turning his attention back to Copper, whose shaking was growing more violent.

"Stay with me, kid!"

Copper couldn't hear him. All of his senses were locked away, and he found himself falling. He had fallen into his own mind. It was a sinking feeling. It was like he was falling away from the sight before him. He saw Raze trying to shake him to, but he was getting further and further away. Something brushed past Copper as his world grew darker, and it wore a devilish smirk.

Copper watched in horror as whatever it was...breached the surface of his mind.

* * * *

"My word...Crimson sure is taking her time in there..."

Pine was sitting around waiting on Crimson to finish up. He was still pouting over having to leave Dash alone, but he figured that may just be a front until Coal is under her control.

Dash wasn't coping well with any of this. Her tears hadn't stopped even though she was forcing her eyes closed as tight as possible. She didn't want to give Pine the satisfaction of knowing just how broken all of this had made her. Overcoming her own bad situation took a long time, but she managed to find some inner strength. Sadly, there was no way to just get over what Coal and Twilight may have to go through. Dash didn't believe for one second that those two would keep their word, and yet there wasn't a thing she could do about it. All Dash could do was hang there, and wait.

Several more minutes went by, and Pine was starting to have a few concerns. Crimson told him the process for taking control of a non magical creature, but he had a hard time believing it. It could apparently be done with unicorns as well, and the only reason you may want to do that is because the hold is stronger. The joining has to be redone at least once a day, but as long as the caster has enough magic to spend, a creature controlled in this way won't need to go through any more processes.

"What is taking her so long? *sigh* I think I'll go check on the other prisoner. Be a good little mare while I'm gone, Ms. Dash."

"Buck you..."

"If everything goes according to plan...that'll be your job." Pine walked out laughing while Dash was left to shake in disgust. She once more tried to loosen her binds, or maybe to try and force her limbs out again, but nothing worked. Even if she did, the metal clasp around her stomach wasn't going to come off. Dash looked up at Coal who just appeared to be sleeping. His face was somewhat peaceful, but the face Crimson was making looked to be frustrated.

"Give her heck, Coal..."

Chapter 150: Unlocked - Part 2

"I've had it with this place!" Crimson had just finished another trek through Coal's personality. His mental defensive habits took on the form of guards who chased Crimson down. She managed to out run them, but even in this space her body had limits. It wasn't her physical body,

but a physical representation of her mental stability. The less focus she had the more tired she would become in this space.

Time and time again Crimson went down the same dreary looking paths, and only every once in a while would there be anything pleasant. One wall along the path was incredibly tall at about ten feet. On the wall hung a portrait of Coal and his Equestrian family. Its size depicted its value; that much was obvious. There came a point where the ground changed into a mixture of lush green grass, and black cracked ground. They intertwined all along the path for as far as Crimson could see. The walls also went through a similar change. Some were a pristine high quality stone, while others were cracked and appeared to be falling apart.

"This place keeps getting more and more disturbing. Where the fuck am I now? What could this possibly represent!?"

Crimson's cries of anger and impatience were answered by two forms stepping out from behind her. She heard them and spun around ready to fight, but ended up gawking at their appearance. They were both Coal, but neither were. One was pristine while dressed in wealthy looking attire. The other was disheveled while wearing little more than rags. The pristine Coal looked upon Crimson with soft eyes while the other stared daggers into her soul.

"Wh-who are you two supposed to be?"

The pristine one performed a graceful bow with a large smile. "I'm Love, and my unhappy friend here is Hate. You appear to be lost, is there anything I may do to help you?"

"Why the fuck do you care, Love? Send this bitch to the cage and unlock the damn door! I'm sure he'll enjoy being let out! Besides, I'd like to see her ripped apart!"

Crimson was both pleased and unbelievably disturbed.

"Now, Hate, that is no way to treat a lady. I'm very sorry Ms. Crimson for Hate's behavior. Please don't worry, we aren't allowed to do anything to you."

"O-okay?"

"Yeah! That fucker, Will, won't let us! He said that he'll deal with you when the time comes! Fucking bastard has all the fun..."

Crimson turned to Love with pleading eyes. She hated to admit it, but this was too much for her. Coal's will was prepared for her? What does that mean, and why is his mind like this!? She was just ready to finish her task and hide in her bed for a long time. She can never unsee the things she has, and nightmares will be her friend for many nights to come.

"P-please...would you point me to...Will?"

"Of course, Ms. Crimson. Simply walk down this path and take the second left. You may run into one of the seven, though I'm not sure which it will be at this time. It seems almost random!"

"Well...it won't be Wrath. He has to be kept locked up. Which is such a fucking load of shit! He is the only guy in here I like! Guy seriously knows how to have a good fucken time!"

"W-wrath? Th-the seven? Wh-what does all of that mean?" Crimson was a smart if not highly disturbed filly, but her youth was starting to show. Uncertainty was her opponent, and she was losing the fight.

"Coal's seven deadly sins. As Hate mentioned, it should just be the six. Our dear friend Wrath must be locked up at all times. He tends to run wild when let out. You could run into any of the others though. Oooh, I hope you don't run into Lust. He would probably have his way with you."

And just like that, Crimson collapsed onto the ground. Her entire body shook with fear as tears started to fall. "N-no more...I-I can't take this..."

"Get over it, bitch! This is your own fucking fault to begin with! Learn your fucking place! I'd let Wrath out myself to run you over if I could!"

"Calm down, Hate. Can't you see she is suffering?"

"You're too fucking nice! This bitch is threatening the Host right now! Fuck her!"

"Yes well...love, and tolerance."

"Jesus Christ! You know what? Fuck love and tolerance! Fuck Crimson, and fuck you! I've had all I can stand of this shit!"

Hate stormed off down a separate path leaving Crimson alone with Love. She was calming down, but each exhale was coupled with slight sobbing. Love stepped over and sat down in front of Crimson, and tried to cheer her up.

"Come now, dry your eyes. You'll mess up your pretty face with all those tears."

"H-how can you say things like that?"

"I'm Love. That's all I can do."

"I-I see...thank you all the same. I...I may not punish Coal for putting me through this after I take control..."

"Heheh, still plan on doing that, huh? I don't want you to, but I won't stop you. Do remember to be on your guard down that path though. I don't know if they're allowed to touch you or not. Even Will can't control those seven totally."

"I-I'll keep that in mind. This place is just..."

"A mess, I know. It's home though, and I wouldn't trade it for anything."

"Heh...funny. Ok, I'm better now. I appreciate your encouragement, even if you can't help it. I'll keep you in mind when I decide whether or not to punish Coal for this humiliation."

"Good luck to you...you'll need it."

Crimson had turned away at first, but at the second half of Love's phrase she turned around in disbelief. He wasn't there.

"...hate this place..."

Crimson stepped onto the grassy portion of the path first, and found it to be cool and relaxing to the touch. Out of curiosity she then stepped onto the blackened path, and found it burned to the touch. "Ouch! HATE THIS PLACE!" She was losing control of her temper, so her judgment was becoming impaired. With rage filling her soul, she ran along the grassy portion while following Love's directions. At the second left she skidded to a halt as another Coal stood before her. His back was to her, so her only question was: "W-who are you?"

"Keh...Lust at your service!" He turned to reveal Coal with the most unholy of smiles. His fingers were constantly twitching while he seemed to move with both grace and careful focus. Each movement he made seemed to put him one step closer to Crimson, who was already panicking.

"N-no..."

"My my my...aren't you the prettiest little thing I've ever seen! I could hear Love...loving on you, how nice. I'll love on you too...just come closer."

"St-stay back!"

Lust simply grinned at Crimson's reaction. She was back peddling, and didn't seem to care if she stepped on the burning ground or not. Her eyes were wide and her pupils small. Her entire body shook as Lust slowly advanced upon her.

"Awww. Don't be like that. Well...I do like it when they fight a little!"

"P-please..."

"And you even say please! I'm going to enjoy this!"

"That is enough, Lust." A voice boomed from a nearby path that seemed to pass undisturbed through the solid walls.

"Great! Of course Chivalry would show up!"

As if on queue, Chivalry stepped onto the path. He wore a suit of armor, but with no helmet. Crimson would have found it cheesy if not for the fact he was saving her.

"Let her pass, Lust. No man should ever touch a lady let alone a child in such a disgusting way."

"Come now! You play a heavy part in each of Host's sexual activities!"

"In the proper way. I'm only thankful your role is minimized due to Love's involvement."

"Keh! I'm always made out to be the bad guy! Fine then...I'll just visit the memories wing!"

Lust stuck his hands in his pockets and wandered off the way Crimson had originally come. She never took her eyes off of him as he walked past, and neither did he. Their eyes were locked the entire time, but the only thing Crimson could process was his smile. That wicked curving smile...

"Let me help you, Ms. Crimson."

"H-huh? Oh...thanks."

"Let us not prolong your stay here. I'm sure you're ready for this ordeal to end, as are all of us here. I'll escort you to Will. From there it'll be between the both of you to settle this."

Crimson didn't respond. She just couldn't believe how complicated everything here was. It was like Coal's emotions would almost literally run wild, and that thought wouldn't be so unbelievable if she knew him from more than still images. Chivalry lifted her up into his arms, so she wouldn't have to walk on the upcoming path. It glowed red with fire that would burn almost anything instantly.

"Wh-why is the path getting more and more dangerous?"

"This path leads to the heart, and that is Will's resting place. Your presence here has caused this place much unrest. It should hopefully become calm once this is settled."

Crimson wanted to ask why Chivalry was helping her, but she already knew the answer. It was

all he could do. He doesn't have a real mind of his own, and can only act as the embodiment that he is. Chivalry seemed to walk over the path with perfect ease, and Crimson could only shake her head as nothing made sense anymore. They rounded a corner, and before them was what appeared to be a town's center. There was a fountain in the exact center with a statue of each pony race pointed outwards. The ground was a pale cobblestone. Those were the only things there though. That is...except for a figure sitting on the edge of the fountain. Chivalry set Crimson down at the end of the burning path, and took his leave.

Crimson turned her attention to the figure as he slowly turned to face her. It was another Coal, but there was something very different about him. His body didn't appear to be flesh, but that of some kind of metal. It most likely symbolized the strength of his will. Crimson gulped as it stood up, and approached her with solid steps. Each step seemed to almost shake the ground she stood upon. He stopped right in front of her, and tilted his head forward without leaning his body. Crimson had to admit that it was intimidating, but she had come too far to give up now.

"I-I take it you're Will..."

"I am."

"Y-you run this place?"

"I control it for the most part."

"Do I have you to thank for all the buck I've been put through?"

"You can only blame yourself, vile pony."

"Grrr! I've had all I can stand of this! Prepare to be bent to MY will!"

"Do your worst, but I'll warn you now. Bind me, and he WILL be let loose."

"He?"

"If you aren't aware of who I speak, then you are a fool."

"Silence! I've had all of this I can take!"

Crimson's horn glowed with a blinding red light that engulfed Will entirely. He didn't seem the least bit phased by it as a leash began to form around his neck. It traveled down to Crimson's hoof, and she laughed triumphantly as she took hold of it. "Finally!"

Will only stood there for a moment, before reaching up and snapping it clean off. "Is that the best you have, child?"

"What!? Impossible!"

"Was that your plan? To control me with a spell so weak? You are a bigger fool than I originally took you for."

"AUGH!" Once more Crimson's horn glowed, but this time it was a much larger light. Her patience was spent, so she poured all of her magic into the spell. The leash formed as a small chain, but it got larger. More chains began branching off from it as they wrapped around Will's body again and again. Crimson's eyes started to bleed as she never stopped her spell. It wasn't until Will's body was completely hidden by chains did she stop. She took hold of the leash, and the world disappeared around her.

"H-huh?" She had to blink a few times before everything registered to her. She was now outside of Coal's mind, and she let out a sigh of relief. Dash saw her starting to move around again, which made her fear the worst.

"N-no...y-you didn't..."

"I did! Now watch as your filthy lover submits to me! Human! Obey my command, and rise!"

Coal didn't respond immediately, but after a moment of nothing, he raised his head. Both Dash and Crimson let out a horrified gasp at what they saw. Coal's right eye had gone completely black, while his left remained the same. He stood up immediately after, and stood there motionless.

Had Crimson not been through all she had, this change may not have had any effect on her. Now though...most anything unknown with Coal was frightening.

Dash had long since spent all her tears, but she could still cry out for Coal. "Coal! Don't listen to her! Please, wake up!"

* * * *

"C-copper!?! Are you alright!?" Raze had lifted Copper up by his shoulders and was trying to get him back to attention. Copper's convulsing had ceased, but he had yet to reopen his eyes.

Celestia was the first to show up shortly after the maids ran off. "Stand back! Let me get a better look at him!"

Copper's body began twitching slightly the closer Celestia got. It was almost like her mere presence put him in pain. She reached down and gently put her hoof on his brow, but that only

made Copper whimper as sweat began dripping from his body.

Celestia noticed his reaction to her, and had to make a tough decision. "I can't help him. I'm hurting him by just being here. Please take him to a holding cell..."

Raze almost couldn't believe the command. Holding cells were only used for prisoners that couldn't be contained locally. The cells were heavily enchanted, and no pony could escape from them. The worst enchantment was the atmosphere inside a cell was heavy. The captives wouldn't be able to breath as easily, and their whole body would be weighed down. It was a slight form of torture just being kept in such a place! He didn't dare argue or question her though, so with much guilt he lifted Copper up...and carried him to the cells.

Copper was bouncing slightly on Raze's back as he walked. When they were out of earshot of any pony, Raze started speaking to Copper.

"Come on, kid. You really need to snap out of this. *sigh* He probably can't even hear me..."

Copper didn't say or do anything in response. Raze made it to the cells, and gently tossed Copper inside. It was with a heavy heart that he spoke, and locked him inside. "I'm so sorry, kid..." Raze stared as Copper began squirming and whimpering under the stressful conditions he found himself in. It was more than Raze could take, and he left to go try and wake Luna. He didn't notice, but before he closed the door that lead to the cells...a small creature managed to climb in on the ceiling.

It got right up to the cell with Copper in it, and sat down. It was Kriss. She stared at Copper while he wriggled and writhed. Her face showed no emotion other than curiosity. This went on for several minutes...until Copper woke up.

"Ugh...what...*sigh...well this sucks. Hmm?" Copper looked up to see Kriss sitting on the other side of the cell staring at him. "Really? So you were that thing following me earlier. Must be Sasha's..."

"Isss that my mother?"

"...and you talk. Great...just...great."

"Why are your wordsss sssso hateful?"

"Cause I'm locked in a damn cage, and the child of the monster that literally drank my blood is talking to me. You tell me why I shouldn't be hateful."

"...you didn't act thiss way earlier..."

"Things change. Now leave me alone while I get out of here."

"I've been here long enough to know that isss impossssssible."

Copper didn't respond this time. Instead he flared his wings under the added weight of the atmosphere, and seemed to concentrate. Kriss watched in awe as the black tips of his feathers began running down through his wings and spread out over his body. It formed tendrils of black that would wave back and forth the further it went. They looked to be like living snakes, slithering down Copper's body.

The enchantments on the cell prevented any magic that wasn't Luna's or Celestia's. Just in case they were ever tricked into one. This proved to be a fatal flaw as Copper's had the exact same properties as Luna's. Copper's physical changes continued as his mane grew out over a foot long while going solid white. His tail didn't grow, but it too went the same blinding white. The changes didn't stop there either. Copper's entire body started to grow at an alarming rate. It stopped when he stood slightly shorter than Celestia herself. Copper's eyes went from their emerald green, to a blue the color of the night sky. They seemed to almost glow as his transformation neared completion. His body expanded slightly to fill out his new height. Once that completed...his appearance could only be referred to as that of a nightmare come to life. He seemed to emit a field of pressure all his own as he bucked at the cell door once. It flew off its hinges and slammed into the wall across from it.



Copper stepped out looking very satisfied. "Ahh...much better." He cracked his neck with a few sharp twists before loosening up his body.

Kriss couldn't say anything. Copper's presence was weighing her down, and she ran off as soon as she could bring herself to.

"...strange creature. Now then! I'm thinking it's time I got out for a bit!" Copper was about to walk out when yelling could be heard coming his way.

"Copper! What was that no...ise..." It was Raze with two other guards. They stopped and gawked at the pony before them.

Raze immediately looked to Copper's cell, and found it to be empty. He then slowly looked back to the being before him. "C-copper?"

"Good to see you, Raze! Hey...care for another race? Something tells me I'll win this time!"

* * * *

Pine stepped down into the basement where the joining took place. In the back was a sliding

wall, and on the other side was the holding area. Twilight was being contained in a magically bound cage. It required constant magical energy from four different unicorns, as it didn't have the magical ability to make such a thing permanent.

The room was solid stone with the only exception being the door. Twilight was still unconscious when Pine entered. She had a little dried blood on the back of her head from where Pine had struck her, and she twitched slightly in her sleep.

"My my my...such an attractive unicorn. Once Dash and that pitiful human are taken care of...I think I'll come back for some real fun." Pine was about to leave, but Twilight was starting to come to.

"H-huh? Owwww...my head..."

"Oh! You're awake, Ms. Twilight!"

"P-pine? Wh-what...what's going on here?" Twilight started noticing the questionable situation she found herself in. The four unicorns maintaining a magical cage around her, and the fact that cage was kept in a featureless stone room didn't help any either.

"Don't worry, Ms. Twilight. Your questions will be answered in good time...or they won't. It depends if Crimson will let me keep you or not."

"...I knew something was wrong about this place. Dash was surrounded by some pony's magic...and Crimson's magic felt the same..."

Pine started to smile, but it quickly grew into an uproarious laugh that boomed across the room. "If you knew something was wrong, you should have done something about it! Now you're trapped and that stupid human is going to be Crimson's new toy! You are such a fool! AHAHHAH!"

"No...you're the fool."

"Hmm?"

Twilight's horn began to glow as she started disrupting the other unicorn's magic with her own. They were visibly starting to struggle as the violet energy was pushing outwards against the cage. It was clear to any pony that Twilight would get out, and Pine began to panic. He tried to reinforce the magic, but because he didn't go through the joining, his magic had different properties. It didn't work well with the other unicorns. He growled in frustration as he ran out of the room for Crimson.

It only took him a couple minutes to reach her, but he ran into the back of the now standing Coal

as he entered the room.

"Augh! Woah! O-Oh! You did it! Wait! No time for that! That blasted unicorn is breaking out of her cage!"

Crimson's eyes grew large, but she didn't say anything. She merely ran out of the room as fast as she could, leaving Pine with Coal and Dash.

"Whew! That was stressful."

Before Pine had entered the room, Crimson taunted Dash with her new found control of Coal. Dash tried to remain strong, but eventually broke down when Crimson had Coal kiss her hooves. Sobs filled the room as Dash couldn't contain them anymore.

Pine had complete confidence in Crimson, so he allowed himself time to relax. Dash's crying caught his attention, and he decided to try something out.

"I take it Crimson took control of the human..."

"...*sob*..."

"That's all I needed to hear!" Pine immediately ran over and jumped up against Dash. She nearly yelped in surprise, but Pine forcefully silenced her with a violating kiss. Dash's cries only intensified as Pine began slowly caressing her body. He broke the kiss moments later to look back at Coal. This was the first time he had seen Coal's minor physical change, but it was enough to startle him a bit. When Coal didn't move, though...he knew he could do whatever he wanted.

"Oh glorious day..." He turned back to Dash who was giving him the most hateful look she could, but its impact was weakened by the pitiful nature her crying had left her in. Pine grinned ear to ear as he began licking the tears off of Dash's face, and inhaling deeply while pressing himself into her mane. "You are a treat to all the senses, Ms. Dash. Sadly, we don't likely have time for much. Until then, though...open your mouth, and do stick out your tongue for me." Dash didn't respond, instead she just tried to turn her head away.

Pine chuckled a little at how little will she had left to fight. She was being broken, and he loved it. "Don't listen to me, and I'll take it out on that human. I'm sure Crimson would enjoy the show."

Dash's crying intensified as she forced herself to comply. Pine took his time exploring her mouth with his tongue, all the while Dash couldn't help but look to Coal. He stood there motionless, and she called out to him once as Pine leaned back for air.

"C-coal..."

"He can't help you now, Ms. Dash!" Pine was having the time of his life. Their plan succeeded, and he was going to have a wonderful new play thing. He giddily bounced over to Coal, and leaned against him. "Look! I can do whatever I want to him, and he'll never raise his hand against me!"

What Pine didn't know...was that Crimson only took control of Will. Even Crimson thought she had complete power of Coal now, but she was dead wrong. With Will locked up, Coal's mind was in a major conflict with itself. Each part of Coal was fighting for dominance, but one had just about claimed victory, and he was ready to be free once more.

Pine laughed a little while longer before trotting back over to Dash. He began rubbing his head against her bound legs, and moved up to her stomach. "Mmm...I wonder if you feel this good on the inside."

Dash forced her eyes closed as Pine began slowly moving down her stomach with his nose. He was getting closer and closer to taking so much more from Dash, and there was nothing she could do about it.

One last time, Dash looked to Coal for help. "C-coal...please..."

Pine leaned up and blocker her view with his same twisted smile. "You never learn, do you?" *CRACK* "What was that!?"

Pine spun around to see Coal cracking his neck and various joints. His jaw dropped as Coal's movements looked to be completely unimpaired.

"N-no..."

"Ahhh! It's good to be out of that fucking hell hole! Mmmm, freedom is sweet! Hmm? Oh...well what do we have here!?" Coal looked over to Pine, who was leaning against Dash with a look of untold confusion.

Hope returned to Dash, but at the same time she too was confused. Coal didn't look angry, so much as he did amused. "Coal?"

"Dashie! I haven't seen you since that fight with Storm! Ahhh...you really fucking pissed me off back then too, BUT it's good to see you all the same."

Pine shook his head in disbelief. This made no sense, and he was getting angry with how little he had control over. "What are you doing!? Crimson took control of you!"

"Crimson? Oh! That filly bitch that fucked up Host earlier! Her, control me? HA! Don't kid

yourself! I am thankful to her though. With that fucker Will out of the picture, taking control was pretty damn easy! Hey now...you have been putting the moves on my girl, haven't ya?"

Pine turned his entire body around to face Coal, who was leaning his head back while looking down at Pine. His expression was that of gleeful hate, and it sent a chill across the room.

"S-so what if I have!?" Pine's judgment was not with him. He could simply try and bind Coal with magic, but his fears and confusion have left him somewhat dazed.

"Heheh...then I'm going to have to kill you."

"B-big talk coming from such a..."

"A what!? Human!? Heh....hahah....HAHAHAHAHAHA!!!" Coal seemed to be slowly moving closer with every second. Pine couldn't bring himself to look away as Coal ended up right above him. "You know what!? I like you!"

Dash's pupils shrunk, and a gasp escaped her lips. Pine merely blinked as he looked up at Coal. "Y-you do?"

"Sure I do! You're a guy who knows what he wants, and will do anything to get it! I can appreciate that! For example, I want nothing more than to break your dick off for getting close to my mare!" The noises coming out of Pine could only be described as incoherent babble as Coal back handed him across the room. "DAMN THAT FELT GOOD!"

Pine's head was spinning after having bounced once into the wall. He tried to stand up, but his legs gave out underneath him. Coal smiled at this before turning his attention to Dash.

"Hey there, love! You look like you've had better days!"

"C-coal? What has gotten into yMMM...mmm..."

Coal leaned in and took a long kiss from Dash. It didn't feel completely right, but Dash had to admit that this definitely was Coal. Just...not all, or the right side of him.

"Heh, I think a few of the others must have gotten loose when I took control. Lust has to be having a field day!"

Dash's mind wasn't with her. She heard what Coal said, but none of it registered as he leaned in again. Pine was just starting to come to as Coal was undoing a strap around Dash while still kissing her.

Pine growled with a furious stomp as this was taking a turn for the worst. He began charging his

magic, but Coal didn't let him. With what appeared to be a single kick from the ground, Pine found Coal's knee right into his nose. He coughed and gagged as blood began pouring out at an alarming rate.

"Woah there, fucker! Can't be having any of that! Now why don't you wait patiently while I catch up with Dashie over there?"

Pine gurgled once as Coal lifted him up by the back of his neck. "Good!" With a flick of his wrist Pine was thrown against the opposite wall with a solid thud.

Dash wasn't sure what to be thinking during all of this. Coal was...fine...sort of. He was clearly out of his right mind, but at least he was free...right? He walked back over to her and once more kissed her deeply while setting her loose. She wanted him to stop, but at the same time didn't. This was no time for such things, and yet a part of her was made to feel better.

Coal undid the straps binding her limbs, but now the metal clasp around her stomach was the big problem. "Going to take a lot of muscle to break through a magical clasp...hey Pine!" Dash was in awe as Coal walked over to Pine and once more lifted him up. "Undo this damn clasp around my mare! I may even subtract a minute from that beating I owe ya!"

Pine's head was lolling to the side, back and forth as Coal spoke. Nothing said was getting through to him, and Coal did not approve. A frown formed on his face at Pine's lack of response, so he tossed him up lightly into the air...and kned him in the chest on his way down.

"GAUHAK!" Pine couldn't hold it, and ended up spilling his guts all over the floor.

"Ewww...heh...think I should make him eat it, Dashie?"

"Coal! Please! W-what is going on with you!?" Dash was somewhat pleased with Pine getting what he deserved, but scared to death of Coal's new behavior.

"What is going on with me? What is going on with you!? This guy has done how much to you? Touched you? You! My mare! Don't tell me you liked it!"

"No! O-of course not!"

"Good! Now stop your yelling, and sit tight! I'm thinking a little bitch needs to have her coat match her mane!"

* * * *

"Copper! What in Celestia's name happened to you!?" Raze was still at the head of the small

group of guards who inspected the noise.

"What!? Can't a guy change himself!? *snicker* I'm just giving you buck! I have no idea! Now, about that race..."

"Copper! This is serious! You need to calm down, and wait here while I get the Princess..."

"Buck that! I'm just going to get locked up again! I think it's time I get away from all of this drama and crap!"

Raze couldn't believe this. Copper was completely different, and clearly wasn't going to listen to reason. With an internal apology to the old Copper, Raze shouted the order. "Seize him! Don't let him escape!"

"Awww! I thought we were friends!" The pegasus guards charged at Copper at full galloping speed. There wasn't enough room in here to properly fly, so they completely blocked off Copper's only escape route. He wasn't worried though. As soon as they were close enough, Copper side swiped them with his wing. Raze ended up taking the blunt of the attack, and was thrown into the opened cell. "Ouch! That looks like it hurt!"

The guards were now allowed to use extreme measures to deal with Copper. He had assaulted another guard, and had to be held liable. They kicked off the ground to tackle Copper at full force, but with a smirk he seemed to easily avoid their charge. They fell further into the hallway, and Copper took this opportunity to run out.

He breached the doorway in time to see several other guards running his way. Many of whom were unicorn guards, so it was past time to go. Copper flared his wings and rocketed off the ground and out through a window.

"Woooooooooooo!" He yelled as freedom became one less want on his list. The sound of yelling could be heard behind him as several pegasus guards flew out the same busted window. "Oh boy! So I do get that race!" Copper turned away from the guards and flew straight for the public districts of Canterlot. His new appearance would make him incredibly easy to spot during the day, so he needed a better hiding place until nightfall.

He flew only a few feet from the ground, and many ponies shrieked at the sight of him as he flew past. The wind pressure being emitted from his wings was causing damage everywhere he went. The guards couldn't keep up, but Copper's trail was easy to follow, so their pursuit didn't cease.

Copper spotted a very large building with several tall towers ahead of him. One such tower had an open window, and Copper got an idea. He flew behind the tower so as to hide himself from the guards, and he then flew up to the top. It took the guards a minute to catch up with him, but

they flew straight past the tower in belief he had too. Copper snickered at them before flying back around the tower, and entering through the window.

The room appeared to be some form of art room. There were paintings with tarps over them everywhere, and many various supplies on shelves could be seen along the walls. No pony was here at the moment, though, so Copper decided a nap was in order.

"*yawn* Haven't slept in a while..." Copper trotted away from the window a little bit, and curled into himself as sleep began to take hold.

* * * *

Crimson made her way to Twilight's containment room, and almost couldn't believe her eyes at what she saw. The cage was nearly destroyed even with four unicorns trying to maintain it. Twilight's face was contorted into that of pure concentration as her magic pushed against her confines. Crimson immediately reinforced the cage, but due to her own exhaustion it was minimally effective.

It became an endurance test as Twilight now struggled against five unicorns, but one by one the unicorns started to fall. They were each worked past their breaking points, and collapsed as fatigue swept over them. When the third unicorn fell, Twilight had all the leeway she needed as she shattered the cage.

She locked eyes with Crimson who immediately turned tail, and ran back to where Coal was. With his help, she could surely regain control. Crimson rounded a corner, and ended up running straight into Coal.

"Well hey there! I owe you a big thanks for letting me out!" He picked up the exhausted Crimson by placing his palm on her head, and gripping tightly with his fingers. She cried out as he was using much more force than needed. "Awww, what's the matter? Don't like it when you're the toy!?" Coal's wore an expression of both rage, and delight as he shook her now limp body back and forth.

Twilight had to deal with the remaining unicorn, but he was too tired to put up much of a fight. With a forceful push, Twilight knocked him out against a wall. She caught up with the sound of Crimson's cries, and gasped when she saw Coal.

"Coal!? Wh-what happened to you!?"

"Sup, Twilight! Dang...you look like shit! Can't say I blame you, that fucker Pine really did a number on the side of your noggin! Don't worry though! I don't think he is going to be doing much of anything for a while! HAAHAHAH!"

Through sobs and cries, Crimson forced herself to ask the questions plaguing her mind. "H-how are you moving around like this!? I took control of you!"

"WRONG! You locked up Will! What did you think would happen if you chained him up like that!? He can't serve anybody! But hey, you did at least let me out! So I owe you a huge thanks for that!"

Twilight knew enough about Coal from all their time together, and their various trips into his memory to know this was in fact Coal, but the darkest part he had to offer. "Coal! Please don't do anything you'll regret!"

"Regret? REGRET!? My only regret is that it took this fucking long for me to get out! Now why don't you join me in...thanking, this little shit right here!?"

Twilight didn't know the full extent of everything that happened, but knew from Crimson's earlier questions that she must have manipulated Coal in some way. The only hope for fixing this, was to find out what she had done exactly. "Crimson! What did you do to Coal!?"

"I-I went inside his mind, a-and tried to take control of him through there!"

"How did you do that!? I've never heard of such a thing!"

Before Crimson could explain further, Coal had lost his patience with their little back and forth. He raised Crimson to his face, and moved his hand to her chin. He pinched both sides of her face with his thumb and index finger, which was now the only thing supporting her body. Her cries of pain were now muffled through Coal's grip.

"You're coming with me, Crimson! It's past time you let out Dashie. I haven't had fun with her in far too long!"

A weak whimper was Crimson's only response, but it was good enough for him. He turned from Twilight, and made his way back to Dash with Crimson hanging limply from his hand.

"Coal! Wait, please!" Twilight ran up beside Coal, and tried her hardest to bring him to his senses. She was going to plead with him more, but the look in his eyes told her everything. No words would be enough to bring the Coal she knew back. The only chance she had was looking defeated as she swung back and forth slightly in Coal's grip.

Coal reentered the room to much the same sight he left. Pine was still on the floor looking half dead, while Dash was still hanging on the wall by her stomach.

"Pine..." Crimson caught sight of him as Coal swung her over to face Dash, but she didn't have the strength or will for much of a response.

"Now, my dear little filth, why don't you release my friend here?"

Crimson was scared, tired, but above all...angry. Her pride was hurt more than anything, and she was far past tired of this mess. "Shove it..."

"Wrong answer!" *Crack*

"AAAAHHHHH!" Crimson screamed out in pain as Coal put a hand on her ribs, and applied enough pressure to crack it.

"Now...why don't you...release my friend here?"

Dash and Twilight were horrified. Coal was starting to torture what amounted to little more than a child. Even if she was evil...some things should never be done.

"Coal!" Twilight cried out. "What are you doing!?"

"Getting Dash down...what does it look like?"

Twilight groaned in frustration. She wasn't going to get anywhere at this rate. Pine was starting to come to, and she had to make a tough call. "Pine! Where did you put my pack!?"

Pine heard her, but couldn't bring himself to respond. He looked up to see Crimson screaming in pain, and nothing else mattered at that point. With what little strength he had, he fired a beam of magic to stun Coal. It connected, and had a much larger effect than it should. Crimson fell from his hands, and Coal stood there with hate in his eyes.

It took a lot of concentration, but Coal had just enough control to speak. "When this wears off, Pine...I'm going to fucking kill you."

Dash was still right in front of him, and she reached out as far as she could to grab his face. "Coal! Listen to yourself! Please! Don't do this anymore! You won! Just get me out, and we can go home...and be a family again..."

It just wasn't going to work. Coal heard everything, but nothing was getting through. Once Wrath was set loose, he took control of the center instead of Will. Now Coal's most horrific qualities and personality traits are in control. Good is still there, but no longer is it even close to being the majority.

Twilight levitated Crimson over to her, and once more asked where her items were taken.

"Th-they're in my room...down the hall..." Crimson was too out of it. The pain coupled with her

exhaustion wrecked her for the world. She quit. There was no winning here anymore, and she knew that.

Twilight ran to Crimson's room, and immediately wrote Celestia an emergency letter upon finding her pack. She sent it off with magic, and then pulled out the potions she had brought along. After that, Twilight ran back to see the effects already starting to wear off on Coal. He had managed to turn himself somewhat, and was now very slowly making his way to Pine. Dash was past the point of patience, and yelled at Twilight for help. "Would you undo this stupid thing, Twilight!?"

"Oh! Right, sorry!" Twilight undid the inner lock of the clasp, and Dash fell to the floor with a soft thud. Twilight ran over, and gave Dash one full red and blue potion. They took immediate effect, so Dash went through waves and waves of pain before she got better.

"Ugh! Is that what Coal went through!? That was awful!" She tried once more to feel her wings now that she was loose, and unbelievably...they worked! "Yes!" Dash used her renewed vigor to get in front of Coal, and forcefully push him to the ground on his back.

"Dash! Get off of me or so heMMF!"

Dash forced herself upon Coal in order to try and silence his rage. It didn't look to be working at first, but slowly he stopped resisting. A better chance wasn't going to come, so Twilight once more made a difficult decision. She got right next to Crimson's ear, and whispered.

"I'll make the pain go away, and ask Celestia to go easy on you if you help me fix Coal."

"C-celestia? Wh-what...h-how..."

"I'm her prized student, and an element of harmony, so is Dash for that matter. I don't know what your plan was, but you were doomed to fail from the start. Now make things easier on yourself, and just help me end this!"

Crimson managed to let out a soft sigh through her pain. She looked up at Twilight, and agreed. "Fine, but...h-help Pine too..."

"Coal first, and then Pine."

"Alright...you j-just go into his heart's plane of existence, and...I-I'll warn you...it's a-an awful place..."

Twilight wasn't familiar with such a concept. Traveling into Coal's memories was the only thing she knew, and that could be compared to walking versus running. Crimson was needed for this...as much as Twilight hated to do it, she had no choice.

"I don't know how to do that, Crimson, so you're going to help me. I'll give you some potions to restore you, but we both have to go into that place this time."

"Heh...how do you know I won't just fight you again?"

"Because I'd keep you busy, while Dash over there finished you off. This isn't a game, Crimson. You're messing with lives, and you're going to fail one way or another. The only thing you can do now is to decide by how much you want to lose."

"F-fine...I'll help you."

Twilight grabbed the last two red and blue potions, and gave them to Crimson. She drank them down, but wasn't prepared for the pain that followed. Crimson writhed on the floor for nearly five minutes before the pain faded, and the effects became apparent. She stood up immediately, which finally got Coal's attention.

Dash had been keeping him busy this entire time, but now he was alert. "What the he..." Crimson cut him off with a high level stun. It worked better than expected, and yet Twilight wasn't so sure of this.

"Crimson..."

"I know...I'm tired of this. Link your magic with mine, and we'll go in. I'll warn you again though...it...was awful..."

"I'll take my chances. Dash, I've sent a letter to the princess. Please stay alert for it."

"Y-you got it!" Now that Coal was finally under control, Dash wanted nothing more than to rest. Her body was feeling better than ever, but her mind was past tired. As soon as Crimson and Twilight went once more into Coal's mind, Dash got comfortable on his chest and nuzzled him affectionately. "You better come back normal, Coal...heheh...as normal as you get anyway."

* * * *

"H-Huh!? What is that!?" Copper had just woken up to the sound of bells going off. The sun was still high in the sky, so it couldn't be later than five. He stepped over to the window, and peered out over Canterlot. Beneath him, hundreds of fillies and colts were making their way home. "Oooh...this is a school...BLEK! Hate school!"

Copper flew out the window, and hovered while trying to decide where to go. Before he could choose, an all too familiar voice could be heard coming from one of the shorter towers. "Is

that...no way!" With a single beat of his wings, Copper propelled himself over to the tower, and peeked inside. Inside were several colts and fillies, lined up in a few rows along some steps. One filly in the second row though, caught his attention. It was Sweetie Belle, and she was singing in the choir.

Copper's heart soared as a huge smile spread across his face. "Yes!" He flew to the top of the tower, and got comfortable. Sweetie Belle would be done in there eventually, and as soon as he could, Copper was going to surprise her by showing up. Granted...his appearance alone is going to be a huge shock, but for whatever reason...he didn't think of that.

* * * *

"This...is Coal's mind? So...I've only been going into his memories before?"

"I'm not familiar with a spell that lets you do that. This is the only one I know."

Twilight and Crimson had made it into Coal's even more hectic mental plane. The once black space surrounding everything was now mixture of black and red. Twilight spent several minutes merely gawking at everything around her. They entered in a separate section from where Crimson entered earlier, so these sights were new to her as well. There was a clear problem though...many of the statues and paintings were completely destroyed. The only ones remaining intact depicted some evil Coal had to offer.

Crimson thought back to everything she had been told during her first trip, and it all finally clicked with her. Wrath in Coal is repressed, so once let out...buck. She didn't so much take control of Will, either. Instead, she ended up sealing him in her anger.

"Crimson...where do we go from here?"

"Isn't that the million bit question! I hope you're prepared to see what kind of monster your friend is!" Crimson was furious, but not without her usual schemes. Celestia would punish her severely if her relationship is indeed as close as Twilight suggests. If she could find Will once more, she would destroy it completely. Coal would be forever be stuck the way he is now, and she could at least fail with the last laugh.

Twilight and Crimson were standing at the dead end of a path. Said path was made up of thousands of different small drops of color, and in this area hung pictures of the most disturbing things Crimson had seen yet. One such picture could only be described as hell. It was of a humanoid creature with a grin that stretched off its face while it disemboweled a restrained Coal. A part of her got a sick kick out of it, but more of her was wanting to vomit at just how incredibly graphic it was.

Twilight hadn't seen that image yet, she was looking at one more immediately disturbing to her as Coal's friend. It was of Pinkie...doing ungodly things to Dash. Every pony has their demons...but Twilight was starting to understand why Coal feared his own so much, and this was only the first stop.

Crimson glanced over at Twilight with a sly smirk on her face. "So...still want to help your friend? I used to think Pine was the most disgusting male I've ever met, but..."

"Shut up, Crimson. Coal has problems, but he manages them. What some pony knows and suffers from doesn't make them a monster. Their behavior is what makes them a monster, and...m-my Coal isn't..."

"Hmph, whatever you say. Now, let's just move o..."

"HEY THERE!"

The girls shrieked in surprise as a voice rang out behind them. They spun around to see Coal...in a jester's suit made up of...oh lord.

"HEHEHAHAAAHA! HOW GREAT TO MEET YOU! I'M MADNESS!"

"T-twilight...w-we need to run..."

"...agreed..."

Twilight and Crimson turned tail and ran off down the only path available to them.

"AWWWW! COME ON! IT ISN'T OFTEN I GET TO PLAY!"

"Don't stop running! In here, think of those things as being real!" Crimson was wanting to conserve her magic to try and pull off her plan later, so running was her only other option.

Twilight knew that each little bit of this place made up some part of Coal, and no matter how small...destroying it could be catastrophic. She wasn't sure what she should do! They both ran down this long path as the maniacal laugh of Madness could be heard right behind them.

"GET YOUR FLANKS BACK HERE! DON'T YOU WANT TO PLAY!?"

Twilight had no idea how dire the situation was, but Crimson knew that there was no chance of being saved this time. If Coal's evil traits have honestly taken full control, then the embodiments of his good traits won't likely be around.

The path was going to become a tunnel a little further down, and light could be seen at the end

of that. The girls didn't question it as they ran at top speed towards the exit. Twilight snuck a peek back, but...Madness wasn't there. She didn't have time to say anything though as he appeared at the end of the path. Crimson and Twilight saw him and tried to stop, but with a snap of his finger the colors on the path became a slick oil. Their momentum was sending them towards him at near top speed.

He stood there laughing as they got closer and closer. Crimson hated herself for this, but there was no choice. She cast the same binding spell she used on Will earlier, but to a much smaller degree.

"AUGH! WHAT IS THIS!?" Madness struggled as chains wrapped around his body a few times as the girls slid past. The exit broke into the same maze like landscape that Crimson was all too familiar with. She didn't put nearly as much magic into this binding, so Madness would most likely escape soon enough. She yelled for Twilight to follow her, and they both ran down a random path.

"DON'T THINK YOU CAN ESCAPE! WE'RE EVERYWHERE! WE'LL FIND YOU!"

Madness's voice grew continually more silent as the girls got further and further away. The route they took was plain compared to what Crimson had seen before, so she assumed that meant it wasn't directly connected to any particular embodiment.

They rounded a corner, and zipped down a couple more featureless paths before coming to a stop. Their hearts were beating out of their chests, and Twilight was starting to feel much the same panic Crimson had before.

"I-is this really what you went through to take control of Coal!?"

"*pant* Y-yes...his mind is a bigger mess than anything I've ever known. I've taken control of all sorts of beasts, and even some ponies in this way before, but never was it like this..."

"Th-that may be due to him being a human..."

"That is possible." Crimson was calming down, and started looking around after regaining her composure. "Now then...which way do we go now?"

They were in a circular break from the paths. They counted each option, and found that they had eight options. None of them looked any different from the next, so it was a guessing game.

Twilight was somehow trying to make an educated decision, but Crimson stopped her. "Don't bother. This place can't be picked apart so easily."

"You're wrong. I've known Coal for a long time now, and I know he isn't crazy. Even if this place

is in disarray, there must be some kind of order!"

"Hmph, suit yourself. I don't care what happens to the human either way."

Twilight turned to Crimson, and spoke with disgust dripping from her voice. "How can you even say that? He saved you from that wolf when he thought you were in trouble. You've seen what kind of person he is when normal. Don't you think your bucking with him has caused all this? You're the one at fault, so don't you dare pass your judgments on him!"

Crimson was in no mood for lectures, and responded with just as much anger as Twilight. "What!? Is he rutting with you too!? I don't care one bucking bit whose fault all of this! I'm just furious I'm forced to help you to save Pine!"

"I'm surprised you have enough good character in you to even care about some pony else!"

"What the buck do you know!?" Crimson lost her cool completely, and went off on Twilight with everything she had. "You tell me not to judge, but you go and do the very same thing! What do you know about us!? Pine is a disgusting, worthless, pitiful stallion; but he is the only thing I have! I hate him, but I need him..."

The girls didn't have anymore time to bicker as another voice could be heard coming from one of the paths.

"What a shame. Two young mares in a world of hurt, and only have themselves to blame."

They turned to face the voice, and saw yet another Coal. He wore a suit of one half black, and one half white. His expression wasn't immediately aggressive, and the girls were still somewhat tired. If they could talk their way out of this, they would.

Twilight was the first to speak up as Crimson was very fearful of any unknown in this place. "H-hello...wh-who are you?"

"I am Deceit, and it is I you would have to beat. To leave this place as one, you will have to get past all of us to be done. I normally don't care to fight, most often I would prefer to stay out of sight. To help you make it to the end, my help is what I shall lend."

Crimson just groaned at this latest turn. "You said you are Deceit! What makes you think we'll trust anything you say!?"

"If you wish to make it out alive, it is I you must trust to survive. Without any good, this place has become quite the bore. For it to return to normal, I'd like nothing more."

"Not likely! I've spent enough time in this damned place to know that you can only follow your

trait! You can only tell lies!"

"I am Deceit, not Lies. The truth I can tell, but I'll admit it is a surprise. The seven allowed me freedom, so long as I stayed out of their way. I told them I would, and that is the deceitful card that I play. Living in this world is not what I wish at all. Now trust me, and find what you seek down this very hall."

Deceit turned his body, and gestured down the second from the last path on the right side. Crimson and Twilight both looked at each with unsure expressions. What Deceit said made sense...sort of, but still...

"C-can you prove to us that you're telling the truth?" Twilight stepped forward while having a hard time making eye contact.

"These paths are my domain. I'd like to help you, but I can't all the same.

Crimson put a hoof to her chin, and pondered a thought. "Does that mean that each embodiment can't go outside a certain boundary?"

"For the time being that is correct. Granted that was something all of us here did expect."

Twilight turned to Crimson and whispered into her ear. "What do you think? You're more familiar with this place than I am. Does all of that make sense to you?"

"It's possible, but I'd rather not take his word on it."

"I've done all I will do. It is past time I take my leave, so good day to you." With those final words, Deceit went down another path as if he had somewhere to go. The girls looked at each other, neither one really knew what was best. The way Deceit put it, he could be telling the truth. Yet at the same time, he could be lying about deceiving others. Twilight looked down at the ground with a look of deep contemplation, and finally came up looking determined.

"I want to trust him."

Crimson snapped over to Twilight in a huff. "Really!? Just like that!?"

"Coal is my friend...and even when he is like this...I want to believe there is still some good here."

"AUGH! Fine!" They both made their way down the path Deceit told them to go, and the second they were both on the path...a wall shot up behind them blocking their way out. "...I hate you."

"..."

The girls had no choice now. The path before them was the only choice, and they made that choice rather begrudgingly. It went on for what felt like miles. Nothing but the same dirt road with grey cobblestone walls. Not a word was spoken up until Crimson saw something that made her gulp. The "Heart" was right before them. The same place she sealed away Will before.

"H-he...was telling the truth..."

Twilight smiled, and thanked Celestia in her heart. Their relief was short lived as they got closer. There were eight figures standing around the fountain, and Crimson recognized two of them.

"Oh no..." Crimson's pupils shrank more and more the closer they got.

Twilight saw them, but wasn't sure why Crimson was as scared as she was. They had only come across two embodiments here, and one of them turned out to be helpful.

"What's wrong now?"

"T-two of those figures...I-I ran into them before. Th-the one in rags is Hate, a-and the one standing next to him on the right...is L-lust."

Twilight didn't need to hear anymore. It was very easy to deduce that those eight must be the ones in control right now. There was one that stood out amongst them though. He looked completely normal. Not a thing seemed to differentiate him from the normal Coal. The others all looked exactly like him as well, but they each wore something or had expressions that never appeared on him before.

"Wh-what should we do then? I-I'm not sure we could stop all eight of them before at least one of them got to us..."

Crimson was cursing under her breath. She noticed something that would solve this problem, but it would ruin her plan. Will was in the center of the statue. The chains made him blend in somewhat, so she didn't notice him before. If he were to be released...then control could potentially be restored.

"Crimson?" Twilight followed her eyes, and she too saw the bound form. "That's Will...isn't it?" Crimson didn't respond. "It is...how do we release him?" Again she didn't respond. "Crimson!" Twilight lost her cool, and ended up shouting too loudly. She caught the attention of all eight Coal's before them. "Ooops..."

"You stupid girl! Look what you've done! Do you have any idea what is going to happen now!?"

"Weh-heh-heee!!!...look who we have here! It's that little cutie from before, and she brought

Twilight! I call dibs!" Lust was all too happy to see them again. The others had a mix of emotions.

A Coal who appeared sleepy seemed the least interested. "Really? Those two? You all have your fun. They aren't worth my time."

Another Coal who wore the finest of clothing seemed put off by his comment. "You're worthless, Sloth. It isn't every day we get to entertain. You should enjoy the moment."

"Shut up, Pride! Just get out of my way! It has been so long since I've had meat, and they look delicious!" This Coal dressed normally, but he seemed to salivate like mad.

Lust turned back with a wicked grin at his compatriots, and addressed the latest speaker. "Hold it, Gluttony! I'm the one who gets to eat them first! There won't be anything left if you start!"

"HAHAH! You're starting to sound a lot like me, Lust. Not that I'll excuse you for taking them of course. I'd rather keep them around so that they can be enjoyed again and again!" This Coal wore clothing that had pockets everywhere.

"I like the way you think, Greed! But I rather like Gluttony's thinking better! Just let me use the hide of the white one! It would look amazing on me!"

Hate stepped forward while shaking his head. "Shut the fuck up, Envy! All of your ideas suck! Just fucking kill them! They'll only try and fuck with us some more!"

The normal looking Coal was the only one to remain silent this entire time. At Hate's outburst, he finally made his voice known.

"I suggest each and every one of you take a seat before I break your legs. I'll handle this."

Not a single one of them argued. There were a few "aww's", but nothing more. Hate grumbled under his breath some as he sat on the edge of the fountain. This last Coal walked over to the girls who were so scared that they ended up holding each other to try and calm their shaking.

"Hello again, girls. You know it wasn't very nice to force us back in here. You're lucky Dash put me in a good mood, or I'd have Lust break both of you in right now."

"I LOVE YOU, WRATH! ALL OF MY HOMO!"

"Somebody keep him quiet." Wrath turned back to the girls who didn't seem the least bit amused. "Now then...what to do with you? You see...I'm torn here. I'm in a good mood, but I'm sure you girls are here to mess that up. You haven't done anything yet, but you're going to try, right?" Wrath got right into Twilight's face, and put his hand under her chin while tilting her up to

look at him. He looked so much like the real Coal, but his touch made her skin crawl.

"P-please...I-let us help you..."

"Help me? Crimson here has already helped me! You're both here to lock me up again!" Wrath flicked his wrist which knocked Twilight onto her back. He picked up Crimson, and looked back at the group. "Hey, Lust! Catch!"

"What!? Noo!" With unusual ease, Wrath threw Crimson into Lust. Who was so happy, he could hardly move for a moment.

"Just take her elsewhere! I don't want to put up with her screaming!"

Crimson struggled in Lust's grasp, but he wasn't letting go. "If you'll excuse me, I'm going to have some fun!" He saluted the group before making his way towards one of the other paths.

Before panic fully set in, Crimson called out to Twilight. "Disrupt the magic! It'll break it!" With that they both disappeared from sight.

Twilight didn't have time to think over what Crimson said. Wrath picked her up and brought her close to his face. "Tell me why I shouldn't take care of this problem right now?"

Tears formed in Twilight's eyes as she stared into Wrath's. They were Coal's eyes, but they were so hateful. She brought her hooves to her face and wiped away her tears as new ones formed. They just wouldn't stop as her cries continued. Seeing Coal in this way was just too much, and she couldn't take it. "Please...please, Coal. I-I love you! Please don't do this! *sob* I'm begging you..."

"I don't believe you, Twilight. You'll say anything to make me listen." Twilight stopped wiping her tears for a moment to reach out for Wrath's face. Her hooves were wet from the tears as she gently ran them over him. "T-twilight..."

Wrath appeared to soften for a moment, but Hate called out from behind him. "Are you really listening to the bitch!? Just fucking kill her!"

"..."

Twilight looked up into Wrath's eyes once more...they...they looked almost normal. He set Twilight down, and walked over to the fountain. He took a seat while putting his hands over his face as he leaned forward. The others looked at him like he was crazy. Hate was particularly stunned, but he couldn't be kept silent.

"THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING, WRATH!?"

Through his hands he responded, but something was clearly different. "It's over guys. We failed..."

"What are you talking about!? You are in control! Just do what you do best! Get fucking angry!"

Wrath shook his head and let out a long sigh. "Want to know something, Hate? Repressed anger is only strong the longer it is repressed. Once it is spent, or gone...I'm left with nothing." Twilight stared at Wrath in disbelief as he pointed overhead at Will. "Disrupt the magic containing him, and everything will go back to normal."

Twilight didn't need to hear another word. She charged her magic and fired it at the chained form of Will. Hate screamed out and tried to disrupt the magic, but Wrath pulled him back down.

"It was fun, but we aren't meant to control this place. We just aren't who Host is meant to be."

The magic connected with a blinding flash. A wave of incredible magic was sent in all directions as the world began crumbling around them. From within the center of the flash, Will stepped out looking completely calm. He pointed a finger at each of the seven in turn, and with a flick sent them flying elsewhere deeper in the mental plane. All were sent, except for Hate and Wrath. Before Will moved onto them, he pointed into the mess of mazes, and flicked his fingers towards himself. Crimson came flying his way, while at the same time Lust was sent screaming further away.

Will set Crimson down on the ground, and she immediately ran over to Twilight.

Despite her anger at Crimson for all she had done, Twilight felt some pity for her. Crimson was shaking, but didn't look scarred. "Did...did Lust..."

"N-No, b-b-but h-h-he got v-v-very close!"

Will cleared his throat while looking to Wrath and Hate.

Hate's eyes were burning as he stared down at Wrath. "Why!? Why did you do this!?"

"Heh...cause I'm not angry anymore."

"BULLSHIT! YOU'RE WRATH! YOU'RE THE EMBODIMENT OF ANGER!"

"I feel bad for Host. He has a lot of hate to share it seems."

"Enough. The two of you have had your time, and now it is time for Host's return." Will flicked Hate across the forehead which dissipated him immediately. The sound of walls falling, and

various booms could be heard throughout the mental plane. It was being reformed, and the girls needed to get out soon. Yet...they were to enthralled with Will and Wrath.

"It's time for you to go back into your cage, Wrath. You won't be running on empty for long."

"I know, but...it's kind of nice, ya know? Not being angry for once..." Wrath looked over to Twilight, and gave her a smile that made her eyes water once more. It was Coal...nothing more, nothing less. "Thanks, Twilight."

Will clasped his hands together which caused Crimson's and Twilight's vision to fail them momentarily. When they could see again, they found themselves back in the same room.

Coal was unconscious with Dash atop him. She had accidently fallen asleep in her comfort, and Pine was passed out as well. His breathing was somewhat ragged, but other than that he wasn't showing many signs of suffering.

Twilight looked to Crimson who just walked over to Pine, and crawled under him. She looked over to Twilight for a moment before burying her face into his coat. Twilight kept her word, and gave Pine a small dose of the purple potion. He screamed out as his body was being restored, but he never returned to the waking world. Of that, Crimson was thankful for.

A letter appeared in Twilight's hooves shortly after Crimson fell asleep as well, and Twilight sighed as she read it. Apparently there was an emergency situation at Canterlot. Celestia sent word for guards from the closest towns to assist Twilight. Celestia herself would arrive after she calmed her sister.

Twilight once more looked around the room at all of the unconscious ponies and Coal. She couldn't help it anymore, and curled up next to Coal as fatigue washed over her. Twilight's eyes grew heavy, and she fell asleep.

* * * *

Author's notes: That flipping awesome picture was done by inoeitall, who also did the cover image. He also writes Not the Afterlife I Signed Up For which is an awesome damn story! Check him out if you haven't already!

Now then...HOO-AH! FINALLY DONE WITH THIS BEAST! I'm sure a lot of you were expecting something entirely different, but I can't be having you guys predicting this stuff, now can I? Regardless, I hope everyone had good fun with this, and I'll see you guys next time!

Note: I may take a day or so off. I'm not 100% on that yet, but I'll admit to being pretty damn worn out!

[Chapters 91-120](#)

[Chapters 151-180](#)