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Through the evening air, far above the forests of the Equestrian wilderness, a cloud of many black bodies approached. The horde was silent but for the buzzing of transparent wings. Shiny carapaces, hole-marked hooves, and jagged ridges running down their spines. Small fangs and gleaming blue eyes were reflected on each drone's expression. At the head, a taller, more elegant figure led the sector. She was marked by a glossy blue helmet and chestplate, as well as intelligent eyes that periodically scanned the drones. She barked an order and the changelings shifted, collapsing into rows and columns that had slowly deteriorated as the day went on.

The light breeze, the open air, and the expansive vistas had entertained drone 12-1557 for some amount of time. There was something satisfying about travelling, being in the open air after being confined inside the Hive for weeks on end. He'd missed the feeling of wind whistling by his ridges.

If only the sun wasn't so smotheringly hot. The beating rays had been sinking into his exoskeleton for hours, constantly, not a cloud in sight. He felt like a crayfish boiled in its own shell.

A small, agile drone darted up to the commander, quickly whispering information. She gave a curt nod, then turned towards the swarm. "Descend to the forest. Avoid the path. Stay out of sight."

Nimble, the insects fell upon the trees and disappeared into the canopy. As soon as the last black body was out of sight, a cluster of pegasi appeared over the horizon. They darted about and laughed, calling down to other ponies trudging along a dirt path.

12-1557, on the far edge of the formation, concentrated singlemindedly on the ground below and the flapping of his wings. He could see the dirt road; he would land just to the left of it, hidden in the undergrowth. The earth approached quickly. A shift in weight, a tilted wing. Then, a flash of panic as his body went a little too far. Wings wobbling, his legs plowed into the dirt and he cannonballed into the drones in front of him.

"Watch it!" a drone hissed, shoving him away with a hind leg.

"Kitty can't control his tiny wings," someone sneered under his breath.

“Shut up,” snapped 1557, scrambling to get back into formation without Commander Lacewing noticing. He breathed out in exasperation; he wasn’t going to be able to get the sediment out of his leg holes for *days*.

Before he could reach his spot, a hard kick sent him stumbling to his side. He yelped as his hoof caught on a root. There was a glimpse of a fanged sneer before he tripped face-first out onto the path.

There were two ponies emerging around a bend in the road. They were going to see him! He immediately squeezed his eyes shut, allowing a subtle shimmer of green flame to pass over his body. Then, instead of a severely out-of-place changeling, a scrawny brown earth pony was awkwardly sprawled out on the ground.

“You okay there?”

1557 jumped up onto his feet, nearly tripping over the unaccustomed weight of his new body. He greeted the travellers with an uneasy grin. “Fine! I’m fine, thanks.” He gave a quick glance into the trees where the changelings were hiding, then turned to smile widely at the ponies.

The smaller one, a black earth pony carrying a hefty saddlebag, regarded the disguised drone with a suspicious look. “What are you doing out here in Oakwood Forest?” he asked.

Why’s it your business? 1557 wanted to say. “Ohhh just...” he mumbled quietly. “...passing through to Canterlot.” He hurried to continue before they could question him more. “How about you?”

“Passing through?” his interrogator squinted as if he could peer into the changeling’s mind. “From where? This way only leads to the Hive.”

1557’s eyebrows flew up. He suppressed his panic, trying to remain calm. “The -- haha, the what?”

His mind was racing, his heartbeat immediately astronomical. They would have to detain these ponies. No one in Equestria was supposed to know about the Hive. There were five hundred drones in his sector, so they could easily catch them. What if the pegasi were faster? Or what if someone heard?

“The legendary Oakwood beehive!” drawled the other pony, an orange mare. “The richest source of natural magic honey in all of Equestria.”

"It's massive," interjected a yellow pegasus with a high-pitched voice, swooping down and stretching out her hooves to demonstrate.

All of the pressure disappeared at a moment. "Oh!" exclaimed the disguised drone. "Y-yes, of course, I wanted to see if the legends were true. The Oakwood beehive." 1557 crossed his forelegs, smiling confidently. He wasn't sure where to direct his eyes to seem natural. Staring at their faces felt wrong. He suddenly noticed bee-related cutie marks adorning each of their flanks.

"I'm Honeycomb," said the mare, taking 1557's hoof and shaking it lazily. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

There was a pause. "Cornbread," he responded, naming the first food he thought of. The black earth pony narrowed his eyes, but continued down the path without questioning him.

"Why don't you have a cutie mark?" asked the pegasus, eyes wide. The changeling inwardly cursed. He always forgot the cutie mark.

"Zap! Don't be rude," reprimanded Honeycomb. "I apologize, Zap doesn't have a lick of sense about her."

The yellow pegasus shrugged. "I was just asking."

With a sigh, Honeycomb looked up at the sun. "Come on, sweetie, we'd better keep moving. If we're not there by sundown my father will have a thing or two to say about it." With a quick nod, the yellow mare flew up to join the other pegasi.

"Hope to see you again, Cornbread," added the congenial mare, plodding along the trail.

"Uh, you too, Honeycomb."

1557 stared after her for a moment, then hurried the other direction. Once he was around the bend, he could duck back into the cool shelter of the trees.

"Hey!"

With a yelp, the disguised changeling jumped and spun, nearly lashing out. "What?"

"So why don't you have a cutie mark?" Zap hissed, hanging in the air, glancing backwards to check that Honeycomb wasn't looking.

"I -- it -- why do you care?" With an irritated turn of his head, 1557 marched onward.

Zap stared confusedly at his retreating figure for a long moment, then darted back to the rest of the travellers. "Fine then, Mr. Bread!"

The drone looked over his shoulder. The pegasus was out of sight. Immediately, he raced into the forest, only to screech quickly to a halt. Commander Lacewing stood there, head raised regally, ice-cold eyes glaring right through to his bones. 1557 shrank. He didn't remember her being so tall.

"Unmask."

1557 quickly reverted to his natural form.

"Identify."

"Drone -" he swallowed, then spoke louder. "Drone 2-1557"

The icy silence stretched until the changeling felt like a statue.

"Get back in formation," she hissed. "When we return to the Hive, report to my office immediately." The "or else" was unspoken. She turned and stalked off, shouting an order to the regiment. As one, the body took off from the forest floor.

1557 hurried back into position, painfully aware of the other changelings' gazes.

"You're fucked now, Kit," smirked a drone behind him.

Fuming, 1557 stayed silent. Whoever had pushed him out onto the road, he was going to *murder* them.

Immediately, the nagging part of his mind, the dozens of voices from his regiment, reminded him that any one of the other drones could overpower his scrawny frame. Actually, he considered, any drone *except* 12-0132, who would probably lose in a fight with Fluttershy. The miserable thing had spent half a year in a Canterlot prison before being rescued, and now he couldn't string a sentence together without breaking into sobs. The pony rulers were sick bastards.

What kind of luck was this anyways? On the *one* time he was included on a military mission, he got in trouble with the commander. They were going to decommission him forever. He was going to spend the rest of his terrible, insignificant life cleaning out larvae pods.

The sun had long set by the time the horde reached their destination. The diminutive drone had spent the rest of the time pointedly trying to ignore any thoughts about his return to the Hive, instead reviewing their briefing on Canterlot.

He flicked his ears. There was someone whispering nearby, nearly inaudible over the buzzing of a thousand translucent wings.

"Is that it?"

"Looks like it!"

"It better be. My wings are going to drop off...."

1557 followed their gaze. Off in the distance, partially veiled by fog, a hint of white stone and a gleam of polished windows.

"Halt!" It was the commander, voice cutting through the air like a knife.

Silently, the changelings slowed to a hover.

"Descend!"

Another massive movement as the swarm dropped to the ground, disappearing below the canopy.

They were in a large clearing: a patch of meadow in the middle of the forest, vegetation pounded down by thousands of hooves. A series of ramshackle buildings lined the edge, little more than sheet metal and nails. A host of changelings, hundreds, maybe over a thousand, already milled around the area. 1557's eyes widened.

"Camp C3!" announced Lacewing, marching down the rows of changelings. "Listen up, insects. You may not be at the Hive, but you are still part of Her Majesty Queen Chrysalis' army. Misconduct will not be allowed. You may not leave the clearing without permission from me or a subordinate officer. Do NOT fly higher than the tree line." She took a moment to glare at the troops. Her eyes trailed past 1557, who remained still, eyes forward, posture perfect. "Your barracks are organized by unit. Operations begin at sunrise tomorrow. Sector four, dismissed!"

Soon 1557 found out that the insides of the barracks were no more attractive than the outside. A series of cots, some benches, a table. Someone had started a game of cards already, but 1557 made a face -- no one he wanted to interact with.

He saw 12-1566 guffawing over a lucky bluff. His friends knew him as Scarab. If anyone in their unit was cruel enough to kick him out onto the path, it was him. It was also that *cockroach* who came up with the name Kitten, way back when they were hatchlings. His name itself was an insult. What a joke.

Before the anger bubbling inside of him could overflow, 1557 turned away from Scarab and stalked away. He dramatically himself flopped down onto the bedding, regretting it immediately afterward as it felt like a sheet pulled over a slab of wood. Better to distract himself. Street by street, he began to review the layout of Canterlot city under his breath, which he had memorized in preparation of the mission.

It was only an hour or two before the activity began to die down. Lying on his back, having been staring at the ceiling, 1557 watched a messenger retrieve 12-1550 for the night watch. Beetle was his name. Their unit leader. He'd been driving them in relentless training for months, but compared to other officers, he was nearly laid-back. It was no secret that 1557's unit was one of the weakest.

He was glad that guard duty wasn't given to normal drones. It would be cold, lonely, and, to be honest, pointless. The commanders had already taken pains to make sure Camp C3 was protected by the strongest available disguise charm. Unicorn magic was never totally trustworthy, however. Similar charms had been used on each of the four sectors chosen for the Canterlot invasion, but whenever a flying traveller neared they still descended to hide among the trees. Two thousand changelings, flown to the Equestrian capital. Invisible.

He heard a rustling as someone settled down on the cot beside his. "Hey, Kit."

1557 rolled over. "Hey Antennae."

Antennae, drone 12-1558, was a lanky changeling that looked like he would be knocked over by a stiff breeze.

"Tough luck out in the forest today."

1557 didn't respond for a moment. He had nearly managed to forget about it.

"Hey, don't sweat it." Ant folded his legs, getting into position to sleep. "Even Lacewing has to be impressed by that transformation."

1557 snorted. "Lacewing doesn't have to be impressed by anything. I could turn into the sun tyrant and she wouldn't blink an eye."

Ant shrugged. "Who was that brown pony, anyways?"

"Hm? Cornbread? I made him up."

Antennae raised an eye ridge. "Never seen him before?"

"Nope."

His friend gave a low whistle. "That's some high-order shapeshifting there."

"I forgot the cutie mark," 1557 grumbled.

Shapeshifting was somewhat limited in its scope. It was also easiest to turn into a pony that was standing right in front of you, and harder to do it by memory. Often, drones would forget small details or use the wrong colors. Becoming a completely original pony, without a real-life reference? To 1557 the skill was a small, indulgent pride. It didn't really have practical applications, however, and the higher-ups refused to acknowledge the talent. The other factor was size and shape. Altering your body mass significantly was near impossible, though it was certainly not unheard of.

In a moment, the lanterns were blown out. Then, it was silent.

1557 rolled back in the other direction. Tomorrow would be a new day. Perhaps a better one.

A sudden realization made him shiver as he stared at the wall. They were actually here. The camp. Five miles due east of the enemy's capital city. One hour's march away from Canterlot, and one hour from where the Queen was working to ensure an endless supply of love from the pony world. The thought of it made his excitement bubble up once more. He'd be in deep manure when they returned home, but for now, he was part of the changeling army. Maybe they wouldn't even need to return home. Maybe they could just stay and take over the ponies' buildings.

He let a small grin onto face, sure that no one would see. Tomorrow was the invasion of Canterlot.

2

Loud, rhythmic crashes reverberated through the city of Canterlot. High above, eye ridges furrowed in determination, 12-1557 smashed his shoulder once again onto the pink barrier. His carapace would be scratched and dented, but it hardly mattered. Due to the adrenaline, he didn't even feel the jar of impact. Beetle shouted hoarsely, keeping the changelings of his unit in tempo. The barrier was quivering with every blow. It wouldn't last long under the weight of a thousand bodies.

He glanced at a drone toiling at his side. The worker's grin was maniacal, eyes set on the streets below. Frantic ponies dashed to and fro over the cobblestone, pegasi zipping through the air. Doors slammed and locks turned. He turned his attention to the grand pony palace; behind the luminescent stained glass windows he knew stood his Queen, disguised as Princess Mi Amore Cadenza, about to be wed to the captain of the royal guard. The guise would be over soon. 1557 allowed a sneer to cross his face as well. The plan was working flawlessly, the shield was slowly cracking, and soon the city was going to be theirs. The sun tyrant was nothing compared to the changeling empire!

A splash of color caught his eyes. The bearers of the Elements of Harmony! 1557 threw himself at the barrier with new fervor.

As his shell hit the magical obstruction one last time, he felt it shake. A spiderweb of cracks, racing across the surface. With a massive roar, the barrier shattered, disappearing like dew into the air.

"Attack!"

With a battle cry, 1557 launched himself down towards the city. Around him he was aware of meteors of green flame shooting into the streets, while a veritable swarm of changelings descended like locusts. He gave up on flapping, allowing gravity to pull him faster and faster downward.

"Sector four, to me!" roared Commander Lacewing. Eagerly, 1557 spread his wings, banking hard to follow her. He noticed vaguely the rest of the sector falling into formation. Below, the Elements dashed headlong down the road.

The commander touched down at the top of a staircase, raising her head disdainfully. The changelings, one by one, touched down behind her. In the heat of the moment

1557 neglected technique, allowing his body to slam onto the pavement and shatter the stone. Chitin damage was the last thing on his mind.

“Unit leaders!” she shouted. “Deal with these vermin and deliver them to the keep. Alive.” With a powerful flap of her wings, she took to the air and soared toward Queen Chrysalis’ new throne.

1557 stood, blood pumping, legs tense. The rest of Sector 4 was silent, ready for action.

Twilight Sparkle emerged from the top of the steps, eyes widening as she skidded to a halt. The rest of the Element bearers barreled into her, mouths falling open as they faced the horde of sneering, pony-sized insects. Heads turned wildly, taking in the crowd. The Element of Kindness cowered behind the others.

“Looks like we're gonna have to do this the hard way!” The Element of Loyalty smacked her hooves together, glaring at the drones. Leaping past her friends, she dashed forward, only to be confronted by a perfect mirror image of herself.

“Wha?” Rainbow Dash slowed to a standstill and turned her head in confusion.

With a nasty snarl, the changeling gave the pegasus a powerful blow and sent her sprawling back into the rest of the elements.

The sky-blue pony shook her head in disbelief. “How did you...?”

“They’re changelings, remember?” the Element of Magic breathed.

“They’re changelings, remember?” mocked a posse of drones, wearing identical leering unicorn faces.

The drones closed in, circling around the frightened ponies. One after the other they erupted in green flame, exposing a different copy of the six ponies each time. 1557 slinked along the street, concentrating hard to change first into the white unicorn, then the yellow pegasus, then back to his natural, underweight form. He was ready for anything. A smirk crossed his face; there was some dark satisfaction in plastering an evil grin on the Element of Kindness’ expression.

Twilight Sparkle spoke up again. “Don’t let them distract you! We have to get to the Elements of Harmony. They’re our only hope.” The six ponies lowered their heads on the leader’s urging, preparing to charge. 1557 felt like laughing aloud. What were they going to do? Single-handedly defeat five hundred trained changeling drones?

He lowered his head as well, pawing at the floor. He could feel the urge to beat and batter in his hooves, a yearning for violence that at that moment occupied his every thought. It was a hatred poured into his heart since the day that their unit, fresh out of the nursery hollows, was flown to visit a blind old drone who had been banished from the Hive. The foals from the nearby town had laughed at him, called him names, teased him with morsels of food that he felt for pitifully across the dirt. Parents, exclaiming in disgust, had pulled their children away from the shack. *Stay away from that thing*, they said. *Changelings are insects. Pests. They're disgusting and untrustworthy.* The ponies had spit at him before marching away.

The day after: Chrysalis, standing at the head of the grand hall, swore solemnly to all of generation twelve that injustice would be defeated. She promised a land of liberty and prosperity, where no grub would go hungry for weeks without love; a land where changelings could live their lives in peace, a land where no drone had to risk their lives to steal what morsels they could from the fringes of pony society. A vision worth fighting for. He'd never forgotten the passion in their ruler's voice that day.

The bearers charged. Springing off his hind legs with tremendous power, 12-1557 lunged headlong into the conflict.

Before he even hit the ground, a pink body hurtled into him, leg pounding harshly on his chestplate before rebounding off. With a raging hiss, 1557 leaped after her, disappearing into a cloud of dust and wind. A tornado of bodies flew around him, but his sights narrowed on the bright coat of the Element of Laughter. With lashes of hooves and periodic exclamations of "*hiyah!*", she burst through a wall of glaring Applejacks and rolled out into a small opening.

The disguised drone leapt in front of her, mustering the cruelest snarl he could. She gazed back, unfazed. This wouldn't do. In bursts of fire, he transformed into Generosity, low to the ground, Loyalty, posed to release a hail of blows, Kindness, floating menacingly over her head. In his rush of anger he hardly felt the strain of repeated transformations.

The Element of Laughter giggled, bouncing up and down. "Ooh! Ooh! Do me!"

1557 drew back, nonplussed. With a roll of his eyes, he transformed into the pink pony, forearms outstretched, putting on a wide smile in a sarcastic display.

Then without warning, he pounced, as quick as a snake. Somehow, Pinkie Pie had already leaped out of reach. He crashed aimlessly into the ground.

“Meh. I’ve seen better,” she proclaimed. Pulling the Element of Magic into her arms, she released a barrage of magic bolts into 1557 and the surrounding drones.

The focused purple ray was like a brand, a beam of fire that impacted with his midsection and sent him flying through the air. With a yelp, he slammed into a tree and slumped to the ground. His hind leg oozed with greenish-black ichor where the magic had blasted away chitin plates. He climbed unsteadily to his hooves, but the pain hit unexpectedly and his wobbling knees gave out. He clenched his teeth and a whimper escaped his lips.

“Kit?” A concerned voice, a familiar face. Antennae.

“Get a move on, Ant!” Scarab’s voice was less welcome as he shoved passed the lankier changeling. He gave a dismissive glance over 1557’s crumpled body. “Coward,” he snarled. “That’s barely a fucking flesh wound.” The burly drone launched himself into the conflict, leaping between flashes of magic from Twilight Sparkle’s horn.

Antennae bit his lip, peering at 1557 sympathetically. A part of the wounded drone rebelled. He didn’t need pity. He needed... he needed medical treatment.

Antennae turned and raced after Scarab, not sparing another word. 1557, with a shock, suddenly noticed a slow stream of ichor seeping down Antennae's body. An entire plate had been ripped off his side, revealing sticky and tender flesh soaked in the green fluid. Yet, as he watched, his friend disappeared into the tumult for more.

Drone 12-1557, inspired, struggled again upright. He felt dizzy, unfocused; there must have been some side effect of the magic blast. A new wave of agony radiated through him, but he stood anyways.

Basically his previous loyalty is overcome with an instinct for self-preservation and he just kinda runs away from the battlefield. Also, he feels delirious and ends up blacking out, but not before he notices someone about to exit a building and instinctively disguises himself as the first pony he thinks of. You know, because the training for “don’t ever let a pony see you out of disguise” was engraved in his head.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

- oOoOoOo -

1557's eyes flew open. Above him, a whitewashed ceiling. A strange, pungent scent in the air.

He flailed as he struggled to his feet. A constricting sheet was flung away from his body. Beneath him was a cushioned sofa, a pleasant shade of burgundy. A stocky green mare with an outrageously large hairdo was hurrying towards him.

Before he could react, a throbbing pain shot through his leg. With an exclamation, he collapsed back onto the cushions, cradling his wounded limb. Tears collected at the corner of his eyes as agony continued to spike through his body.

"Sweetie! Are you alright? No, don't move -"

1557 tried to snarl as the pony grew closer, but only a pitiful hiss escaped from his lips. He shut his mouth quickly. He was in disguise.

"Just lie back down, I'll get you some more medicine and painkillers...." The green pony fretted over him, retrieving the blanket and hurrying over to a small table with various ointments scattered on it. He caught sight of her cutie mark, an ornate comb and a ribbon.

The pain subsided long enough for 1557 to take decent stock of his surroundings. If he'd been given painkillers, they must be working. The green mare was the only other

inhabitant, busying herself across the room. The large pane windows were curtained, but he thought he could hear the cackling of changelings in the distance. The linoleum floor was checkered black and white. A long, tall mirror and a massive cluttered counter dominated most of one side of the room. Large, cushioned chairs faced them, all empty, but all in pristine condition. Obviously this situation called for stealth, not violence.

1557 blinked at his reflection. Yellow coat. Wings. Lustrous orange hair. Bright, innocent, blue eyes, welled up with tears. He immediately rubbed the tears off with his forelegs. So he was Zap. For some reason, she was the first pony to have come to mind.

He grimaced as he saw his wound. It looked even worse without the cover of an exoskeleton. Though it had clearly been wrapped at some point, the bindings were only rags now. Blood and flesh looked so very alien on his body; the liquid was so *bright*.

The mare was returning, losing bandages on the floor behind her from the collection of medicine on her back. The disguised changeling supposed there was little immediate danger in the situation. He could dispatch of her shortly and return to the sector; it seemed ridiculous now that he'd felt the need to disguise himself. Then again, even standing up was an endeavour at the moment.

"Now just hold still, darling, this might hurt a little."

The changeling allowed the mare to approach, then bit his lip as a fresh bandage touched his wound. It hardly hurt at all. His whole leg was numb. Good -- he hated the feeling of being prisoner, of being controlled by his body's response to physical harm.

"I would have gotten the paramedics, but heaven knows it's not safe out there." the mare shook her head, worriedly. "Hang in there, Zap honey."

1557 watched unblinkingly as the mare trotted away once more. What would Beetle say if he found out about this? He wouldn't be able to face anyone from his unit again. There wasn't a chance in Tartarus he was telling them. He should leave now.

Yet, when he left, he would have to explain how he'd crawled away like a pitiful, two-legged ant after a single blow. This, on top of the incident in Oakwood Forest. Changelings were supposed to be sturdy and unbreakable, with superior natural armor; but after this mission, the entire sector would know for certain that drone 12-1557, *Kitten*, was softer and weaker than everyone else.

Why was it that Antennae could fight through the pain? What in his lanky body gave him the amazing strength? The disguised drone simmered silently, eyes focused on nothing

but the lush carpet. Look at him now, not even able to leave a pony's establishment to rejoin his unit. So much for undying loyalty to the Queen.

"Tea is ready!" exclaimed the mare in a sing-song voice. 1557 furrowed his brow as he saw her sauntering across the room, a tray with tea balanced on her withers. Tea? In the middle of an invasion? He forced himself to put an appreciative smile on Zap's face.

"It's chamomile, your favorite!" She set a steaming cup in front of him. He could almost feel his very being revolting at playing along, but he picked up the mug between two hooves. Ponies were such vapid, ignorant things.

It was silent for a moment as the green mare sipped at her tea.

"You're awfully silent, sweetie. Are you feeling okay?"

1557 coughed. "Yeah -" with an inward sigh, he included the obnoxious energy of Zap's voice. "Yeah, I'm fine, thanks!"

The green mare nodded. "Alright, if you say so."

She then tilted her head, a thoughtful expression on her face. "I can't hear fighting anymore." Walking to the entrance, she pulled aside one of the curtains and peeked out onto the street. "Why, I think it's over. Praise Celestia! I'm sure those horrendous bug monsters were no match for the Royal Guard."

1557 gritted his teeth, staring down at his tea, while she continued. "Oh, they're horrible things! Have you heard the stories, Zap?" She shook her head. "They kidnap your loved ones and take their place, slowly sucking away at the love that you funnel into them. They destroy villages and eat the children! The sooner those things are gone, the better."

The changeling pointedly ignored the mare's abuse, though he gritted his teeth. The Royal Guard was a joke of an armed force, only a bug for Queen Chrysalis to squash under her hooves. He bet she was sitting on the sun tyrant's throne at this very moment! This pathetic green mare would soon get her comeuppance.

Through the window he became aware of a sign, hanging out from the storefront. *Green Jewel's Luxury Hair Salon*. That explained her beehive of a mane. Then, a unicorn couple dashing down the road, pursued by a collection of drones. An explosion in the distance. Green Jewel, at the back of the room, didn't notice, but a grin cracked Zap's face. They weren't gone yet.

He spied another movement as a solitary black figure stalked down the path. 1557 set down his tea, straining his neck to see better. Unexpectedly, the figure turned its head and caught sight of the yellow pegasus. 1557 gasped and turned in the other direction. It was a changeling, and he couldn't let it see his face. There was a subtle, small, but revealing blue light hidden in every disguised drone's eye, hard to detect but easily recognized by any trained changeling. He couldn't let anyone recognize him -- not when he was reclining in Green Jewel's Luxury Hair Salon.

The bell attached to the door jingled. 1557 gulped, not daring to look. Instead, he stared at the swirling floral designs on the upholstery.

"Oh, ponyfeathers, I must have forgotten to lock the door," Green Jewel muttered, then let out a high-pitched screamed. "Changeling!"

A scurry of hooves, then Jewel's panicked voice again. "Stay away from Zap!"

"Out of my way," came a disdainful mare's voice. 1557's heart sank. It was Commander Lacewing. Hearing an *oof* and then heavy footsteps, he realized the commander had pushed past the green mare. "I said leave!"

1557 peeked. Jewel, indecisive for a moment, glanced between Zap and the storefront. He found himself quietly begging her not to leave him, although what a pony like her could do against Lacewing he had no idea. "I'll get help!" she declared, dashing out the door.

His heart raced. Maybe there was a chance Lacewing hadn't recognized him. Maybe she thought he was a normal pegasus.

"Look at me."

Quivering, 1557 looked up. The intimidating changeling towered over him, blue armor gleaming, eyes more furious than any he'd ever seen before.

"Unmask."

Déjà vu. Even now, it was beyond 1557's capabilities to ignore a command. He transformed into his original form.

"Identify."

A very short silence. "Drone 12-1557," he muttered

There was a massive blast, a roaring sound, and a pink-hued explosion came ripping into the building. Colliding with the two changelings, it sent them flying through the air

and crashing into the wall-length mirror. As shards of shattered glass rained down, 1557 staggered and collapsed onto the flooring. He heard exclamations from outside and changelings wailing in the distance. Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw the commander racing outside, and he pulled himself to his three good hooves. His exoskeleton had absorbed the impact, thankfully.

Mustering his strength, he shook glass off of his body and limped out the door as well. He transformed into Zap on instinct; the pony form felt vaguely comforting, safe from both the accusing gaze of ponies and the disdainful leer of drones. He stretched his yellow wings, getting used to the strangely lightweight pegasus body. None of the windows had broken; the building was intact. He saw ponies emerging onto the street from all around, but none of them seemed worse for the wear. They weren't important. Rather, his attention was on the sky, where hundreds of drones were being flung into the distance. A receding wall of pink magic accompanied them. 1557 gulped.

A cheer arose around him, ponies stomping their hooves in celebration. Green Jewel appeared, galloping quickly to Zap, but he paid her no mind as shock overtook his brain. They were *gone*. All of them. Somehow the blast had evicted changelings -- and *only* changelings -- from the city.

The invasion was over, and now he was alone.

3

Green Jewel fretted around drone 12-1557, peering at his bad leg. "Zap sweetie, I'm so sorry! Are you alright? What did the changeling want? Oh, thank Celestia that explosion happened when it did. I suppose she's miles away now!" She laughed in relief.

1557, suddenly remembering, took a sweeping glance around. *Not quite miles away.* In the distance he spotted a group of royal guards struggling to detain Lacewing. Shouts and sounds struggling floated through the air. With a flash, the commander shifted into the image of a royal guard. The ponies froze in confusion, and Lacewing galloped into the nearby forest.

"You should be resting, Zap!" She started herding the pegasus into the building. "I can't believe you're still up and about with -- with that -" she blanched slightly. "That *horrible* injury. Come on, dear..."

1557 realized that by moving around, he was only causing more damage to his leg. He couldn't feel it due to whatever Green Jewel had administered to him, but as soon as the painkillers wore off he was going to be in agony. He limped back into the establishment.

What am I going to do now?

"Yo! Zappy!"

A slim, light pink pegasus zoomed in from behind, beaming and holding a hoof up in the air. Her hair was dyed a vibrant green. Zap stared at the limb, unsure of what to do.

"H-hey!" He grinned widely, waving at her.

"What, too cool for a hoofbump?" The pink mare darted forward and embraced him. Startled at suddenly finding his face inches from her coat, 1557 nearly shoved her away. Remembering his course on pony customs, he returned the hug. Her body felt strangely warm. *Mammals.*

"Anyways!" she drew back again. "You didn't tell me you were visiting! How is life in Fillydelphia?"

"Tiger Lily!" Green Jewel's voice sliced sharply through the air as she hurried back. "Don't bother Zap, can't you she she's wounded?"

Lily gave a little screech as she noticed Zap's leg, hooves flying to her mouth. "Zap! You -- holy shit, why are you still walking around?"

1557 brought an image of Zap into his head, falling into the role. "Aw, it's no biggie," he dismissed.

Tiger Lily alighted on the cobblestones and approached her friend. "Hold on, I'm flying you to the hospital."

"What?"

"Lily, is that safe?" The green hairstylist fretted.

"Safe -- safe?! Sitting around with a wound like that isn't safe!" She tried to maneuver herself behind the yellow pegasus, but the disguised changeling sidestepped her. He had to dig deep into his training to remember what a hospital was: a place for treating injury and sickness. He should make up an excuse to not go. There was no reason to imbed himself further into pony society.

Then again... he wasn't getting out of Canterlot anytime soon with this wound.

"Zap! Stay still! I'm not letting you fly with your leg like that."

"Okay! Fine," he said, slowly turning back around. It was probably -- no, definitely -- the best course of action to stay until his wound was better. Then he'd leave, post-haste. A plan, one he could stick to.

A pair of strong arms wrapped around him. 1557 blinked unsteadily. "Hey, be careful -" he gave a yelp as Lily gave a massive heave. A quick, arduous fight against gravity and the drone found himself dangling from the air. Tiger Lily's limbs supported her from under her arms. Green Jewel looked on worriedly, biting her lip.

"I'll..." the pink pegasus shifted her grasp on her friend with a grunt. "I'll come tell you how she is later. Seeya!"

A deep breath, and all of a sudden, the road was zooming past underneath him. 1557 squinted against the rushing air, clutching tightly to Tiger Lily's hooves. Being this close to a pony felt wrong. The warmth was distracting, the fur was disconcerting, and the way their bodies *squished* was completely disgusting. Weak evolution, in his opinion.

Colorful houses and gaudy storefronts sped by. Sounds of laughter and celebration floated into his ears as multiple groups of ponies socialized outside their homes.

Thought we were goners... thank Celestia... changelings? They ought to stay out in the badlands....

“You’re gonna be okay, Zap,” he heard mutterings from above.

“Course I’ll be fine,” chipped in 1557. “H-hardly a flesh wound.”

Tiger Lily looked down at her passenger, a worried grimace visible for a moment before she reverted her attention to the airway.

1557 was lost for a moment, trying to think of a suitable continuation to the conversation. Soon he decided it was best to remain silent. To occupy his thoughts, he began reviewing the concepts from Espionage 101. A good drone could always find something useful to do.

Well... the changeling had never been given real training on how to blend in with ponies. He’d been taught by drone 10-5203, named Chameleon, who had been retired long ago but enjoyed entertaining hatchlings with stories of his exploits. 1557 had taken special interest. He’d adorned green goo horns and makeshift wings. He’d practiced hard as a foal and watched his hoof turn colors before him.

Real espionage training was reserved for special units. Ever since Chrysalis’ predecessors had united them under the Hive, individual shapeshifting prowess had been rather unnecessary; a small team of drones could easily supply enough food. Ponies were so lax on their security that you could practically waltz into any town and take your pick of living love fuel. Recently, Chrysalis had found a use for special espionage unit 1.01: paving the way for the Queen’s role as *Mi Amore Cadenza*.

Of course, taking love by force was very inefficient. The pathetic things struggled and resisted and after a couple months they were dried out. When creatures gave love voluntarily -- that was the real jackpot. Ponies especially seemed to have an endless well of emotion. If you were a convincing actor, they would be overflowing with sickly sweet affection day after day.

But, in the end, too much work. There were fifteen thousand drones to be fed, many too young or too old, and at least half without rudimentary transformation skills.

A tall, glaringly sterile building loomed ahead. A red cross adorned its front. *Canterlot Urgent Care*.

“You hanging in there Zap?”

1557 nodded, though Lily couldn’t see. “Yup.”

“Alright,” the pegasus declared. “We’re going in.”

A pair of burly earth ponies were carrying boxes in through the entrance. “Coming through!” announced Tiger Lily, prompting them to duck as she sped past the glass doors.

“Hey! Doctors! Or -- somepony!” Lily’s voice cracked slightly as she slowed to a hover inside the well-lit room. “Can I get some aid here?”

Bystanders stared, different-hued eyes widening. The secretary gave a start, but adjusted her spectacles and immediately addressed the pegasus.

“Appointment or urg -”

“Urgent! Urgent care! Look at her leg!”

The gray mare blinked. “Of course, to the left. Follow Nurse Sweets.” A blue stallion in scrubs flagged them down, motioning for them to follow. The pink pegasus continued to carry 1557 down the hallway, forcing others to stay out of the way of her wings.

“We’ll get that leg in tip-top shape in no time, ma’am.” The nurse pushed open a door and led them through.

1557 was wide-eyed through the whole process, furiously processing the alien surroundings. White, blue, speech, movement all around. A spotless sheet on a tidy bed, a concerned-looking, bespectacled unicorn with a clipboard and an immaculate white jacket. Tiger Lily conferring madly with Nurse October. This was nothing like the Hive’s medical ward.

“Take a seat. Just try to relax,” said the doctor. “What’s your name?” A green glow overtook his horn as various tools, bottles, and boxes were lifted out of cabinets.

“Uhh, Zap.”

“Hi, Zap. I’m Dr. Frasier. “You seem to be coping pretty well. Was there first aid at all...?”

1557 nodded, allowing Zap’s innocent tone to come through. “Yeah, Green Jewel gave me some weird stuff -- painkillers, I think, and ointments and things.”

“Good, good, so it doesn’t hurt too much?” Dr. Frasier examined the leg closely, a sheathe of green magic flowing over the wound. There was a tingling, but little other sensation. The disguised changeling shook his head rapidly, wavy hair bouncing.

Out of the corner of his eye he noticed Lily stomping the floor, face set in a frown, obviously arguing something very passionately. The irate nurse yanked open the door, motioning through it with a long foreleg. With a huff and an upturned nose, the pink pegasus stormed out.

“I don’t think there’s a fracture,” the doctor murmured obliviously. “Alright, now, don’t be scared. I’m going to need to disinfect this wound....”

The rest of the treatment was an odd experience. 1557 reclined on a comfortable bed in a different ward, wiggling his wounded leg curiously. It was wrapped in some sort of adhesive cloth; he no longer felt a thing from the affected area. A strange blend, he was sure, of medicine and unicorn magic.

“Alright, Zap” said Dr. Frasier, “I’m about done. It’s getting late, so you’re welcome to rest here overnight, and in the morning we can do some checks before you go home. Try to stay off that leg, avoid strenuous exercise, and most of all don’t go flying around. You’re not confined to your house or anything, just take it easy. Deal?”

“Yessir,” replied 1557.

He checked his hoofwatch. “I’ve got to run some paperwork down to the office, so if you choose to stay, I’ll see you tomorrow.” the unicorn gave him one last smile and pushed his way past the door. It slowly fell shut behind him.

The disguised drone turned, resting on a very plush pillow. He felt his head sink into it little by little. A novel comfort, but nothing compared to the soft goo beds at the Hive.

The other beds in the room were vacant, the lights flipped off. A glass of water and some colorful reading material rested on the nightstand. *Generous accommodations*, he thought dryly. The blinds on the window were pulled open, revealing the center’s prim and closely sheared yard. The greenery was sheathed in a dim light; dusk had fallen while the doctor worked. In the distance he could see fireworks, quietly bursting into dazzling arrays of color above Canterlot castle. They must be celebrating the wedding.

Besides the distant booms, it was silent. For once, he had time to think. He let Zap’s boundless energy fade from his mind, and it was replaced by a growing sense of unease from the alien surroundings. The effort of maintaining a disguise for so long was also taking a toll.

The changeling thought of nothing for a while, only watching the fireworks. A muted clock ticked off the seconds. The world felt somber, a gray landscape, a brick wall.

Getting back to the Hive was the important thing. Being alone wasn't right, not for a changeling. It felt oddly disconnected, as if a knife had sliced him out from the whole and thrown him out to rot. What were drones without their Hive? Parasites, bugs. Worthless.

1557 had tried to avoid reviewing the route to the Hive, and he hesitated before starting now. As his mind went from one landmark to another, his worries and despair slowly overspilled. The forest was only the first leg. There were plenty of dangers besides hiding from ponies, and he wasn't even sure in which direction they'd flown. Hundreds -- maybe thousands of miles. It seemed impossible.

Maybe it was hopeless.

1557 curled up on the bed, staring emptily at the wall. Now that the adrenaline of acting had left his system, he wanted nothing more than to be in the safe confines of his unit chamber, or to see the comforting faces of his companions. He wanted his daily dose of love from the feeding hall, or a quiet game of checkers with Antennae. Even Beetle's barked orders would be welcome.

A frown crept across his face. Beetle would have a thing or two to say about 1557 the next time they met. He'd have to admit to deserting the Hive and forsaking the Queen, standing under the accusing glares of every drone in his sector. The incident in Oakwood, his defection during the battle, having tea with Green Jewel. The ridicule would be unbearable. It seemed that no matter how hard he worked, no matter how much he perfected his transformation technique, he would never be recognized by an official All because of a weak body and a weak will.

I don't belong at home either. Good Chrysalis, it was all pointless. 1557 covered his face with Zap's hooves, stifling a wail. How had the invasion failed when the outcome had seemed so certain? The Queen could have easily overpowered the sun tyrant with the power of Shining Armor's love. The army should have had no trouble capturing the bearers of the elements. The vision of a perfect, satisfied changeling society had seemed so excruciatingly close earlier, but it eluded his grasp. Even now, the ponies were celebrating the happy union of Shining Armor and Mi Amore Cadenza. The *real* Mi Amore Cadenza.

No, there wasn't much to go back to. Just more abuse and more glancing failures. More missed opportunities to be happy. At this point -- though he felt guilty thinking it -- he felt more comfortable in Zap's body.

A subtle little bubble of thought. Could he stay in Canterlot?

1557 grimaced and disposed of the idea immediately. He felt sick just from considering it. He was one of Chrysalis' drones, he had to return to the Hive, and that was that. His emotions didn't matter. Ponies didn't matter.

The disguised drone sat up, blanket sliding off onto the ground. What was he doing, pitying himself as he lied in comfortable bedding? He needed to focus.

"Step one," he muttered. "Step one, get what I can from Canterlot before I leave." Despite the doctor's orders, he slid off of his seat and being pacing along the tiles. Moonlight splattered against Zap's coat as he passed by, painting it an odd silver.

Lacewing! He needed to find his commander. The drone knew that there was nothing he needed right now than a higher officer to listen to, and, at the moment, they were both ensnared in the same predicament. Maybe she'd have some harsh words for him, but insubordination be damned.

Then what? Then towards the Hive?

No, Camp C3. He needed to check C3, in case there were supplies, directions, maybe even stragglers! It was coming together. He had a purpose. As soon as the sun rose, he would know what to do.

Then again, why wait?

Padding over to the window, 1557 braced his front hooves and forced it open with a grunt. The window gave a nasty little squeak, but nothing more. Using his wings for balance, he clambered over the sill and out into the evening air. He staggered slightly, trying to keep his balance on only three limbs. A deep breath of fresh air, then a satisfied exhale. The stuffy scent inside of pony buildings was terrible.

The drone looked upwards, thoughtful. A couple lonely clouds meandered across the starry sea. Travelling in the air would be easiest, but he didn't trust these odd feathered wings and he could hardly fly over the pony capital in insect form.

He'd better walk. A brisk trot began and a lively clopping filled the air, leading him away from the building and one step closer to home.

4

“Love is in bloom!

A beautiful bride, a handsome groom,

Two hearts becoming one!

A bond that cannot be undone....”

As the distant music drifted through the white wicker fence, 1557 glared seethingly. What a joke. It was as if the invasion had never happened, or that they hadn't just *blasted* hundreds of changelings into the wilderness. Far away in Canterlot garden, he could see Twilight Sparkle bursting joyfully into the chorus as ponies of all shapes and sizes moved to the beat. The uselessness of the whole event was astounding. Changelings didn't have music because it didn't make *sense*. A certain arrangement of sounds, a series of pitches played into the air, and ponies were suddenly transformed into sappy romantics.

Before anyone spotted him, 1557 continued striding down the cobblestone road. He'd been curious as to how the ponies were celebrating, but this was ridiculous.

He periodically looked over his shoulder, to his left, to his right. The changeling had shifted into Cornbread earlier, his coat darker and harder to notice. He wasn't exactly doing anything malicious, but apparently Zap was a popular character in these parts. Ponies might raise some difficult questions as to why she was out at night.

Soon, the path gave way to gravel and the pony music gave way to the chirping of cicadas. A fringe of bushes and low-hanging trees appeared before 1557 entered the forest for good. Then, he paused.

In Canterlot, the disguised drone had found a taxi carriage willing to ferry him across the city, although there had been some issues when he found out he was supposed to *pay*. The driver wasn't a very intelligent stallion; a little bit of trickery and Zap had been replaced by a nonchalant passerby earth pony

But in any case, it would have to be on hoof from now on. That is -- on wing. A small flash lit up the trees, causing alarmed birds to take flight, and 1557 returned to his

natural form. He ran a hoof over the plates on his head, then grinned. No more squishy flesh. *Much better.*

Cautiously flapping his translucent wings, the drone lifted off the forest floor. Making sure to stay under the tree line, he weaved through the reaching branches. A silence followed him, but it was the good sort of silence. Insects and owls filled the air with subtle sound. Nothing like the stale, empty air in Canterlot. Cool earth beneath his hooves, a dense canopy above his head. He carefully navigated his way through an overgrown patch of greenery, paying attention to his bandaged leg. A couple vines were swatted out of the way. Leaves swirled down around him as he sped past. Although 1557 had always been less than average at flying, it seemed natural to him at that moment. He was travelling with a purpose, after all.

Some while of determined flapping and the drone finally emerged in a familiar clearing. *Here's hoping for the best.* He remained vigilant as he ventured forward, eyes searching for movement. Rows of barracks, now barren, stood resolutely.

“Hey! Hey you!”

1557's face lit up. “Who's that?” He took a step back, peering up at the sky to locate the source of the call.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

“Yeah, but what's your name?” he disappeared into one of the metallic structures.

“It's -- it's uh....” 1557 shuffled his hooves, a variety of fake names coming to mind. “Kit. I'm Kit.”

Twitch stuck his head out of the entrance. “Are you coming?”

The drone rolled his eyes, following the erratic drone towards the structure. "I'm coming."

"So, anyways, what are you doing here? I didn't want to fight so I hid in mess hall when everyone left." Twitch's fast-paced voice greeted 1557 as he pushed his head through the fabric covering the doorway. "I expected them to come back at some point, but this is fine too! Got the whole camp to myself and -"

"What in Tartarus are you doing with that beast?" 1557 exclaimed in shock.

Twitch froze, furrowing his brow. He sat by a metallic table, where a magic-powered lamp illuminating the barrack with soft green light. The drone's hoof hovering over a long-furred black animal nearly as big as he was. "...Fang?"

"Twitch, that is a *dog*."

"His name is Fang." The animal gave the changeling a sloppy lick, panting. His tail flopped back and forth. Twitch wiped off the slobber, unfazed, then continued to pet him. "I named him Fang because he's furry, and -- no, hold on." He put a hoof to his chin. "I named him Fang because I have fangs, and I also have a dog, so it makes sense."

1557 remained frozen in the entryway, mouth slightly agape. "But -- but didn't they tell you about the wolf stories?"

Twitch made a dismissive snort. "Fang isn't a wolf."

"It's a dog! That's just a smaller wolf." 1557 seated himself a good distance away from the beast, on one of the cots. Fang rushed towards him, tail waving in the air, but the drone immediately pushed off the floor and hovered in the air. He had the impression Twitch was one of the younger drones in the regiment. "Can't you control that thing?"

A stern voice came from the entrance. "Drone 1557."

The changeling froze, turning towards the voice. Blue armor, regal hair, slender, tall legs. Commander Lacewing's imposing presence filled the room. Under her watchful stare, 1557 lowered himself to the floor.

She stepped elegantly into the shelter, never once letting her glare leave his visage. "Drone 1557. Do you know how long it has been since the explosion?"

1557 stared straight forward, falling into military posture. "N-no ma'am."

“Six. It has been *six* hours since the explosion.” Lacewing stepped uncomfortably close to 1557, who tried to stop his legs from trembling. “Did you not consider checking the camp until now?”

“I -” 1557 clamped his mouth shut. He’d nearly forgotten not to talk back.

The changeling leader allowed the silence to stretch for an excruciatingly long time. 1557 swallowed nervously; he felt like he was a hatchling again, going through his first examination. Twitch resumed petting his adopted dog.

“Where did you get those bandages?” asked Lacewing with an icy tone, eyeing his leg.

“Canterlot Urgent Care,” mumbled 1557.

“Excuse me?”

“Canterlot Urgent Care, ma’am,” he repeated, clearly.

The commander narrowed her eyes, letting the ever-present silence return. When she spoke, it was a hiss. “I’m beginning to think that you’re a pony disguised as a changeling and not the other way around.”

She finally stalked away from the subordinate drone. The dog wagged its tail obliviously, while Twitch remaining silent, not looking at the commander.

Lacewing seated herself carefully on a mat, legs bent underneath her. “1557, we will remain here until I confirm that no other changelings remain in Canterlot. A week should be sufficient; I suggest you locate your own source of nourishment.”

“F -- find my own...?”

The tall changeling paused. “Is that a problem?”

“I -- no, ma’am. Well,” He hesitated. “You want me to... stay with the ponies...?”

She spoke dryly. “I believe you’ve proved often enough the sufficiency of your shapeshifting abilities.”

He felt a little flutter at the vague compliment, but 1557 didn’t understand why the commander was being so understanding. “What about Twitch? He -” the drone glanced at his younger counterpart, who was reclining peacefully on his thick-furred pet. He could sense sporadic sparks of love flowing from the beast, though none in 1557’s direction. “Never mind.”

“There’s not enough for both of us to feed on Fang,” commented Twitch, drawing the pet close as if protecting it from his gaze.

The commander spoke again. “Alternatively, we could capture and hold a pony. Given our limited resources, this is probably not a prudent course of action.”

1557 nodded.

“We will meet here again at sundown every day. If you don’t show up or leave a message with Twitch two days in a row, I will assume you’ve been detained by royal forces or otherwise incapacitated.” She stood. “Most importantly, even if you are captured, do not disclose any intelligence, no matter how seemingly insignificant. If a pony sees you out of disguise, do what you must to contain the information and retreat here to wait for me. Is that clear?”

“Yes ma’am,” he responded decisively, though he was still considering the implications of “*do what you must*” in his head.

Lacewing adjusted her armor with a subtle glow of changeling magic. “Do not forget, 1557, that you are part of the changeling army. Remember your place. Though you may live among the ponies, you will never be one.” On that note, she exited.

1557 grimaced. He didn’t want to be a pony, and if the commander thought so she was *sorely* mistaken.

With the intimidating changeling gone, he collapsed onto one of the cots. Facing her was as difficult as ever, but nonetheless he was relieved. He had orders now. And hey, there was a bright side -- in light of recent events, his misdeeds during the invasion would probably be neglected.

“I wonder where she’s going,” 1557 commented.

“The castle, probably,” replied Twitch perkily. He trotted over to the other changeling with Fang leaping after. “She’s a royal guard. Isn’t it funny that she’s serving Celestia now?”

1557 scratched at the space between his neck plate and his chest plate. “Really? How do you know?” If Twitch was telling the truth -- *doubtful* -- Lacewing must have infiltrated the Canterlot military.

“I can read minds.”

“No you -”

“Right now Fang is thinking about eating a rabbit for dinner.”

1557 looked skeptically at the beast, who was scratching wildly at his neck with his hind leg. As if aware of his accusing stare, it straightened and stared blankly in his direction, tongue lolling out slightly.

“Okay.”

“It’s nice to be out of the Hive for once,” said Twitch, hopping onto the cot beside his. “Before I go back I’d like to explore this forest.” 1557 was raising his foreleg in protest when the other drone burst out: “Yeah, I know the rules.” He raised his upper body, puffing out his chest and looking down disdainfully. “*Don’t fly over the trees, don’t let a pony see you, basically don’t have fun ever.* You know, I want to see the griffin kingdom too, someday. Also, that place where people are made of glass. *Personally* I don’t think that’s real.... ”

1557 watched, vacantly, as Twitch gestured and pranced about, not really hearing his words. He couldn’t care less, honestly, but after being submerged in an alien environment it was calming to hear another changeling’s raspy voice. The ponies’ bright colors and oddly shaped eyes made everyone seem *distant*, no matter how kind they were acting.

He noticed an oddity on Twitch’s figure; a strangely disfigured horn, somewhat stunted and with a ragged edge. He bet it was a source of endless teasing back in the Hive.

“...So there’s a huge beehive down the road? I gotta check that out too, ‘cus maybe they have changeling-sized bees - -”

“Wait, what?” 1557 focused quickly. “How did you hear about the beehive?”

“Fang told - -”

“Fa -- the dog can’t talk!” exclaimed 1557, throwing up his arms. “Why do I even bother?”

Twitch crossed his arms. “Hmph, rude.” He fluttered off of the bed, his pet trailing faithfully after him.

With a grumble, 1557 slid off of his own cot and pushed through the exit. Outside, a breeze rushed by his paperlike wings and blew at his thin gray tail. The lack of moon was no issue; drones’ bright eyes could see with ease in the dark.

The lean changeling turned his head towards Canterlot castle in the distance. This was quite an endeavour, wasn't it? He'd be acting days on end -- not even unit 1.01 did that.

An eager smile spread across his face and he nearly bounced on his hooves. His talent in shapeshifting was *finally* going to come in handy. He knew he could do it, and, more importantly, he knew that few other changelings could. The dull ache of hunger was becoming noticeable, but soon he'd have all the sappy affection he could want.

"So are you going to stay for a while?" asked Twitch, his voice muffled by the cool wind.

1557 shook his head. "No, I'm gonna go back to Canterlot. Ponies will notice I'm missing."

Twitch spoke nonchalantly. "I'll see you in three days, then."

1557 hesitated -- there was something odd in Twitch's tone. "Are you going to be alright by yourself?" he asked, turning back towards the quirky drone. He expected another quip about Fang, but the changeling was silent.

"It's lonely," Twitch finally responded, crossing his legs in an attempt to look casual. "But we're drones, yeah? Drones have gone through a lot worse for the sake of the Hive." He cracked a grin.

The smile must have been contagious; the corners of 1557's mouths upturned. "See you," he offered.

"See you."

Lifting into the air, 1557 zoomed into the cover of the trees.

5

A pair of birds sang lightly as they soared overhead, illuminated by a bright afternoon sun. The city of Canterlot bustled as ponies rushed to their destinations. Bells jingled as store doors opened. Hooves clip-clopped on the pavement and friends called excitedly to each other across the street. A white earth pony was slowly tearing down decorations from yesterdays' festivities, balancing precariously on a thin ladder.

"Dad, I swear I'll be okay."

An light orange stallion shook his head emphatically. "You can't be too careful when something like this happens."

Tiger Lily snorted, flapping slowly through the air behind him. "Even if there are changelings left, what are they going to do? Kidnap a grown mare in the middle of a busy street?"

"Just in case, Tiggy -"

"Lily. Call me Lily. I'm twenty-one, dad. I can take care of myself!"

The stallion sighed, wrinkles deepening over his eyes. "I'll leave you and Zap alone once you get to the shop."

"Finally!" huffed the pink pegasus.

1557 trotted along behind the pair, in Zap's body, looking at the buildings as they passed by. Besides rectangular brick structures, some were stretched tall with stately pillars or styled with clean, modern architecture. The pedestrians that passed by were equally as unique. Short, tall, bright, dark. *Distracting and pointless*, he thought.

"Hey, Lily!" A mare the color of sand, wearing a modest gray saddlebag, hurried down the sidewalk towards them. Her hair was tied in a stately ponytail, and her cutie mark was an old-timey scroll.

"What's up, Sandstorm?" Tiger Lily greeted her.

The tan earth pony's expression was gleeful. "Guess!"

"*White Stars* got approved?" Lily replied, her eyebrows raised in surprise.

“Yes!!” the earth pony hopped up and down, voice almost a squeal.

“Sandy! I’m so proud of you,” exclaimed Lily, enveloping her friend in a large embrace.

1557 stared disinterestedly from behind Tiger Lily’s father, legs crossed. He brushed a lock of orange hair out of his face.

“Hey, Zap! Didn’t see you there,” said Sandstorm cheerfully.

“Hi Sandy!” The disguised changeling waved.

His attention was drawn to a young filly, cream in color, peering around Sandstorm’s legs. Her hair was a placid, light red. Noticing his attention, the filly widened her eyes and drew back.

“Thought I’d give you the script,” said Sandstorm, stretching her neck back to grab a small booklet out of her saddlebag. “So you have a better idea about what’s going on.”

Tiger Lily swooped down to take it between her hooves, flipping to the front page.

“When are you opening?”

“Oh, yeah, that’s the thing -- it’s a little more than a week from now.” She laughed apologetically. “I know it’s short notice, but we’ve been anticipating this for a while so it’s fully rehearsed and everything. We just need like, some touch-ups on the set.”

“No problem, no problem.” She let out a squeal. “I can’t believe it! Your play is finally gonna be on stage!”

A small white pegasus swooped in from behind Sandstorm, halting herself with a gust of wind. “Zap! What’s up, girl?”

“Hiya!” This time, 1557 returned the hoofbump correctly.

“Oh my gosh! Winter, you’re playing Carmelia, right?” Lily still looked like she wanted to bounce up and down.

“I know the lines by heart,” boasted the pegasus.

Sandstorm gave a dismissive snort. “She didn’t have the script memorized until a week ago.”

“Yo, the *emotion* is the part that counts.” The white pegasus grinned, cocky.

1557 drifted off into thought as the three friends conversed. Apparently, Lily had been thrown out of the hospital the day before for getting in a heated argument with Nurse

Sweet. *Typical*, for a pony. She'd come back this afternoon with her father, offering to treat Zap to ice cream. The pegasus was simply oozing with concern and affection; 1557 had feasted like a queen.

"Hey, Zap, you're coming to opening night, right?"

1557 snapped back to the present. "Oh -- of course! I can't wait!" Chipper, he continued; "Wanna grab some ice cream with us?"

"Ooh! Pleeeeeeease, sis?" said the filly, peering out from behind Sandstorm.

"Okay, okay, fine," grinned the mare. With a squeal of joy, the filly bounded down the sidewalk. Lily and Sandstorm trailed after her, speaking quietly amongst themselves. the laid-back white pegasus flapped lazy after them.

"Tig -- I mean, Lily," interrupted the pegasus' father. "I'll see you later. Before dinner, okay?"

"Mhm," she responded distractedly.

The orange stallion gave Tiger Lily a cross look, but started back the way he'd come.

- oOoOoOo -

"...so *basically* the managers have hay for brains," said Lily, shaking her head disdainfully. "They don't know true genius when they see it!"

Sandstorm smiled, blushing, but turned her head so that her hair covered her expression. "Nah," she denied.

"I mean, come on! They chose *Ponyshoes*."

"There's nothing wrong with *Ponyshoes*," said Sandstorm.

"Are you kidding me?" Winter rose out of her chair, raising one hoof dramatically to her forehead. She spoke in a high and melodramatic voice: "*Oh Jeannete! Your voice is like honey on top of chocolate on top of more honey! I met you three hours ago, but marry me!*"

As Sandstorm giggled, 1557 glared at the ponies enjoying their frozen treats around him. Sugary, fat-filled snacks. Confections bursting with flavor but with *basically* no

nutritious value. And if ponies felt full before they finished? They threw the *entire thing* into the trash. He'd watched a pinched-looking mare order a daisy petal pizza and then have it thrown out because there was a patch of burnt crust.

Extracting emotions was a difficult process -- hundreds of hatchlings went hungry whenever ponies decided to feel especially unloving. Changelings starved as guards captured invading drones one by one, yet they had to continue risking themselves to get more sources of food. And here they were, enjoying and wasting more *ice cream* than any creature could possibly need. It made him want to buck each of them in the muzzle, as hard as he could.

"Hey, girls, I need to get back to work," said Sandstorm, checking the clock above her. She began gathering her belongings into her bag.

"Aww," whined Lily. "Seeya later."

"Seeya, Sandy," said Winter, slurping on a milkshake.

"*Winter Wit*, you're coming with me," Sandy said with a roll of her eyes. "Rehearsal for Act Three starts in fifteen minutes."

"Oh! Gotcha."

"Come here, Peachy," Sandstorm said, motioning her sister to follow. The filly bounded across the tiled floor, licking her lips. "Oh, and good to see you again, Zap."

Winter Wit looked over her shoulder. "Aren't you coming, Cobalt?"

"No, I'm not in Act Three," the blue unicorn reminded her.

"Oh, duh." Winter clonked herself in the forehead with a hoof.

The bell jingled as the three ponies exited. Tiger Lily went back to slurping her milkshake, and 1557 listlessly rolled a plastic straw around the table. He absently, and futilely, reached up to his head, trying to tame Zap's spiky hair. A radio softly crackled out a pop song, but he could hardly hear it over the murmur of chattering ponies.

"Are you alright, Zap?" asked Lily, setting down her drink. "You've been awfully quiet."

Ponies need to learn to mind their own business. "I'm fine!" Even he could tell his smile was half-hearted. "Just... a little tired. Really. The changelings shook me up."

His friend nodded, unconvinced. "Do you wanna know something?" she said, using a light tone. "I had my headphones on when it happened, so I didn't realize anything was

happening until a pink wall came crashing through my house.” She giggled, and 1557, after a moment, joined in.

After a moment, the pegasus spoke up again. “Wanna head back home then? -- or, I mean, wherever you’re staying. If you want to rest.” She unfolded her legs, taking her plastic cup in her mouth.

“Yeah, alright.” 1557 didn’t feel any inclination to interact with ponies at the moment. Maybe retreating to the camp would be for the better. The concern radiating from Lily, some left over from yesterday, was obvious. 1557 leached distractedly off of the emotion as he stood from the table, but he didn’t feel hungry.

A blue unicorn sporting a tidy white collar trotted towards them, a cup of steaming liquid suspended by his magic. His flank was adorned with three white stars. “Hey, Lily! You coming to the party?”

The pegasus frowned. “Par -” her eyes shot open. “Oh my gosh the party’s today! I totally forgot!” She lifted into the air, holding her hooves in front of her mouth. “When does it start?”

The blue colt laughed good-naturedly. “Like, thirty minutes ago.”

“Zap! We gotta go, Ragtime throws the *best* parties.” She clasped her hooves together, looking at her friend with pleading eyes.

“Wha -- sure?”

“Come on then!” Lily dashed out of the shop, leaving the door to swing back and forth. “Bye Cobalt!” her voice faded away.

“Seeya,” responded Cobalt, though she couldn’t hear.

1557 was facing another direction, but, through his peripherals, he noticed the unicorn’s actions. With his drink frozen at his lips, Cobalt was staring at the yellow pegasus. A little suspicious, Zap rotated and met his eyes. Cobalt smiled sheepishly and turned his head. Without a word, he left in pursuit of the excited pegasus.

1557 frowned, brows furrowed. The blue colt had definitely been staring at him, and he wanted to know why. Besides, he wanted to know why Lily was so excited about a *“party”*. Whatever that was.

Cobalt was walking unhurriedly down the sidewalk, sipping from his cup. A taxi carriage roared by the sidewalk.

“Hey there,” tried 1557, emerging out from the store.

The unicorn blinked and looked behind him. An uneasy grin. “Hey. Are you new to Canterlot?”

“Uh-huh.” the drone hurried forward until he was by Cobalt’s side. “I’m Zap.”

“Cobalt,” said the unicorn. He shook his hoof, though he looked uncomfortable.

There was a silence, but 1557 didn’t let it last long. “What are you drinking?”

Cobalt looked down at his cup. “Coffee. In the afternoon, I know. Bad habit.” He took a draught, avoiding 1557’s eyes.

The drone looked him over. An average pony, to his eyes -- on the taller side, neatly combed hair, calming eyes.

“What’s that cutie mark for?” asked Zap.

“Oh, well,” Cobalt glanced back at his flank as if reminding himself. “It’s uh, I’m a student in transformation magic.” His voice wavered slightly -- was he nervous? -- but he grinned, genuinely this time. He turned back forward and took a draught of coffee. “It’s nasty stuff. The other day I tried to turn a maple leaf into an oak leaf. Got poison ivy instead.”

1557 giggled, though he was still unused to Zap’s high-pitched laugh. The corners of the blue unicorn’s mouth turned upwards.

“Transformation magic, huh?” 1557 hadn’t considered that ponies could also turn one thing into another. “Is that popular?”

“No, not at all.” Cobalt spoke more easily on the familiar subject. “Scholars say it doesn’t have practical applications, which is a load of ponyfeathers if you ask me. Just think -- you can take a lump of rock, light up your horn, and *bam*, you have carbon! Or carbon dioxide to oxygen, or poison joke to harmless grass -- legends say Starswirl the Bearded was able to turn pegasi into unicorns and -”

He paused, a self-conscious blush appearing. He glanced at 1557, whose expression was a little blank.

“Sorry, I just get excited about magic sometimes.” Cobalt hid his reddening face once more in his cup of coffee, falling slightly behind.

“I’ve... I’ve heard transforming magic is one of the hardest kinds.”

“I’ve been practicing since I was a little colt,” said Cobalt, failing to keep a little glimmer of pride out of his voice.

1557 bit his lip. He could recall practicing his shapeshifting day after day as a hatchling, trying to generate a horn that didn’t look like cardboard. Frustrating, yet immensely rewarding. Good memories.

Suddenly, Cobalt yelled. “Watch out!” Lunging forward, the unicorn grasped Zap’s tail in his teeth and pulled. 1557 fell backwards just as a carriage zoomed past, ruffling his hair. He froze, eyes wide.

“Are you okay?” Cobalt rushed forward, looking into Zap’s eyes with a concerned gaze. “Is your leg okay?”

“Y-yeah, I’m fine,” he dismissed, scrambling to his feet and backing away from the uncomfortably close unicorn. He noticed the coffee cup, top popped off, liquid slowly running out onto the sidewalk. “Oops -- sorry about that.”

“It’s alright,” said Cobalt, sheepishly stepping away from the pegasus. He levitated the ruined drink and deposited it in a nearby waste bin. “You have to watch out when you’re walking around in a city like this.”

1557 nodded, wordlessly. He checked both directions for incoming vehicles before attempting to cross the road again. The conversation fell awkwardly into silence, and eventually the disguised drone walked separately from Cobalt altogether.

- oOoOoOo -

Before long, he arrived at a squat and colorful building [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

1557 peered into the window, then jumped in shock as a pony dashed across the glass. The place was packed; a bar sat a dozen ponies, and others reclined on couches where the space widened into a warm-looking lounge. Others devoured food and chatted. All around them unicorns, pegasi, and earth ponies danced. The lights were dimmer than usually. He stared, unable to comprehend the activity. What in Tartarus were they doing?

A pair of unicorns pushed past the yellow pegasus, too busy talking to each other to notice him, and pushed open the front door. For a moment, music and laughter blared out -- then it was muted once more. "Excuse you," he muttered, peering through the glass again.

"Hiya Zap," a unicorn with wild hair called out, nearing the sidewalk where he stood. "Figures you'd show up in Canterlot right when Ragtime throws a party!"

"Hiya," echoed the drone, not turning his head.

The pony paused before entering the building. "Aren't you gonna come in?"

"I -- uh -" his eyes flicked to the side to see the unicorn.

"Do you have somewhere to be? Shame, I can't remember the last time you missed a party like this." The pony grinned broadly.

"Oh, yeah," said 1557, shifting his hooves. "I need to help out at the theatre, and -- actually I was just passing by -"

The door was flung open, Tiger Lily's head popping out. "Yo! Zap! I thought you were right behind me," she laughed. "What are you waiting for?"

"Well -" 1557 glanced at the unicorn, trying to calculate a new lie that would convince Lily. Before the silence could grow too long, he decided to simply hurry through the doorway. *I gotta keep a lower profile! For Chrysalis' sake.*

Walking inside was like hitting a wall of noise. He almost winced. The music came from the back, where a band of ponies were performing on a raised platform. It was unlike anything he'd heard before -- driving, forceful. A multicolored unicorn sang passionately into a microphone, but the lyrics were obscured.

It was dim in the building, and the lights were odd colors. The drone navigated cautiously to a corner, where a group of ponies were standing about a pool table. Jostled periodically by moving bodies, he watched disdainfully as a heavyset colt stared down the polished balls on the surface. He carefully aiming a long wooden rod, then with a quick movement, sent the balls crashing around the table.

A powerful chord ended the music, and, filling the sudden silence, the ponies applauded and cheered. 1557 ignored them, taking stock of his surroundings. Tiger Lily had disappeared. He ought to excuse himself from this mayhem.

So basically he stumbled upon a maroon mare who is drunk and keeps trying to befriend him or possibly hit on him and he eventually ducks under a table and transform into a random pony -- he chose Dr. Frasier -- to escape out the back door. He doesn't know what alcohol is, however, so this whole time he's like wtf why is this mare acting so weird.

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[REDACTED] 1557 continued towards the exit, pushing ponies aside with his new body. Yanking it open, he leaped into sunlight and slammed the door behind him. He gave a sigh, enjoying the soothing silence.

He would never understand ponies.

“Hey, mister.” A youthful voice caught his attention. An earth pony colt, sky blue, with searching eyes, was seated against the wall. His ragged coat looked as if it needed a good bath. 1557 glanced at his surroundings; it was an unattractive alleyway, adorned only by dim windows and dumpsters. At the end the confining brick walls opened into a road where ponies trotted.

At first the drone considered ignoring the child, but he hesitated. “What are you doing in here?”

The colt stared wordlessly at him for a moment. “I was looking for food, sir.”

1557 paused. “There’s -- there’s pizza inside.”

“I don’t have any money.”

“Oh.”

Another silence, while water dripped off a fire escape into a muddy puddle. Muted noises continued to filter through the door behind him.

The colt spoke up. "Do you suppose you could spare a bit or two, sir?"

A concerned expression slowly grew on green stallion's face. "I, uh, don't have any money on me either."

"Oh." The colt looked back down. His stomach grumbled loudly, eliciting an embarrassed glance.

"Where are your parents?" 1557 questioned. In the Hive, no hatchling would be left alone for long without a guardian's watchful protection. A long moment passed, but there was no answer.

1557 scraped at the ground with a hoof. Why was this foal hungry? Ponies clearly had enough to eat, enough to throw away. Yet, somehow, this one miserable colt was left to scrounge in an alleyway for a morsel to munch on. A feeling of hollowness spread through his body as he came to a realization. He'd always dreamed of a Hive where changelings never lacked love, where supplies were plentiful. However, in Equestria -- which was overflowing with surplus -- ponies still went hungry.

Glancing again at the colt, a stagnant sorrow seeped through his insides. He felt as if he should be angry at the ponies' negligence, or their terrible selfishness and greed. Rather, he felt empty, a plastic bag floating in the wind.

Maybe all this was pointless.

He could do one thing though. He turned to regard the foal once more. "Hey! I can, uh," 1557 glanced back at the door where muted noises continued to filter through, indecisive. "I can try to figure something out, maybe. Don't go anywhere, okay?" The blue colt looked up, eyes wide.

Not giving himself enough time to change his mind, the stallion yanked open the door and stepped into the tumult. Immediately, booming music assaulted him. He paused, overwhelmed, eyes slowly adjusting to the low lighting. Then, taking a deep breath, he began forging a path across the room. Broad shoulders pushed past clusters of partygoers.

A counter neared, where on the other side ponies were furiously taking orders and dispensing food. Determined to reach it, 1557 shoved aside a unicorn and rested his hooves on the slick surface.

"How much for a slice of pizza?" he shouted.

“Three bits, sir,” called a worker over his shoulder before he disappeared through a swinging door.

The disguised changeling scurried backwards, removing himself from the crowd around the counter. He gave a disgusted snort -- being close to ponies still made him uncomfortable.

Now, how to find three bits? He stood for a moment, brow furrowed in thought. Then, he reared onto his hind legs and scanned wildly across the establishment. Amongst the dancing ponies, a group of pegasi chatted over a tall table, chewing on slices of a large mushroom pizza. He recognized Tiger Lily cheerful visage before dropping back onto four legs.

An idea fizzled into being. With a wicked grin, 1557 ducked again under a table and transformed into a sandy earth pony, hair in a ponytail, scroll for a cutie mark. Emerging back into the crowd, Sandstorm navigated closer to the table.

“Hey! Lily!”

The pegasus looked up.

“Over here!” 1557 waved wildly.

Catching sight of him, the pink pony shouted back, “Sandy? What are you doing here?”

“Come here!” responded the disguised drone. “I need to show you something.” Then, he disappeared back into the hubbub of ponies. He watched, hidden, as Tiger Lily took off with a confused expression and floated away from the table. For the first time he realized she had no cutie mark.

Quickly, he ducked out of sight and turned into the pink pegasus herself. Hooves pounding on the tile, he dashed through the throng of ponies and he seated himself at her table.

A brown pegasus was speaking. “...so I *swear* Diamond Daze is hiding something. I never liked her, you know? She just has this *vibe*.” Her friends nodded in agreement.

“Mhm,” said 1557 distractedly, taking three slices of pizza onto Lily’s plate.

“Lily, you were there, weren’t you?” asked the brown pony.

“Oh -- uh, I don’t know. Hey, I gotta go,” he said, hopping off his stool.

Several moments and one transformation later, 1557 staggered out into the alleyway as Frasier. The hectic atmosphere of the party and the repeated transformations had left him short of breath, and he gladly breathed in the fresh air. The sky-blue colt's eyes immediately latched onto his plate.

"H-here you go," he said, setting down the food. For a moment the foal watched the disguised drone with huge eyes, as if confirming that the meal was for him. Then, he snatched the food in his hooves and tore into it voraciously. It was painfully obvious that he hadn't eaten in a long time.

Slowly, the adrenaline seeped out of 1557's system. For a while he quietly watched the foal eat. Then, he seated himself next to the young pony, back against the brick, and let out a long sigh. His eyes stared blankly at the opposite wall.

"Thank you, sir," spoke the colt suddenly through a mouthful of pizza. "Thank you so much, sir."

A small smile graced the changeling's face. "You're welcome."

6

“You want me to *what?*”

1557 wore an expression of shock, sitting on a bench at C3. He'd been toying with a pinecone, but now he let it fall to the grass.

Lacewing gave an exasperated sigh. “Drone 1557, I told you that you may treat our conversations casually, not *disrespectfully*.”

The changeling blinked, nonplussed. “Sorry, commander.”

The officer shot him an irate look, but continued pacing across the ground. “As I *said*, prisoners in the Canterlot dungeon are never transported without at least two royal guards watching over them. Only high-level offenders are kept there -- as far as I can tell, there are only solitary confinement cells and the prisoners hardly ever see the light of day.” Lacewing paused thoughtfully “Given the special circumstances of drone 3344's imprisonment, it would be difficult to isolate him even *with* two guards.”

“But --” 1557 grimaced. “Do you really think I can do this?”

Commander Lacewing frowned. “However much I trust in your abilities, we have no other choices. Leaving a drone in the sun tyrant's hooves is not an option.” She made a face of disgust. “Within a week, no doubt, he'll have spilled all of the Hive's secrets.”

A loud bark from across the clearing caught 1557's attention. Twitch was darting towards them, while Fang ran in circles around him. “Can I help?” he asked, eagerly.

The commander shook her head. “No, but I commend your enthusiasm.” She shot a barbed look at 1557, who bit his lip to prevent himself from responding.

“Are you sure? I could be a distraction or something.”

“That won't be necessary, 6709.” Lacewing's tone was final. With a shrug, the tall changeling drifted away once more.

The commander stepped in front of 1557. “Let's see your transformation.” With a flash of light, she became a powerful white stallion, marked by a thick neck and narrowed cerulean eyes. One of the sun tyrant's nearly identical royal guards. 1557 studied the

pony closely, memorizing every curve and blemish. Then, closing his eyes to concentrate, he transformed himself into a mirror image of the guard.

“Not bad,” said Lacewing in the stallion’s deep voice. She dropped the disguise before continuing. “There’s no reason to postpone the rescue. Tonight, at moonhigh, we will report to duty at Canterlot castle. I’ve already ensured that two stallions will be absent for us to take their place. I am Night Watch, and you are Royal Ribbon.”

1557 listened attentively, but a frown remained on his face.

“We’ll navigate to dungeon level two, which is where 3344 is being held. If he has basic shapeshifting skills, the escape should be relatively easy.” The commander focused her gaze on 1557. “If someone stops us, leave the conversation to me. And of course, don’t betray your identity unless absolutely necessary. Clear?”

“Yes, ma’am,” the drone responded. Eyes flickering towards a sudden movement, 1557 deftly stepped out of the way of Fang. The dog barrelled past like a furry train, barking excitedly, chasing a stick. It had happened often enough in the past few days -- it didn’t faze him anymore.

Lacewing returned a curt nod. “Get some sleep, 1557.” The tall changeling turned and swept away, ducking into her own private barack.

“Hey, Zap!” Twitch nudged him as he flew by. “Let’s play some checkers.”

“I’m coming,” he responded, slowly plodding towards the barrack they’d claimed as their own.

He had hoped to hear good news when he met Lacewing at sundown. Then again -- he let out an amused breath -- when had the commander ever been the harbinger of good news? Not only were they *not* leaving Canterlot, Lacewing had discovered a drone imprisoned in the castle dungeon. Trying to save him was likely to put all three of them under pony custody.

Then again, maybe he should be flattered that Lacewing had chosen this plan instead of developing another method. *I am a shapeshifting prodigy, after all*, he smirked to himself.

It had been three days since the invasion. The time he’d spent in Canterlot since then had been relatively free of conflict, as he’d stayed mostly uninvolved. He’d spoken at length with Twitch, browsed nonfiction in the Canterlot library, and watched Sandstorm rehearse her play. He thought he was slowly getting the hang of pony society.

“*White Stars*,” 1557 had commented earlier that evening while an actor delivered a lengthy monologue on their mock stage. “Any correlation to your cutie mark?”

A breath. “It may have been the inspiration,” admitted Cobalt. The unicorn didn’t meet his gaze, though 1557 watched interestedly. “Sandstorm’s my ex. Don’t tell her I said that -- she refuses to admit to anyone that her masterpiece is based on my flank.” He gave a tentative grin, peeking upwards.

1557 had purposefully sought out the blue unicorn when finding a seat to watch the *White Stars* dress rehearsal. Although he always kept a cool, professional distance from his persona as Zap, he found it a lot easier to talk to Cobalt than the others.

Tiger Lily accosted the changeling when he got up to get a drink of water, wearing a wide grin. “Zappy, don’t think I can’t see you getting close and cuddly with Cobalt!”

“What?” responded 1557.

“He’s cute, don’tcha think?” Lily shot her friend a knowing smirk.

A smattering of enthusiastic applause signaled the end of an act, cutting off 1557’s response. Although only about a dozen ponies were watching the rehearsals, they were certainly eager.

Mentally, he reviewed his lessons on pony society, though he knew next to nothing about pony courtship. From what he’d picked up, it was a mushy and fruitless exercise. *At most, Cobalt will be a convenient source of love.*

- oOoOoOo -

Canterlot castle was very intimidating up close. All heavy white stone, cast purple by the dark sky, adorned with banners displaying symbols of the sun and moon. Golden parapets soared into the sky. Towers, bridges and balconies sprouted off in erratic directions, each one capped in a pointed roof.

A cold wind ruffled the uniformly trimmed grass, as crickets filled the air with sound. 1557 stepped lightly -- or, as lightly as he could in Royal Ribbon’s stocky body -- as he followed Lacewing towards the magnificent palace. According to her, there was a side entrance for guard members.

As they passed over an ornate bridge, the disguised drone looked down at the peacefully rushing currents. It was unnaturally clear; he could see a dozen fish flocking around a morsel of food. The stream was only one of many they'd seen -- along with fountains, hedge formations, and incredibly dull stone statues. Obviously the royal sisters were lavish with their decorations. It was a strange contrast from the rusted and stained alleyways elsewhere in the city.

"Here," muttered the commander in the guard's low voice, nearing a small door on the castle wall. Fumbling with her hooves, she held up an identification card and inserted it into a mechanism beside the entryway. Lacewing had given 1557 his own card as well, bearing Royal Ribbon's photograph and information. How she had gained possession of them, he wasn't sure.

A whirring sound, then a click as the door unlocked. 1557 followed Night Watch cautiously into a utilitarian corridor. A whited stallion seated by the door, nose buried in a book, looked upwards. He nodded to the two guards before returning to his novel.

"We have a couple hours until we're expected on duty," instructed the commander under her breath. "That's simply following Celestia around the castle. Our goal is to be finished before then." She pushed through a door, emerging into a hall decorated with gleaming suits of armor and crystalline windows. A couple ponies strided across the red carpet, but all was silent. 1557 regarded them warily, stepping uncertainly after Lacewing. The formality of the place was disconcerting.

The commander looked back, then rolled of her eyes. "Try to look like you know what you're doing," she hissed. With a self-conscious cough, 1557 straightened, thrust his chest forward, and paced confidently.

Lacewing eventually led him into a storage room, where in a locker with his name he found a set of golden armor. One piece covered his chest, back, and flanks, while a helmet with a blue plum protected his neck. Four golden hoofpieces were stacked behind them. Diligently, he began to slide into the armor.

"Why do they wear this stuff all the time?" muttered 1557, trying to stretch out his neck. The unyielding metal was unbearably constricting. "It's not like they *actually* do any fighting."

Lacewing fit on her helm. "You ought to be glad that you have natural armor."

The trip to the dungeons was mostly free of conflict. Although 1557 caught some curious glances -- he discovered after a while that they were looking at his hoofpieces, which were backwards -- nopony questioned them. They passed a massive ballroom,

where a team of ponies was scrubbing every inch of tile and glass sculpture. The royal archives, the kitchen, and dozens of offices passed by in turn.

“Night Watch! What’s up?” called a friendly voice. Lacewing turned to greet another royal guard, eyes lighting up as if in recognition.

“Same old, same old,” dismissed the disguised changeling, falling into step beside the gray stallion. “You?”

The guard exhaled, disgruntled. “I got put on street duty again.”

Lacewing winced in sympathy. “Tough luck.”

1557 trailed behind them, glad to be out of the attention. He’d never seen his commander in disguise before and he was curious about her acting skills.

“How about you two, where are you headed?” asked the stallion.

Lacewing’s face remained neutral. “Confidential, you know,”

“Ooh, confidential?” He turned, eyes wide. “Don’t tell me you got that promotion you were talking about.”

“Weeeeell,” said the fake Night Watch, drawing out the syllable. “I haven’t *exactly* been promoted, but, you know.” She grinned slightly, sharing a knowing look with the gray stallion.

“For Celestia’s sake, how come you get all the good breaks?” The guard’s tone was exasperated, but a smile remained on his face. “Congratulations, man.”

“Nothing’s certain, yet,” retorted the commander. “Don’t start spreading rumors.”

“Nah, nah, of course not.”

They walked in companionable silence for a moment.

“I bet I know where you’re going. The dungeon.”

“No comment,” replied Lacewing good-naturedly.

“‘Confidential’? It’s gotta be the captive.” The stallion shook his head, an edge creeping into his voice. “You know, they say there are still changeling spies roaming Canterlot.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” muttered the commander.

“Ugh.” The guard shivered. “I can’t believe those things even *exist*. Just -- the idea that something so disgusting can trick you into loving them, and then... and then *drain you of your emotions*. It gives me the creeps, man.”

1557 narrowed his eyes, a little annoyed. The past couple of days he’d heard nothing but insult after insult, usually founded only on rumors.

“They’re not all bad,” he offered. “From my experience.”

The gray stallion looked over his shoulder, surprised. Then, his eyebrows lowered. His expression turned to confusion.

Lacewing spoke harshly before he could say anything. “As far as I care, they can all go burn in Tartarus.”

The guard blinked. “Amen,” he responded, slowly turning back around.

“They’re vermin,” continued the commander in Night Guard’s gravelly tone. “And I don’t know about you, but I don’t feel safe when there’s one in the castle with me. I keep expecting ponies to turn into fanged insects.” She shook her head. “I’ll take a manticore any day.”

“I gotta head outside,” interrupted the gray stallion, peeling off of the group to head down a branching hallway. “I’ll catch you later, Night!”

“Seeya,” responded the commander.

Once the guard was out of eyesight, Lacewing stopped, whipped her head around, and shot 1557 a deathly glare. He shrunk, grinning weakly, like a deflating balloon.

“Leave. The conversation. To me.”

“Yes ma’am,” the drone whispered.

With a disdainful toss of her head, the fake guard stormed down the hall.

Before long, 1557, now keeping his eyes on the floor, reached a broad stone stairwell that led only downward. Lacewing strode confidently into its depths. Sounds of conversation floated from ahead -- 1557 reminded him to act his part, lifting his head and stepping confidently.

They emerged in a small room, furnished sparsely, where a group of guards lounged around a round table. A unicorn was concentrating as he shuffled a deck of cards.

Another sipped from a mug. As she noticed the two disguised changelings enter, they sat up in their seats.

“Night Watch,” announced the commander, pulling an identification card out from within her golden armor. “We’re here for the changeling.”

1557 watched as, dislodged from inside the armor, a dull, scratched blue badge fell onto the ground. He quietly picked it up, hiding it inside his armor. It probably belonged to Night Watch.

The unicorn tilted his head. “What for?”

Lacewing motioned up the stairs with her head. “The Princess wants to see him.”

Another guard glanced down at a stack of papers, shuffling a couple to the top. “It’s not scheduled,” he said in a bored tone. “I suppose it’s one of *those* requests.”

“You know how it is,” responded Lacewing.

The unicorn glanced at his companions, then rose from his seat with an irritated sigh. He stretched his shoulders. “I get that she’s the Princess and everything, but Celestia really needs to go through the scheduling process.” His voice was accusing. “She puts way too much trust in everyone.”

With a jingle of metal, he lifted a ring of keys. A moment to locate the correct one, then he unlocked the door. “Follow me.”

1557 blinked in confusion as they emerged in a well-lit and unremarkable hallway. He had been fully expecting a cold, stone dungeon. The walls were painted a dull gray. Metal benches occupied one wall, while rigid jail cells lined the other.

The unicorn led Lacewing down a flight of stairs, but the drone, darting away from the others, peered through the prison bars. The bed looked rather similar, 1557 noted with a frown, to the cots at camp C3. A lamp and a stack of books sat on a bedside table, while one was held in the hooves of a slim black pegasus. She looked up from the text with piercing violet eyes. Silently, he held her gaze.

“Ribbon?” called Lacewing.

With a start, the drone scurried down the stairs. “I’m coming!”

“Remember the procedure for the changeling,” the unicorn was saying in a bored monotone. “It’s volatile. Can’t use magic at the moment, but I would be surprised if it doesn’t try to bite you.”

He fell silent as he turned a corner, reaching the last cell of the dungeon. For a moment the only sound was their quiet breathing.

1557 swallowed, anxious for some reason, as the unicorn fumbled with his keys. Lacewing stood like a statue, staring into the cell. Slowly, with a mournful wince, the bars were pulled open.

“Changeling,” the unicorn announced in a rough tone. “No funny business, no pony gets hurt. Get out here.”

1557 peered over the guard’s shoulder as the drone stepped out of his cell, blue eyes narrowed. He seemed weak, like his legs were having trouble holding up his body. His eyes flickered suspiciously. A metal ring was clasped onto his horn -- a magic suppressor -- and a black band was wrapped around his midsection, constraining his wings.

The guard slammed the door shut once more. “Let’s go.”

It was silent on the way back up the stairs. 1557 glanced at the commander, but she refused to look anywhere but forward. He then examined drone 3344, the captive, who was trudging by his side with his head drooping. *What a sorry sight.*

He nudged the emaciated captive gently. When he looked up, 1557 stared straight into his eyes, willing him to see the subtle blue light. A moment passed, but then the prisoner’s eyes widened in surprise. A small smirk flickered onto his features.

Back aboveground, Lacewing and 1557 marched on either side of the drone, escorting him through the castle. Ponies gasped and whispered as they passed, sending both accusing glares and frightened glances. 1557, for his part, ignored them. *Let them say what they want.*

The commander caught his attention, motioning towards a door leading off the hallway. With a nod, he helped steer drone 3344 into the room.

It was empty -- a meeting room of some sort. Lacewing quietly locked the door behind them.

“Woohoo!” exclaimed the captive, leaping into the air. “I thought I would never get out of there.”

“Shh!” hissed the commander, turning back into her natural form. “Speak softly. You’re drone 12-3344?”

“Call me Terra,” responded the drone.

“3344,” said Commander Lacewing, ignoring him completely. “Have you given any intelligence to the ponies during your imprisonment?”

“I’m not sure, but in my opinion they’re just as dumb as they were before.”

Lacewing paused, confused for a split second, before narrowing her eyes in realization. Terra cackled and flopped down onto a chair. “No, I didn’t tell them anything.”

1557 transformed into insect form and seated himself as well, golden armor clanking. “Hilarious.”

“Lighten up,” remarked the newly rescued drone. “Haven’t you heard? Equestria is the land of *sunshine and rainbows*.”

“Drone 3344,” cut in the commander, drawing up to her full, intimidating height in front of the changeling. “So long as we remain on pony territory, we are on military duty. Hold your tongue.”

He rolled his eyes, but responded, “Yes ma’am.”

1557 wore a disgruntled expression. Of all the changelings that could have been captured, they had to get *this* ungrateful drone.

“I assume your shapeshifting powers are impaired by that ring.”

Terra nodded, lifting his hooves to push at the magic device. “Can’t get it off.”

“Hm.” Lacewing furrowed her brow, staring at the wall. “That complicates matters.” She turned slowly, pacing away from the renegade. “Maybe if we stage an escape....”

As the commander deliberated with herself, 1557 took off his helmet, glad to be out of the constricting metal. He subtly peered at Terra out of the corner of his eyes. Currently, the lanky drone was cursing under his breath as he tried to wriggle his wings out of the band around his midsection. His gray tail and mane seemed a little longer than military regulation. His expression was gaunt, and his hooves shook often. The energy in the drone’s movements was misleading -- he probably hadn’t fed for days.

He’d heard of drones that went for months without love and survived to tell the tale. Their bodies were hardy things. After some time, though, it became impossible to concentrate, function, speak. The weakness of being truly hungry was one of the most terrible sensations 1557 had ever felt. Terra would be fine for another week, probably, but he couldn’t help but feel a little sorry for him.

“Where the hell is my badge?” asked Lacewing vehemently, spinning around. She had just been searching in her armor’s inside pocket. “Did one of you *insects* take it?”

Her sudden anger was shocking. Usually, the commander was in total control of her emotions.

“Oh!” 1557 suddenly remembered. He fished the dented blue badge out of his own pocket. “This fell out of your armor when we were in the dungeon. I thought it was Night Watch’s.” The drone looked at it closely for the first time. A black emblem of outstretched, hole-marked wings. An old unit leaders’ badge from the Hive.

The commander tore it from 1557’s grip with a field of green magic, staring daggers into him. She tucked it carefully back into her armor. Then, without another word, she stalked away from the changeling.

1557 caught a glimpse of Terra rolling his eyes. He looked again at Lacewing, who was facing away from them. They stayed like this for a few moments.

“Okay,” said the commander in her usual impartial voice. She turned around. “All the entrances will be guarded. The windows are magically reinforced. It’s certain that no one will let out a prisoner like you -- at least, not without checking with a higher authority first. Furthermore, there’s only a certain amount of time before someone figures out that their highest-security has disappeared.”

She paused and took a slow breath. “A direct confrontation might be possible, but we would likely end up being pursued across Canterlot by guards. Normally not a problem, but I doubt we can escape without shapeshifting.”

“Easy,” replied Terra. “Just find a unicorn and blackmail it into taking the ring off.”

“And what will you do when the unicorn immediately teleports out of the room and reports us? What will you do if someone hears through the door and runs for the sun tyrant?” Lacewing turned, eyes casting fire on the drone. “I did *not* ask you for input, 3344.”

Terra rolled his eyes, but he didn’t respond. It was a couple moments before the commander turned away and resumed her monologue. “1557 and I will remain in disguise. I will find out who is on duty to guard the north entrance to the keep -- the least busiest -- then replace them in however way possible. Immediately outside the north entrance is Canterlot garden, but on the other side of that is the north wall of the city. If we can get through the garden, we should be able to escape into the forest.” She fixed her gaze on Terra. “Do not treat this flippantly. Escape will not be an easy undertaking.”

“Yes ma’am,” responded 1557 sharply, not wanting to give Terra another chance to speak. Seemingly satisfied, the commander turned away.

“You two will stay in here.” Lacewing pointed to a door on the back wall of the room. “I checked that room -- it’s filled with boxes. If someone tries to get in, you should be able to find a place to hide. I’ll be back shortly.” A swift curtain of flame washed over the changeling as she took the visage of Night Watch. She adjusted her chestplate, then, with a curt nod, stepped through the door.

1557 fiddled with his helmet, aware for the first time his pounding heartbeat. They were in the same building as the sun tyrant. A single slip-up, and they’d be delivered right to her hooves.

Terra yawned widely. “I think I’ll find a hidden spot and take a nap. I’m exhausted.”

1557 looked over his shoulder as the other drone ambled towards the door, opening his mouth to speak. He hesitated -- he’d be glad to pretend the ill-mannered changeling didn’t exist. However, the words spilled out. “Are you okay?” He fumbled as he continued: “I mean, did the ponies do anything to you?”

The drone laughed aloud, speaking in a dismissive tone. “Don’t worry. Ponies are cowards. They don’t have the spine to do any real harm to a prisoner.”

Terra disappeared into the adjacent room, leaving 1557 alone. A clock slowly ticked off the seconds as he settled down to wait.

7

Drone 1557 spent a long, anxious eternity in that room. There was nothing to do, but 1557 needed to stay awake to watch the door. So, instead, he sat, thought, and dreamed. Patience was drilled into every drone at an early age.

When there finally came a knock at the door, he was lying on an faded couch. He scrambled to his hooves immediately. Conscious of every step, he crept across the room, as quiet as a mouse.

"It's Night Watch," came a familiar voice, speaking low. Remembering his current state, 1557 quickly transformed into Royal Ribbon, then pulled open the door. A quick glance revealed the blue light in the guard's eyes and confirmed her identity.

After Terra, rubbing his eyes, emerged from the doorway, Lacewing gathered them around the entrance.

"Two guards were posted at the north entrance," she murmured. "Both are now out of commission. We need to get there before someone notices, so time is of the essence." Leaving no room for response, she swept open the door once more and trooped out. Pulling 3344 behind them, who once again acted the role of prisoner, the two drones hurried through the castle. Tapestries, carpets, and ponies with clipboards all blurred together. 1557 let himself be led blindly by Lacewing's steady pace.

One last turn, and, crossing a barren antechamber, the three emerged into an entrance hall. The room was empty, besides grand columns and scattered sculptures. Their hoofsteps rung sharply through the air as gold hoofpieces hit marble floors. 1557 abandoned his act and rushed towards the huge double doors.

Lacewing caught him by the shoulder before he could exit. "Might be guards outside," she warned. "Move fast, but stay hidden if you can. There could be any number of ponies watching."

1557 stepped out once more into moonlight. The castle's gardens stretched out before them, a maze of stone paths and leafy corridors. No one in sight.

The three drones scurried away from the palace. 1557's senses were on high alert; every creak, every distant call, and every bird flapping from a bush turned his head. He was breathing hard, agitated. *You're nearly out*, he reminded himself.

Night Watch's foreleg shot up, barring the drone's path. He stopped short. Flicking his ears, he detected a murmur of conversation drifting from behind a thick hedge. The commander crept forward, bringing her head close to the ground before peering around the corner.

She paused a moment, then scurried back, placing her hooves carefully. "Guards," she whispered. "Go back."

A clapping of hooves floated through the air, the stallions' voices growing larger. Panicked, 1557 glanced back through the length corridor they had just traversed. On either side were imposing walls of shrubbery, overgrown with vines and flowers, which rose high into the air. He would have to be fast to get back to the start before the stallions noticed....

Before he could begin galloping, 3344 shoved him harshly towards a low alcove set behind a stone fountain. "Hide!" he hissed. With a flash of realization, 1557 dived into the space, curling up as small as possible. The other two changelings followed.

Four sets of hooves appeared, ambling down the path. He could see the golden helmets on their heads. They weren't paying attention to the surroundings, busy discussing something amongst themselves.

1557 felt a sudden itch in his nose. *Uh oh*. Panicking once more, he tried desperately to hold back the sneeze.

"Achoo!"

The ponies paused, every head turning. For a moment their wide eyes took in the changeling and the two guards huddling behind the fountain.

Then, one the stallions narrowed his eyes. "Hey! What is the changeling doing out here?"

1557 burst out from the alcove and galloped down the corridor. "Run!"

"After him!" came a cry from behind, then a set of hoofsteps in hot pursuit.

3344, lunging ahead with his smaller body, neared him. "Idiot! You're going towards the castle!"

It was too late now. The disguised drone skidded around a corner, Royal Ribbon's weight nearly making him topple into a bed of flowers. The north entrance was nearing ahead; 1557 looked around wildly, trying to find a place to hide or a passageway to

escape down. All too visible and open. They'd catch up in a heartbeat. Yanking open the door, he leapt into the palace.

The drone didn't slow down, hooves pounding on marble floor. His heart beat like a jackhammer. Down a different hallway, dodging passed surprised staff members, 1557 searched furiously for a hiding place.

A set of bathrooms neared against the wall. That would do. Nearly kicking the door off of its hinges, 1557 barged through. A tall gray stallion in a top hat, just about to exit, reeled back in shock. "Oh!"

Hooves slipping slightly on the slick surface, the disguised drone pushed into a stall and locked the door behind him. He stood, panting, listening for sounds of pursuit; the only sound was the pony gently *tisk-tisking* as he left.

A crackle sounded as a magically amplified voice echoed through the castle. *"Attention, please. Canterlot Keep and the gardens are under magical lockdown. No pony may leave or enter until further notice. Guests and all staff on non-essential duty, please report to the south entrance hall."*

1557 gulped. *I'm trapped.*

Where was Terra and Lacewing? Giving himself a few moments to calm down, he turned himself into a less-auspicious pony -- Cornbread would do -- and ventured out of the stall. The armor, he left sitting on the tiles; there was no way to take it with him.

He glanced in the mirror as he passed, halting when he saw a frightened and pale face. *I look really suspicious.* He spent a moment composing his features, maintaining a concerned but neutral expression, then stepped onto the carpet of the hallway.

No ponies were in sight. The guards must have lost him completely, thank Chrysalis! Out the window, a pink gleam caught his eye. A very familiar barrier surrounded the keep, a translucent dome of shimmering magic. It seemed intangible, as if it would part like a waterfall, but he knew from experience that it was impenetrable. A smaller, keep-sized version of the dome that had once covered all of Canterlot city.

Against the wall, a cabinet door creaked open. "1557," hissed a voice, blue eyes glowing in the shadow.

"Terra?" the drone lowered his head, peering into the space. "Have you seen Lacewing?"

"She ran the other way," responded Terra, voice hushed.

1557 gulped. He'd felt vulnerable even with the commander at his side. Now, there was a growing sense of despair. "We gotta get out of here," he muttered.

"I've got a plan." Checking both ways, Terra clambered out of the cabinet. His face was focused, unemotional -- a completely different drone compared to the jokester from earlier. He held up a stack of cloth. "First, wrap these around our hooves. Noises carry here."

1557 took a piece of fabric. "What's your plan?" he asked.

"Gotta get to the magic department wing," Terra said. Hoofsteps now muffled, he started down the hallway with no further explanation. He seemed like he knew what he was doing. 1557 followed, checking behind himself periodically.

At each intersection and doorway, Cornbread sneaked by first, motioning to the other drone when the coast was clear. His body was constantly at alert, sending waves of alarm through him. His limbs were tense and shaky. It seemed to him that behind every crystal statue hid a platoon of royal guard. On the other hand, Terra was somehow staying calm, eye ridges furrowed as he carefully calculated their movements. 1557 saved the jealousy for later.

Hoofsteps echoed around the corner. They hurried under a table -- 1557 as well, since he should have been with the other guests. He held his breath, praying silently, as he watched legs trot by under the tablecloth.

It was only a few tense minutes -- but many tense encounters -- before they reached their destination. Terra shoved through a set of double doors, adorned with a star and a runic eye. The magic wing, presumably. On the other side, the walls were painted a warm magenta. A lone bookshelf held stoppered potions and tattered tomes.

A bespectacled gray mare stepped through a doorway, nose buried in a book. She raised her head, but, before surprise even registered on her face, Terra had leapt across the hallway and delivered a sharp blow to the side of her head. Glasses and book hit the floor alongside the unconscious body.

Terra regarded the prone unicorn disdainfully, then continued down the hall. 1557 edged around the fallen pony as well. Beetle had taught his unit how to do that, but he'd never seen it in action before today.

"Diamond Mint," whispered Terra, barely audible, reading off of a name card beside an office door. "Head of the magic department. I heard the guards mention her."

1557 peered through the window. A tired-looking sea-blue mare was seated behind a desk, poring through a stack of scrolls. Lines ran under her eyes. A filly of the same color sat nearby on a faded couch, kicking her legs back and forth.

“Perfect,” muttered Terra, joining him. Reaching to the leather band around his midsection, he quietly pulled out a small, sheathed dagger.

The other drone took a double take. “Where the hell did you get that?” he hissed.

“Found it in the room with the boxes,” said Terra, expression steady. He backed away from the wall. “I need you to knock on the door and wave through the window.”

1557 hesitated. Did he have any reason to trust Terra? After all, there was a child in there! Ponies were lunatics, but the diminutive drone couldn’t bring himself to hate a filly.

“If you recall, we *don’t have all night.*”

1557 took a deep breath. He was a changeling of the Hive, and any other changelings -- even Terra -- came first. Confidently, he knocked his hoof on the door, then waved furiously through the window.

Diamond Mint looked up, expression confused. With a field of green magic, the unicorn unlocked and opened the door. “Yes?”

Terra bolted into the room. Dagger held in his mouth, the changeling wrapped one foreleg around the filly and dragged her off the seat. The young pony squealed. Diamond Mint shot up in alarm.

“Diamond Mint,” growled Terra through the weapon in his mouth. His eyes were narrowed, his mouth set in a vicious snarl. “Don’t move. Don’t scream. If I see your horn light up, the filly is a goner.”

“Momma!” cried the young pony.

“Close the door,” muttered Terra. With a start, 1557 stepped into the room and closed it off behind him.

Diamond Mint swallowed. “W-what do you want?” she asked, slowly, her voice shaking. “Please, please don’t hurt Breezy.”

“Tell me how to get the ring off of my horn,” demanded Terra.

The unicorn only stared for a moment, eyes fixed on the blue filly. "It's a lock and key charm," she said weakly. "There's a lodestone that makes it unclasp."

"Where is it?"

"On my shelf." Diamond Mint glanced at the wall, where a colorful collection of smooth stones rested on a bookshelf. Beside them were several other metal rings.

"Which one?"

"It's red," murmured Mint.

"1557," commanded Terra, jerking his head towards the collection. With a solemn nod, the changeling stepped past Diamond Mint and lifted the object. The polished gemstone felt almost like glass. As he passed the unicorn, he glanced at her uncertainly. He'd never seen a pony -- or changeling -- so distressed.

At Terra's urging, he brought the rock up to his constricted horn. It pulled at his grip like a magnet, then attached itself solidly to the ring. It opened with a click and fell to the floor.

"Now... now let go of Breezy," asserted the unicorn, although her voice still shook with uncertainty. The filly looked at her pleadingly.

"I'm not done," growled Terra. "Tell me about the pink thing." He motioned out the window.

Diamond Mint took a long look at the barrier. "It's... it's a selective kinetic arrest field. I designed it myself."

"Are you able take it down or get past it?"

The unicorn shook her head. "You would need a tremendous physical force."

Terra was silent for some while.

"How is it powered?" spoke 1557.

Diamond Mint turned. "Shining Armor. Shining Armor powers the field."

1557 recognized the name of the captain of the royal guard, a minor detail Lacewing had covered in their briefing. Terra nodded thoughtfully.

"1557, put the ring on her horn."

Carefully, the brown pony wrestled the red stone off of the device. Then, trying to avoid Diamond Mint's fearful gaze, he nestled the ring onto her blue horn, where it automatically clamped down.

Terra released the filly, letting her dash away to her mother. Diamond Mint put a protective arm around her, slowly backing away from the two intruders.

Striding to the corner, Terra pulled open an out-of-sight door. A closet. "Inside," he barked at the frightened ponies. Slowly, but holding her head with some sort of dignity, the blue unicorn walked into the room. She ushered Breezy in front of her.

Terra slammed the door with some sense of finality. Putting his shoulder up to a bookshelf, he slowly slid the heavy furniture partly in front of the entryway.

Then, he turned and beamed at 1557. "What did I say?" With an expression of concentration, he shifted himself first into Diamond Mint -- in the smaller body, he easily slipped out of the strap constraining his wings -- then into the form of a royal guard. "Let's find Shining Armor."

1557 quickly transformed into Royal Ribbon, trailing the drone out of the room. Reluctantly, he had to admit he was impressed, although seeing Terra hold a blade to a filly's throat had made him nervous. He had been bluffing, of course. Hopefully.

They marched down the hallway, no longer wary of attracting glances. After acquiring two sets armor from the storage room, 1557 had suggested they find the south entry hall, where there were certain to be guards. Terra agreed that it was as good of an idea as any.

1557 could hear the distant clamor of dozens of ponies talking long before they reached the room. He took a deep breath as prepared himself once more to interact and blend in; the constant adrenaline from being trapped in enemy territory was making him feel jumpy. However, there was a gleam of confidence inside him. He had a plan, a capable companion, and several small victories under his belt. If ever he could take on Canterlot castle, it was now.

He stopped behind the doors. Glancing once at Terra to make sure he was ready, he drew himself up to his full height and threw the doors open. He stood at the top of a wide, regal, red-carpeted staircase. Below, a small crowd of colorful bodies was gathered in the grand chamber. Some sat, some stood, and some paced. Many were still, fearful, but others held lively conversations. Who knew there were this many ponies in the keep in the middle of night?

Guards in golden armor stood posted at each entrance, gazing solemnly into the mob. 1557 sidled up to the closest one.

“Excuse me, where’s Shining Armor?”

The guard turned, blinking. “Uhhh... in the throne room.”

“The throne room?” muttered 1557, trying to remember where it was situated.

“Are you new?” The stallion furrowed his eyebrows. “The captain always insists on protecting the princess himself.”

“Why in the throne room?” 1557 questioned.

“It’s one of the most heavily protected rooms in the castle. Were you sleeping during your introduction or something?”

Another guard rushed over to them, pushing past visitors as he levitated a clipboard in a field of magic. Gleaming silver armor set him apart from the others. “You two -- who are you?”

“Night Watch,” replied Terra curtly.

“Royal Ribbon,” added 1557, snapping into a familiar military stance.

The tall stallion scanned his list, flipping several pages. “Off duty.” He squinted suspiciously at them. “Why didn’t you come to the hall when you were called?”

“We found a unicorn who swore she saw the changeling, sir,” lied Terra smoothly. “A wild goose chase, for sure. Never saw it once.”

“Hm,” rumbled the guard. “Hold still, I need to do the changeling screening spell. It’ll tingle a little bit.” He dropped the clipboard, furrowing his eyes as a larger glow of magic flared around his horn. 1557 saw Terra’s eyes widen subtly.

For a moment they were still, his mind racing, then 1557 turned his head as if catching sight of something in the distance. He erupted into action. “Look! The prisoner!” He pounded through the hall and down an adjacent hallway, setting off frightened cries from the crowd of visitors. “After it!”

Guards immediately fell into a gallop beside him. “Where?” called one of them.

“He turned the corner!” Rounding the curve, 1557 skidding to a halt at an intersection and glared accusingly down each hall in turn.

“Spread out!” commanded the guard who had accosted them earlier. “Two per hallway. Check every door. Never take your eyes off of the hallways, in case it decides to make a run for it.”

As the ponies started down each hallway, 1557 fell by Terra’s side. Glancing behind his shoulder to make sure no one was watching, he ducked through a branching hall and swiftly trotted away from the commotion. The sound of footsteps and angry growls slowly faded.

Terra turned to the other drone, grinning widely in approval. 1557 returned the expression, then, with a deep breath, composed his features once more.

He felt unstoppable. The quivering, clumsy runt of sector 4 was far away, part of a different life in the Hive. He’d never considered before that being stuck Canterlot might be an *opportunity*, but it was like having a second shot. Sure, there was no one to impress here, no Queen to serve or expectations to meet. He no longer had the chance to excel in the changeling army. But maybe he didn’t need to.

One more step, then they were free.

8

A platoon of eight royal guards stood resolutely in front of a grand door, a spear clasped by each of them. They were still, like statues, though their keen gazes picked up on every movement. Another stallion, a white earth pony wearing golden armor, was marching towards them.

He stopped, then spoke in an ever-so-slightly wavering tone. "I need to speak to Shining Armor."

One of the guards, gray in color, stepped forward. "What for?"

"I have news about the prisoner."

"Your name?"

"Flurry."

With an expression of focus, the gray unicorn's horn burst into a bright glow. Flurry jumped slightly as a field of magic flashed into being at his hooves and moved its way upwards, scanning his entire body. He blinked, uncertain.

The magic reached the top of his head and fizzled out of being. Nodding, the gray stallion stepped to the side. As one, the other seven sentries also parted, leaving open a path to the door.

Flurry gave a differential nod, then slowly approached the entry. A deep breath.

He thrust the doors open, letting them hit the wall with a bang. Several pairs of eyes immediately turned, fixating on the white stallion. Both princesses, light and dark, seated at their tall twin thrones. A troop of guards in military formation, protecting the royal sisters. Shining Armor stood at the head, set apart by his blue mane and his regal purple uniform.

Despite his obvious trembling, Flurry spoke loudly. "Shining Armor, the changeling has been detained."

With a gasp, the captain of the guard galloped forward to greet him. "Flurry, is it?"

"Yes sir."

“Where was it found? Why didn’t Silver Scales come to notify me?”

“It was trying to sneak out of the north entrance, sir,” said Flurry, seemingly unable to meet the captain’s inquisitive eyes. “Silver Scales wanted to watch over it, so he asked me to take the message, sir.”

Shining Armor nodded thoughtfully. Flurry was suddenly aware of Princess Celestia’s calm gaze, resting directly on him.

“H-he also suggested that you meet him at the north entrance, for confirmation.”

A frown appeared on the captain’s face. “Why didn’t he take the prisoner down to the dungeon?”

“I... I don’t know, sir.”

Shining Armor bit his lip, indecisive. “Alright. Princess?” Shining Armor turned to regard the royal pony. “Your permission?”

“You may go,” said Celestia in her silky-smooth voice, but her eyes never moved from Flurry’s body.

The captain waved his hoof, and two of the guards in the room stepped up to him. “Flurry, come with me too,” he ordered.

The white stallion knew the Princess of the Sun was still looking at him when he left, her face expressionless. Being under the scrutiny of such a powerful pony made his knees shake, made the guilt multiply a thousand times. He let out a soft breath when she was finally out of sight. As he followed Shining Armor and his entourage, his head drooped towards the floor.

Before long, the captain used his magic to push open the doors to the north entrance hall. He walked in, opening his mouth, as if to speak, but froze. The chamber was empty. His two guards looked past in confusion.

Two dark figures, hidden on a ledge above the door, dropped in front of the two guards. The ponies exclaimed in shock, but with a sharp blow to the temple and a strong uppercut to the chin they both collapsed to the ground.

1557 and Terra turned to Shining Armor next. Though he backed away rapidly, both changelings -- disguised as civilian earth ponies -- leaped and brought the captain crashing down to the marble floor. A cry for help escape from his lips, but Terra quickly

clasped a hoof over his mouth. 1557 clamped one of Diamond Mint's magic-suppressing rings onto his horn.

Shining Armor's eyes widened as a cool blade pressed against his throat. Then, they narrowed in disgust.

"Don't speak," hissed Terra. "Do as I say, silently." The stallion nodded slowly.

1557 stood, dusting off his coat, as Terra allowed Shining Armor to get to his hooves. The captain stood straight, head raised, expression ever defiant.

Meanwhile, Flurry stepped unsteadily past the two fallen guards. He stared at the captain sorrowfully. *I'm sorry*, his eyes seemed to say. Then, he turned his attention to the changelings.

"W-where is my sister?" he demanded, voice shaking.

1557 responded. "Right now? She's safe. And if you keep doing what we tell you, she'll stay that way."

Terra shoved Shining Armor towards the exit, dagger still at the ready. "Walk," he snarled. "If you see other guards, act normal. Try anything, and it's the lives of you *and* this pansy here."

The tense procession emerged into the garden, stars' lights filtering through the pink barrier. They strode by the flower beds and hedges of Canterlot garden, passing under the shade of numerous fruit-bearing trees. The wind brushed softly against their coats. The journey seemed to take ages.

1557, though he maintained his evil glare, couldn't hold back a sense of triumph. The two of them alone had defeated the entire royal guard. Operations had run smoothly. Glancing at his companion, he let a smile momentarily appear on his face. He still disapproved of Terra's attitude, but there was an undeniable sense of companionship.

The surface of the dome approached, just in front of the stone wall that marked the edge of Canterlot. 1557 ordered the two ponies to stop.

"Listen, Shining Armor," he said in a low tone. "We are going to take the ring off. You will lower the barrier. We will put the ring back on. Do you understand?" He felt for the pouch he had strung across his shoulders, with the corresponding lodestone inside.

The captain was silent for a while. "And if I don't?"

Terra held the dagger up to Flurry, who edged back in fright. No words were necessary.

They stood like that for a while, Shining Armor's eyes flickering back and forth between the two changelings. The disguises were simply for the extra earth pony strength -- their identities were hardly a secret.

"Well?" prompted Terra.

A pause. "Your queen is very compassionate, isn't she?" murmured the captain of the guard.

Terra snarled. "Do you understand or not, Shining -"

"Yes." 1557 stepped in front of his companion. "Our queen cares for all of us."

He knew ponies considered Chrysalis a monster, a fiend. It made him burn with anger every time he considered it. 1557 could stand the abuse, the casual disgust of the ponies, but he knew Chrysalis was the last being that deserved it.

Shining Armor continued. "Enough to risk herself for the sake of every changeling in her Hive."

"We're not monsters," agreed 1557, a feeling of righteousness rising inside of him.

"What are you doing?" hissed Terra, fury hidden under a cool tone.

"I don't think you're monsters," spoke Shining Armor, slowly. "I think you're just trying to do what's best for your people. I understand that."

He fixed a burning gaze directly onto 1557. "And I have that obligation too. I won't lower the barrier."

1557 was taken aback. If they couldn't convince Shining Armor that they were serious, the whole plan would come crashing down.

"Don't try me," he growled.

"I think you're bluffing," continued the stallion, unfazed. "You love and hate and live just like we ponies do, and I think that there's enough decency in you to know that this is wrong. That killing is wrong. If this is a world where an intelligent being can take the life of another with remorse -" he straightened. "Then this isn't the world that I swore to protect."

Terra brought the dagger ever closer to Flurry's neck. "Are you willing to bet on the life of another pony?" he demanded. "Is it really worth it? Lower the barrier!"

Shining Armor stood tall, dignified -- a paragon of justice, a warrior for love and peace. At that moment he seemed like the most powerful pony in Equestria.

“No.”

The world hung in stillness for a second. Flurry, shaking, eyes closed, silently mouthing a prayer. 1557, furiously parsing new plans in his head. Shining Armor... invincible.

There was a soft *shlick*, a choking gasp. Flurry’s body fell to the floor.

Terra aimed the blood-stained blade at Shining Armor.

“*Lower the barrier.*”

The captain stared, in shock, unmoving for the longest time. Something undecipherable flashed through his eyes. Then, wordlessly, he slowly lowered his head and nodded.

1557 couldn’t move, his eyes fixated on Flurry’s inert frame as crimson liquid seeped out onto the grass. Vaguely, he noticed Terra snatching the lodestone, the a *woosh* as the barrier dissolved into nothing. A hole-marked changeling arm, urging him forward. The city falling away behind him.

- oOoOoOo -

“You’re a fucking monster,” accused 1557.

“Hey, we got out, didn’t we?” shot back Terra.

“You killed a pony!”

Terra paused, wings flapping furiously as he hovered in midair. “I killed a pony?” he echoed, his eyebrows raised.

“How the hell can you just fly off after cutting someone’s throat? Flurry was completely innocent!” There was anger bubbling in 1557, but also a bottomless feeling of weakness, futility. He was shaking slightly. “It’s one thing to kill during a fight, but this?”

“Do you think your precious Queen doesn’t have blood on her hooves?” challenged Terra.

1557 was at a loss for words for a moment. "If she does, it was necessary! She was looking after thousands of changelings. This is *different*. Your freedom isn't worth his fucking life."

Terra he swooped up to the other drone, drawing eye-to-eye. 1557 floated backwards in response. "Let me tell you something," Terra spoke under his breath. "The Hive is going to go to Tartarus if something drastic doesn't happen soon. In the dungeon I got a chance to do some research on that spell that threw Chrysalis out, and it's a doozy. She's going to be out of commission for a while. Then there's seven thousand military drones that have been bred, trained, and broken into undying loyalty -- without the Queen, they'll wander off like lost hatchlings. And the commanders? If Lacewing is any indication, they're all halfwits. "

"Have some respect," hissed 1557.

Terra continued as if he hadn't heard. "Everyone else in the Hive? No experience, no powers, no opportunity. Without leadership, the Hive will fall apart, and it'll be every drone for himself. The changeling Dark Ages, round two."

"How does any of this excuse murder?"

Terra narrowed his eyes. "Thousands of changelings would starve to death. We would become a warring, hunted, nearly-extinct race. Don't tell me about *murder*."

The changeling spun, continuing to travel through the dark forest canopy. "After ages of depending on Chrysalis, no one has the skills anymore to survive on their own. Someone has got to stop this -- and it's not going to be the commanders, and it's not going to be the ponies."

"What, is it going to be you?" responded 1557, incredulous. "Don't make me laugh. You couldn't dream of replacing the Queen."

"Chrysalis is deluded and egocentric," said Terra levelly. "If -"

"She is *not!*" With a jolt, 1557's wings clipped a tree branch. Dipping in altitude, he struggled to rise again. "The Queen is a hundred times the changeling you'll ever be!"

"She was born into the throne," spat Terra. "A couple of sweet words and the entire Hive flocks to her like flies to honey."

"Queen Chrysalis devoted her life to serving the Hive," growled 1557. He despised Terra more every time he opened his mouth. "She gave us justice, hope, a sense of purpose. She gave us our entire lives. You would be *nothing* without her."

"This is besides the point," muttered the other drone, touching down in a small hollow. He spun to face 1557 once more, hooves stomping on dead ground. "Her invasion failed. There were some very clear mistakes in her plan -- easily preventable mistakes. You saw how easy it was to infiltrate and escape the castle, even with the magic dampener. Use the correct leverage, put pressure on the right points, and Canterlot is ours. All we need is a competent leader."

"And you think that leader is you," snarled 1557 contemptuously.

"If no one else is available," Terra replied, "then it has to be me."

"You make me sick," hissed 1557. His hooves dug into the dirt. "You're a filthy fucking *cockroach*. You killed Flurry just to satisfy your misguided sense of superiority!"

"You should know something about myself," Terra snapped, never looking away from the other drone's eyes. "I was '*disposed of*' as an egg. They thought I was a dud. I lived alone, without leadership. I protected myself from predators and fed myself in overwhelmingly hostile environments. I know how the world works, 1557. I know what makes ponies tick."

1557 snorted. "You also know what makes them *stop* ticking."

"Are we back to Flurry again?" Terra's tone was disdainful.

"How can you expect me to ignore it?" 1557 demanded.

The taller drone shook his head pityingly. "You're acting like you've never killed a pony." Before 1557 could respond, Terra continued. "Have you never sucked the last dregs of emotions out of a captured mare in the feeding hall, savoring the final drops? Have you never casually left a dried husk hanging from the ceiling for the custodians to clean up?" Terra's stare was piercing. "You fed off of ponies for months on end as they drifted in limbo between life and death. Flurry died in a heartbeat."

"That's -- that's different," replied 1557. "We need to feed to live."

"Oh, of course," said Terra, rolling his eyes. "The ever-righteous drone, forced by the needs of mortality to act against his virtuous principles. I'm sure you resented every feeding, offered a heartfelt apology before taking every draught of love, prayed for the families of the ponies that fed your Hive." He spat the sarcastic words out, gaze barbed. "You don't really care about Flurry. Your body is just reacting from seeing blood spilled for the first time. And if you do care, you must despise yourself. You're a changeling. You live by killing. You prosper by deceiving."

It was a moment before 1557 could bring himself to respond. “Shut up,” he said weakly.

Terra snorted, spun, and walked away. “Seeya, 1557. We made a great team.”

The drone disappeared into the forest, leaving 1557 alone once more with only his whirling thoughts. The insects resumed their frenzied song. The moon cast baleful light onto the clearing. His legs were deadweights, his body was empty as the night air. He felt as if the world was cracking around him, like Shining Armor’s pink barrier, accosted by hundreds of tiny drones. And above it all, the echoes of Terra’s contemptuous laugh.

9

Zap trotted through the streets of Canterlot, dodging around other pedestrians wordlessly. 1557 knew better than to trudge and mope, lest he cause difficult-to-answer questions, but his eyes were listless, and they stared fixedly at a point on the sidewalk several meters in front of him. Not terribly out of place between businesslike ponies rushing home, rushing away from home, and waiting impatiently for taxis.

1557 thought he spotted a unicorn he recognized, seated outside a diner with a gaggle of friends. He quickly turned his gaze, hoping she was too distracted by her sandwich to start a conversation.

He'd found Lacewing at Camp C3 soon after escaping the keep, sitting in her usual sleeping place. She had been staring listlessly at the faded unit leaders' badge that she'd nearly lost in the dungeon, but, after an initial shock, her expression had snapped back to the disapproving countenance of a commander. The badge was tucked away into a pocket on the inside of her blue chestpiece.

Recalling his exploits in Canterlot Keep was much less satisfying than he'd expected. A sensation of unease had settled deeper within him with every reflection, and Flurry's icy blue eyes had refused to leave his mind. Ever since speaking with Terra, doubt had consumed his body. An unfamiliar uncertainty, a vicious parasite. He'd found himself waiting apprehensively for a sign of approval from the commander -- or, Tartarus, even a sign of disapproval -- but she hadn't spoken until he finished his narrative.

"I will fully admit," Lacewing confessed, examining 1557 closely, "I didn't expect in my wildest dreams that you two would get out safely." Her praise came as a shock, but it was not much of a balm.

A movement at the entrance. "That was awesome!" whispered Twitch, who had been eavesdropping. A fiery glare from the commander, and the recalcitrant drone disappeared.

"Where's 3344 now?" questioned Lacewing.

"I haven't seen Terra since we escaped," muttered 1557. "He walked away into the forest."

The commander cursed under her breath. "When will drones learn to have some common sense?"

1557 had slept away what remained of the night, then wandered aimlessly around the camp for most of the light hours. Hunger had forced him to leave -- otherwise he might have sat in his barrack all day. *Better to just feed and get back to the camp*, he thought. However, somewhere inside of him, he knew it wasn't true. Sitting and stagnating at the camp, thinking about Terra's rescue, wasn't doing his mind *or* his body any good.

Who knows? Maybe *White Stars* would get the thoughts out of his head.

The troupe rehearsed at this time every day, at a "studio" that Sandstorm had rented. It was a tiny establishment, to say the least. The two-story brick building was wedged between the Canterlot Theatre and a pawn shop, hidden in the shade of an inadvertently placed tree. The bottom floor belonged to a dance studio, but the upper floor was free for the cast of *White Stars* to use.

1557 had seen Winter Wit insisting it was an unnecessary expense. They could just as easily practice in someone's house. Sandstorm had been adamant, however, on having an actual mock stage -- she was unwilling to give ground on any aspect of her play. The drone could respect that.

When he walked into the room, the lead actress had just finished a monologue. A few of the spectating ponies started clapping, but Sandstorm quieted them as she hopped onto the stage. "No, no, no," she muttered, "run that again. Petunia, you missed your cue by a *mile*." Her usually small voice was firm, frustrated.

"Come on, Sandy, that was *fine*," insisted Winter. The small white pegasus floated back out onto the stage, touching down and giving a huff of breath.

Sandstorm shot her a glare. "It is not *fine*. We are performing at the Canterlot Grand Theatre in *six days*. Ivy? Where are you? Get your plot on stage."

The director turned, placing her hooves on Winter Wit's shoulders. Her expression was intense. "Winter. Your diction was good, way better than last time, but I need more emotion. More *conviction*. You're not convincing anyone right now. Got it? All of you -" she turned. "We need to establish some major framework in this scene! Get into the story. One more time." She hopped off the stage.

1557 seated himself quietly by Lily, on a folding chair. He'd been in the room multiple times before, with the same ponies no less, but somehow the situation seemed very fragile. Wasn't it funny? He was an *insect*, pretending to be a pony.

“Sup, Zappy,” greeted Lily quietly. The pink pegasus had her nose buried in a novel, entitled *Daring Do and the Ring of Destiny*.

“Sandy’s driving them hard today,” commented 1557, though his tone was detached.

The pink pegasus shrugged.

On the stage, a lime green actress warbled a heartfelt confession. Sandstorm was watching with the stage managers from the side, shaking her head, scribbling notes on a clipboard.

“I don’t understand why you’re into those books,” commented a gray earth pony seated on the other side of Lily. “They’re so juvenile.”

Lily looked up, sighing softly. “Like... I don’t know. I read this all the time when I was a filly, ‘cus, believe it or not, I didn’t have that many friends. No one wants to hang out with a blankflank.” She rolled her eyes. “I mean, true, *Daring Do* is pretty dumb, but it has a special place in my heart. You know?”

The earth pony shrugged.

“Did you hear about the security warning?” whispered a colt behind them, eyes wide. “Supposedly a changeling escaped from the Canterlot dungeon last night.”

1557 spoke up quickly, letting out a dismissive *pshh*. “Just a rumor.”

“Still,” the pony insisted. “If I were you, and I saw a friend acting strangely...” He shook his head. “I’d watch out.”

“I did notice one of those pink bubbles surrounding the keep last night,” commented a lanky unicorn. He sounded worried. “I thought they were just running tests....”

“Not to mention, they’re flying black flags today. Somepony died.”

1557 gritted his teeth, trying to ignore the uncertainty and unease that rose once again to the surface. It didn’t matter that someone was dead. It didn’t matter what Terra had done. They were just ponies -- food. Ponies didn’t matter.

The conversation was disrupted as a furious cry came from stage. 1557, startled, looked upwards.

“What the hell were you thinking? This isn’t a game!” It was Cobalt, eyes narrowed, body shaking in rage.

"I *know* it's not a game -"

"Then why don't you act like it!? Ponies could be dead right now and you're still wailing about your 'research' like a demented banshee!"

1557 watched, surprised, as Cobalt shot daggers into a defiant green mare.

"I - it's not like that!" The mare marched forward, matching Cobalt eye-to-eye. "You don't understand. I can't just drop this. I gave up my family to do this. I left behind my whole life."

"*Pardon* me," sneered Cobalt, "but you've obviously mistaken me for someone who gives a damn!"

"Listen to me!" the mare pleaded.

"No! Go away. Stop talking to me before I do something I regret." Cobalt turned, head raised condescendingly, breathing heavy with anger. The green mare raised a hoof, mouth open, but then halted. Wordless. Her defiant expression faded into a softer emotion -- regret? Sorrow?

She turned and dashed off the platform.

1557's eyes were wide. **He'd heard that Cobalt was in *White Stars***, but he'd never actually seen him act before. Who knew the soft-spoken stallion had such fire inside him?

A character entered dramatically from the side, wearing a ridiculously large and poofy red wig. Her eyes were mournful under the wild bangs. "Whe -"

"WINTER!" Sandstorm exploded. Giggles floated out from both backstage and the audience. Even Cobalt cracked a smile. "What in Equestria is on your head?"

"I'm just trying to get into character," joked the white pegasus, fluffing up the fake hair. "I feel like it accentuates her *passion*."

"No! Take it off -- *stop laughing!*" The sandy pony was furious. "You got the blocking wrong too! Enter stage *left!* Run it again!"

"Chill, Sandy," said Winter Wit, pulling off the wig. "I'm just having some fun."

"Just -- just having -" Sandstorm stood in place for a moment, breathing hard, then, with an exasperated sigh, stalked back to her seat. 1557 glanced warily at her. He wasn't sure which was more disconcerting; Cobalt's fake anger, or Sandy's real anger.

Soon, Sandstorm called for a break. Actors dispersed, some collapsing into chairs, some making a beeline to the bathrooms. 1557 sauntered up to Cobalt as he appeared. He'd decided to stick around and try to distract himself from Terra and Flurry, although the unsettled, void-like feeling still simmered at the bottom of his stomach.

"Amazing!" he began.

"Hm?"

"Your acting, duh?" Zap sipped from a paper cup that he'd obtained from the water fountain.

"Oh! Uh, thanks," responded Cobalt, looking away. "I mean, I'm nothing special compared to the pros."

1557 raised an eyebrow, unconvinced. "Sandstorm is super lucky to have you."

"You know who would *really* be a good actor?" asked Cobalt, hurrying to change the subject. He lowered himself onto one of two bean bags stashed at the back of the room, folding his legs underneath him. "A changeling."

"W-what?"

"I mean, imagine," said Cobalt. "Imagine for a moment that you could turn yourself into any character you wanted. Imagine *actually* being in another pony's body." He shook his head. "I'm jealous."

1557 lowered himself onto the other seat, still a little wary about the abrupt topic change. He drew slowly on the slow stream of affection coming from the blue unicorn. "Transformation magic, right?"

"It's the most frustrating thing!" exclaimed Cobalt. "Transforming something as big as a pony is incredibly advanced magic, but it looks so easy for them. You know, I've been fascinated with changelings since I was a colt. Imagine my surprise when they practically showed up at our doorstep!"

He paused suddenly. "I mean, I know it was a huge threat to Canterlot and all, but I couldn't help being excited. If we knew how they did the transformations, we could learn so much... but there's no sources on them at *all*. Literally."

Chrysalis makes sure of that, 1557 thought.

He sighed. "And getting a first-hand account seems to be out of the question. I've always dreamed of getting to work with an actual changeling. Ask some questions, run some tests.... But, I mean, they're gone now."

There's one right here, thought 1557, but he only nodded and murmured "Mhm." He watched Cobalt slowly grow more animated; the unicorn eventually fell back into a seating position so he could motion with his forelegs. He really was passionate about magic -- and *changeling* magic, no less. The poor stallion would be practicing and researching his entire life to do something 1557 could do in a heartbeat.

Suddenly Cobalt fell silent, adjusting his collar self-consciously.

"Hey, do you have a spare copy of the script?" questioned the disguised drone ██████████

The unicorn smiled slightly at the flattery. "Uh, no, I don't think so...."

"You can have mine," spoke an elegant gray unicorn, walking by with a cup of water levitating in a field of magic. Startling yellow eyes immediately caught his attention. "It's memorized, anyways." A booklet lifted off one of the seats, depositing itself in 1557's hooves.

"Thanks...." 1557 tore his gaze away from the odd mare.

"You must be new here," she said. Though her voice was smooth, her golden gaze was disconcerting. "I'm Nebula."

"I'm Zap," responded 1557, not missing a beat. He prepared for a hoofshake, but the mare had already continued on her path.

He pried his eyes from the odd unicorn, examining the script. On the front was printed "White Stars," in a utilitarian font. *Golden Nebula* was scribbled in the corner. Something to keep him occupied, and something to hone his acting skills. Not a bad deal.

As 1557 flipped through the pages, Cobalt glanced towards the front of the room. "I'd better get back." He hesitated. "Thanks for listening to my boring rambling, Zap," he added with an uncertain laugh.

"Aw, don't say that," the changeling responded distractedly, still perusing the script. "I think it's interesting." After a long moment, the blue unicorn's hoofsteps clopped away.

“...So be here at ten in the morning, *sharp*, on Monday. The performance is next week, ponies! If we put in our all, then I think *White Stars* can be a great success.”

A murmur of conversation filled the room as weary performers found their belongings. It was late -- a while past the intended end of the rehearsal -- and the moon already shone through the dusty window. Zap was reclining at the back, flipping through the third act of *White Stars*.

“Finally! You need a break, girl,” exclaimed Tiger Lily, accompanying Sandstorm across the room.

“Taking days off so close to a performance feels wrong,” muttered the pale mare, brows furrowed as, no doubt, she reviewed the scenes the actors had yet to perfect.

“*White Stars* isn’t going anywhere,” reassured Lily.

1557 clambered to his feet, closing the booklet. He stretched his back, head low to the floor, not unlike a cat. His body was tiring rapidly, his adrenaline-filled night finally taking a toll. If not for the looming threat of nightmares, he would be eager to return to his cot and drift unconscious.

Lily sauntered up to her friend. “Zappy, any weekend plans?”

“Uhhhh,” he replied. “I don’t think so.”

“You have to come camping with us!” The pegasus beamed, wings fluttering.

“Remember Thunder Mountain?”

1557 giggled in response, although he didn’t know what she was talking about. “How can I forget?”

“So that’s a yes?” Lily stretched forward, eyes wide.

The decision was made in a split second. 1557 had forgotten all about Terra and murder for a while that evening, and now that the memories were rushing back, he was eager for more distractions. “Sure,” he replied with a grin.

“Sweet! Meet us at my house tomorrow at four, ‘k?” Lily zoomed over to Sandstorm, who was exiting through the stairwell.

“K!” Zap called after.

“Don’t worry about camping gear,” the pink pegasus shouted even as her voice faded away. “I’ve got enough for all of us!”

The drone thought she said more, but he couldn’t pick out any specific words.

1557 trotted down the stairwell, yawning. The wooden floorboard creaked underneath him. Hanging out with Lily wouldn’t hurt anyone, although he was a little unclear on the definition of “camping.” He was going to have to stay in Canterlot until the commander found Terra anyways -- which seemed unlikely, if Terra didn’t want to be found. 1557 wasn’t even sure if the power-hungry drone would agree to return home. His voice was clear in his head. *“The Hive is going to go to Tartarus if something drastic doesn’t happen soon....”*

Bad thoughts. 1557 hastened down the sidewalk, trying to drive Terra from his mind. Off in the distance, black flags flapped accusingly on top of Canterlot Keep.

10

The sun filtered brightly through the forest's canopy, dappling an earth path. The wind rustled leaves as if they were windchimes. Distantly, insects and birds chirped, though they were disrupted by peals of pony laughter.

A group of four travellers ambled leisurely through the landscape, bearing lumpy saddlebags and packages. Sandstorm's earthen coat blended into the scenery, making her seem perfectly at home. She chatted with Tiger Lily, lively. Much more cheerful than the day before. Her sister, Peachy Cream, bounced along energetically beside them. She often wandered off to examine an odd boulder, or a fallen tree struck by lightning. A stuffed lion was strapped onto her back; she had refused to leave it behind.

1557 spoke on occasion, cracking jokes, but more often he let himself fall silent and enjoy the scenery. This was an odd concept. Travelling, but with no destination in mind other than the place you'd begun. Though the drone was put off by the significant waste of time, he supposed the peacefulness was enjoyable.

It was a long time walking before they finally reached someplace. On the other side of a small hill, a grassy clearing was dotted with trees and neatly cut logs. Wildflowers grew among the greens.

"Is this the campsite?" asked Peachy, eyes wide. She stood with her legs apart at the crest of the hill, taking in the sight.

Sandstorm nodded. "Mhm."

Her sister gave a cry of delight as she bounded forward. "It's so pretty!"

1557 followed at a slower pace, considerably less impressed.

Before long, the three older ponies had set up two small orange tents, built a fireplace, and dug food out of their saddlebags. They enjoyed their meals in silence, glad to have a chance to rest their legs. 1557, reclining against a log, slowly nibbled at a flavorful sandwich. Tiger Lily sat beside him, while Sandstorm faced them from across the fireplace. Peachy Cream had disappeared to chase a butterfly.

Changelings had very insensitive taste buds, having few occasions to eat material food. They did have to consume something every now and then, but the nutrients were

duplicated and preserved through vaguely magical means that 1557 had never really been clear on, powered by the arcane energy of emotions. In any case, love was the real source of their energy. Eating pony food was a novel experience.

“Did you ever get a response from any of the colleges?” questioned Sandstorm. “It’s about time for them to be accepting ponies.”

“Eh,” said Lily. She took a loud bite from her apple. “Some of them. They’re not impressed.”

Sandstorm gave her a sympathetic look. “Really? Why?”

Lily looked uncomfortable for a moment, but then the expression was gone. “Well, I certainly don’t have anything as impressive as a performance in the Canterlot Grand Theatre to put on my application.”

“That was *all* luck, Lily,” responded Sandstorm modestly, though she smiled. “If **famous actor pony** hadn’t happened to be passing through when we were performing for the judges, I’d just be another nobody.”

“Zap, did anypony tell you?” Lily said. “**Famous actor pony himself** wrote a letter to the managers saying how much he liked *White Stars!*”

“No way.” 1557’s eyes were wide.

“Why else do you think the Grand Theatre accepted Sandy’s play? They take only the best of the best.”

As Sandstorm picked up the conversation, 1557 realized how swiftly Tiger Lily had directed the conversation away from herself. Impressive -- and interesting.

“The actors are like, eighty percent of the performance anyways,” Sandstorm dismissed.

Lily nodded. “Isn’t Cobalt great?” she asked, elbowing Zap with a conspiratorial grin.

“What? I mean -- sure.” The disguised drone looked away quickly, feigning embarrassment and eliciting a giggle from his friend.

“The entire cast would be great if they would just *focus*,” muttered Sandstorm, an edge to her voice. “We’re too close to the performance to goof off. Every minute counts.”

“Well -”

“I mean, Tom is still moving like a *robot* on stage, even though I know he’s capable of emoting. He’s making scenes go totally flat. Then Nebula keeps missing rehearsals -- I swear that pony never runs out of excuses. And did you see Winter yesterday? Ugh!”

“She’s just trying to lighten the mood,” defended Lily, sounding sympathetic.

“That wouldn’t be so bad if she put some effort into her acting! She’s a great friend, but I can’t handle this right now.” Sandstorm sighed. “I’m stressed enough as it is.”

“Stressed?” Lily raised her eyebrows. “Did you get a job?”

“Well, no, but managing a play is stressful enough.”

An incredulous expression crossed Lily’s face for a split second.

“Sandy! Sandy!” Peachy Cream came rushing across the clearing, tiny hooves flying. The stuffed lion bounced up and down on her back. “Guess what I found!”

“What is it?” Sandstorm asked, smiling. She was quickly back to the cheerful countenance from before.

She slid to a halt beside her sister. “A stream! It’s over there in the trees, and if you’re not careful you might fall in.” Peachy put on a very serious expression.

Sandstorm widened her eyes. “Really?”

1557 frowned, reviewing what he knew about Oakwood Forest. Camp C3 was located near a creek, where it drew water, but he wasn’t sure how far upstream or downstream it might be.

Lily pitched in excitedly: “Who wants to go swimming?”

“Yeah! Let’s go, sis!” implored the filly, lifting her front hooves onto her sister and wearing a pleading expression.

“I don’t know, Peachy,” said Sandstorm in a joking tone. “It’s kinda cold out....”

The young pony pulled at her arm. “Come ooon!”

Sandstorm chuckled. “Okay, okay, I’ll come! Just let me finish my sandwich.”

1557 blinked, swallowing a lump of bread. He didn’t know how to swim.

The stream was pleasant, a clear band of burbling water winding fluidly through the trees. 1557 stared at it, eyes narrowed, while the others were distracted. The idea of

being surrounded by liquid didn't sound appealing in the least. He'd fallen into a river once before -- an especially embarrassing training session -- and he'd flailed and yelled until Beetle fished him out. His exoskeleton had felt waterlogged for hours afterward. The playful mocking of the other changelings had lasted even longer.

Tiger Lily poked at the water experimentally, testing the temperature. "Cold," she commented.

Sandstorm urged the others downstream, picking her way over roots and rocky shores. Soon the undergrowth gave way, revealing a small, hidden pond within the forest. Trees surrounded it on all sides.

Peachy Cream let out a squeal. "Oh my gosh! This is amazing!" Canter down to the edge, the filly splashed her hooves into the water.

Sandstorm followed, smiling contentedly. "Remember to take Mr. Paws off before you get into the water!" she called.

"K!" The filly pulled apart a velcro strap and tossed her toy onto the bank.

1557 approached warily behind them. He set down the saddlebag he'd been carrying, then trotted onto a rock ledge. He peered down at the soft ripples, and Zap's distorted expression stared back at him.

"I haven't been swimming in forever," commented Sandstorm, seating herself next to 1557.

"Me neither," said the disguised drone, not untruthfully. "I might, you know, need to learn it all over again...."

"Well, no time to start like the present!" came Lily's voice. He felt a hefty shove, and, with a cry of alarm, toppled over the edge. He hit the cool water like a rock, sinking to the bottom. Panic bloomed. A burst of bubbles, hooves whirling. 1557 broke the surface, though he almost immediately bobbed below again.

"Lily!" he sputtered, throwing his arms at the water. *Keep calm! Float! Paddle!*

Nearby, he noticed Sandstorm also drawing in a deep breath, having just surfaced. The sandy mare looked indignant for a moment, wet mane plastered to her scalp, but then burst out into laughter. From above, the pink pegasus giggled as well.

1557 moved his hooves rhythmically, if erratically, trying to keep his head over water. A wild lock of wet hair obscured his eyes. *What the hay, Lily?*

Waves rolled towards him as the pink pegasus jumped in as well. A moment, then her head broke the surface. "Whoo! Feels great," she exclaimed. From the edge of the pond, Peachy Cream swam slowly towards the others.

1557 caught a glimpse of movement amongst the trees. "What -" he began, before dipping below the surface. He spluttered, squinting as he examined the forest. Black legs, a flash of blue. *Twitch?*

"You alright, Zappy?" asked Tiger Lily, doggy paddling over to the yellow pony. Meanwhile, Sandstorm had initiated a splash fight with her younger sister. High-pitched shrieks of merriment floated above the water.

"Not -- not so great at swimming," 1557 responded, catching his breath.

Lily made a dismissive noise. "You were fine last summer!"

The drone looked over the pink pegasus' shoulder, trying to spot the movement again. Under the trees, the shade was hard to decipher. There! A pair of blue eyes, peering curiously out at them. *What in Tartarus is he doing?*

"Whatchu lookin' at?" asked Lily, looking over her shoulder. Twitch had disappeared.

"Nothing."

He experimented with his strokes until he could keep himself above water, taking a few circuits around the pond. This wasn't too bad.

A great wave of water hit him, leaving him spluttering. The perpetrator -- Lily, paddling lazily -- giggled. "Come on, Zap," she said. "Let's gang up on Sandstorm."

1557 let himself be coerced into joining the splash fight, spraying the others with great scoops of his wings. He would participate for now, if only so he didn't seem suspicious.

A steady barrage of water from Sandstorm and Peachy left him gasping for air. He held up his hooves to deflect it, scooping up water towards them with his wings. Sandy dived into the water to escape, but 1557 pursued her diligently. He attacked enthusiastically when she surfaced.

After a while, he began to feel self-conscious about how eagerly he was participating. He had to admit some part of him enjoyed it.

By the time they climbed back out, dripping wet, all other thoughts had fled from his mind. He felt like he was a hatchling, playing carelessly.

“Mr. Paws is gone!” came a wail.

Sandstorm galloped over to her sister, voice concerned. “Where did you leave him?”

“Right here,” Peachy Cream pouted, tears welling up in the corner of her eyes

“Uhh, hold on...” Sandstorm trotted along the bank, eyes flickering back and forth rapidly for anywhere the stuffed lion might have disappeared.

“Don’t worry, Peachy,” soothed Lily, sitting down beside the filly and wrapping one arm around her. “Sandy will find it.”

“I bet the bug thing took it,” she accused, stomping her hooves.

1557 squeezed water out of his drenched mane, then shouldered his bag. “What bug thing?”

“The big one with blue eyes.”

1557 froze. Nearby, he saw Lily and Sandstorms’ eyes widen as well.

“Peachy,” said Sandstorm, hurrying in front of her sister and looking her in the eye. “Where did you see the bug thing?”

“It saw it walking along the river when I was exploring,” she said.

Lily sucked in a breath, looking apprehensive.

“What?” asked Peachy Cream, cross.

“That sounds like... sound like a changeling,” explained the sandy earth pony.

“There are no changelings left in Canterlot,” asserted 1557. “Maybe she just thought she saw it.”

“I’m not lying!” cried the filly. “The bug thing took Mr. Paws!”

“Wait -” Lily raised a hoof to her mouth. “Didn’t someone say a changeling escaped from Canterlot dungeon?”

1557 swallowed. “We -- we don’t know that for sure.”

“What are you talking about?” demanded the cream-colored filly, tears still threatening to break out.

Sandstorm hugged her sister. “Changelings are dangerous creatures, Peachy.”

"This one was nice," argued the young pony, wriggling out of her sister's grasp. "He had a dog. If we find him, then we can get Mr. Paws back, right?"

The three older ponies shared glances. 1557 silently cursed Twitch. What if Lily and Sandstorm told the guards and they discovered the camp? What if they caught Twitch and they had to go on another rescue mission?

"Why don't you believe me?" complained the filly.

"Let's go back to the camp," said Sandstorm. "Maybe we can decide what to do then."

"Fine!" exclaimed the filly, marching off with a huff.

The others followed, some distance behind. "A dog?" questioned Lily. "Maybe she is just making it up. She could have heard about changelings at school."

1557 nodded emphatically. "It's really easy to convince yourself that you saw something. Especially when you're foal."

A flurry of leaves sounded behind him, and his head snapped around. Nothing -- just disturbed greenery. The others walked in silence.

"Look! The bug!" cried Peachy Cream. With a leap, the filly crashed away into denser trees. "Come back!"

"Peachy!" Sandstorm galloped after her, side by side with Lily. 1557 couldn't see anything, but he followed blindly, swerving around rough bark trunks. Anxiety pulsed in his mind. He couldn't let them discover Twitch. However, no matter how he craned his neck, both the changeling and his pursuer was out of sight.

"Peachy Cream, come back here this instant!" commanded Sandstorm.

The light of the sun suddenly broke through above, leaving Sandstorm and Lily to skid to a halt. 1557 nearly toppled over as he tried to avoid running in to them. They looked into a massive clearing, utilitarian barracks placed erratically. The camp.

1557 stepped back, alarmed. Ponies weren't ever supposed to see Camp C3. He knew what Lacewing would have told him to do. *Detain them and wait she comes back at sundown.*

"Whoa," said Sandstorm.

"Peach?" Lily ventured into the clearing, poking her head through one of the entrances.

"What is this place?"

Then again, 1557 considered, the camp wasn't of much use to the changelings anymore. Even if word of it somehow got to the authorities, it would hardly be a security breach. Right? He scanned the area, trying to spot any signs of the other changeling. *All I have to do is keep Twitch out of sight.*

"Peachy!" called Sandstorm as she wandered farther into the camp. "Where are you?"

"Hey, come look at this," Lily said, disappearing into one of the buildings. The sandy earth pony followed her, curious.

With the others out of sight, a movement caught 1557's eye. Twitch, visible for a moment as he dashed behind a barrack. A flash of something small, furry, and tan. Narrowing his eyes, 1557 sprinted around the building. The other drone's gray tail had just disappeared through the flap covering an entrance.

1557 burst into the barrack. "Twitch!" he hissed.

The room seemed empty, still. The cots were undisturbed. Suspicious, 1557 trotted further in and peered behind the furthest bed. He had to be hiding somewhere.

There was a rustle of movement and, before he could turn around, something blunt and heavy collided with his head. 1557, with a guttural exclamation, was sent crashing to the ground.

Twitch's hole-marked hooves pinned him to the floor. When his eyes focused again, head pounding, he saw a **club-like object of some sort** suspended threateningly in the air above him. "Don't move or talk," Twitch commanded, voice breaking slightly as he tried to sound menacing. "Or I'll hit you again!" Mr. Paws was fastened to his back.

"Twitch!" 1557 squirmed out from his grasp, unbalancing the changeling and nearly receiving another thwack to the head. Before the drone could attack again, he shifted back to his natural form. He raised his front hooves as protection. "It's me! Chill!"

"Kit?" asked Twitch, eyes wide.

"There you are, bug!" came a young voice from outside. Twitch, eyes wide, immediately dived for cover behind a bed. 1557 tried to take on Zap's appearance once more, but through the throbbing pain in his head the transformation was sloppy. When he looked up, Peachy Cream was peering into the barrack.

The filly looked straight at him, and a fearful expression crossed his face. He hadn't changed fast enough! She must have seen his real identity. The act was up. He needed to hide -- he'd have to find a new persona -

“Hi Zap,” said Peachy Cream nonchalantly, trotting into the barrack.

The disguised changeling was frozen. Did she not...?

The filly stopped behind the bed where Twitch was cowering. “Bug,” she said. “Gimme Mr. Paws.”

The changeling looked up, then, with a relieved expression, stood. “Oh. It’s just you.”

“Mr. Paws! Now!”

“Okay! Okay!” Twitch unstrapped the stuffed lion, offering it forward. Peachy snatched it, with a huff. Then, head raised high, she marched back out of the barrack.

“You two have *met*?” asked 1557, rounding on the other changeling.

“Just once! Like, thirty minutes ago.” Twitch dropped the **club-like object**, speaking rapidly. “I know I’m supposed to detain anyone who sees me, but it was just a filly! Who’s going to listen to a filly? No one’s going to listen to a filly.”

1557 didn’t speak for a moment. “It -- we still need to....”

What would they do? Were they supposed to knock out the child and keep her prisoner there? He rubbed his neck. “I guess they might just put it off as a made-up story.”

“Duh! It’s totally fine. I mean, no one will believe that a friendly changeling with a dog stole her stuffed lion.”

“Oh, that’s another thing -- why did you have to take the Chrysalis-forsaken *stuffed animal*?”

“Good reasons,” declared Twitch defiantly.

1557 stared at him.

“I thought Fang might like it,” he confessed quickly, looking down.

1557 sighed, massaging his still-pounding head. “Well, the good thing, is, I don’t think she saw me in changeling form. As long as I can convince them not to report a changeling sighting to the royal guard, both of us should be fine.”

“Zap?” came a distant call.

“I should go,” said 1557. “Be more careful next time.” Twitch gave a curt nod, and 1557 trotted out the doorway.

Sandstorm and Lily were wandering through the clearing in the distance, worriedly calling out for the missing ponies. The disguised drone called out and waved.

“Hey, Sandy, Lily!” He trotted towards them. “We found Mr. Paws buried in my saddlebags. Someone must have put it in there and forgot.”

Lily took to the air, approaching swiftly. She looked relieved to see him when she touched down. “Is Peachy with you?”

“I’m here!” called out the small filly as she cantered over the grass, wearing a glossy blue helmet and a chestplate. 1557 took a double take as he recognized Lacewing’s armor.

With a gasp, Sandstorm rushed up and hugged her sister. The tight embrace looked smothering. “Peachy! You had me so worried,” she fussed.

“I found the bug thing,” the filly proclaimed proudly. “He gave Mr. Paws back.”

Sandy drew back. “What are you wearing?”

“I found it over there,” answered Peachy, pointing towards the commander’s barrack.

“Go put it back where it came from,” said Sandstorm disapprovingly.

“Aww.” The filly pouted. “Okay.” The filly scamped off, and Sandy followed some ways behind. Clearly she was no longer willing to let her sister out of sight.

Lily shot 1557 a questioning look. “She ‘found the bug thing?’”

1557 simply grinned and rolled his eyes. “*Foals.*”

11

“Please, Sandy?” begged Peachy Cream, trotting to keep up with her larger sister. “We just got here!”

“We’re not sleeping anywhere near a changeling,” said Sandstorm with a sense of finality.

“There’s no changeling, Sandy,” said Lily, rolling her eyes, though she kept her voice down.

Sandstorm looked at her friend. “Peachy Cream doesn’t lie.”

“They don’t do it on purpose,” pitched in 1557, hurrying to catch up to them. “Sometimes fillies just convince themselves that something happened when it really didn’t.”

“My *sister* is not a liar,” repeated Sandstorm firmly. Lily, from out of sight, shot her an exasperated look.

1557 couldn’t understand the pony. She was friendly and deferential most of the time, but when it concerned *White Stars* or her sister she acted like Lacewing.

The sky had darkened by now, stars beginning to peek out. He imagined a campfire would have been roaring if they’d been in the clearing. The four ponies walked in silence, although every so often Peachy sniffed dramatically.

A splash of liquid dotted 1557’s nose. Blinking, he glanced up; above the tall branches, gray clouds were gathering. Another raindrop fell on his shoulder.

“Aw, ponyfeathers. Looks like a storm’s coming. Better set up camp.” Lily grinned triumphantly.

“Yayyy!” exclaimed Peachy Cream, hopping up and down. Sandstorm let out an annoyed noise, but shrugged the folded-up tent off of her back.

Soon, they set up both tents, though not before all of them were thoroughly soaked. 1557 was huddled under a thin blanket, staring out of the entrance as raindrops marred the dusty path. Lightning momentarily flashed in the air, followed soon by a rumble of thunder. At the Hive, they never got much rain. The last time he could remember was

before he was even allowed outside the nursery. He'd peered at the phenomenon from a distance, sitting near the exit. It looked like the sky was falling.

All four ponies had huddled under one tent, though it was rather small. None of them had wanted to separate so far away from bedtime. Lily had made herself at home in a back corner, sitting on a large pink pillow. Beside her, Sandstorm was curled up with Peachy. A chess board was set up between them, taking up even more room. 1557 didn't enjoy being so close to the ponies, but he figured he would have to get used to it sooner or later.

He was currently trying to think of ideas. Somehow he had to convince Sandstorm not to tell the authorities about Camp C3 or the changeling sighting, but each plan seemed less plausible than the last.

Sandstorm moved a black bishop, capturing one of the enemy pieces. "Check."

"Hm," said Lily, rubbing her chin. She reached down and nudged her king out of the way.

Her friend cracked a grin. "Bad move, Lily."

"What?"

Sandy swept the black queen across the board. "Checkmate."

Lily blinked in surprise. "Oh, hay." She knocked over her king, then leaned back against her pillow. "I don't know why I even bother with you." Her opponent giggled good-naturedly.

1557 looked over at the sand-colored pony, trying to understand her. Why did she have to be so difficult about Peachy Cream?

Gathering the pieces into a bag, Sandstorm stood and glanced out the entrance. "I've gotta use the bathroom," she muttered.

Peachy Cream widened her eyes. "You're gonna get all wet!"

Sandstorm grabbed a small blanket off the floor, tossing it over her head and back. "I'll be fine. We're drenched already. Be back in a mo!"

1557's eyes trailed the earthen pony out of the tent, staring long after she'd disappeared from view. He had an idea. A far-fetched idea, but maybe one that would work....

“Sandy always beats me at chess,” Lily commented. She folded up the board, sliding it into a saddlebag. “Beats me at most things, actually,” she added under her breath.

“I gotta go too,” said 1557, standing abruptly. “Be right back.” He dashed out the entrance.

The rain assaulted him immediately, making him squint as he stared into the obscured forest. A rumble of thunder sounded closer than ever. Water drenched his coat. He thought he could see Sandstorm’s figure, hurrying into the trees.

The disguised drone ducked behind a tree where he would be out of sight. Then, he took a long, deep breath and closed his eyes. While the chilly rain cascaded onto him, he brought up an image of Peachy Cream. Red hair, milky coat, bright and chipper eyes. The filly was frighteningly little; he didn’t know if he could go small enough. Each pound he dropped in a transformation was a significant expenditure in energy.

Slowly, he drew on the magic within him. It was usually second nature, but, this time, he pulled until he could gather no more. If the effort took more energy than he could spare, he would probably black out. What would happen then?

No -- he could do this. He was one of the most talented shapeshifters in the Hive.

He clenched his teeth, then let the magic flow. A wave of green flame, seemingly unaffected by the rain, fluidly shifted over his body. Sparks fizzled from his horn. More and more strands of fire swept out until the yellow pegasus was completely engulfed in luminescence, swirling furiously. His body shook as more and more energy rushed through it.

A pop, then 1557 staggered forward, nearly collapsing onto the drenched earth. A wave of fatigue rushed into him, making his limbs feel like lead. He would have been glad to lay down on the mud and sleep.

Cream-colored hooves, he noted. He straightened, with some effort, and found the ground much closer than usual. He took a deep breath, garnering what energy he had left. He had to be quick. Sustaining the transformation was already making his body ache.

“Sandy!” he called, his high pitched voice squeaking, as he raced through the forest. He nearly stumbled as his tired legs protested.

Surprised, the mare turned. “Peachy! What are you doing out here?”

“I wanted to talk to --” 1557 gasped for air -- “talk to you away from Zap and Lily. I’m sorry about earlier.”

“What?” Sandstorm hurried up to the filly, hovering over her protectively. “Peachy, you’re getting drenched.”

“The bug thing! I made him up. He didn’t take Mr. Paws.” 1557 stared up, eyes pleading. His eyelids were drooping slightly. He leaned on the sandy mare, grateful for the support. “I... I thought it would be fun, but now I feel really bad about lying to you so I’m really sorry. Please don’t tell anyone,” he said all in a rush. His head fell onto Sandstorm’s side, but jerked back as he felt his eyes starting to close.

“Oh, Peachy,” she said, enveloping the disguised drone in a hug. “It’s okay. You told the truth eventually, didn’t you?” 1557 was aware of an open stream of love coming from the mare, much stronger than he’d ever felt from Lily or Cobalt.

The pony’s soft body was going to put him to sleep. He broke away, putting on the widest grin he could manage. “Thanks, Sandy!” he squeaked, eliciting a smile in return, then rushed back towards the tent. Once he was out of the forest, he collapsed onto the ground. He let the transformation fall away, and in a violent flash he was back to his changeling form.

He kneeled in the mud, unthinking, before even collecting his thoughts. *Great, now I have to turn into Zap.*

It took him several very long moments before he could bring himself to undergo another change. The magic was slow in coming, at first seeming out of reach. He felt like he had just sprinted a mile. Exhausted, emptied, yet still spurred on by nothing but willpower. A thin flash of green.

The drone slowly walked into the tent, trying to appear normal. His sleeping bag looked as comfortable as a cloud. Collapsing onto it with a sharp exhalation, he finally let his eyes close.

- oOoOoOo -

“...it’s just so unbearably annoying. Apparently Blue Iris from the other side of the city -- like, the only other blankflank in Canterlot older than fifteen -- finally got her cutie mark. Dad wouldn’t stop badgering me about it, like it’s my fault somehow!”

1557 cracked open an eye, woken by Lily's bothered movements.

"I'm sorry," said Sandstorm sympathetically, looking at her friend over a butterfly-patterned notebook.

1557, sleepily, looked back at Zap's cutie mark, a cartoonish lightning bolt. A thought crossed his mind. If changelings had cutie marks, what would his be?

"I just -- ugh." Lily buried her face in her hooves. "I have so many things going on right now, but I can hardly walk to work without people staring at my flank. It's like... well if you'd listen to my dad it's like I'm missing something *fundamental* that makes me a pony. I might as well be an alien."

"Ooh!" said Sandstorm. "That's good." She grabbed a pen with her mouth and scribbled something in her notebook.

Lily looked up, slightly suspicious. "What are you writing?"

"I'm working on a companion piece for *White Stars*," she mumbled around the writing utensil. "You just gave me the best character idea."

Lily blinked. "An alien?"

"No, a blankflank."

An uncomfortable silence. Thunder rumbled in the distance. 1557 blinked sluggishly.

"Do you ever think about anything but *White Stars*?" Lily asked. When 1557 glanced at her, he saw a hint of harshness in her expression.

"I still don't know what your play is about," complained Peachy, interrupting the tense moment. "You talk about it all the time, but you won't tell me about it."

Sandstorm set down the pen. "I told you, it's not for young ponies." She brushed a strand of red hair out of Peachy's eyes.

"I can handle it," responded the filly, swatting her sister's hoof away.

Sandstorm paused. "How about I read a different story?" She reached for her bag, rummaging through it with one hoof until she found a small, dog-eared paperback.

Peachy Cream was indecisive for a moment. "Okay." She flopped down onto the sleeping bag.

In the corner of his eyes, 1557 caught a glimpse of Lily rolling her eyes. The sandy pony didn't notice as she flipped through the worn book. A cleared throat, then a smooth voice.

"The first night, then," she began, "I went to sleep on the sand, a thousand miles from any pony habitation. I was more isolated than a shipwrecked sailor on a raft in the middle of the ocean..."

1557 set his head down on his sleeping bag, letting the words float aimlessly through his head. He must have only slept for a few minutes. His scalp was still sore from the club-like object.

"Thus you can imagine my amazement, at sunrise, when I was awakened by an odd little voice. It said: 'If you please -- draw me a sheep!'

"What!'

"Draw me a sheep!'"

1557's attention was drawn to Tiger Lily, who had a strange look on her face. Maybe sorrow? No, something more bitter. She was staring at the two sisters, Peachy with her eyes closed peacefully and Sandstorm focused intently on the narrative. The filly was reclining comfortably against her sister's tan coat, breathing in and out slowly. 1557 could feel their sickly-sweet love permeating the air.

He knew what it was. Jealousy.

Several paragraphs passed before Lily tore her eyes away from the pair. 1557 closed his eyes as well, letting his mind fade into hazy thoughts.

- oOoOoOo -

Early in the chapter add a bit where sandstorm said something not very tasteful about how they're lucky to have opportunities to pursue their passions in canterlot, when lily mentions wanting to live in a small town. Then, sandstorm asserts that there's really no excuse to be unsuccessful in a society like this because all it takes is hard work. This also leads to the faction plotline.

1557 was awoken again when a body shuffled past him, heading out of the tent. Changelings were light sleepers. Evolutionarily advantageous, but a nuisance whenever he tried to sleep outside of the Hive.

“You awake?” asked Lily. There was an odd, emotional waver in the pegasus’ voice.

1557 nodded, groggy.

“Peachy Cream fell asleep, so Sandstorm’s taking her to the other tent. I mean, it’s probably time to turn in anyways. I’m pooped.”

“G’night!” came a low call from outside.

“Night, Sandy!”

1557 blinked. “Uh, ‘night.”

More shuffling, then the sound of a zipper as the other tent was opened. The rain had stopped, he noticed, leaving the crickets to sing as the sole sound. The air was still as Lily spread out a sheet, making her bed.

“Isn’t it nice out here, Zap?” she said, sitting down onto the blanket.

He ought to go back to sleep. “Mm.”

“It’s a huge relief to get away from the city sometimes,” the pink pegasus murmured. “Not to mention getting away from dad. I just feel... you know. Too much pressure sometimes.” An appreciative grin appeared on her face. “I know I can tell *you* about it,” she said, putting a bit too much emphasis on “*you*.”

“Hm?”

“I mean, I gotta find a better job, get an education, be a good friend. And you know, our apartment sprung a leak earlier this week, so I’m trying to fix it myself because we can’t really afford to pay for it. Not to mention, Lester from next door is threatening to sue me for a botched *petsitting* job.” She laughed, but it was dry. “Like, somehow, during all this, I’m supposed to discover my special talent?”

At least you get three square meals a day, thought 1557. Outwardly, he put on a concerned expression. “Can’t your dad help?”

“Pfft. He’s still unemployed. The only thing he does nowadays is fret over me.”

Lily sighed, adjusting her position on her makeshift bed. "But what can you do? You just put on a good face and keep pushing through."

Guessing that she was done, 1557 closed his eyes slowly, coveting the warm of the fabric under him.

"You know what?" continued Tiger Lily. "I really need to move out, but dad won't even consider it. Can you think of anypony our age who still lives with their parents?"

"He's just concerned about you," responded 1557, not fully paying attention.

"I know, but..." the pegasus sighed. "I want to go to Ponyville."

1557 flicked his ears. "Why there?" he asked, lazily.

"Well -- Canterlot is nice, but it's way too busy. It's like... in small towns, everyone knows each other, and no one's in a hurry, and you can do what you want to do."

"Uhuh," responded her friend.

There was a silence for a while. When Lily finally continued, her tone was hushed. "You know, maybe if I was raised in a small town, there wouldn't be so much pressure to find a purpose," she murmured. "I mean, you've just gotta be happy, right? You're lucky, Zap -- you have a huge, warm family waiting for you when you go home...."

1557 opened his eyes, hearing hints of tears. A longing for a future that could have been, but wasn't.

"Who needs a special talent?" muttered Lily. "Who needs a degree?" Fervor rose in her voice. "Zap, do you -- do you want to know why the University of Fillydelphia rejected me?"

1557 didn't respond. He wasn't sure if the pegasus was even talking to him anymore.

She stood, pacing within the confines of the tent. "I mean, I tried to appeal the decision, really, and you know what they said? You know what the letter said? *'because of your cutie mark, or lack thereof, we do not believe you meet our standards of focus and determination -'*" She stomped the floor, indignant. "Bullshit! They denied me for being a *blankflank*. You can't do that. You can't..."

The mare took in a long breath, then gave a snuffle. She sat down abruptly. "Sorry."

In the text before this, the conversation got more involved and Lily actually revealed her feelings about Sandstorm.

1557 stared with an uncertain expression. The pegasus had always seemed indomitable, but now she seemed defeated, on the edge of tears. She looked at the floor, hair hiding her expression.

Zap would have been comforting Lily by now. Maybe he should try.

“Hey, Lily....” The drone stood and slowly walked over to his friend, sitting down beside her. He awkwardly stretched out a wing and pulled her close. Lily, clearing holding back tears, rested her head on his shoulder.

Ignoring, for the moment, the uncomfortable contact with her soft body, 1557 tried to clear his thoughts. His exhaustion didn’t help. “It’s... it’s hard to be left behind when it looks like everyone else knows what they’re doing,” he murmured. “You grow up being told you have to belong and be like everyone else. And it doesn’t really stop.”

Lily was silent.

“And... uh, I know how it feels, when all you want is a normal life without having to fight for it every step of the way. I know it feels terrible.”

Lily looked up. “Do you?” she asked, quietly.

He could hear the echoes of other changelings in his head. Calling him *Kitty*. *Cockroach*. *Runt*. He could see Beetle’s disapproving face, staring at him after the tenth time he’d messed up the drill. The unit leader didn’t even say anything, out of words. He just shook his head.

“Yeah.”

There was a silence. Was she crying? 1557 couldn’t tell. His coat still damp from the rain.

“It took me a while,” muttered the drone, “to realize that what they told me... it might not, you know. It might not all be true.”

Lily closed her eyes tightly.

“Maybe the people who put you down and told you what you have to do -- maybe they’re wrong. The people who tell you that society has to work this way. Maybe they’re wrong.”

At the moment 1557 could see nothing but the dozens of green capsules hanging from the ceiling of the feeding chamber, ponies lined up one by one in unending stasis.

“And I’m still not sure,” he concluded quietly.

“Hey, Lily!” came a chipper voice from outside. 1557 jumped, detaching himself from the pink pegasus and scrambling back to his own sleeping bag.

Lily quickly dried her tears, though she kept looking at the floor. “Yeah, Sandstorm?” Her voice was unstable.

“Come out here, I need to talk to you about something.”

The pink pegasus glanced at Zap, who shrugged and gave a supportive smile. Lily took a deep breath, steadying her breathing. She unzipped the entrance and clambered out.

“What’s up, Sandy?”

1557 let the emotion fade from his face. A shiver momentarily seized his body.

He had more in common with Lily than he’d expected. And, listening to the pegasus’ voice outside, valiantly bright and cheerful, he thought of one more similarity. He could hide his true self. So could she.

The two ponies’ voices faded to a whisper, inaudible. The drone, sitting still, felt his thoughts drifting into darker territory. His conversation with Lily had dredged up concerns that he’d manage to bury for the majority of the day. He needed to distract himself somehow.

What were those two talking about? 1557 got up and trotted to the opaque plastic wall, carefully placing his ear against the surface. Still, nothing more than a whisper. Even the soft breeze was louder. He thought of a trick that he’d learned years ago, though he’d had little opportunity to use it since. His lessons from Anatomy 101 were buried deep in the back of his mind.

A flicker of green flame, and his yellow ears broadened slightly. Deep within, a slow, small click, bones and cartilage shifting and snapping back into place. All of a sudden the crickets were deafening.

A thin, distant voice. “...I mean, Lily, don’t you think she’s a little... *different* now?”

“What? No, of course not.” An indignant response.

“Not even a little? She used to be so innocent and upbeat.”

A pause. “Well... maybe a little. But come on, Sandstorm! Ponies change, but a friend is a friend, and that’s that.”

"It's... it's not just that."

A long pause. 1557 strained his ears.

"Remember what Cinderblock said back at rehearsal?" Sandstorm's murmur was nearly inaudible.

A second as Lily processed the thought. "Oh! What? No! That's impossible."

"Are you sure?"

"You sound like one of those illumineighti conspiracists. Of course I'm sure! Do you seriously think a changeling could act like Zap?"

"I'm just saying you should be careful," said Sandstorm.

Lily breathed out with a hint of exasperation. "You're being ridiculous."

"It's possible! You know, in the companion piece to *White Stars* there's a changeling that -"

"You know what I think?" snapped Lily. "I think you need to get your head out of *White Stars* and face reality for once."

"Hey!" Sandstorm sounded offended. "Theatre is my life right now."

"Oh yeah? Well maybe some ponies have actually *important* things to deal with in their -"

Lily stopped abruptly.

Sandstorm didn't speak. The silence was like ice.

"I'm... I'm sorry, Sandy."

"No, it's alright." Sandstorm's voice was curt. "Maybe some ponies do have more important things to worry about."

Muffled hoofsteps. Then, nothing.

1557 slowly let his ears return to normal, walking quietly to his sleeping bag. Inside, his thoughts were racing. Sandstorm was starting to catch on. He wasn't convincing her. He'd avoided one disaster today, but another one was already emerging.

The tent entrance unzipped, letting in a small draft of humid air. Tiger Lily entered, then slowly padded over various blankets and bags. The mare's eyes looked dismal, troubled, her head drooping as she walked. Lethargically, she curled up under her blanket and faced away from her friend.

"Lily?" he asked, making himself sound concerned. "What's wrong?"

Her response was so quiet he might have mistaken it for the wind. "Nothing."

1557 blinked. He would never understand ponies, with their complicated layers of hidden emotion. Lily and Sandstorm had seemed such close friends, but in the span of the day they were like strangers.

A low snuffle drew his attention, and, turning to Lily, he noticed her shoulders shaking. An unexpected pang hit 1557. He felt a sudden urge to go back and comfort her once more, to calm her tears and let himself leak out his true thoughts.

What am I doing? he asked himself, turning back around abruptly. This was wrong. He was a changeling, not a pony, and there was no way he could start acting like this. Terra was right. Changelings deceived to prosper. Changelings killed to live.

Commander Lacewing's words suddenly came to mind. *"Do not forget, 1557, that you are part of the changeling army. Remember your place. Though you may live among the ponies, you will never be one."* At the time he'd dismissed it as an unnecessary warning. Now, he understood. Now he would start living by those words.

Yet, as he stared at the ceiling, he couldn't take his thoughts away from the sobbing mare.

12

“And what makes you think they’re so special? You think they stop being ponies when they put on a mask?” 1557 addressed the crowd accusingly -- or, rather, the collection of chairs that Twitch had set up to represent the crowd. He leaped onto one of the cots, gesturing grandly. “This is a time of *war*. Maybe we ain’t using guns like the ponies of Ancient Equestria, and maybe the battlefield is the grimy slums of the city. But mark my words -” the drone glared at one chair after the other - “by the time this boils over, blood will be spilled. And I’ll be damned if it’s gonna be mine.”

“Why do you always get the cool monologues?” complained Twitch, sprawled out on his seat.

“Read the script,” said 1557, rolling his eyes and dropping character for a moment.

“We really should have had a badge for earlier in this scene,” said Twitch, refusing to budge. “We could have used Lacewing’s unit leader badge.”

1557 blinked. “Yeah, if we wanted to have our carapaces flayed off.”

“She stares at that thing, like, *every night* before she goes to bed,” Twitch whispered, eyes wide. “Must be important.”

“How do you know that?” 1557 narrowed his eyes.

“I told you earlier, I can read minds.”

“You cannot read minds!” the drone responded, exasperated. “Were you spying on Lacewing?”

“*Well*,” Twitch said, looking off to the side. “It gets boring around here, so I have to entertain myself somehow.”

1557 was speechless.

“She also hugs a pillow when she sleeps,” the lanky drone continued.

His eye ridges raised. “Really?”

“Really.”

1557 stared at him for a while, trying to detect a lie. Twitch's expression was comically serious, as if they were discussing a funeral. 1557 willed himself to keep a straight face. Eventually, he had to look away as he grinned. Twitch responded likewise, and soon the drones were giggling like schoolfillies.

Twitch cleared his throat, then jumped to his hooves, holding the booklet out in front of him. "Anyways!" His voice was smoother, more focused. "Is that what you think, Ripley? Pony versus pony, huh?"

1557 coughed out a last laugh, straightening back into his character's intimidating stance. Immediately he was back in character. "What do you suppose we do?" he responded, hopping down to stare the other drone in the eye. "Sit still and let them ruin our city? You're new here, Paris, so let me tell you something. We've been working on stabilizing this society for nearly ten years now, and we're *this close* to success." He held his hooves an inch apart. "I'm not letting some lunatics wearing animal masks ruin all that work!"

"And how are you going to stop them, huh? Crush them? Destroy their lives?" Twitch jabbed at the other drone's chest. "I don't care about your *war fantasies*. This isn't Ancient Equestria. We already have our work cut out for us -- if we start fighting ourselves too, then there's no hope for **City Name**."

1557 scoffed. "We'll... Uh, we'll...."

He paused. "Line?"

Twitch looked down at the script, reading in a monotone. "We'll see what you think when your family is -"

"We'll see what you think," growled 1557, instantly back in character, "when your family is driven out into the wilderness to fend for itself. I've had enough of this. Good day, Paris." He turned, stalking away. *Exit stage left*, he thought to himself.

Unenthusiastic applause sounded from the entrance. 1557 spun, catching sight of Commander Lacewing.

"Bravo, drones. Now, if you two are *done*, we have business to attend to. Come with me."

1557 gave Twitch an embarrassed glance. He'd enjoyed acting out *White Stars* with his companion, but they must have looked ridiculous. Good thing she hadn't showed up earlier when they were discussing the badge.

The drone had spent most of the last few days at the camp, hanging out with Twitch and avoiding Fang's slobber. After the emotional incident with Lily -- and learning about Sandstorm's suspicions -- he'd decided it was best to excuse himself from Canterlot for some time.

There had been time to spend long hours poring over the dialogue in Sandstorm's play. He had to admit that he saw a hidden genius in the mare, crafting beautifully developed themes and subtly shifting relationships. Since he had been reading from Golden Nebula's copy, he'd also been privy to comprehensive notes and stage directions. He felt especially close to her character -- Dusk. So conservative with words, yet so stirring. And, at the end, so many diverging ideas and stories came together for a strikingly emotional finale.

Eventually he'd suggested they act it out. Espionage practice, he said jokingly. Twitch had leaped at the idea; the young drone really was bored.

He peered into Lacewing's barrack, finding it much the same as his own. There had never really been a reason for him to be there before.

She'd been searching fruitlessly for Terra, the renegade drone, for the past few days. 1557 expected they would begin the journey home soon without him. Some part of him was glad. His experiences in Canterlot had dredged up a massive weight of doubts, some uncomfortable ideas about the Hive. On the other hand, he knew he'd never experience something like this again. The society of ponies was so shockingly complex, with each pony adding a unique flavor. An odd contrast to repetitive Hive life.

Besides, he would have to miss *White Stars*. He knew he was trying to stay detached from pony society, but he had let himself have this as his one indulgence. It was a great story and an awe-inspiring feat of acting. What was wrong with enjoying that?

The commander was pulling a rolled-up newspaper out of a drawer. She unrolled it with her magic, presenting it to the two drones. "*Changeling scare causes panic in Fillydelphia*," she read. "The article says there were at least twenty drones involved in raids of government facilities. Did either of you hear about this?"

1557 shook his head, scanning the article intensely. Twitch was silent; he always seemed subdued when in Lacewing's presence. He took a while to stare at the picture; that changeling looked familiar....

"There were sectors dispatched to Fillydelphia -- two, if I remember correctly -- alongside the ones that went to Canterlot. I considered travelling there to meet up with

the others, but I assumed their operations would have been over by then. In fact, they should be back at the Hive by now.”

“Then why are they...?” He squinted. “Commander, do you recognize that drone?” He pointed at a changeling at the edge of the photo, seemingly in the lead of the small swarm.

She was silent for a moment. “He does look familiar.”

“I think it’s Terra,” said 1557, quietly.

The three drones considered the implications, eyes fixed on the article.

“Commander, I haven’t told you everything about Terra’s escape,” 1557 muttered. “He had... he had *plans* to carry out in Equestria.”

“Elaborate,” said Lacewing, voice like stone.

The drone spoke about Terra’s disrespect for their Queen, his belief about the future state of the Hive. He’d said that the changelings needed a leader. In Fillydelphia, it certainly looked like they’d found one. And, on reflection, 1557 thought he knew what Terra was planning on doing next.

Lacewing had dropped the newspaper by now. “He *what?*” Her usually stoic facade cracked open for a moment as she heard of the drone’s audacity.

“He thinks he can replace Chrysalis,” 1557 responded, eyes narrowed. “They already hit government sites. I think he’s going to invade Equestria himself.”

“With twenty drones?” asked Twitch quietly.

Lacewing pulled open more drawers, floating out objects. A bag was taken from the corner, filling up with documents and personal belongings. “We have to stop this. I’m going to Fillydelphia.”

1557’s eyes widened. “Right now? Are we going with you?”

The commander glanced at Twitch as she sealed her bag. “It may be difficult to transport you two across the country with me.”

“Well, if we just went into disguise...” 1557 looked at his companion, who was staring pointedly away from him. He glanced at Twitch’s mangled horn, then realized that he’d never actually seen him transform before.

"I will go alone," said the commander with a sense of finality. "Don't let the camp be discovered, don't let your identity get out. If you have to leave, hole up somewhere in the forest and wait for me."

Oops, thought 1557, sharing glance with Twitch.

Lacewing closed the zipper on her bags, then turned to look the two drones in the eye. "I should be back within a week, at the very most. Operations have run smoothly so far, so I'm sure you two can handle things without me. Are we clear?"

A determined nod. "Yes, ma'am."

The commander looped the bag around her shoulder. Then, almost as an afterthought, pulled open the drawer and rummaged through it again. 1557 sensed she was done. Nudging Twitch, he walked towards the exit.

The door slammed shut in a blaze of green magic, making the drones recoil. "Which of you two took my badge?" hissed Lacewing from behind them, the changeling's smooth voice suddenly sounding deadly.

1557 spun around. "Twitch?" he asked in disbelief.

"It wasn't me! It wasn't me this time, I swear!" the drone backed away, eyes wide.

"Do you think it hopped out on its own?" hissed the commander, returning to her natural form and stepping up to Twitch. "Give it back. *Now*."

"I-I don't have it," he responded, backing up against the wall. 1557 had been getting used to Lacewing's civil side; her vicious protectiveness came as a shock.

"Who else has been in this building in the past four days?" she demanded, eyes aflame. "Who could have taken it, *12-6709*?"

1557's eyes widened suddenly as he came to a realization. Someone else *had* been in here. Peachy Cream. But he couldn't tell the commander about that, or she would ask why the filly was there and why he didn't detain her. Lacewing's anger now would pale in comparison to her reaction.

"I don't have time for this," hissed the commander. "I'll miss the train to Fillydelphia. I expect the badge to be back where it belongs by the time I return, or I won't be so *understanding*. Is that *clear*?"

"Yes ma'am," mumbled Twitch.

Transforming once again, she strode angrily out of the building. Both drones were left silent.

“Did you take it?” asked Twitch, timidly.

“I think the filly took it,” responded 1557, still looking out at where the commander had disappeared. “I’ll get it back. It’s no big deal.”

Fang was also there this whole time, by the way.

- oOoOoOo -

The next day, 1557 knocked firmly on the door of Sandstorm’s residence. The brick home was a respectable place, located not far from the busy center of Canterlot. A wind chime dangled from the roof of the small porch. A small window garden of flowers hung off of a window.

He wasn’t in his usual disguise. His coat was a sandy tan, his hair in a ponytail, and his cutie mark, a quill. The real Sandstorm was away at rehearsals; she wouldn’t return home until at least sundown. Plenty of time for him to get the badge from Peachy Cream and get back to camp. He had considered asking directly, but he couldn’t think of an excuse for Zap to be asking for such a thing. Better to be subtle.

The door opened. A young purple mare greeted him, smiling. “Sandstorm! You’re back early.”

“Hey, Lavender! I just forgot some books,” said 1557, returning the smile. “And I, uh, left my keys at the studio.” He’d done his research before showing up to Sandstorm’s house. Both parents were on a business trip, not expected back for another month. Only Peachy Cream and her babysitter were there.

“Did you dye your hair?” asked Lavender Lilac, shutting and locking the door behind them.

“Hm? What?” 1557 turned his head, catching sight of his ponytail. Was it a shade off? “I uh, no. It must be the lighting.”

“Really? It looks nice today!”

“Thanks!” He hurried down a hallway before the mare could question him more.

He passed through a spotless sitting room, looking for the staircase. A series of bookshelves held both dusty-looking tomes and various valuable objects on display. Near the window, a typewriter and piles of discarded paper covered a dark brown desk. That must be where Sandstorm worked.

Upstairs, he encountered a closed door with a sloppy, hoof-written sign. *Peachy's Room! Stay out!*

He glanced off to the side, then ducked into the bathroom. Better fix the hair. If Lavender Lilac had noticed, then Peachy could certainly realize that something was off.

Lighter? Darker? 1557 leaned up against the counter, peering into a large mirror as his hair slowly shifted hues. There were so many possible shades of brown, and he couldn't remember which one to use. *Maybe I can find a picture of her somewhere?*

He did have one idea, however. Quickly, he transformed back into his natural form. His instinct had often proved more helpful than his conscious memory; if he started the disguise from the beginning, the hair might correct itself.

The door opened.

"Hi Zap!" Peachy Cream trotted past him, nonchalant. She grabbed a towel from a rack on the wall. "What are you doing here?"

1557 was speechless. His body was still tense, prepared to stop the filly, but his thoughts had run into a brick wall.

"Are you looking for Sandy? She's at rehearsals."

The drone looked down, confirming to himself that he was covered in a black carapace and not a yellow coat. His legs, as hole-marked as always. "How -- why are you --"

"I saw you in one of those metal buildings when we were camping," responded Peachy brightly. "I didn't say anything because maybe you're self-conscious about being a bug thing."

"You... didn't tell anyone?"

"Not even Sandy!" Peachy sounded proud. "She tells me that changelings are dangerous, but I can tell you're really nice. I mean, if I looked like you, I'd probably turn myself into a pony too."

"Thanks," 1557 said, voice dry.

Peachy Cream smiled before she left. The changeling was left standing there for a moment, staring after her. Then, he came to his wits.

“Hey! Peachy!” He dashed after her, managing to catch her before she entered her room. “I appreciate that you kept it a secret. Don’t tell anyone, please.”

“You can trust me,” responded the filly, turning to gaze at 1557.

“And, uh. When we were camping, did you take anything from those metal buildings?”

“I took the blue armor,” she said, cross, “but Sandy made me put it back.”

1557 blinked. “Did you find like... a badge?”

“Oh! Yeah, do you want to see it?”

“Actually, I kind of need it back. It’s very important.”

The filly pouted. “Aww. Okay. Wait right here.” She disappeared into her room.

The changeling remembered seeing Lavender listening to loud music on headphones, too immersed to even notice him walking by. However, he kept his senses alert for hoofsteps on the stairs. The young filly was okay with his secret, but the babysitter would probably object. And by “object,” he meant “run away screaming.”

Then he heard the front door open. He pricked his ears, eyes widening, stepping away from the sound. Who was that?

“Found it!” sang Peachy, muffled, stepping out from her bedroom with Lacewing’s badge clamped in her mouth. “It’s not that pretty anyways, so you can have it.”

From below, he heard Sandstorm call out. “Lavender? Peachy? Where are you?”

“I’m here!” hollered the filly, dropping the badge and racing towards the stairs. Alarmed, 1557 leaped forward and grabbed her tail. “Ow! What -”

“Your sister doesn’t know I’m here,” he muttered. “I’m not supposed to be here. Don’t tell her, okay?”

Peachy’s eyes widened. “Okay,” she whispered.

“Peachy?”

“Coming!” The young pony continued downstairs.

1557 quickly turned into Zap. Less questions if he was seen.

He ran to a window, peering through. Maybe he could just climb through. Even as he searched for the latch, he noticed a carriage waiting in front of the house, an irritated-looking orange pony and a pink pegasus within. Lily and her father. 1557 didn't have a good impression of the stallion -- likely, he wouldn't get away without some impossible-to-answer questions. And if Sandstorm caught wind? It could be the tipping point for her suspicions.

Words drifted up from below. "...I just forgot some of my notes at home. I'll leave in a moment. Think I left them in my bedroom...."

"No, don't go upstairs!" said Peachy suddenly. "They're probably not upstairs."

"What? Where else would they be?"

"I don't know. But I don't think you should...."

"Let me pass, Peachy." A pause, then hoofsteps on the stairs. Panic flooded through 1557's system -- he had to hide! Quickly, he ducked into Peachy Cream's room. He took in the pink wallpaper and flamboyant posters for only a moment before locating the closet. She was only home to grab some notes. She'd be gone soon.

He closed the doors behind him, leaving him in darkness. Through a crack he could see part of the room, but no one would notice him. The sounds of speech were distant, but he thought he could hear Sandstorm muttering to herself. Drawers were opened, papers shuffled. At one point he thought she stubbed her hoof, drawing a sharp exclamation.

"Peachy! Have you seen my clipboard?"

"What?" yelled the filly from downstairs. "Your clipboard? I used it for the project at school last week."

"Did you bring it back?" asked the mare, sounding annoyed.

"Duh!"

Grumbling, he heard Sandstorm approach. The door to the bedroom opened, shedding more light through the room. 1557 gulped, then held his breath. He felt like she would be able to hear his pounding heart.

Please please please don't look in the closet....

Seconds crawled by slowly as the earth pony rummaged through a cabinet, then sifted through a pile of books and belongings on her white desk. She ducked to look under the bed, then stood, a thoughtful expression on her face. Then, she strode straight towards the closet.

The doors were yanked open.

Sandstorm gave a screech as a purple unicorn tumbled out, hair disheveled.

“Lavender?”

“Oh! Hi Sandstorm!” 1557 said, rapidly, wearing a huge grin. He felt a little disoriented from the ultra-fast transformation. “I was uh, looking for something. Looks like it’s not here, haha.” He dashed out of the room before she could respond.

He hurtled down the stairs, not looking behind him. Just before he ran past the sitting room, where the real babysitter was relaxing, he transformed into Sandstorm. Lavender Lilac looked up. 1557 waved cheerfully, then ran past.

“Sandstorm!” called the filly, running up to the disguised drone. “I found the clipboard!” She waved it in the air.

“Lavender!” yelled the real Sandstorm from upstairs. “What are you doing?”

Peachy Cream stepped back in confusion.

“Sandy? What is it?” The real Lavender stepped out from the sitting room. She pulled her headphones off.

“I-I gotta go,” said 1557, tightly, before rushing out the front.

He nearly ran into Lily, who stood poised to enter herself. “Oh! I was just wondering what was taking you so long. Sorry, but I’m missing important things at work.” Her words were apologetic, but her voice was awkward and unfeeling. She refused to meet his eyes. Clearly the aftermath of the camping trip.

“Get in the carriage!” called her father. “There’s no time for dilly-dallying.”

“I *know*, dad!”

1557 was already way too close to being revealed. If Sandstorm came outside -- or Lilac or Peachy Cream -- and saw Tiger Lily driving off with a doppelganger of her....

“Sandy?” asked Lily.

His mind raced, but he couldn't see an easy way out of this. One thing, he knew; he couldn't leave. Sandstorm had caught on to the act. If he left her alone, she might tell the royal guard, or disperse the news amongst Canterlot.

1557 knew what he should do. Since the camping trip, he'd had lots of time to consider his conflicted emotion -- his loyalty to Chrysalis and his sorrow for Lily. He was still unable to reconcile himself with Terra's actions. However, he had come to some sort of a resolve. He couldn't control his emotions, and there was no shame in that. He may have messed up, deserted the army, and grown fond of a pony, but none of that mattered. Because in the end, he was still one of the Queen's drones. The others had called him weak and cowardly, but he had always stood by that one virtue: undying loyalty to the Queen. There was no reason for that to change now.

He'd fucked up. But he could fix this.

"I left my script inside. Be right back."

1557 dashed inside, but then halted in his tracks. In front of him, Sandstorm. A perfect copy. It was like looking in a mirror.

Lavender gasped, backing away from the pair with her eyes wide. Peachy Cream's eyes darted between the two mares. On the other hand, Sandstorm's eyes narrowed. "I knew it." A wide, cruel grin spread across her face. "You can't get away now! I know where you're hiding, *insect*."

He had to be fast. Quick as a , he dashed past the ponies and out of the entrance hall. The study would be in this direction.

"Yeah, run away!" taunted Sandstorm. "Once the royal guard know, you'll never be allowed back in Canterlot. If you thought you could leech off of my friends and get away with it, then you were dead wrong!"

"What's going on, Sandy?" asked Lavender in a tremulous voice.

Before she could answer, the drone leaped back into the room. A letter opener was grasped in his mouth, a deadly look in his eyes. He slid up to Peachy Cream, standing between her and the other two mares. Lavender let out a shrill scream.

"Don't make a sound," 1557 hissed.

"Put that down!" commanded Sandstorm, eyes wide, stepping forward.

“Don’t! Make! A sound!” the changeling ordered, although his voice wavered slightly with uncertainty. “Don’t move, either of you, or the filly gets it.” Sandstorm stared, helpless. Her earlier defiance was gone.

“Sandy? Are you alright in there?” Lily’s voice floated through the door.

“I’m fine!” he called, still in his Sandstorm disguise. “Just give me a moment!”

He could imagine Peachy Cream staring at him in confusion, in hurt, in anger, but he didn’t let himself look. Instead, he turned back into changeling form and focused on the two grown mares. “Sandstorm,” he said in a hushed tone, “you are going to walk outside, greet Lily normally, and go to rehearsals. You will not breath a *word* about this incident. Understood?”

“Or what?” challenged Sandstorm. There was a determined glint in her eye, but the way her voice shook betrayed her fear.

It took him a moment to find his words. “Peachy Cream is coming with me,” said 1557. “And if word gets out, or if guard members come marching up to the camp, she’s *staying* with me. All the way back to the Hive.” He swallowed, almost able to feel Peachy’s horrified gaze. “I’m sure my peers will be *dying* for a taste of her young, pure emotions.”

“Take me instead,” said Sandstorm immediately, stepping towards the drone.

1557 blinked. “Someone would notice. They’d come looking for you.”

Sandstorm was silent for a while. 1557 brought the letter opener closer to the filly’s throat, in case she needed extra persuasion.

“You... you wouldn’t hurt her,” muttered Sandstorm. “I’ve seen you. You fooled Lily and you made Cobalt fall in love with you. That can’t all be fake.”

1557 forced himself to narrow his eyes. The words were difficult to get out. “I’ve spent my entire life sucking ponies dry of emotion. Reducing them to empty, pony-shaped husks. We throw them out into mass graves. One more pony isn’t -- isn’t even a blemish on my conscious.”

The silence stretched out for far too long. 1557 could feel his legs starting to shake as he continued to stare at the mare.

She was going to call his bluff. He was going to have to hurt Peachy.

He imagined bringing the blade a couple inches closer, of seeing it bite into her flesh and watching the body collapse. He could see her blood pooling. A feeling of sickness rose within him.

He couldn't do this. Peachy didn't deserve it. Sandstorm didn't deserve it. He tried to recall his feelings of devotion to the Queen, but his body yearned to simply drop the act and run away.

Sandstorm finally spoke, with a tear-filled voice. "If we stay quiet," she said quietly, "then you'll bring her back?"

"I'll bring her back," responded 1557.

With a deep breath, Sandstorm walked towards the door. She caught Peachy's gaze as she passed. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

The filly didn't respond. Sandstorm stepped out the exit.

1557 turned his gaze to Lavender, who gulped and backed away. "Please don't hurt me," she whimpered. "Please don't hurt Peachy."

"Return to your home," ordered 1557, though his tone was weak. "As -- as far as anyone is concerned, you were replaced by a different babysitter. Say anything, tell anyone, and the filly is a goner."

"Okay," said the purple mare, backing away. "Okay. Peachy, I'm so sorry. I'm so, so sorry. You'll be back soon, sweetie, don't worry..."

1557 stood still as Lavender slowly made her way out the back door. Then, it was silent.

He quietly sank down to the floor. The blade clattered on the tiles as he spat it out. His head buried itself in his arms. Peachy was still standing there, watching the broken drone. The filly didn't speak, and neither did he. The weakest of ponies looked down on him.

Who was he kidding? He wasn't a real changeling.

13

1557 stared down at the stream, watching his distorted reflection. His solid blue eyes, his fanged leer, his armor-covered face. The morning air was cool, the winds still. 1557 could see the moon was just about to fall below the horizon, along its daily, routine cycle. If only his life were so predictable.

There was a rustle in the undergrowth behind him, but he didn't move. Two bodies emerged.

"Oh, hey, Kit," said Twitch.

"Hey."

Peachy Cream trotted up to the river some distance away, wearing a collar that they had originally obtained for Fang. It was tied firmly with a rope to Twitch's forehoof. The filly shot an angry glare at 1557 before leaning down to drink.

Twitch approached the water, but he only stood quietly beside the other changeling. Their reflections were nearly indistinguishable. Both just another identical part of the swarm. Or, at least, that's what he'd thought.

"What's wrong, Kit?" he said, finally.

"Nothing."

"You refused to say anything all day. I want to understand."

"How could you understand?" dismissed the small drone. "All you do is make up stories and play with Fang."

A slight pause. "I can try."

1557 looked up at the other changeling's genuine expression, an odd contrast to his usual happy-go-lucky attitude. "I just want things to go back to normal," he murmured, voice softening.

As he stood side-by-side with Twitch in the cold forest, the drone found himself longing for contact with another body. He wanted some reassurance, some material comfort. He wanted a hug.

Haha. What a joke. The changeling wants a hug.

"I don't like it much out here either," responded Twitch, sitting down in the dirt. "But we didn't have it so great in the Hive anyways."

1557 glanced over. It was true. And now that he had spent so much time with ponies, he would be even more of an outcast. He didn't belong in the Hive, or in Canterlot.

Better not to think about it. "So, uh, the food that I grabbed for Peachy Cream. How much is left?"

"We're about to run out," he reported. "Ponies eat a lot more than I thought they did."

"I'll get some the next time I go to Canterlot," muttered 1557.

Peachy Cream walked up to the two changelings, wiping water from her mouth. Her eyes were defiant, but she didn't say anything. She hadn't spoken much since they'd brought her to the camp.

"Let's head back," said Twitch.

1557 nodded. Together, they ducked into the forest, with the filly following behind.

"So when do the parents come back?" questioned Twitch.

The other drone shrugged. "Not sure. Lacewing will have returned by then, anyways. She can figure it out."

"Two weeks," said a small voice, full of resentment. Both changelings looked over their shoulders.

"What?"

"Mom and dad are coming back in two weeks."

Before 1557 could figure out what to say, Peachy Cream continued on angrily. "I've been thinking about it a lot. And yesterday, when you were talking to Sandstorm. You really meant it, didn't you?"

1557 kept walking, not meeting the filly's eyes; he didn't need another reminder of the incident.

“You were going to....”

“No. I couldn’t have killed you.” The drone sighed. “I was just saying that so Sandstorm would do what I told her to.”

Peachy Cream’s voice was accusing. “Why couldn’t you just ask her, huh? Sandy is a good pony. She wouldn’t give away your secret.”

1557 didn’t respond. He had just woken up, but he hadn’t gotten much sleep. He felt tired, weary to the bone. The conflict was long past, and the threat was taken care of. Yet, he felt terrible.

Twitch spoke up. “Ponies and changelings don’t like each other,” he explained. “If ponies found out about Kit -- I mean, Zap -- then they’d probably throw him in jail.”

“Well, why don’t they like each other?” Peachy’s tone was still defiant.

“Changelings... you know how we feed on love? We can’t really do that without harming somepony. So we kinda don’t have a choice.”

The three emerged into the clearing. Fang bounded up eagerly to his master, who petted him absentmindedly as he walked towards their barrack.

“Zap wasn’t hurting Sandstorm.”

“I was lying to her,” said 1557, trying to answer unemotionally.

“Of course you were lying to her!” Peachy exclaimed. “If you didn’t lie, you’d be thrown in jail, right? But why does it matter? Whether you’re black or yellow you’re still the same pony.”

“I’m not a pony!” yelled 1557, turning around suddenly. His sudden anger silenced the group. His voice broke. “I’m a changeling. We’re different. We’re not supposed to have friends.”

“No one can live without friends,” said Peachy after a moment.

Of course the filly couldn’t understand. She still saw the world in monochrome, in black and white.

“I’m going to Canterlot.” Turning into Zap, 1557 split from the other two. “I’ll get some food for you.”

“

Cobalt trotted up to the yellow pegasus immediately when he entered the room, as cheerful as always. “Hey, Zap!”

“Hey, Cobalt.” He put on a fake, unconvincing smile. They were at rehearsals for Sandstorm’s play again; 1557 couldn’t think of any other place to get love from ponies.

“Is something wrong?” asked the blue stallion, sounding concerned. “Sandstorm looks depressed today too, and Lily didn’t show up at all the past few days. Not that you look depressed,” he added hastily.

“It’s nothing,” said 1557, trotting across the room. He muttered an apology as he stepped past another mare.

“You can tell me,” insisted the pony. “It always helps when you talk to somepony.”

1557 shook his head. “It’s nothing, really.”

The flood of concern coming from Cobalt was nearly overwhelming; the drone took long draughts as he found himself a seat. On stage, an imposing stallion was gesturing wildly as he spoke to a posse of ponies wearing crude, animal-shaped masks. Actors, stage crew, and managers were seated nearby, focusing intently on the scene. There were three days until the play, if he remembered correctly. The atmosphere was taut.

“Hello, Zap,” came a curt voice. Sandstorm. She was shooting at him a resentful glare.

“Hi.”

“What have you been up to lately?”

Kidnapping foals. “Not much. How’s that companion piece to White Stars going?” 1557 stared right back at the pony. “I heard it’s about changelings.”

“It’s going great,” she said, narrowing her eyes.

“Good to hear.”

Cobalt watched the taut exchange with a worried expression. “Did you hear the news from Fillydelphia? Apparently, some changelings attacked the city hall.”

“Well it’s a good thing there are none left in Canterlot,” shot Sandstorm sarcastically as she plodded towards the stage.

1557 knew Cobalt was staring at him, probably anxiously wringing his hooves, trying to figure out what was wrong. Whatever.

They fell silent as the scene continued. It was one of his favorite parts of the play, seeing the ins and outs of the Animals’ society. He also loved the dry humor punctuated throughout the act. **By the way, the Animals were definitely introduced earlier in the story. Totally.**

At least *White Stars* was something he could enjoy without doubting himself. Perhaps, a bit of a guilty pleasure. What was wrong with a changeling that appreciated good acting?

Loud screams from outside interrupted the dialogue, turning heads all over the room. Nearby ponies rushed to the single window, trying to see outside.

“Changelings!”

The room erupted in chaos. Alarmed, 1557 rose into the air. He was much more comfortable on pegasus wings than he had been when he first arrived in Canterlot. Swooping over the others’ heads, he peered out onto the street. A small pod of drones darted down the street, confronted by a group of determined royal guards. Pedestrians dove for safety into buildings, while shops closed their windows. Beams of magic and globs of green goo flew through the air.

Pushing aside one of the stage crew, 1557 ran for the exit. Something was wrong.

“Wait, Zap!” He heard Cobalt from over the tumult of worried voices. “Where are you going? It’s not safe!”

The drone was already rushing down the stairs, shoving the front door open and sliding out onto the sidewalk. He ducked as a pegasus guard zoomed nearby overhead. A line of guards were blocking the path down the street, while a flying squad of chased down drones that tried to zip past their defenses. Already, more armored ponies were flying out from Canterlot Keep to help.

1557 scooted down the street, staying out of the action. He searched wildly, head turning side to side, but he couldn’t see Terra within the chaos. Were these the same drones who had attacked Fillydelphia?

“Zaaap!” Cobalt burst out from the building, galloping towards the yellow pegasus. He cast a frightened eye over the invading forces as he skidded to a halt. His chest heaved with panic and exertion. “What the hell are you doing? We need to get inside!”

“I’m -- I’m looking for somepony I know.” Terra had to be behind this. Apparently he’d proved himself a leader after all, but 1557 was certain that this attack could only end badly. For one, the changelings were outnumbered two to one!

“Come on, Zap!” Cobalt wrapped a hoof around his foreleg, trying to pull the disguised drone back inside. He yelped as a changeling’s green projectile nearly grazed his body.

“Stand back!” roared a stallion, rushing into the center of the conflict. A brilliant glow lit his horn, then a resounding flash cast the world into a blinding white. Letting out a cry, 1557 shut his eyes tightly. The shrieking of changelings filled the air.

Fearing the worst, he let himself peek; the light had faded away, and every drone had collapsed onto the floor. Yet, every pony stood unaffected.

Guards were already rushing between them, chaining changelings together and fitting Diamond Mint’s magic restriction rings on their horns. The murmurs of bystanders slowly turned into a cheer. 1557 stared in shock.

“Whew,” said Cobalt, collapsing into a sitting position. “Thank Celestia that didn’t last long. Zap, are you insane?”

“No?” 1557 answered distractedly, watching the scene before him. The royal guards hauled the disoriented drones onto their hooves, marching them towards the keep. The stallion who had performed the spell trotted at the front, obviously pleased with himself.

Another guard rushed up to him, eyes wide. “Night Watch, how did you do that?” he asked. “The research teams at Canterlot Keep have been trying to recreate something like this for weeks!”

“It’s nothing special,” said the stallion with a cocky grin. “There’s a fundamental difference between changeling and pony eyes. All I did was overload their senses.”

Night Watch? Lacewing’s disguise, and, later on, Terra’s....

As the soldier passed, he glanced at 1557. The disguised drone drew back in shock.

There was a blue light in his eyes.

“I should get back to rehearsals,” muttered Cobalt. “Now that that’s over. Zap, you coming?”

"I don't think it's over yet," muttered 1557.

That wasn't the real Night Watch. Some changeling was pretending to be a royal guard, and he had a sinking feeling that he knew exactly which one.

The plan was obvious now. Get all the changelings into the royal dungeon. Infiltrate the royal guard with a couple talented drones. Set the changelings loose, then overrun the castle before they know what hit them.

"Aren't you coming?" asked Cobalt.

"I-I need to go," said 1557, taking off into the air. He should get back to camp.

"Oh. Seeya tomorrow?"

"Yeah..." Distracted, the disguised drone started through the air, leaving the keep behind him. Cobalt disappeared behind buildings.

A buzzing sound emanated from the keep. A scratchy, magically enhanced voice. *"Attention, Canterlot. The city is under magical lockdown. No pony may leave or enter until further notice. Thank you."*

A pink wall started spreading from the floor up into the sky. Eyes widening, 1557 flapped his wings harder, racing towards the edge of the city. Air rushed by his face and blew back his hair. The hole in the barrier became smaller and smaller. He came screeching to a stop, just in front of the dome, as the space disappeared altogether.

With a frustrated sigh, the pegasus dropped down to the floor. Well -- he had to pick up food for Peachy anyways. He'd almost forgotten in the chaos.

1557 spent much of the day hanging out at the rehearsals for *White Storms*, sitting at the back with a bag of groceries and watching the scenes unfold. Cobalt seemed to have decided that Zap didn't appreciate his company, leaving him alone. However, 1557 did catch the stallion glancing worriedly at him.

Before long, Sandstorm dismissed the crew, still sounding robotic and unenthusiastic. Likewise, the actors were subdued as they dispersed, some murmuring **not-nice** things about their director.

What happened now? Rehearsals were over, yet 1557 saw the barrier still stretching through the sky. Avoiding Sandstorm's accusing glare, he followed hesitantly behind the others as ponies slowly trickled out of the room. Great.

1557 walked slowly down the sidewalk, counting the cracks as they passed. He wasn't sure what to think about Terra. When he'd first met the ambitious changeling, he'd seemed completely insane. Now? He wasn't sure what "sane" meant. It seemed to him that Terra wasn't exactly acting on the Hive's best benefit... but he was hardly on the pony's side.

Kinda reminds me of myself.

He was longing for any decision. He wished that Lacewing was here, so that she could tell him what to do. Tartarus, he would take an order from any changeling. Well -- maybe not Twitch. But, the time of blindly taking orders had been left far behind him.

Well, what were his options? He could try to stop Terra, attempt to reveal his identity. Not unfeasible. And, on the plus side, he'd be the savior of Canterlot.

On the other hoof, he could *join* Terra's forces.

1557 stopped as he considered the idea. It had been a while since he'd been amongst many other changelings. If he joined, he would get the orders and the guidance that he longed for. And, on the plus side... well, it was his lifelong dream, wasn't it? To bring about a peaceful period of changeling rule? Ensure that no drone would ever go hungry?

Yet, he couldn't forget how strongly his body had rebelled after Terra's actions. 1557 was more unsure than ever about Flurry's death. It seemed so *wrong*, yet... it was a part of his dream. Killing ponies to further the livelihood of the changelings.

There were only so many sidewalks for the changeling to traverse. Looking around him, 1557 looked for familiar buildings to hide out in. Green Jewel's hair salon was nearby. A useless establishment, he thought, when he could change his hairstyle with a single poof of transformation magic. He could see Ragtime's place around the corner. Curious as to the state of the building when it *wasn't* throwing a party, 1557 peered into the window.

The scene was shockingly calm. A couple patrons reclined in the lounge, paper plates at hoof. The pool tables were unoccupied. The cashier seemed to be reading a comic book, half-heartedly hiding it behind the cash register.

1557 pushed through the door, setting off a familiar set of bells. The cashier looked up only momentarily. "Welcome to Ragtime's," she said, unenthusiastically.

Most of the seats were filled, but the changeling found a long couch in one of the corners with a mare only occupying the far end. He settled down, dropping the bag of

food beside him. A radio was crackling out news about the recent changeling attack. It was nothing he hadn't seen first-hand.

He rested his head on the armrest, stared silently at the ceiling. He turned the situation around and around in his head. Maybe, like one of those optical illusions, everything would make sense if he just looked from a different angle.

Eventually the drone became aware of an awkward glance coming from the other end of the sofa. With a jolt he recognized the maroon mare from the party, drinking from a straw out of a plastic cup. She looked away, a slight blush nearly visible. 1557 considered moving to a different seat, but the pony seemed to have gotten a grip on her emotions. More than he could say for himself.

"Hey," she muttered, breaking into his thoughts. She didn't look at him. "I'm sorry about the other day."

1557 was silent for some while. "It's fine."

"I'm not usually like that, I swear. Had too much to drink."

Drinking that made ponies act delirious? That was a first.

The mare took a breath, then turned around to face the yellow pegasus. "So, um. I was hoping we could start over. I'm Berry Punch." She extended a hoof.

"Zap." 1557 returned the hoofshake.

Berry Punch smiled, then turned back around. 1557 returned to staring at the ceiling.

He hadn't sat there for long before a buzzing noise came from outside. A crackling message, a familiar voice. *"This thing is working, right? Yeah?"*

1557 shot up from the couch, nearly tripping over his own hooves. "Terra?"

"Ahem. Hello, Canterlot. This is drone 12-3344; I will be your new sovereign ruler this beautiful afternoon." The voice was smug. *"Although I'm sure with the power of love somepony will be able to blast me back out. What do you think, Princess Celestia?"*

There was a short pause.

"Oh, right, I forgot. Princess Celestia is currently... occupied." Terra cackled. *"Don't worry, your precious pony princesses are safe. Relatively."*

He paused again. *“Where was I? Oh, yeah. Movement in and out of the city is restricted indefinitely. Have a good day.”*

As the broadcast cut off, low murmurs arose within the building. 1557 rushed past the wide-eyed patrons, pushing through the entrance and out into the street. He stood amongst other, similarly concerned pedestrians, as he watched the lights in Canterlot Keep dim. A small group of changelings flew out from above the palatial building, disappearing into the city.

The door to the pizza place burst open and Berry Punch galloped out as well, skidding to a halt beside 1557.

“You *know* that pony?”

“He’s... not a pony,” 1557 muttered.

“Is it a changeling?” The maroon mare spoke in a worried voice. “I-I need to get home to my daughter.” She raced down the sidewalk.

After a second, the disguised drone turned around to shout after Berry Punch. “You have a *daughter?*”

The mare looked over her shoulder. “Don’t --” her eyes widened. “*Look out!*”

Ponies around him shrieked and dove for cover. 1557 turned around, but not before a drone’s leering face filled his vision. A solid impact, and he hit the sidewalk, his head ringing.

He was vaguely aware of someone picking him up from under his arms, his body lifting off the ground. “Hey!” he cried, twisting violently. A jolt of pain shot through his head once again, and he was forced to close his eyes.

“Stop squirming,” hissed an annoyed drone’s voice. 1557, heedless, tried to push away the hole-marked arms. The changeling’s grip was like iron.

Canterlot Keep drew close beneath them. Less than gently, the changeling dropped the yellow pegasus onto the balcony. As he stumbled to his knees, another drone swiftly wrapped a tight band around his midsection, pinning his wings to his side. With an angry grunt, he kicked out, feeling a solid body and hearing an “*oof!*”

1557 drew up to his hooves, backing up from his assailants, but something hard hit his head and his world went black.

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Above 1557, a blank, gray ceiling. He leaped to his feet, mind immediately in fighting mode. His head was pounding, and he felt dizzy. A glance at his hooves: he was still disguised as Zap.

“You’re awake,” commented a dry voice.

1557 immediately glared accusingly at the source, a tired-looking drone sitting on a bed across the room.

“Hey, hey, calm down,” the changeling said, raising his arms in a motion of surrender. “I’m not going to hurt you!” He caught sight of 1557’s eyes. “Wait, hold on. You’re a changeling, aren’t you.”

1557 turned from the drone to examine the room he was in. Utilitarian gray walls, reminding him of a prison cell. A metal desk connected to the floor, empty of anything but a lamp, and two low beds were attached to opposite sides of the room. There was no wall to his left: only a set of vertical bars.

Oh. He was actually in a prison cell.

“Shame, too,” continued the other drone, reclining on his pillow. “I thought they paired me with a beautiful mare.”

“That’s disgusting,” commented 1557. “Stick with your own species.”

“Should I?” The changeling raised an eyebrow. “Changelings share a lot of genetics with ponies. Otherwise we couldn’t transform into them so easily.”

“You’re not telling me we could *reproduce* with them.”

“Well, I’ve certainly never tried before.”

1557 slowly sat down. “Ugh. Stop talking.”

The drone grinned. “I’m 12-0132. Call me **Limelight**.”

“12-1557.”

1558 didn't offer the name *Kitten*, and **Limelight** didn't ask. He stared out the prison bars at the empty hallway. Why was he in jail? Did Terra think he was a threat?

"**Limelight**'s a weird name," he said eventually.

"I was thinking about Lemon Limelight, but that makes me sound sour," joked the other drone.

"You chose your own name?" asked 1557 looking up. This changeling was sounding stranger by the second.

Limelight shrugged. "I didn't like the one my unit gave me, so I picked another."

"What was your name before?"

"Puck."

1557 furrowed his eye ridges. He'd heard that name before, but he couldn't quite recall where from. It was like trying to distinguish a figure through heavy fog.

"You recognize me, probably," said the drone nonchalantly, "as the changeling that got captured by ponies and came back a rambling wreck."

1557's eyes shot open. "Oh! *Puck!*"

"Completely misleading, by the way," he said quickly. "The changelings that 'rescued' me used a confusion spell to get past the guards. Happened to affect me too."

"Queen Chrysalis wouldn't sanction a lie like that," defended 1557.

Puck shrugged. "Deception is in every changeling's nature."

They were silent for a moment. "So what really happened when you were captured?" asked 1557, trying to remember all the rumors he'd heard about Puck.

"I wasn't captured. I ran away."

1557 fell silent. Although he would have found the idea absurd a month ago, he thought he might understand why a changeling would run away.

"I worked my plot off to get into an espionage unit. Eventually got stationed in Hoofington on an intel mission. Before long I fell in love with a pegasus named Silverwing and -"

"You *what?*" 1557's jaw dropped open.

Puck rolled his eyes. "Like I said. Genetics. Ponies and changelings. Live long enough in Equestria with a body like that and you'll have plenty of stallions to choose from." He tilted his head. "Or mares."

Immediately, 1557 transformed back into his natural form, though he had to admit that Puck was telling the truth. "Still!"

"Silverwing reacted the same way as you when I finally told her." Puck sighed. "They put hoofcuffs on me and sent me off to speak to Princess Celestia. She let me stay in Canterlot, though they watched me closely in case I tried to run off."

"Did you give her intelligence?" interrupted 1557.

Puck shrugged. "Yeah. Some. Nothing helpful. What she really needed was the location of the Hive, but I don't know where it's at."

"So you're a traitor," muttered the drone.

"I suppoose," said Puck, stretching out the word. "You have a problem with that?"

1557 was silent for a little while. "Keep telling your story."

"Hmph. Well, I got myself a new disguise and enrolled in a school for unicorns. Made a few friends." Puck scratched his shoulder. "I stayed like that for a couple years, but eventually the commanders figured out where I was and dragged me back to the Hive. It was terrible there. Thankfully, after a couple weeks, I had the opportunity to sneak into a supply cart when the army left for the Canterlot invasion. *Not* a fun experience. I got splinters everywhere."

"How did you get splinters through your...." 1557 shook his head. "Nevermind. Keep going."

"Well, after Chrysalis' plan *inevitably* failed, I lived in Canterlot for a while, trying to get back into my previous life. Then Terra found me and stuck me in prison. That's it, really."

"Inevitably?" asked 1557 with a hint of irritation.

Puck snorted. "Don't start. I love Chrysalis, really. She's just overconfident."

1557 spoke heatedly. "Our Queen -- our Queen devoted her life to serving her subjects, and...." he flopped back onto his bed. "Ugh. Forget it."

Puck let out a small laugh. "So. What's your story?" he asked. "If you're so chummy with the Queen, then how come you're not up there with the rest of Terra's army?" He pointed at the ceiling.

1557 pondered the question for a moment. "Last time I met Terra, I saw a pony be killed for the first time. So I got angry at him. He probably thinks I'm on the ponies' side."

"Are you?"

"I don't know," said the changeling, frustrated. "I can't choose. I can't figure it out."

"Who says you have to choose?" asked Puck, solemnly.

"Well, I can't keep living like this!" exclaimed 1557. "I spend every day making friends with people that I might be expected to kill in the future! But I know I'd be an outcast if I went back into changeling society." He sat up suddenly. "What about you? How did you choose?"

Puck, at that moment, seemed very small. He looked at the floor. "I know what you feel like," he responded. "Kinda like your heart is divided in two. First you think of little grubs starving in the Hive, and then you think of ponies being torn from their families to become living food."

He stared directly at the other drone. "I didn't choose the pony's side, 1557. How can I do that, when the ponies want to wipe changelings from existence?"

1557 didn't respond.

"For me, it's easy enough to imagine the solution," continued Puck, voice somehow still strong and steady. "A world where changelings and ponies live side by side, sharing love willingly. But I'm sure you know by now that the world doesn't change so easily. When two sides hate each other this much, any contact is like fire and water. You could try to force them together, but they'd all go up in steam. And then you'd be left with nothing."

1557's eyes were fixed on Puck. If changelings had tear ducts, he thought Puck would be weeping. "So what do I do?" he asked quietly.

Puck sighed. "I guess some would say the only just life is to pursue that dream. I don't know, maybe some sort of diplomatic hero could manage it. But me?" He was laid back on his bed, looking up at the ceiling. "I just wanted a little, personal victory. I wanted one pony and one changeling to love each other -- just once. I guess that's why I jumped the

gun and revealed myself to Silverwing. She was starting to like me, I could tell. If I had waited a couple months... you know, maybe she would have reacted differently.”

The drone paused for a short moment, eyes closed. “I still wanted that victory, though, which is why I stowed away and came back to Equestria. I thought I’d find some friends, make a life for myself, live happily ever after.”

1557 was silent, staring at the ground. He’d had a dream too. Changelings, living peacefully as authoritarian overlords of Equestria.

But maybe it was time to let go of that vision.

“Sorry, that got weird and personal,” said Puck, sitting up. “I’m a hopeless romantic. There are a bunch of books in those cabinets if you’re bored,” he said. “And a chess set. You like chess?”

“I don’t know how to play,” admitted 1557. “Antennae and I used the pieces to play checkers.”

Puck clasped his hooves together. “I have to teach you! Chess is a *real* drone’s game.”

“Not right now,” said 1557. “I need some time to think.”

Puck shrugged. “Suit yourself.” He yawned. “It’s nearly night, anyways. I’m going to sleep.”

“Good night, Puck.”

“**Limelight**. My name is **Limelight**.”

“...Good night, **Limelight**.”

As the room fell into silence, 1557 closed his eyes. He wanted to think about the other drone’s story, figure out his own beliefs, put his life in perspective. Maybe this was a chance to put his doubts to rest.

Yet, all he found himself doing was looking at the faces he’d become so familiar with in the past weeks. Lily, cheerful, but weary when no one was looking. Cobalt, watching him with concern when he thought he couldn’t see. Sandstorm, eyebrows furrowed as she focused intently on the stage. Peachy Cream... an innocent face marred by a resentful scowl.

“Hey, Pu -- **Limelight**?”

“Mhm?”

1557 fidgeted with his hooves, **linking together jagged edges.**

“What was Silverwing like?”

The emptiness stretched on, and 1557 thought Puck wasn’t going to respond.

“She was beautiful,” he began, speaking slowly and purposefully. “Great wings. Long and elegant. I loved her wings. Always made me self-conscious of these things.” He fluttered his own, hole-riddled appendages. “Dark hair, violet eyes. She was self-conscious about those eyes, which I never understood. She hardly ever smiled, which was a shame. But whenever I managed to put a grin on her face, it felt, you know. Special. That’s really sappy, sorry.”

“It’s fine,” said 1557 quietly.

“Anyways... her cutie mark was a crescent moon. She worked night shifts at a hotel. I’m not sure why, but she always seemed more comfortable after dark.”

“She sounds nice,” commented 1557.

“Nice doesn’t even begin to cover it,” said Puck wistfully.

“Kitten?” called out a changeling’s voice from the hallway. With a start, 1557 scrambled to his feet. A stocky drone appeared, a bag slung over his shoulder.

“What is it?” 1557 asked.

“You’re wanted upstairs.” The drone grabbed a key of rings out of his bag, attacking the lock with a couple of _____ attempts. A muffled curse was hidden by clangs of metal.

“Your name is *Kitten*?” whispered Puck, a small fanged grin spreading across his face.

“Shut up,” responded 1557, rolling his eyes.

The drone pulled open the gate, taking a magic dampener ring out of the bag next. 1557 stood still as it was fastened onto his horn.

“K. Follow me.”

The path through the dungeon was familiar, but as he looked into the cells, he found each and every one occupied. In fact, many held two or three. Some were for ponies, huddling fearfully in the corner, and others for resentful changelings that must have tried to rebel against Terra.

1557 jumped as he saw a familiar face in the next cell. "*Lacewing?*"

"Hello, 1557," responded the commander, expression as neutral as ever. She rested on her cot, but she raised her head to her usual respectable position.

"What are you doing here?" he hissed.

"Believe me, it's not by choice." *Lacewing's* voice was dry.

"Hey!" The guard drone snapped at 1557. "You're a prisoner. Don't talk."

"We're both the same rank," 1557 argued, narrowing his eyes.

"Not according to Terra," said the guard disinterestedly. "Keep walking."

The halls of Canterlot Keep were eerily empty. Only a couple drones trotted by, one focusing intently on a document on a clipboard. Another he noticed wearing a purple sash across one of his shoulders -- maybe one of Terra's new high-ranking officers. It was an odd sight.

"Is your name really *Kitten*?" asked the guard, turning his blue eyes on 1557.

"Shut up," he replied once more, eyes narrowing.

Before long, they'd arrived at a familiar location. 1557 recognized the double doors that led to the throne room. However, the guard led him past, taking him instead to a wide flight of stairs. To be honest, 1557 had fully expected Terra to be lounging in the sun tyrant's seat of power.

It was only after several more flights that the guard halted, in front of a tall purple door. He knocked three times.

"Who is it?" 1557 recognized Terra's voice.

"*Talon*," the guard replied. "I have *Kitten* here with me."

"Wonderful! Send him in."

The guard pushed open a purple door, holding it open for the prisoner. Taking a deep breath, 1557 stepped forward.

The room's decor was drenched with lavender, with warm wallpaper and an elegantly shaped fireplace. Books and scrolls laid forgotten in the corners. A wide window showed a panorama of the city, cast under moonlight and lit periodically by green

changeling flame. Terra sat on a purple bed situated in the center, oddly pedestrian compared to the surrounding decor. It looked more like a luxurious bean bag.

The drone gave a toothy grin as Talon allowed the door to swing shut. "Hey, 1557. Sorry about using *'Kitten'* on the summons. It's my policy to not use numbers."

"What do you want?" asked 1557, narrowing his eyes.

Terra rolled his eyes. "Haven't you figured out by now that I'm not the bad guy?" He motioned to a variety of other pillows resting on the floor. "Have a seat."

"I'm fine," he said, curtly.

"Suit yourself." Terra leaned forward, his hooves clasped together. "So! What do you think?"

"What do I think of what?"

He raised an eyebrow. "How I just usurped the most powerful ponies in Equestria, maybe?"

"Impressive." 1557's voice was flat. "Did you want something, or did you just call me to gloat?"

"Well, gloating is part of it, sure." Terra reclined on his bed. "I just wanted to speak to you. We're old friends, right, 1557? It would be a shame to leave it how we did."

"You mean after you -"

1557 stopped. He knew mentioning Flurry would lead to nothing good.

With a sigh, he seated himself on a gold-fringed pillow. "Okay. Fine. You were right."

"Hm?"

"You brought the drones back together. You conquered the ponies. Somehow, I don't know."

Terra grinned once more. "I've been busy. How about you? How are you liking life amongst the ponies of Canterlot?"

"It's... it's fine."

"Got your fill of love and friendship?"

1557 didn't speak, and he knew Terra could hear the hesitation in his voice. "There's a place in Canterlot Keep for you, 1557. A place among other drones. No need to keep hiding."

"I didn't say anything about that."

A skeptical look. "Wouldn't you rather live with us? And besides, now that I control the city, it's not like any of us will go hungry."

"It's not just about feeding!"

Terra laughed suddenly. "Ohhh, I see. You don't want to leave your friends." He leaned over and flicked the small drone's nose, making him jump back. "Stop being so *sentimental*. If they ever found out that you're a changeling, they'd hate your guts."

1557 knew it was true, if Sandstorm was any indication.

"Come on. Let's go for a walk." He stood and strode to the entrance, pushing open the purple doors. 1557 slowly rose to his feet, following some distance behind.

As Terra meandered down the hallway, two drones fall into line behind them, each wearing a blue helm. Bodyguards?

"Think about this, 1557. Once you're on my side, it'll be like life in the Hive again -- plus everything you ever wanted." Terra slowed his pace until he was beside 1557, eyes wide with sincerity. "No one's going to make fun of you. The officers won't ignore your talent. After all, we still have to conquer the rest of Equestria and put down whatever resistance we find -- that's a hard job. I need drones like you, 1557. Dependable and smart."

"I'm neither of those things," muttered 1557.

"I've seen you in action, 1557," Terra scoffed, turning onto a staircase. "You're the most talented shapeshifter in Canterlot. Your only weakness is your sentimentality, and you know what? That's a valuable trait. If we're not kind, then everypony will rebel. I don't need you to kill people. I just need you to get on their good side, convince them that your disguise is legit. You're good at that, right?"

1557 narrowed his eyes and stopped walking. "You just want to use me, don't you?"

With a sigh, Terra turned around. "Fine, I'll be upfront with you. You're a valuable asset. Your assistance can be a game-changer here. But let me ask you something -- what does Lacewing think of you?"

“What’s that got to do with anything?”

“She didn’t even know you before the invasion, huh? Maybe just that one annoying drone who kept messing up the drills.”

1557 didn’t respond.

“You were just a number, 1557. Another, identical, expendable part of the changeling army.”

“I was a part of something bigger,” he defended. “That’s part of being a changeling.”

“How about loss of identity?” Terra sounded dismissive. “Believe me, us drones are still parts of a whole. But things are going to be different. Every drone will be referred to by name, and every drone will have a part to play and an opportunity to speak their voice.” He spun towards the two helmeted drones. “1557. Meet Pincer and Tracer.”

The diminutive drone looked over his shoulder. “Hey.”

“Hey,” responded Pincer. The other nodded in acknowledgment.

“I’ve never met more trustworthy drones. Both of them would give their lives for the cause.” Terra turned and continued down the checkered floor. 1557 followed after a moment, as well as the two guard drones, who stood a little straighter after the praise.

He led them up a spiraling staircase, emerging on a balcony at the pinnacle of a gold-capped tower. 1557 stared out at the view as he ascended the final steps. It was a remarkably clear night; he could see all of Canterlot, laid out like a map. The streets were empty and windows were dark as ponies huddled in their homes. Past the gracefully designed buildings, a steep drop led to the bottom of the mountain. Forests, rivers, lake. Patches of buildings -- some solitary towers, other stately skyscrapers -- dotted the landscape. At the horizon, city lights mingled with the stars in the sky.

“Some would call my plan impossible, but we’ve done plenty of impossible things since we’ve arrived here.” Terra trotted up to the railing, exhaling deeply. “All of Equestria,” he murmured. “What do you say, 1557?”

He turned back to the drone, an expectant look on his face, but 1557 was still frozen at the top steps. He didn’t know. How could he decide? He’d been in confusion for too long, avoiding the confrontation and running away from the consequences.

Puck's vision had been so compelling and _____. In Puck's dream, no one died. But now, Terra was offering him the world. His vision. His ambitions. All he had to do was join him at the railing.

"I don't know," stammered 1557 finally, drawing back a few steps. "I'm sorry. I need to think about it."

Terra's expression seemed sincere, nothing but disappointment. Was he acting, or was he sincere?

"You sure?"

"...I'm sure."

A sigh. "Alright, then. Tracer, fetch us a kinetic arrest bypass from the magic wing. One of those -- one of those fiddly card things. Meet us at the front entrance." With a sharp nod, the drone rushed off. "1557, I'd offer you a room to stay in overnight, but I suppose you'd rather leave now."

"You're letting me leave?" said 1557, confused.

"Did you expect me to put you back in the dungeon?" asked Terra, looking sideways at the other drone. "I'm not a tyrant."

"What about about Puck? And Lacewing?" 1557 rounded on the larger changeling.

"When are they being set free?"

"Lacewing nearly sabotaged our operations at Fillydelphia," muttered Terra. "You understand why I'd rather keep her under my watch. And **Limelight**? He was in an espionage unit back at the Hive, so I'm hoping I can get him on my side. But he's one hell of a ponylover. Chances are he'll be back out in Canterlot before long."

The two drones were silent as they travelled back down the stairs, eventually emerging in the large -- but empty -- entrance hall. Their hoofsteps echoed dolefully.

"Hate the interior decoration in here," muttered Terra. "Too cold."

Pincer had already arrived. Terra took an object from his hooves, muttering a thanks, and transferred it to 1557. It was rigid, about the size of a playing card. The surface felt like stone, and it was partly translucent. "Force field pass. Long as you hold on to this, you'll be able to walk through the barrier. Put your hoof on it."

Tentatively, the drone placed one hoof on the cool surface. A moment passed, then a faint light ran through the material.

“Aand done!”

Terra gripped his shoulder lightly, his reflectionless blue eyes catching his. “Come talk to me when you make up your mind,” he said. “You’re always welcome in the keep. Introduce yourself as Kit and the guards will recognize you.”

The drone nodded. Drawing himself up, Terra pushed open the heavy doors and gestured out at the city. “Good night, 1557.”

“Good night.”

- oOoOoOo -

1557 slung the paper bag of food onto the metal table, head turning back and forth. “Twitch?”

The changeling was nowhere to be found, although the messy bed seemed to have been occupied recently. 1557 wandered back outside, flapping his wings to lift himself on top of a barrack’s roof. A bright morning sun illuminated the camp. Still, he couldn’t see Twitch anywhere.

He heard a distant voice. “Kiiiiit!”

Eyes narrowing, 1557 turned in a circle, trying to spot the source. Eventually, he looked up. A black figure, rapidly approaching. With a jolt, he ducked down onto the metal.

Twitch zoomed by overhead, flapping his wings wildly as he skidded to a stop on the barrack roof. 1557 noticed, with wide eyes, that Peachy Cream was clinging onto his back. The filly hopped off, then staggered a few steps, disoriented.

“Kit! You’re back!” 1557 let out a yelp as the pale changeling tackled him, sending him to the floor in a tight hug. Before he could even respond, Twitch had retreated, floating above his friend. “Sorry! I was *so worried* because I saw changelings flying into the city and I thought they were Terra’s, and then the pink thing went up so how were you going to get out? But then I heard a voice and it was coming from the keep and then you didn’t come back last night -”

1557 clamped a hoof over the drone’s mouth. He couldn’t stop his own mouth from creeping into a grin. “I’m fine, Twitch.”

The drone had decided to stay the night in Canterlot, since he didn't have food to bring back to Peachy and all the markets had closed for the night. Understandably. He'd bought food first thing in the morning and trotted back, slipping through the barrier as if it didn't exist.

"I'm starving," complained the filly, marching up to the drone. "Where's the food?"

"Oh! I brought some." 1557 hopped down from the roof, fluttering his wings to soften the impact. Twitch lowered Peachy to the floor after him as 1557 rummaged through the bag, pulling out cans of beans, loafs of bread and packages of applesauce.

"Applesauce!" cried the filly, leaping up onto a chair and attacking the package with her teeth. 1557 stepped back, standing beside Twitch.

"Sorry," said the drone. "About the hug. The other drones used to yell at me all the time about it."

1557 shrugged. "It's okay. Hugs are okay." He frowned. "What were you doing up there with Peachy?"

"Oh. She wanted to see what flying felt like."

The diminutive drone glanced at Twitch. "So she's warmed up to you already?"

"Peachy takes things in stride."

1557 muttered. "Probably still hates me."

Twitch awkwardly looked the other way. *No wonder*, thought 1557. *I held a letter opener to her neck yesterday.*

"So *anyways*, what happened in Canterlot?" asked Twitch. "I thought you got captured or something and then I'd be left all alone. How am I supposed to feed Peachy by myself?"

1557 opened his mouth to reply, but Twitch interrupted once more. "What's the plan, too? I saw like, at least fifty drone go into Canterlot, so it'll be pretty hard to get back to the Hive without being noticed. I mean, I think they got noticed already."

"I don't think I'm going back to the Hive," muttered 1557.

Twitch was silent for a moment as Peachy Cream tore open another container of applesauce.

“I don’t want to go back either,” he said softly, “but what else are you going to do?”

With a sigh, 1557 sat himself down on one of the cots. The beds in Canterlot dungeon were a lot more comfortable, he noted. “Let me explain....”

Peachy had finished eating long before he finished his story. He also wanted to tell Twitch about Cobalt, about Lily, about *White Stars*. Right now, no matter how irresponsible or thoughtless, Twitch was the only person he knew for certain he could depend on. The only person he didn’t lie to. He ought to have appreciated that earlier.

Twitch was watching Peachy Cream play with Fang when 1557 was finally finished. He’d been a little apprehensive when he first saw the massive dog approach the filly, but Fang was oddly gently around her. He rolled over on the grass, inviting Peachy to rub his belly.

“...So, yeah,” said 1557. “I don’t know how I got so far away from the original plan, but it’s not like I really belonged in the Hive anyways. Now I have a choice.” He massaged his temples. “Never really had that before.”

Twitch didn’t respond for a long time, drawing circles in the sand with his hoof.

“Do you think Terra would want me?” Twitch asked, suddenly.

1557 looked up. “What?”

“In his army. If I tried to join his army, what would he say?”

“I don’t... I don’t know, he’d probably let you in.” 1557 felt a little cross. Was the decision really this easy for Twitch?

Twitch stood. “But if I was in Terra’s army, I’d probably have to hurt ponies, right?”

“Uh, yeah?”

“Ponies like Peachy.”

1557 looked up at the changeling, who held himself very confidently. “I suppose.”

“Then personally, I know what I would do.” He started to walk towards the barrack.

“Wait! Twitch -” 1557, brows furrowed, leapt to his feet and ran after him. He caught the drone by his shoulder. “You can’t decide something this important that easily! If you side with the ponies, then you’re ignoring changelings that could starve to death. Not to mention, ponies are going to keep hating you.”

“I know. I’m not stupid.” Twitch picked a bone-shaped treat out of the paper bag.

“So? How...?”

“There’s no way to make everyone happy,” he said. “So I just chose the way to make my friend happy.”

1557 raised his hoof, about to object, but nothing came out. A sincere grin came from Twitch as he trotted away. Though he couldn’t see, a loud woof and a *thud* made it clear that the dog had greeted him with a “playful” tackle. Peachy’s giggling floated afterwards.

- oOoOoOo -

A yellow pegasus drifted through the air, watching the streets of Canterlot pass by. The activity was subdued, the sidewalks nearly empty. The few ponies out in the open walked hurriedly, with their head facing the ground. Store windows left and right held “*closed*” signs.

The changeling didn’t feel especially hungry; he had feasted on enough of Cobalt’s love to last for days. He didn’t need to buy supplies, and he hadn’t made any plans with his friends. Yet, something had drawn him back to the city. By now he knew who he was looking for.

There needed to be some confirmation, is all. 1557 figured he’d come to a decision, but he wanted one last touch. One piece of evidence to seal off the choice.

1557 touched down among the dozens of closed businesses. Relieved to see the lights on in the ice cream parlor, he approached the front door. Before he opened it, he peered through the spotless glass, catching sight of a familiar pink pony behind the counter. If anypony would be showing up to work on such a day, it would be her.

“Welcome to Dana’s,” said Lily when the bell rang, though her voice was empty of emotion. She was slumped over on a stool, her head resting on the counter, toying with a plastic spoon. Prominent lines underscored her eyes.

“Hey, Lily,” said 1557, quietly.

Lily’s eyes jerked open. Scrambling to her hooves -- and knocking the spoon onto the floor in the progress -- the pegasus stared at 1557, as if he’d come back from the grave.

“Zap?”

In a flurry of motion, she leaped over the counter and flew straight into the disguised drone, knocking him to the floor. She wrapped her arms tightly around him, and 1557 returned the embrace. The pegasus’ soft coat against his no longer set him on edge, he noticed.

It was a wonder how he had spent so much time trying to decide between pony or changeling. Race didn’t matter. *This* is what mattered.

“I thought you were dead,” Lily said, with a sob. “Berry told me what happened -- I thought they killed you....”

“I’m fine,” murmured 1557.

Lily sniffled, not letting go. The drone didn’t rush her.

So this is kind of where I was when NaNoWriMo ended. Everything after this is either a random scene I wanted to include farther on, or a really brief summary written in red. Most of it doesn’t make sense anymore, since I changed the plot so much from the original. I marked out some especially nonsensical bits.

After being greeted tearfully by both his changeling friend and his pony friends, 1557 decided that Puck’s philosophy was the way he wanted to live. He didn’t forget about Terra’s offer, but he forced it deep into the back of his mind.

As opening night approached, 1557 witnessed his friends fight a lot for various reasons, with added tension from Terra’s occupation. Using his shapeshifting abilities, he was only just able to diffuse tense situations and stop the play from falling apart.

Although all of the cast and crew were shaky, the date of the performance eventually arrived.

Sandstorm’s voice rang through the theatre, piercing through the air. “Where the hell is Nebula?!”

“Good Celestia, Sandy, keep it down,” commented Winter Wit as she passed by the director. “She probably just overslept.”

“Call time was *thirty minutes ago*,” hissed Sandstorm, stomping out one of the exits. With a shrug, Winter continued along the stage.

1557 was holding a ladder for a technician as he adjusted a recording device high up on a pole. He watched the ponies around him with a keen eye. Each one, seeming to know what they were doing, yet all clashing with one another. Work, slowly getting done. Noises echoed and multiplied off of the vast ceiling of the hall.

“Hold it steady!” called down the earth pony, wobbling slightly.

“Why don’t you let a pegasus do it?” responded 1557, cross.

“Let a twitchy little pegasus touch my baby?” asked the technician, shaking his head. “Sorry miss, I ain’t lettin’ anyone else handle this job.”

A stocky green earth pony pushed by, muttering snippets of script to herself. Ivy, he recognized. One of his favorite actors involved in *White Stars*. When he watched her he could almost let himself be fooled into thinking it was real.

It was easy enough to distance himself from pony society, but this one facet was intriguing like nothing else. Most drones had decent acting skills; the best were indistinguishable from the real thing. He still had fond memories of the day that he’d disguised himself as Beetle and completely derailed endurance training. The unit leader had been spitting mad when he came back to find the entire squad resting under a weeping willow. He never found the culprit, either. In any case, if he had to be a pony, he wouldn’t mind being involved in theatre.

Lily shows up.

“What’s up, Lily?” he responded.

“I’m sooooo excited! Come on, I want to go backstage and wish everyone luck.” The pegasus led her friend away, wings fluttering in anticipation.

“Wait, what about the -” he glanced behind him as he was pulled out of the performance hall, trying to spot the technician on the ladder. A loud crash and a yelp sounded, eliciting a wince from the disguised drone. He hurried away faster.

The make-up room was filled to capacity, with ponies checking on costumes, combing their hair, and mouthing scripts to themselves. He noticed Sandstorm in the midst, looking so anxious he was surprised she didn’t faint.

“Hey Sandy!” called Lily, elbowing her way into the room.

"Gotta find the books someone lost the books -" she hurried past them, not meeting their eyes. Her hair was starting to come out of her usual ponytail, 1557 noticed.

"Zap!" greeted Cobalt. The drone's eyes widened as he saw the blue unicorn, for the first time, in full costume. Make-up seemed to have added ten years' worth of experience and maturity to his face, while giving a haunted look to his eyes. His white collar had been replaced with a tuxedo. He held himself taller, somehow looking more dignified and confident than usual. Even his voice lacked the usual uncertainty.

"You look great, Cobalt," said 1557, not untruthfully.

"Thanks." A small smile, averted eyes. Lily elbowed 1557 softly, sharing a knowing glance, then slipped away before he could protest.

"Good luck," the drone said. "Not that you'll need it."

"Cobalt! You're needed on stage!" hollered a stage manager from the distance.

"Coming!" he yelled in response. "Thanks, Zap. I'll see you later." He grabbed a hat off of a nearby stand, tipped it to the pegasus, and rushed out of the room.

Grinning slightly, the drone seated himself on one of the empty seats. He examined himself in the mirror, at the soft pony features that he'd become so accustomed to.

Acting it out with Twitch had been nothing more than a fun game, but he the actual performance would be remarkable. Considering, after all, what Cobalt and Ivy and the others could bring to the stage!

1557 had invited Twitch to venture into Canterlot and watch *White Stars* with him. For once, the drone had hemmed and hawed. He'd never gotten a good answer from him, but it was clear Twitch didn't want to leave the camp. Odd.

A stocky pegasus rushed up to him. "Have you seen Nebula?" he asked, eyes wide.

"What?" 1557 focused his eyes. "No. Sandstorm was looking for her earlier."

Muttering under his breath, the pegasus continued past him.

The room had started to empty out while he'd been lost in thought. Several stragglers remained, some with their eyes closed while breathing deeply, others frantically reviewing the script. He saw one pony praying in the corner.

A head popped into the room. "Y'all done? Doors open in twenty minutes."

Before long, the entire company was gathered backstage. Technical staff, stage runners, managers, and devoted followers filled out the fringes. Sandstorm stood at the front. 1557 tried to see over the other ponies, but he found himself stymied by Zap's height. He saw other pegasi rising into the air to hover and considered it for a moment, but ultimately decided against the idea. He'd end up falling and knocking everyone over.

He had a better solution. Subtly, hidden in the tumult of bodies, he let a green flame flicker over his legs. Inch by inch slowly added to his height. The drone released the magic before he became noticeable taller, but now he could see comfortably over the shoulders of the others.

"Everypony!" called the playwright from the front, grinning uncertainly. A moment until the conversations dwindled off. "This it it, guys. The production starts in an hour."

A small cheer rose up from the gathered crew. Amongst it, 1557 thought he could hear some less-than-cheerful mutters. He could understand why Sandstorm wasn't popular with every member in her cast -- she'd been working them like a slave driver for the past weeks.

"I know for most of you, this is the first time you've been on a stage this big. Canterlot Grand Theatre. I saw some nervous faces in the dressing room -- I guess all I have to say is, you know, it's going to be alright. We impressed the judges, right? We got a letter of recommendation from **famous actor pony** himself."

1557 had to commend how well Sandstorm was holding herself together. Earlier she'd seemed on her last nerve, exhausted, running on adrenaline. Now, she seemed tired, but she held herself proudly. Her voice was smooth and collected.

"We've worked hard on this -- we've gone through a lot of crap together. And I'm always glad to have had the opportunity to work with all of you, because, I mean, you're all great. You're going to rock it today."

Her voice was starting to sound a little emotional. She took a moment to wipe her nose with a handkerchief that she had at hoof.

Zap checked a clock hanging high on the black brick wall. If he wanted to get a seat with a good view, he'd better get down to the auditorium. He edged through the crowd. Had the doors opened yet? Unreserved seats might be taken by the time he circled through the corridors and entered through the front! He didn't want to miss this play for anything.

Why was he so anxious about this? 1557 stopped and took a mental step back. He really was excited for *White Stars*. Maybe more excited than he should be. Sandstorm's production, for whatever reason, seemed to rank way up there in his priorities.

~~But... that was okay. He still didn't know how to reconcile his changeling allegiances and his troublesome pony empathy, whether it was okay to invest in his friends this much... but *White Stars* was harmless. It was a spectacular feat of acting, after all, and an intriguing story. For once, he was glad he didn't have to kick himself for showing interest.~~

"Break a leg, everypony." Sandy had finished her speech. "Get ready for-

"Sandstorm!" a panicked voice. A messenger, letter floating in a sparkling field of telekinesis, pushed through the congregation and leaped in front of the director. "Golden Nebula's not where she promised. Instead we found this note."

A pause. Every pony in the room was silent.

"What?" asked Sandstorm, quietly, as if wanting to believe her ears had fooled her.

1557 looked over his shoulder, although he had been about to leave. He could see actors with eyes wide in disbelief, actors muttering amongst himself, and actors wincing for the inevitable whirlwind of rage that was surely about to consume the sandy earth pony.

"I -- uh -" the messenger held up the letter in front of the playwright, not meeting her eyes. "She's not... she's not coming."

"Nebula is *not coming*!?" Sandstorm looked like she was shaking. "How the hell are we supposed to perform... in Canterlot Grand Theatre... if one of our *lead actors are missing*!? How are we going to...." Sandstorm sank to the floor, clutching her head. "We can't just cancel it. We just can't. Maybe we can... maybe we can fill in the role...."

He saw actors exchanging glances, knowing full well there was no one qualified to fill in the lead role.

Sandstorm leapt to her feet, nearly falling over. A fire burned in her eyes. "We have to find her. We have time. Stage managers! Come help. Someone needs to get to her home."

"Yeah, right," muttered one of the runners, turning away. "If Nebula doesn't want to come, she's not coming."

So... the performance would be called off. *A mishap*, he dismissed in his head, but soon he had to acknowledge that he was a lot more disappointed than he would have liked to let on.

Cobalt, still dressed up, pushed angrily through the crowd. 1557 watched with eyebrows raised. Where was he going?

He extricated himself from the other ponies, then trailed the blue unicorn out into the hallways. The door to the dressing room was ahead. Cobalt slammed it open with a blast of magical energy, then trotted in. Alarmed, 1557 peered in. The blue unicorn had found his saddlebags, rummaging in it with both hooves. He eventually pulled out a note -- 1557 noticed, the same paper as the one that had been presented to Sandstorm -- and silently scanned it. The drone found himself holding his breath as he waited for a reaction.

A burst of anger. Cobalt, with a grunt, kicked the wall beside him, once, twice. Then, fuming, he seated himself. His head was placed in his hooves.

1557 hesitated for a moment, but not for long. Being curious about Zap's friends' lives seemed second nature by now.

"Cobalt?"

The blue unicorn looked up, startled. "Oh -- Zap. Hi." His voice was strangely devoid of emotion.

The drone entered the room fully, walking over to sit next to the stallion. "Are you alright?"

Cobalt didn't answer for a long time, looking down at the floor. He crumpled up the note, flinging it into a nearby wastebasket with magic.

"Yeah."

Despite his words, he looked dejected. Maybe it was amplified by his make-up.

1557 was stuck in deliberation for a moment. The situation was much too familiar, too reminiscent of a conversation with a pink pegasus in an orange tent. ~~He'd resolved to distance himself from other ponies' emotions -- it was too early to break the promise now.~~

~~He could imagine acting otherwise. He'd put an arm around the blue pony, ask him what was wrong -- dismiss doubts, reinforce support -- it almost felt empowering, being able~~

~~to mitigate the effect of such a powerful emotion. And there would be something very satisfying about seeing Cobalt cheerful again.~~

“We’ve worked really hard on this,” he said, voice sounding defeated. “Opportunity of a lifetime, you know -- Canterlot Grand Theatre.”

“I’m sorry,” said 1557 almost instinctively.

“I just... if we could have that one character, then everything would be fine. But how can we get someone with **thirty minutes’** notice?” He sighed.

“No one even has it memorized,” muttered 1557.

Except him.

Nebula’s lines were few and far between; hours poring over them had commit them to his memory a long time ago. Besides, he’d had nothing better to do. Drones were trained to focus on one task at hand, but that didn’t prevent him from getting bored.

Of course. He was the only possible replacement.

He needed to leave. “I have to go,” he muttered under his breath, then stood. Not looking behind him, he pushed his way out of the dressing room.

It was a wild thought -- going out in front of the crowd, disguised as the intimidating gray unicorn, single-handedly saving the performance. There were so many things that could go wrong. It was a risk to the security of his identity, which was obviously the foremost thing.

The more 1557 thought about it, however, the more possible it seemed. If he disappeared right after the performance, there would be no chance for awkward questions.

Two conflicting sides of himself argued as he walked slowly down the hall. He was kind of divided between his pony persona and his changeling form, if he thought about it. The pony told the changeling that this was the chance of a lifetime, the chance to put his shapeshifting and acting prowess to good use. The changeling told the pony that he was a joke of a drone. Compromising his security in order to participate in a dramatic production.

Of course. It was stupid. A week or so earlier he would have dismissed the notion as ridiculous -- back when he was still surrounded by other drones. Imagine if Lacewing or any other changeling caught wind of this!

But then his thoughts flashed to Cobalt, the energy sucked out of his body. He didn't understand why, but the image was more compelling than any argument. It induced a vague, distant sorrow, some uncomfortable feeling of wrongness that made his thoughts rebel against his common sense.

He'd already deserted the army. He'd already shared tea with a green mare in a hair salon. He'd participated in a splash fight. One more to add to the list couldn't hurt.

Only a few minutes later, an elegant gray unicorn burst into the area backstage.
"Sandstorm!"

The playwright looked up, tears hinted at the edge of her eyes. A look of shock overtook the sorrow, and she leaped to her feet. "Nebula...?"

The unicorn nodded.

"Where -- where the hell have you been? Get to your position." It was clear Sandstorm was biting back tears when she raised her voice. "Stage managers! Get the cast! Nebula is here!"

The disguised drone caught a few irritated looks, some relieved sighs, some looks of outright anger. He held his head high. Golden Nebula wasn't affected by anything, and neither was he. In that moment, in that small room at the back of Canterlot Grand Theatre, drone 12-1557 had no doubts.

Showtime.

The lights were very bright. They shone in his eyes, though he turned to face away. The crowd -- nearly impossible to see in the darkness -- at the edge of their seats. There were hundreds of them. Maybe a thousand.

He processed the information in under a second. Across the stage, Cobalt -- no, the character was Gregory -- was yelling angrily at a stocky green mare. The same lines he'd heard in rehearsal.

"...Ponies could be dead right now and you're still wailing about your 'research' like a demented banshee!"

"I - it's not like that! You don't understand. I can't just drop this. I gave up my family to do this. I left behind my whole life."

"*Pardon* me, but you've obviously mistaken me for someone who gives a damn!"

"Listen to me!"

“No! Go away. Stop talking to me before I do something I regret.”

Opening night ended a disaster, as Terra’s changelings’ interference stopped it in its tracks. An immediate changeling scan from the royal guards’ rebellion group revealed that Golden Nebula was a changeling. 1557 managed to escape.

After a lot of shenanigans, involving more meddling changelings, many frayed tempers, and the revelation of 1557’s identity to all of his friends, Cobalt got kidnapped by Terra’s forces to be used as food. Having slowly won over the heart of Peachy Cream once again, 1557 reconciled with whatever friends he could -- further solidifying his faith in those friends -- and led a rescue attempt. His plan? Take up Terra’s offer to help him take over Equestria. Now working on the inside, he hoped not only to free Cobalt, but also to use various schemes to usurp Terra, free Canterlot, and, although it seemed like a long shot, demonstrate to Canterlot that changelings and ponies can work together.

His friends met together at one point to discuss tactics. 1557 started explaining the organization of the changeling army to give them some perspective.

“Well,” said 1557, running a hoof through the dust. “Most of us are in the army. Even changelings who are... less-qualified, like me. We’re divided into fourteen sectors, about, uh, five hundred drones per sector, and each one is led by a commander like Lacewing.” He paused to check if she was still listening. “Then we’re divided into small units of like twenty or thirty. I’m in unit four point oh three. Sector four, unit three. See?”

Tiger Lily frowned, but nodded.

“Some units have special duties. Unit 1.01?” he exhaled in exasperation, then made air quotes. “They’re *talented* in espionage, except minus the part about being talented. I’m not kidding you, I saw a couple of them in training once and it took them *ten whole seconds* to come up with a convincing Applejack. The commander likes them, so the unit leader just turns a blind eye.”

1557 suddenly thought of how Lacewing would react to such disrespectful talk. He smiled sheepishly.

“Is ten seconds bad?” asked Berry Punch.

“Is it *bad*?” 1557 hopped to his feet, casting the commander from his mind. He reverted to his natural form. “Watch this.”

He shut his eyes, concentrating on the image of the Element bearers. They’d been told to study the picture until it was engraved in their heads, although he doubted anyone else in his unit had bothered to. Purple, pink, white, blue, yellow, orange. Cutie marks,

hair styles. Neck, legs, withers, rump. Everything flashed through his mind in a matter of seconds.

Then, with a flash of flame, he was a sneering Twilight Sparkle, Fluttershy, Rarity, Applejack (complete with Stetson), Pinkie Pie, and Rainbow Dash in a vivid spectrum of color. He took a moment as dizziness swept over him, then spoke in the Element of Loyalty's scratchy voice. "Not bad, huh?"

The changeling scanned the audience. Peachy Cream was on the edge of her stool, her eyes stretched wide, but Berry Punch and the others seemed uncertain.

"Impressive," offered Tiger Lily, grinning.

"You guys just don't know how hard this is," grumbled 1557 before reverting back to changeling form. The rapid transformations had more of a toll than he'd expected. Hit by a sudden wave of fatigue, he seated himself once more on a bale of hay.

"This is good info," said a royal guard who had joined the team earlier, stepping up to address the group. "How many sectors were sent to Fillydelphia?"

The drone mulled on the question for a while. "No more than two. Fillydelphia wasn't a huge point in Chrysalis' plan."

"So, a thousand changelings at the most?"

Later, they saved all of Canterlot (and possibly Equestria). Terra was locked up, but showed promise for "rehabilitation." A heartwarming scene between 1557 and Cobalt (who was, admittedly, still a little put-off by 1557's real identity) was followed by a speech from the Princesses themselves. The real Zap showed up, which was an entertaining encounter, and Puck caught wind of Silverwing once more.

Obviously, most of the population still hated changelings, so Celestia arranged for drones to have safe haven on a trip back to the Hive. Lacewing left in this manner. However, Celestia also allowed changelings -- Twitch, Puck, and 1557 included -- to stay in Canterlot if they wanted, and slowly begin the integration of changeling and pony society. It would be a long and difficult journey, but 1557 felt like it was a worthy cause.

White Stars was featured once more in Canterlot Grand Theatre, and, this time, it was a huge hit. Sandstorm was brimming with ideas for the companion piece. Eventually, _____ would make history as the first play to feature changeling actors. 1557 was offered the lead role, and, full of enthusiasm, he dived into his new life in Canterlot.