

Chapter X

I saw the light and heard the bang, and the only thing I could think of as my senses were overloaded was: *Since when did they have flash-bangs here?*

It was disorienting, sure, but as the light and sound washed over me, I felt a pain in my head, and the words **compensating for sensory overload** flash briefly in front of my eyes in Krin. In an instant it was over, leaving me blinking like an owl in the aftermath and staring dumbly at what was before me.

The guard that had brought Evening that note was gone, and in his place stood something that vaguely resembled a pony. It was shorter than Evening, though it looked like it was far beefier and meaner. Its whole body was covered in shiny black chitin, except for its back, where the chitin formed some kind of shell that was a deep teal color. Its eyes were also teal and lacked any kind of iris or pupil, giving me a sick sense of déjà vu, since its eyes reminded me of my own. Its gossamer wings were covered in holes, as were its legs, giving it an alien, insectoid vibe that set off *all* the phobias percolating in my brain. Along its neck I could see a set of frills, and on the top of its head sat a short, curved horn. Its fangs were long and sharp, which only added to the menace that its current expression was trying to convey.

However, as menacing as it looked, it *also* looked confused. A quick glance around told me why that was.

Everyone else was out cold, their limp, four-legged bodies splayed out where they had once been standing or, in Rainbow's case, sitting. They weren't dead, thank goodness, since they were still breathing. However, whatever had happened seemed to have had a more pronounced effect on them, leaving me relatively unscathed. Probably some kind of stun spell, set to go off when that scroll was opened.

Never once had I *ever* thanked the crazy a-holes that kidnapped me and turned me into what I was. However, for a brief moment I was tempted to do just that.

All of this I processed in a matter of nanoseconds as the supercomputer lodged in my brain accelerated my perception of time, allowing me to formulate a plan. It wasn't clear whether or not this thing was powerful, but I wasn't willing to take a gamble on it. Ever since I found out that magic was real here, I decided to take everything I saw at face value, and what I saw in this thing *screamed* danger. It was unlikely that it was here for the others, though. I had seen the look in its eye before, and I could see the look in its eye *now*, as well as the glow emanating from its horn. It wanted *me*, and I doubt that a little thing like me being conscious was going to change that.

I was at a severe disadvantage, however. I couldn't talk to this thing or reason with this thing, I was tired, and on top of that *my* magical abilities more or less revolved around electronic

beeping things. A quick extension of my consciousness revealed that, no, this thing had no computers in its head, which was both a blessing and a curse: a blessing because it meant that it *probably* wasn't a courtesy call from my ex-employers, but a curse because it meant that it was most likely a native to this planet and still *plenty* dangerous, seeing as how it was most likely quite versed in magic and its use in killing things.

My options were limited. I might have been able to take this thing out here and now, but that might put the others at risk. I didn't know what this thing was capable of, and it was entirely possible that it would explode itself before letting itself get captured. I briefly considered killing it, but threw that out of the window before it had even finished forming. This wasn't *my* planet, and I had already made a promise to myself about the people who lived here.

No, it was a far better option to run, call for help, and hope the guards got here quickly. With any luck, the creature would chase me, leaving the others relatively safe.

With my decision made, I allowed my perception of time to return to normal again. As the creature's horn began to charge, I quickly hooked my fingers underneath my tray and flipped it at the monster in front of me with all my strength. Without even looking to see if my move had connected, I sprang to my feet, and bolted for the door. It must have dodged, though, because as I crossed the threshold for the door, I heard a sound similar to a Star Trek phaser, and felt a pain shoot up my left arm. Whatever it was that hit me threw me with enough force to knock me to the floor, but I didn't let that stop me for a second.

As I scrambled back to my feet and out of the way of another laser, I briefly noted the two guards outside my room. They both appeared to be sleeping, which explained why they hadn't immediately burst into the room the moment the magical flash-bang had gone off. They were probably under a similar, yet quieter spell that my friends inside the room were under, and were going to be of no help in the near future.

Without another thought towards them, I righted myself and sprinted down the hall, clutching my bruised and possibly dislocated arm to keep it from moving. Before I had made it twenty feet, though, I heard the thing behind me charge and fire again. On pure instinct and adrenaline, I jumped. Not as high as I could go, which would have put my head straight through the ceiling, but high enough for me to lunge into a dive that had me pass right over the harmful green beam of energy. *Those magic rays must move slower than light. Good to know*, I thought as I watched the energy pass harmlessly underneath me and strike the wall down the corridor.

I reached out with my undamaged hand and, with a grunt, used it to turn my lunge into a roll, allowing me to dodge another shot that had been aimed at where the creature had thought my head would end up. As I got up, I reached out and grabbed hold of the corner at the end of the hall, chancing a glance right before I ducked down the right-hand passage. The creature had disappeared, or, rather, I figured out that it had changed shape again, because I wasn't

completely thick. It had retaken its old unicorn soldier guise, and it was currently charging me as it readied its horn for another attack.

“Okay, buddy. You want me? Come and get me,” I said as I charged down the corridor in front of me.

* * *

“Look, all I’m saying is that maybe you should give her some space,” Private Stout Heart told his friend.

Corporal High Wind rubbed the back of his head uncertainly. “I dunno, doesn’t that sound like I’m giving up on us? Honey Dew means a lot to me, and I don’t want her to feel like I’m giving her the cold shoulder or anything...”

Private Heart gave his friend a reassuring smile and put a hoof on his withers. “Wind, she’ll be *more* upset if you smother her. Let her make up her *own* mind. If she’s half the mare you say she is, she’ll be the one to close that distance.”

“Well... if you’re-” Corporal Wind started to say, but stopped when they heard what sounded like an explosion.

“What in the hay was that!?” Private Heart asked in alarm.

“I don’t know, but it sounded like it came from this way. Private Foot, you stay here and keep the checkpoint. Heart and I will-”

Before the corporal could finish, their question was answered when the alien who inhabited this wing came barreling around the corner. One of its arms was hanging limply at its side, while the other held it still, so it wouldn’t cause the monster to lose its balance as it ran. On its face wasn’t an expression of pain, but of grim determination.

Before any of the soldiers at the checkpoint could even form coherent thought, an order cut through the fog of their confusion, and gave them the whole picture in as few sentences as possible.

“He’s having one of his flashbacks! Stop him before he hurts anyone else!!”

Private Heart felt his insides go cold at that. *I knew something like this was going to happen!* Without even fully processing what he was doing, the private leapt forward, intent on stopping the creature for good.

Private Heart heard a shout from somewhere behind him, but he ignored it. He had a duty to perform, and no one was going to stop him. Right before he reached the monster, he reared up on his hind legs and punched out with his right foreleg at the monster's knee.

If things had gone according to plan, his strike would have punched right through the bone, shattering the creature's leg and crippling it. A simple stomp afterwards while it was writhing in pain, and all of Equestria's troubles would have been over.

Unfortunately, he had misjudged the alien's reflexes.

Quicker than his eye could follow, the creature reached out, planted its still functioning arm on the top of Private Heart's head, and cartwheeled straight over Private Heart's punch.

Without anything to take the force of the blow, Private Heart overbalanced and fell to his stomach, aided along his way by the none-too-gentle shove from the alien as it dismounted. Private Heart heard shouts and hoofbeats as his fellow guards chased after the rampaging monster, but Heart couldn't get up to help. At first, he thought it was because he had been winded by the fall, but that assumption was quickly thrown away when he noticed his forelegs were glowing a eerie, sickly green.

"Sorry about this, soldier, but I need a new disguise," a voice buzzed in his ear. Private Heart saw a flash of green, felt himself sinking, then everything went black.

Right before unconsciousness took him, he had just enough presence of mind to realize that he had been duped by a changeling.

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Shapeshifters. Of COURSE they have shapeshifters. Why would I expect anything else from a planet with minotaurs, griffons, and unicorns that can control the freaking sun? Just throw in a vampire or a mummy, and we've got the whole mythological CAST!

What I *said*, though, was: "Crap. Crap. Crap. Crap. Crap."

I didn't have a whole lot of options open to me at the moment. My lack of ability to speak the language was going to be the death of me. The shapeshifter had dashed my hopes for help in what sounded like two sentences, and I wasn't confident enough in my fluency to tell them what happened. My only chance *now* was to find someplace to hole up until one of the Princesses found me, or to stumble upon someone I knew by complete accident.

Unfortunately, it looked like my wild escape attempt had carried me right out of the areas I recognized; I had no idea where I was.

That was bad. At any moment, I could turn down a dead end and get trapped, and while the soldiers *probably* wouldn't try to hurt me, the shapeshifter would have a clear opportunity to finish me while I was being corralled. It would probably get caught or killed in the process, but assassins only *sometimes* cared about that kind of thing. Usually, their priorities were kill the target first, with everything that *didn't* involve the target a distant second.

That is, *if* it was an assassin. It had already shown that it wanted to *capture* me, but I was quite certain that it would gladly murder me rather than let me stay with the ponies. No, I needed to find someone I knew and fast.

While I was busy trying to figure a way out of this, I made a random left turn and nearly barreled right over someone. It was another stallion, though this one wasn't a soldier. His blond hair was extremely well groomed, and he seemed to have a taste in expensive clothing. I barely managed to register the compass rose on his flank, but that wasn't *nearly* as important as the look of abject terror on his face. Before I could think of anything to say or do, the stallion let out what he must have thought was a manly shout, but in reality was more akin to the sound of a scared schoolgirl.

I didn't have time to deal with him, so I performed the same cartwheel trick I pulled with that Dirt Pony stallion a few minutes back, my feet running along the ceiling as I kept my momentum going.

I was running out of steam, though, and as I left the freaked out pony in the dust, I slowed down to a more manageable jog as I tried to think of what to do.

A shout from behind destroyed that thought, and as quick as I could, I dashed forward and turned a corner. My luck seemed to turn as I spotted a doorway. Doors meant rooms, which meant I could hole up for a time, which meant I could control whether or not the shapeshifter had direct access to me. As soon as they knew I had gone to ground, they'd call in the Princesses to get this thing sorted out.

As quick as a whip, I turned and shoved my way through. I briefly noted that these doors seemed to not have handles, and instead swung freely, but I didn't think to figure out why that was until I was already past them.

As soon as I entered, I noticed the cooking implements and the various Ponies dressed in chef toques and waiter outfits. *Come on! Now it's just **blatant** how much they developed like us!* I thought as the ponies began to scream.

I ignored them, though, vaulting over counters and ducking under pots and pans as everyone in the room ran. *Despite these people having such powerful potential, they're surprisingly skittish,* I thought as I pushed open the pantry door and shut myself inside.

I took a second to catch my breath, my right shoulder and forehead pressed up against the door as I rubbed my aching, dislocated left shoulder. *I can wait this out*, I thought as I heard voices and hoof sounds on the other side of the door. *All I need to do is keep this door closed until Sun or Moon get here. They'll sort this out, we can catch the assassin, then get the others the medical attention they need.*

I silently prayed that the assassin hadn't decided to go back and kill those that had seen its natural form. If anything, that would have been *worse* than if it had flat out killed me; I don't think I could continue living with myself if it had gone back and hurt my friends.

My thinking was cut short, though, as my sharp ears picked up a sound that was not unlike the sound of a small mouse getting stepped on right behind me. I turned around quickly to see a rather petite yellow pegasus mare with purple hair. Her eyes wide with terror, and her body was shaking like a leaf. *Aw... that's just great... Now it looks like I'm holding a hostage.*

I tried to shush her, to at *least* make it so that she didn't start screaming in this confined space, but I didn't have very high hopes for anything like that happening. Much to my surprise, and despite the fact that I was a scary space alien and we didn't have a language in common, she *actually* quieted down and even laid down on her belly in a submissive fashion. She still looked like she was about to wet herself, but at least she wasn't about to scream about how the monster was going to eat her.

With my worries about her satisfied, I kneeled down and pressed my face to the pantry keyhole. I needed to find out how far along they are in this situation, and I wasn't going to learn *anything* by just listening to their incomprehensible gobbledygook that I only knew a handful of words in.

I was disappointed, though, because from my position, all I really could see was a whole lot of counters and the tops of a few foreheads. Not a lot of information, but at least it let me know that they weren't about to break down the door S.W.A.T. team style. They *might* have been planning to teleport in, but seeing as how these were my *allies*, I rather doubted that.

Well, *mostly* my allies. One of them could have been a shapeshifter. In fact, quite a few could have been shapeshifters. But since this was the *pony's* land, the chance of them *all* being shapeshifters was actually quite low. *I mean, if this was shapeshifter land, they hardly need to disguise with me. I'm an alien. It's already assumed that my standard of beauty is going to be different, so why hide that you're a shapeshifter?*

This was, of course, all still based on the assumption that I wasn't clinically insane and busy chewing the walls of a padded room back home. Man, if it turned out that *that* was the case, I was going to be so freaking mad...

*Well, technically that would mean you're **already** mad, but that's not the point,* I thought to myself, completely missing the light humming sound that was coming from behind me.

As I continued to watch, I suddenly became aware that this pantry had grown uncomfortably hot. I leaned back a bit, only to discover that, near the ground, small tufts of purple fire had appeared around me in a semicircle.

Panic set into my brain, and I tried to turn around to figure out what was happening, but I was foiled in this attempt by the fact that my feet seemed to be stuck to the floor.

Not just stuck, I seemed to be *sinking* into the stone, all while the purple flames around me grew higher and higher.

"Help! No, I'm freaking serious, get in here guys! Some weird magic bullcrap is happening in here!" I was trying to draw the ponies outside to my predicament, but I had a terrible feeling that they weren't going to make it in time, or at all. As I sunk lower and lower, I turned my head around to try and see how my roommate was reacting to this predicament, though, as it turned out, I shouldn't have bothered.

She was the freaking *cause* of it.

The mare was gone. In her place was another shapeshifter, though this one's natural look had a few distinct differences to the assassin's form. For instance, this one had luminescent pink eyes, and the shell on its back was a dark purple.

This one *also* had a look on its face that was more apologetic than contemptible.

Before I could say anything else, the floor completely swallowed the two of us up. Purple fire engulfed us, but it didn't hurt like I thought it would. Instead, I felt the familiar feeling of disorientation, letting me know that I was being teleported, and not burned alive.

As soon as the world came back into focus, I found that I could move my legs again. Without even thinking about it, I rolled to the right to avoid the laser I was sure was going to be aimed at my head and brought my claws to bear. It didn't come, but I was still ready for anything. "What... the... devil..." I started to say, but slowed down as I noticed what was in front of me, and that I *really* wasn't as ready as I thought I was.

The shapeshifter was still there, and we *had* teleported like I thought we had, it's just that we teleported somewhere where the shapeshifter had a *serious* homefield advantage.

Behind the shapeshifter were literally *thousands* of shapeshifters, each one could have *easily* have passed as a twin of the one in front of me. They were also freaking *everywhere*. On the walls, the ceiling, the floor, in the air. There were so many, in fact, that I couldn't even

figure out the general architecture or structure of the area we were in. What was worse, though, was that all of their luminescent pink eyes were focused on me, as if they were daring me to make a wrong move.

“Uh... Hi?” I said as intelligently as I could.

Given my current circumstances, that was probably the best I could come up with, to be honest.

Before I could voice another concern, a thousand beams of light came at me from all directions. So many, in fact, that the world around me looked like nothing short of a wall of bright, glowing purple. Time seemed to slow, and my eyes instantly picked out all the trajectories that every beam would follow. Contained in that second, I could see every conceivable move I could make, every dodge, roll and jump, and in that instant, I knew one thing.

I was royally boned.

* * *

Skitter winced as the Promethean fell, his strong, upright posture becoming limp and battered as spell after spell struck him, tossing him like a rag doll.

“*Stop!*” a commanding voice called out over the sounds of horn charging and spell impacting stone and flesh. Instantly the sounds died down, and Skitter could *feel* the hooves of the thousands of changelings behind her move to make room for the Queen Mother.

Not looking, Skitter turned and went straight into a bow so low that her face was pressed into the floor. “Mother Titania, I am so sorry for-”

“Why is the Promethean here?” The Changeling Queen asked. Skitter couldn't see her face, but her voice was dripping with disappointment.

“I’m sorry, My Queen, but I felt that I had no other option. Chrysalis' assassin had already penetrated the ranks of the Ponies. Had I not acted, the promethean would most likely be dead now.”

Skitter heard a sigh, then the sound of hooves as her Queen moved past her. “Very well... though this will only make life harder for us in the long run.” Skitter lifted her head, barely daring to believe that she had somehow made it through that mess without facing an execution or banishment.

Her Queen was moving towards the limp form of the Promethean. His skin had turned a nasty shade of purple, and his shoulder *really* looked like it needed medical attention, but he was still breathing. The Queen stared at him for the longest time, before finally muttering something under her breath, something so faint that only Skitter could hear. "So this is what you look like?"

She stared at him for a bit longer, before shivering and turning away. "Take him to the holding pods, and make *certain* he stays there. We cannot have him rampaging through the hive before he is returned to the Equestrians." As if only waiting for her to give the word, four changelings leaped forwards and began to wrap up the promethean in a cocoon produced from the secretions from their mouths. Once he was ready for transport, one of them hooked his limbs around the promethean's upper body, while another changeling grabbed the legs. Once they were sure that they weren't about to drop the promethean, they began to fly him up to where Skitter knew the holding pods were.

"Skitter!"

Skitter immediately sidled up to her Queen and bowed again. "Yes, Your Highness?"

"I want you to take a letter that I will draft to the Princesses of Equestria. When it is ready, I will give you further instructions, but until then, you should get something to eat and prepare yourself for the journey."

"Yes, my Queen." Without another word, Skitter took off to follow after where her fellows had taken the promethean.

As she left, though, her ears managed to pick up one more thing. Something she was pretty sure that the queen intended to keep to herself. "I only hope the Sun and Moon will be in a forgiving mood..."