

"Good afternoon, ladies," the brassy voice greeted, followed by the sound of a watering can sprinkling over green leaves and colorful petals, a fond hum rising up among the pittering rhythm, "Sorry the water's a little late today, you wouldn't believe how long it takes ponies to finish up at a fair."

The flowers only responded by drinking deep of the water they were offered, yet the one addressing them still smiled while caringly drizzling the foliage, keeping mental note of how long the water poured forth. "It was fun, don't get me wrong," the stallion continued, still beaming to himself as he tended to the garden that wrapped around the tiny shack, visible gaps between the boards and obvious recent repairs where wood had rotted through. "But I can't help my nerves when I'm out and about, you know how it is," the pony continued, speaking to his plants like they were his own children, "Especially after hours of keeping up appearances. I tell you, my fellow farmhands have way too much energy between seeding and harvest!"

Chuckling to himself, the pony set the watering can aside, stepping back to take in his work. "There, no more thirsty flowers," he hummed, sitting up on his haunches and stretching his hooves overhead, running the limbs through a leafy-green mane while he admired his handiwork. "Who'd have thought I'd be chatting with plants?" The stallion mused, smiling while he shook his head, "The hive would think I'm "

"Hey! Oak!"

Jerking at the call, the pony hastily hushed himself, turning and looking down the path that led to his small home. Trotting up the trail, a violet-eyed glare was thrown the stallion's way, though he simply smiled and lifted a hoof in greeting. "Hello again, Miss Dawn," Oak greeted, keeping the familiarity out of his tone. After all, he wasn't supposed to know her that well.

"What are you doing here again?" Dawn replied sharply, her eyes narrowing after stopping a careful distance from the male pony, a frown crossing her cream-colored muzzle.

The stallion simply gave a warm smile. "Well, after house-sitting for Miss Star, she was quite pleased with how I tended to her garden, so she hired me on as her gardener," he lied, though the words were spoken without a discernible hint of deception, and his tan-furred features lined up into a perfect replica of cordiality, "And I've grown ever so fond of her flowers. They're beautiful, wouldn't you say?"

Though he gestured to the flower bed, the stallion found Dawn continuing to give him a suspicious glower. "Is she home?"

"She is, yes," Oak affirmed, turning toward the door, "I'll fetch her for you."

"You do that."

Flashing a casual smile to the mare, Oak trotted through the door, closing it behind him. Inside, the shack had just enough room for a makeshift, circular bed more of a nest, really composed of multiple different pillows, with a small living area to the side. Trotting around the low table a few times, the stallion looked toward the door, before glancing at his window.

Curtains drawn, good.

The dim interior of the shack lit up in acid-green light briefly, the flash subdued by the drapes in the window. A moment later, the knob to the shack door was enveloped in an aura of pale light akin to the illumination of a full moon, and the door opened to reveal a mare standing in the entryway. "Hey, Dawn! Oak said you're here," she greeted, internally grateful to see the relief on the other mare's features.

"Oh good, for a moment I thought," Dawn started, before shaking her head with a chuckle, "Well, I dunno what I thought, but it's good to see you, Star!"

Giving a grin, Star stepped aside and beckoned into the shack with her head, violet mane bobbing against the singular horn on her brow. "Come on in," she invited, her head giving a slight tilt once Dawn entered, closing the door behind her, "What was that look when I opened the door? You looked ready to call the authorities for a moment."

"Oh, um," the mare replied, giving a sheepish chuckle as she sat by the table, "I guess it's silly, but... well, when I saw Oak at your house again after last time, I guess I was a little suspicious."

Feigning ignorance, Star stepped over to sit beside her friend. "Suspicious how?"

Blushing, Dawn sat up and rubbed her neck abashedly. "When you took your trip to see your family after our first round of tutoring, I came around to... uh, check on your little house," she answered, clearing her throat, "And when I got here, Oak was already here. He said he was your house-sitter, but I guess I just got a little worried because you'd never mentioned him before."

"Oh!" Star exclaimed in faux realization, remembering the incident between Oak and Dawn well, though she wasn't about to admit that. "Oh yeah, Tender Oak is a sweet guy, great with his hooves, and he's got that earth pony knack for gardening," she corroborated her own story, flashing a reassuring grin, "Bit on the sensitive side, though."

Dawn gave a relieved chuckle, though that expression shifted quickly into guilt. "Well, now I feel like a jerk," she stated, her auburn mane swaying when she shook her head, "Poor guy was just doing his job, and I treated him like a burglar!"

Star lifted a reassuring hoof, giving a soft chuckle. "Oh, I'm sure he understands," she insisted, though her head cocked when Dawn looked around.

"Where'd he go, anyway?" the visiting mare inquired, and for a brief moment, Star's heart skipped a beat, though she was quick to improvise.

"He went out the back door to check on my lawn for me," Star replied, keeping her voice even, "Oak's a hard worker, he doesn't like leaving things unfinished!"

Smiling at that, Dawn gave a little nod, before getting to her hooves, her host tilting her head. "Where you going?" Star asked, getting a bright grin in response.

"I'm going to invite him in so I can apologize over tea," the red-maned mare replied, and again Star felt her heart drop.

"Oh, um, I think he might be a bit busy for tea," she insisted a bit too hastily, getting a bemused look from her companion.

"What, you don't want him joining us?" Dawn replied, taking a step toward the back door.

"W-wait!" Star cried out before she could stop herself, hastily clearing her throat and giving a sheepish grin at the surprised look she got. "You, uh, just get comfortable, I'll get him for you."

Regarding her fellow unicorn for a moment, Dawn gave a little shrug and sat back down. "No need to shout," she remarked with bemusement, watching as Star hastily hurried out the door.

A moment later, Tender Oak stepped through the doorway, flashing a somewhat forced smile. "You wanted to see me?"

Smiling back, Dawn gave a nod, though her head tilted again after a moment as she asked, "Wasn't Star following you?"

"Oh, she's... checking my work," Oak replied, panic starting to set in when Dawn got to her hooves.

Stammering, the stallion tried to stall the unicorn, yet she simply brushed him off while stepping around him, brow furrowing when all she found outside was an empty lawn. Suspicion rising again, the mare turned toward the earth pony, though even before she could say a word, he blurted out a bit too loudly, "I heard the front door! She's probably inside, now!"

Turning again, Oak barged back in through the door, kicking it behind him in an attempt to slam it shut, yet failing to notice the old latch simply bouncing off the rickety frame. The door was wide open when another flash of green lit up the inside of the shack, yet before Star could even turn around, her heart dropped into Tartarus at the sound of a sharp gasp behind her.

Ears wilting, the mare turned slowly, finding her tutor staring at her wide-eyed from the door. "Ch... changeling?" the unicorn stuttered, her shock turning to fear, and quickly to rage, "Changeling! What did you do to Evening Star?"

"W-wait, Dawn!" Star stammered at their friend when she lunged at them, the changeling throwing up their forelegs defensively as they were knocked off their hooves. Rolling to their back, the shapeshifter hid their face behind their hooves when Dawn's horn lowered over them, flaring dangerously with magic.

"Where is she?!" the unicorn demanded, "What did you do to Star? I swear to Celestia if you've hurt her I'll... I'll... I'll make you hurt a hundred times worse!"

"Dawn, no! I-it's me, I swear!" the mimic pleaded, yelping when that horn pressed its glowing point against their throat, "I-I promise! Um, oh! Ask me anything! I can prove I'm Star, please, just give me a chance!"

"Likely!" Dawn growled, the changeling gulping at the horn being pushed against their collar, "Fine, I'll play, doppelganger. Where'd we meet?"

"Pastern Library!" the mimic hastily answered, "I was browsing through the kid's section looking for basic books on magic so I could start teaching myself, and you sat across from me without me realizing at first, and then you introduced yourself as Serenity Dawn and said you were one of Pastern's magic tutors and you offered to teach me magic because I never got the chance to learn!"

Serenity's eyes widened at the thoroughness of that answer, momentarily pulling back just slightly, before pressing in again. "How much did you torment her to get that "

"N-no! Ask me another one!" Star whimpered, trying to pull back from the horn that pushed painfully against their neck.

There was a pause, and for a moment the changeling was sure that horn was about to thrust in. "Why did you need help learning magic?" Dawn asked, her voice dangerously calm. Star hesitated, and that was enough for Serenity to press a hoof down on their chest. "Answer."

Gulping hard, the changeling let out a soft cough. "I told you my family lived on a farm in the middle of nowhere, and formal magical education was something we'd lacked for generations," the faux-unicorn answered, voice starting to get hoarse from the pressure on their neck, "But... that was a lie. Dawn, the real reason I needed tutoring is... because my hive didn't have access to formal magical education at all."

"So you *are* a changeling! You admit it!" Dawn declared, pressing down with her hoof and getting a pained groan from below, "Tell me where you hid Evening Star, right now!"

"D-Dawn! You're not... hearing me!" the pinned unicorn coughed out, their hooves pushing against the limb that pressed into their chest, "I *am* Evening Star! Evening Star *is* a changeling!"

"Liar! If you're Evening Star, then... what did my little brother study in college?" Dawn demanded, glaring at the changeling from behind the radiance of her horn.

"Yarrow Dawn studied horticulture and... wait, you're the youngest, you don't have a younger brother," Star realized the trick question, looking down the length of the horn that was pressed dangerously against their throat, "Yarrow's five years older than you, you were a surprise to your parents, since they'd decided just to have the one foal. Yarrow's an earth pony, he takes after your mother Serendipity Dawn, because your father, Dusk Luster, is a unicorn, but he didn't have any

talent for magic, but he still supported you all the way through your studies at Canterlot, and he even managed to get your whole family to Canterlot for your graduation. You told me Yarrow even brought you a morning glory he'd grown especially for the occasion... and for Luna's sake, if I were really dangerous, why aren't I fighting back?"

Each detail added to the recounting caused the flaring of Dawn's horn to dim slowly, her eyes getting progressively wider, until with lingering uncertainty, the unicorn slowly withdrew. Coughing and rubbing their neck, the changeling soothed the tenderness as their eyes welled up. "It's me... I'm Star... I'm..." the faux unicorn whimpered, face pressing into their hooves while they sniffled back gentle sobs, repeating over and over, "I'm sorry... I'm sorry... I didn't want to lie... I'm so, so sorry."

Above the changeling, Serenity stared with a blank expression at the dark-furred unicorn, taking in every little detail. From the position of each tiny, star-like speckle of white on her midnight-blue coat, to the curl of her familiar violet hair, and the crescent moon holding a four-pointed star presented on her upper thigh. She had to wonder, could a changeling copy someone this perfectly?

Stepping back, Dawn felt her heart wavering, her empty expression slowly filling with regret. "Oh... Celestia. Star... Star, is that really you?" the unicorn asked, not wanting to believe it, "Star, you're... you're a changeling?"

The shapeshifter winced at the questions, letting out another cough as they tried to catch their breath, timidly lifting their gaze from their hooves. "I... yes... yes, I'm a changeling," they admitted, their breath catching again at the hurt in Dawn's eyes.

The unicorn faltered, her eyes falling to the ground briefly, before lifting again and meeting her companion's, voicing a single, heartbroken question.

"Why?"

Tensing again, Star chewed their faux lip, before sighing and slowly lowering their hooves. They made to stand, only to yelp when magic pressed them to the floor, their tutor's horn glowing with the same golden aura that held them to the ground.

"S-stay down, changeling!" Dawn commanded, a hoof brushing away the tears that were welling up in her eyes, "You stay down and you answer my question!"

The force holding them to the ground was strong, yet careful to avoid harming the changeling. Even so, pain swelled up in their heart at being treated this way by one of their best friends. Taking a breath, Star steeled their nerves, before beginning to recount their tale of being shunned by their hive, of coming to town in search of love to steal, only to find the community they'd come to love. They told of their arrival in town as Cirrus Glide, the pegasus weather pony, and later their time as Tender Oak, the earth pony farmhand, along with all the things they'd learned from their friends and how much their outlook had changed since coming to live here.

"Yes I'm a changeling... but I've learned so, so much from you ponies," Star insisted, only able to bury their face into the floor with guilt as their friend's magic held them otherwise restrained, "I don't want to steal love, I don't want to hurt anyone. I just... want to be a part of this town and its wonderful community. I just want to be with my friends. To be with you, Dawn."

Serenity didn't want to believe it, yet it all added up, the more she thought about it. Evening Star's lack of magical knowledge and yet talent for illusions, her incredibly fast learning, how she never seemed to eat around anyone. Now that she thought about it, it was strange that the shack didn't even have a proper kitchen, just a set of cupboards full of tea. It was the truth, and yet it didn't make the reveal of the lie any less painful.

"Why... why did you lie to everyone, then?" Dawn demanded accusingly, not ready to accept what she'd learned, "Why would you trick everyone like that if you just want to 'be friends'?"

"Because I'm a changeling!" Star howled into the floorboards, tears flowing freely now, "What was I supposed to do? Just walk right into town without a disguise not even a year after my kind attempted to overthrow Celestia? And I was honest! I didn't come to Pastern with the intent of making friends; you're right, I came here to feed on ponies and their love. But you all changed that! You showed me another way, you taught me how to love and be loved, how to give more than I take, how to become a true part of a community. I never had that in the hive. I just wanted to belong!"

Panting hard, the changeling's face pressed against the floor all the more as they quietly whimpered, "I just... want to belong. And I knew... I knew I never would." Star had to swallow the lump in their throat before they could continue, "So I lied. I lied and I lied, and the lies kept growing, even though more than anything, I wish I could just tell the truth. But... I can't. I'm so scared... I'm so, so scared of what you all will do if you find me out."

Slowly, Evening Star turned their head so one tearful eye could look up to Dawn. "You're my best friend," they sniffled, eyes squeezing shut, "And look what you did when you found out."

The aura suddenly dissipated from around the false unicorn, yet instead of standing, they simply curled into a tight ball, whimpering apologetically. "I'm sorry... I didn't know what to do... I'm so sorry."

In the midst of begging for forgiveness, the changeling gave a shuddering gasp at a gentle touch against them. It felt like hooves wrapped around them in a tentative hug. And yet, they didn't dare hope.

But those hooves remained, the changeling slowly, hesitantly lifting their head from their forelegs, sniffing when they opened their eyes to find Dawn there, holding them close. The unicorn's pale cheeks glistened with tears of sympathy as she held the changeling in unicorn's guise, giving her own apologetic whimper, "O-oh, Star, I'm so sorry."

It took a while for the pair to compose themselves, each sitting on a cushion on opposite sides of the tea table. "Your name isn't Evening Star, is it? Or Tender Oak, or Cirrus Glide," the unicorn said, the question making the mimic flinch, yet they still nodded silently. "If we're going to move past this... look, before I can accept this, I need you to promise me you're going to be one-hundred percent honest from now on," the unicorn insisted, looking to her friend sincerely, "No more secrets, okay? So... first off, what's your real name?"

The changeling hesitated, gulping as they fidgeted their hooves. "Pectinate... Pectinate Antennae. Everyone at the hive called me Pectin, though," they answered, pulling their hooves down through their false mane anxiously.

The tutor nodded, clasped hooves pressed to her muzzle. "Okay, Pectin," she continued, gesturing at the changeling, "This... is a lie too, isn't it? You don't look like this, do you?"

Pectin cringed, their gaze falling. "Y... yeah," they murmured in response.

The unicorn regarded the changeling for several moments of pensive silence. "Total honesty," she repeated, her magic catching Pectin's chin and lifting so they had to meet her gaze, "I want to know what my friend actually looks like, okay? No more "

"O-oh!" Pectin gasped, their cheeks flushing as they looked down at themselves. Images of the state of their actual figure flashed in their mind, the changeling's unicorn hooves covering their face again. "Oh please, n-no! I... I can't, I... I-it's so embarrassing, b-but "

"Star," the unicorn interjected, before cringing and shaking her head, "O-or... Pectinate. Look, I'm putting a lot of trust in your hooves after learning you've been lying to me from day one. You owe me this, don't you think?"

Pectin couldn't argue, though their hooves still remained on their face for a while. "Okay... okay, but," the changeling started, lifting their face, which still shone bright red, "Um, you know h-how... changelings feed on love, right?" A brief pause, just long enough for the unicorn across from Pectin to nod, before they continued, "W-well, um... the ones from my hive have a... defect, so we can't exactly... turn that off. If there's a lot of love in the air, we pull it in regardless of how much we've... a-already pulled in. And this community, it... it's got a lot of love, heh."

Looking toward their companion, Pectin found a mix of impatience and bemusement. "Just, um... keep that in mind, okay?" the changeling concluded, closing their eyes and taking a deep breath to calm their nerves, before a flash of green rose around them, and their tutor gasped in shock at the sight before her.

"Oh. O-oh! You were talking about... oh," the unicorn stumbled over her words, taking in the sight of the changeling before them.

The very, very plump changeling.

The actually quite obese changeling, really.

For several moments, Pectin fidgeted under the gaze of their friend, bright green blush coloring their rounded near-black cheeks. The changeling flinched when Serenity got to her hooves, stepping around the table and leaning close to take in the sight of the overblown shapeshifter. Pectin's hole-pocked hooves clicked together as they simply allowed their friend to take in their true form, too nervous to speak.

With wide eyes, Dawn regarded the extremely dark green facial plates that covered Pectin's head, tough chitin forming into smaller, almost scale-like articulations around their plump face that allowed more expressive flexibility, a shudder running through the pony's spine when they spotted the pair of insectile mandibles that were partially retracted into the shapeshifter's pudgy cheeks. Not lingering on the unsettling features for long, Dawn lifted her gaze to find larger segments covering their companion's skull, frayed ears splaying timidly under the scrutiny behind a pair of feathery, mothlike antennae. The unicorn's eyes lingered on the cyan frill that crested the changeling's head and trailed down their doughy neck like a false mane, before sliding down their torso. That near-black color brightened into a venomous green around the changeling's bulging middle and rolled flanks, a sequence of verdant plates almost similar to a snake's gracing the blubbery abdomen of the equine invertebrate. That belly curved out until its deepest point was level with the changeling's gaskins, a testament to their statement of being unable to limit their consumption of affection. Once she'd managed to tear her eyes away from that incredible gut, the unicorn continued to trail her gaze across the alien creature, finding a deep-violet, beetle-like carapace that covered their back, providing an anchor point for a pair of tattered-looking wings, the shell curling down over their broad rump and leading into a tail frill similar to their faux mane.

The changeling endured the inspection with rising trepidation shimmering in their acid-green compound eyes, fidgeting their hole-pocked hooves all the while. Once they finally gathered enough courage to look up, Pectin was greeted by an expression that hovered between complete disbelief and utter fascination, the changeling gulping hard before they stammered, "L-like I said... changelings from my hive can't choose not to feed."

The comment seemed to pull Dawn back into the moment, her expression shifting into brief abashedness, before souring slightly. Sighing, the unicorn turned, and Pectin expected her to go back to the other side of the table, yet surprise took them when Dawn sat next to them instead.

"So like, are you," Dawn started, before hesitating, visibly torn on whether she should ask the question on her mind, until curiosity eventually won out and she turned to face the changeling with a hint of a bemused smirk, "Are you a mare, or a stallion?"

Pectin blinked their compound eyes, regarding their companion for a moment, before they both gave sudden snorts, giggling together. "Um... that is actually a good question!" Pectin chuckled, looking down at themselves and blushing again at how their figure bounced with their laughter, sheepishly stilling their rippling paunch as they responded, "I guess... neither? Or... both? I... you know, I never actually thought about it."

"I mean, I ask, because... okay, you're a mare as Star, right?" Dawn remarked, a gentle, compassionate smile on her face while she spoke, "So I've always known you as a 'she', but the other two, uh, yous, they're both stallions. So do I call you 'she' like before? Or do you prefer 'he'? 'It'?"

Pectin cringed. "Not it, definitely not it," they chuckled, looking back to their companion, "I guess... 'they' fits. But he or she also work, really. Just don't call me an 'it', please, that feels gross."

"Noted," Dawn affirmed, looking at her friend again, her expression slowly falling. "Celestia, you... you really are her," she breathed, her head shaking, "I don't know if I've actually processed this. You're a changeling. A changeling! We almost lost Equestria to changelings, but you're... I'm sorry, am I being insensitive?"

Pectin had been in the middle of another wince at the question, their gaze averting as they curled their frilled tail around themselves, mumbling, "I deserve it."

"Hey, don't say that," Dawn chided gently, hesitating for a moment, before nudging the changeling's side with her elbow, pausing at the odd sensation of a carapace that was both firm and squishy at the same time. "You didn't have a choice, I get that now," Serenity continued, offering a comforting smile when Pectin met her gaze again, "I'm just... having a hard time adjusting, you know? For like, a year now I've known you as Evening Star the unicorn illusionist, and now I learn you're... actually Pectin the changeling, but I can't be mad that you lied because... well, changelings aren't exactly well-received, are they?"

"N-no, we're not," Pectin chuckled ruefully, rubbing their plump foreleg. It was just a relief their heft wasn't the focus of Dawn's curiosity.

"So, uh, you weren't kidding about the town having a lot of love, were you?"

Aaand there it was.

Blushing green again, the changeling's ears folded when they looked down at themselves, exoskeleton bulging with excess fat. "Believe it or not, I was pretty scrawny when I got here," Pectin insisted, subconsciously trying to hold a wing over their rolled flank, not that the transparent limb made for an effective veil, "I was wandering Equestria for weeks before I eventually found myself here. And then I started making friends and coming into town more frequently and... y-you ponies have a lot of love to give, you know that?"

Dawn laughed slightly, trying not to stare at the belly that rounded out level with Pectin's gaskins. "Are you saying I'm responsible for some of that?" the unicorn tittered, though her joke only made the changeling's blush deepen.

"I, erm, wouldn't use the word 'responsible'," the changeling muttered awkwardly, rubbing the back of their neck.

Dawn blinked, before it hit her. "You've fed on my love?" she asked, her features screwing up into an odd, unplaceable expression.

Pectinate cringed, once more averting their eyes. "I... y-yeah," they answered quietly, "You love Star as a close friend... and I fed on that. I've probably tasted a bit of everybody in town's love by now. But a lot of yours especially, yeah. Along with the... rest of my friends." Sighing, Pectin's head lowered until their chin was flat on the table, hooves covering their eyes. "Sweet sun and moon, I'm a disgusting parasite," the changeling whimpered, tensing up when a hoof rested on their back tentatively.

"You're not, uh, sucking the love out of ponies, right?" Dawn half-assured, half-checked, and Pectin could swear they heard the relief in the unicorn's tone after they shook their head, "Then you're not a parasite, unlike Chrysalis. If you can't control it, it isn't your fault."

"But I lie to you ponies," the shapeshifter rebutted, their voice muffled by their hooves, "I lie and I lie, and I keep lying because I'm too scared to tell the truth. I... I don't deserve your kindness, I don't deserve your friendship, I should just leave and "

A soft squeak left Pectin's fanged muzzle when gentle hooves curled around them, freezing again in shock, only to slowly lift a hoof from their face, finding Dawn resting her head on the changeling's shoulder while she hugged them again. "Shh, it's okay," the unicorn shushed gently, tenderly brushing the changeling's back, pausing when she felt the thin, chitinous wings under her hoof. "Um, these aren't fragile, are they?" Serenity asked, lifting her hooves gingerly from the wings as Pectin let out a soft, involuntary chuckle.

"N-no, they're surprisingly tough," they answered, giving a soft buzz of their wings, before feeling Dawn stroking their back again.

For a while, Pectinate sat there, feeling the ginger touch of the unicorn's hooves down their back. It was strange. They'd gotten used to the embraces, the nudges, the playful roughhousing among ponies as their personas. But as themselves, as a changeling, the touch of hoof against their hardened shell was so different. And yet, the same, familiar love was tangible in it.

Lifting their head, Pectin looked toward Dawn with confusion. "You don't... think I'm gross?" they asked earnestly, "But you... hate bugs."

Dawn smiled, patting her friend's back. "I think I can make an exception," she said, before frowning and reaching up to tap Pectin's cheek, "Just keep those bug jaws hidden, okay? Gotta be honest; they're a little freaky."

Pectin couldn't help laughing, though they were quick to lift a hoof and cover up the mentioned mandibles while they giggled. "H-hey, a few more months here and my cheeks are gonna hide my mandibles permanently," they joked, Dawn laughing with them, only for her mirth to fall into a questioning look.

"About that... what are you going to do now?" she asked, the changeling's expression falling as well, looking toward their door.

"I don't know," Pectin answered sincerely, "I haven't made any plans for the future... I've always been ready to run if I was ever found out."

"Are you going to run now?"

Pectin blinked, looking at their friend. "No... I don't think I will," they answered, sighing again, "Some naive part of me hoped this could go on forever. But I don't think I can keep lying to my friends. But I also don't know if I'm ready to tell everyone the truth."

There was a soft click when unicorn hoof met changeling foreleg, Pectin's eyes widening as she met Dawn's gaze. "Now you've got a friend who knows your dirty little secret," Serenity insisted, smiling, "Together, I'm sure we can figure something out."



Pectin's eyes searched their companion's, vision starting to shimmer slightly. "You mean...?"

"You think I'm going to let you get away with pulling the wool over my eyes?" Dawn tittered, patting Pectin's hoof, "You're stuck with me until I can figure out proper payback. And while I'm here, I might as well help you find a way to be yourself, for real. You're not getting away so easily, Star." The unicorn smirked, before frowning, "I mean, Pec "

Dawn grunted with surprise when a pair of heavy forelimbs wrapped around her, eyes bulging at being squeezed. "You can s-still call me Star," Pectin sniffled into their friend's chest.

"Th-that's... great..." Dawn groaned, patting Pectin's back, "But... I can't... breathe!"

"Oh!" the changeling gasped, pulling back and fretfully brushing at the unicorn's shoulders while she half-laughed and half-coughed, "S-sorry! I forgot you don't have an exoskeleton."

"I might not have a skeleton at all anymore," Dawn wince-chuckled, rubbing her chest, yet still she smiled at her friend, simply taking in the fact that the green-hued arthropodal pony before her was the companion she'd known all this time. Flushing shyly at the look, Pectin shuffled on their plot under the gaze, their hooves fidgeting together anxiously.

"Can I, um, ask you a question?" Dawn checked, waiting until the changeling gave a shallow nod before continuing, "What's it like being able to be anyone you want? I mean, you can be a unicorn and practice magic, or a pegasus and walk on clouds, or an earth pony and strong as an ox. That sounds pretty awesome, I gotta say!"

In spite of herself, Pectin found a slight smile on their cheeks at the compliment. "I-I guess it is kind of cool, yeah," they answered, though their expression fell as they glanced aside, regarding the light filtering through their curtains pensively, "I can be anyone I want. I could become a famous unicorn wizard, or I could work hard as a pegasus and maybe join the Wonderbolts. Or I could become a star athlete as an earth pony."

The changeling paused, taking in a breath, that inhalation making the spiracles on their flanks whistle slightly. "But I'm scared of getting that much attention. Chrysalis was an idiot, thinking she could just take the place of royalty. If you have that many eyes on you, some of them are going to get suspicious," Pectin mused, and Dawn had to wonder if the shapeshifter was still talking directly to her, or simply voicing their thoughts out loud. The changeling chuckled, finally looking back to Serenity with a rueful smile, "Look at me; I'm a pegasus maintenance guy, an earth pony farmhand, and a unicorn who works backstage as an illusory special effects pony at the rare events she takes part in. And I still got caught."

Shaking their head, Pectin looked down at themselves, resting a hoof on their pudgy middle, flushing at the firm-yet-yielding feel of their abdomen. "But the biggest risk of it all?" the changeling's voice lowered into soft quiet, "Is the risk of... losing myself. I'm Cirrus Glide, funny and playful, a gentlecolt who's always the first to volunteer when something needs to be taken care of. I'm Tender Oak, calm and kind, a soft-spoken stallion with a love of nature and an ear that listens to anyone's problems. I'm Evening Star, curious and shy, with a flair for drama and entertainment as long as eyes aren't on her. But I don't even know who Pectinate Antennae is anymore. I don't know who I should be, or even *if* I should be. I'm rarely ever," the changeling paused, gesturing at themselves, "This, anymore. And maybe that's for the best. Ponies love Star and Cirrus and Oak. But Pectin? The only ones who know about Pectin probably forgot about them. Except for you now, I guess."

The changeling's voice quieted, still staring at the green plates of their middle. After a moment of silence, however, Pectin slowly looked toward their companion, ears wilting when they saw the shimmering of Dawn's eyes and the drops trickling down her cheeks once more. "Dawn, are

you ?" the changeling started, only to find herself cut off again as hooves were thrown around their shoulders, letting out a squeak of surprise at being pulled in against the unicorn's chest.

"Sh-shut up," Dawn insisted as she brushed her hoof over the changeling's neck-frills, "Just shut up, Star. Don't you... don't you dare talk like that again. That's *my* friend you're talking about. Even if... you aren't really Evening Star, Evening Star is still you. And don't you even think for a moment that you 'shouldn't be', because I'll zap anyone who talks like that about my friend. Even if I have to zap my friend so she stops putting herself down, you got it?"

Pectin couldn't move. They could swear their heart stopped, eyes glistening as they tried to comprehend what they'd just heard. Their senses were blitzed by the outpouring of love from the heart they could hear beating within the chest their head was pressed against. Higher thought felt impossible in that moment, awash in the glow of perhaps something more than platonic love that seemed to open up like a rose-colored, star-filled sky before their eyes. It was utterly beautiful, the most wonderful sight they'd ever seen. And far, far too much at the same time.

"D... Dawn," the changeling gasped as an ache in their middle managed to pull them out of their reverie, "P-please... too... full...!"

The unicorn's head cocked at the stammered phrase, taking a moment to comprehend its meaning, only for her eyes to widen when she suddenly registered the sensation of something round pressing slowly further against her middle with each passing second. "Oh! Oh my gosh, I'm sorry," Dawn apologized as she pulled away, looking in shock at the changeling that had gone from portly and soft to looking like they'd just swallowed a beachball whole.

Panting, Pectin winced as they shuffled back from Dawn, who was still radiating care and concern. "Y-you... ponies and your, h-huff, love," the changeling chuckled, cringing again when the mirth shook their now-glowing gut, gingerly resting their hooves on the bloated curve, yet in spite of the discomfort, Pectin couldn't help a teary-eyed smile to her friend, "What did, whew, what did I do to deserve a friend like you?"

Dawn gave a sheepish smile in reply, making to scoot closer, though pausing when Pectin lifted a holey hoof. "P-please, I'm going to pop!" the changeling laughed, a squeaky hiccup interrupting the mirth while they scooted back again, "But... hah, Dawn, you... I mean... I can't even..."

The unicorn smiled more, scooting back as well at realizing that getting closer at that moment would be the opposite of comforting. "Yeah," she replied, her head tilting, "Um... am I still...?" Dawn pointed at the changeling's middle in clarification.

"Y-yeah," Pectin confirmed, wincing as they felt their stomach still slowly filling further, starting to pant heavily.

Nodding, Dawn got to her hooves, giving another smile when Pectin regarded her with a guilty expression. "Hey, I'm not gonna stick around if it's going to make my friend burst," she chuckled, turning and moving toward the door, only to pause and look back at the changeling again, "St um, Pectin? Would you mind if I came over again tomorrow? Not to visit Star. To visit you."

The shapeshifter shuddered as another wash of love poured over them from the unicorn's direction, suppressing a soft groan of fullness. Realizing what she'd done, Dawn's expression shifted into apology, yet the changeling gave a little "it's fine" motion with their hoof, a flushed smile coming to their features. "I'd... like that," Pectin affirmed, before giving a sheepish grin, "But p-please, could you...?"

"Right, right," Dawn chuckled, stepping out of the door, though she threw another smile over her shoulder, "I'll try to tone down the love tomorrow."

"G-get out before I explode!" Pectin laughed after the unicorn, soothing their shimmering stomach as the door swung closed, smiling at the sound of their friend's laughter through the door.

A relieved sigh left Pectin's muzzle once the aura of love faded, grunting when they tried to get to their hooves. A lot of awkward rocking and swaying, and the changeling realized they were going to need a different tactic. Fortunately, they had their shapeshifting, able to change briefly into Star in order to stand. Even in their unicorn guise, however, the shapeshifter felt lingering bloat as they sluggishly cantered to the circle of cushions that served as their bed, falling on their side and letting their unicorn form flash back into their natural, doughy state.

All this love was definitely going to stick to their figure.

Pectin jolted awake at a knock at their door, blinking blearily in the small light of the morning. Who would...?

"Pectin! Are you awake in there?"

A clatter of hooves and a flash of green light through the curtains, and the door practically tore open under a moonlight glow. "Dawn!" Evening Star hissed through the door, "Please, for the love of Celestia and Luna, don't yell my name like that! What if someone else was coming and they heard you?" The groggy changeling squinted in the morning light at the unicorn, who smiled sheepishly at them as they asked, "What are you even doing here this early?"

"Well," Serenity started, sitting on her haunches and rubbing her neck, "I realized when I got home that I don't know Tender Oak's or Cirrus Glide's schedules, so I thought I'd drop by early so I didn't miss you."

Star looked upward, trying to find the sun, much to the real unicorn's amusement. "There's a reason I've got Dawn in my name," Serenity chuckled, nodding to the changeling, "Can I come in, or should I come back later?"

Pectin couldn't help a soft titter. "I'm not going to send you away just because I'm groggy," they said, stepping aside to allow their friend in.

The unicorn trotted past the disguised changeling, taking up her seat from the previous afternoon. Giving a smile in Star's direction, the unicorn's expression fell when she saw the nervous expression as her companion sat across from her, fidgeting nervously. "Hey, are you alright?" Dawn checked, the changeling giving a soft squeak.

"Yes!" Star insisted hastily, only to wince when Dawn glared at her. "Honesty, right," she sighed, poking at the floor under the coffee table, "I've never been around a pony who... knows who I actually am. Aside from last night, I mean."

A soft chime of magic came from across the table, and Star felt a phantasmal hoof on her shoulder. "It's still us, Star," Dawn insisted, smiling to her companion, "I brought over some new magic books from Canterlot the library just got, we can..."

Serenity paused, regarding Star curiously. "Do you have to be, um, a unicorn to do magic?" she asked, "Or can you do it as... well, yourself?"

The disguised changeling fidgeted, hesitating to answer. "I can... do magic just as well when I'm... me," they confirmed, tapping their hooves together.

Smiling reassuringly, Dawn scooted around the table, pulling the books from her saddlebags with her magic. "You don't have to be Star around me, now," she insisted, setting the books in front of the faux unicorn, "You can relax, Pectin."

The changeling bit their lip, eyes averting. "Can't I just stay Star around you?" Pectin muttered, giving a meep when their side was nudged by Dawn's elbow.

"I want to get to know you. The real you," Dawn said gently, brushing the false unicorn's foreleg with her own, "What kind of friend would I be if you felt like you couldn't be yourself around me?"

In spite of her uncertainty, Star found herself smiling slightly. "Okay... I'm just really not used to this."

"You think I am?" Dawn laughed, gently shoving Star's shoulder and getting a giggle from her friend, "Part of me still thinks last night was a dream! So hey, let's dive into this weirdness together, yeah?"

The changeling smiled a bit more, nodding to the unicorn. Taking a breath, Pectin closed their eyes, before a column of green light flashed upward over them. "Ah!" Dawn yelped when a wall of greenish-black chitin pushed her back from the changeling's side, though she was quick to laugh it off when Pectin started apologizing. "It's okay! I just forgot how wide " the unicorn's hoof flew to her muzzle, eyes widening and cheeks flushing brightly, "I-I mean..."

Pectin's features lit up in vibrant green when they blushed as well, though they simply shook their head and chuckled sheepishly. "Honesty, right?" the changeling said, smiling to their friend, "You don't need to dance around it, I know I'm... a Fatty McFatling." The shapeshifter rested a hoof on their middle gingerly, noting for the first time since waking that they felt even softer than before.

They weren't the only one who noticed, the unicorn regarding them with a mix of concern and fascination. Yesterday that gut pushed out level with the changeling's knees; today, it was rolling forth an additional inch, Pectin's exoskeleton pressed outward by steadily deepening layers of blubber underneath, starting to form subtle folds along the borders of the plates on their flanks.

Squirming under the scrutiny, the changeling fidgeted with one of the holes in their foreleg. "I can... change back, if "

"Oh! No, it's," Dawn stammered, before chuckling and smiling to the bug-pony, "Actually kind of adorable."

Pectin stared at the unicorn with their brow cocked in confusion. "Come again?"

Serenity laughed, raising her hooves. "We promised honesty! And honestly, I think, well, it looks kind of cute on you, now that I'm over the shock," she shrugged, a slight blush on her cheeks, her face turning to concern after a moment, "Are you going to be okay, though? No offense, but... you're getting bigger, aren't you?"

Pectin looked themselves over again, hooves resting on their middle and giving an inquisitive squeeze, shuddering at the strange feeling of their carapace yielding at the pressure. "I... think I'll be okay," the changeling answered uncertainly, letting out a chuckle, "I mean, the only way I'm losing weight is if I leave town for a long while. And I... don't want to do that."

Dawn nodded in understanding, smiling again. "Hey, if it doesn't bother you, it doesn't bother me," she replied, scooting in beside the changeling once more and flipping open the first of the books, "Now, my student, ready for your next lesson?" Returning the smile, Pectin nodded, warmth filling their heart as they went over their magic, just like nothing had changed at all.

Pectin lost track of time as hours rolled by throughout the day. Serenity must have taken the weekend off, because she made no indication of needing to leave, a fact that further warmed the shapeshifter's heart. It didn't take long for the lesson to turn into playful banter and lighthearted conversation, just like it always had. But there was something different, now.

Without their disguise, Pectin found themselves more anxious, yet slowly becoming more open and sincere. They were still afraid, but seeing their friend smiling with them gave them courage

enough to express themselves more freely. Which apparently delighted Dawn, the unicorn gently praising her companion for being more earnest. Slowly, they reached the end of the lesson, yet Dawn seemed content to simply relax with her friend for a time afterward.

"So, I'm curious," the unicorn prefaced after a while, drawing Pectin's gaze from the book they were studying. "You can use magic while in your real form, and you've got wings, so you can fly," Dawn mused out loud, flipping a quill over her hoof idly, "And that hug last night was at *least* as strong as an earth pony's. So you're kind of like an alicorn, huh?"

Pectin tilted their head at the observations. "I mean... I'm not nearly as strong as some earth ponies. Or as fast as some pegasi, or as magically powerful as some unicorns," the changeling responded, "We changelings might be above the pony average in all those areas, but... we can't develop those skills to the point that you real ponies can. We've got limits way below what real unicorns, pegasi, and earth ponies can achieve. That's what we evolved to become; jacks of all trades, masters of none, able to convincingly fit in any role through mimicry."

Dawn nodded, humming to herself. "But you have a talent for illusion," she thought out loud, before looking toward Pectin, "I'm talking about you specifically, now. I'm curious, have you found anything else you excel at?"

The changeling cocked their head the other way, considering. "I mean, when I'm Tender Oak, the animals at the farm seemed to really like me," they replied thoughtfully, "And I definitely enjoy taking care of them and the pear trees. Oh, and I'm good at fixing things, I learned that as Cirrus." Pectin turned their attention back to Dawn, "Why?"

The unicorn smiled, her horn glowing while her magic lifted her saddlebag to display her flank. "I'm wondering what your special talent is," Serenity replied, nodding toward her rump, the symbol of a sparkling tome and quill displayed proudly on her upper thigh, "My talent is teaching magic, which is why I work at the library as a tutor. So I'm curious about your talent."

The changeling gave a somewhat saddened smile. "That's really sweet, Dawn," Pectin replied, "But I'm a changeling; I don't have a special talent, and I don't get a special 'this is your destiny' rump stamp. I can get pretty good at anything. But I can't become great. Jack of all trades, remember?"

Pausing for a moment, the shapeshifter regarded the magic tome in front of them. "I don't say we've got limits to be self-deprecating," Pectin continued, acrid-green magic turning the page of their book, "Every changeling grows up learning our limitations, in my hive. That's why so many of us envy you real ponies. You have so much more potential than us."

Dawn frowned at the changeling's words. "Please, stop saying things like that," she pleaded, the shapeshifter regarding her with a bemused expression.

"Telling you my physiological limitations?" they asked.

"No, not that," Serenity replied, gently resting her hoof on top of Pectin's own, the changeling blinking in surprise as they felt a slight blush cross their rounded cheeks. "You keep saying 'you real ponies' like you aren't one," the unicorn clarified, looking into the changeling's eyes earnestly, "Stop invalidating yourself. Please."

The arthropod-equine blinked, before glancing away shyly. "Technically, changelings aren't ponies, we just look like you," Pectin remarked softly, "I'm just being accur "

"Star," Dawn interjected, tentatively curling her hoof around the changeling's, "Please."

Pectin took in a breath through their spiracles, holding it for a moment, before sighing softly through their snout. "You're way too nice, you know that, right?" they commented, looking back to Dawn with a gentle smile.

"I can get mean if someone's putting a friend down," the unicorn rebutted, though she still smiled back, reaching up and gently, playfully bopping the top of the changeling's head, tittering at the strangely-solid sound it made, "You don't want to see me get mean, do you?"

Chuckling, the shapeshifter gave a little shrug. "I mean, now you've got me curious," they giggled, only to let out a soft squeak again when they felt a shove against their shoulder, their hooves wheeling involuntarily as they fell over onto their side, blinking in confusion while their plated middle bounced at the sudden shift.

"Still curious?" Dawn laughed, grinning at the blushing changeling. After a moment, the unicorn's expression turned inquisitive when Pectin gave little grunts and flustered whines, wings buzzing while their hooves scrabbled at the floor, not quite able to get purchase against the hardwood floorboards. "Are you stuck?" the unicorn asked incredulously.

"N-no!" squeaked the changeling, whose horn glowed as they were surrounded by green light again, briefly shifting back into Evening Star in order to roll herself upright onto her middle, before another flash had them bouncing upward atop their own squashed abdomen, grinning abashedly to the unicorn beside them, "S-see?"

Serenity regarded the changeling with a cocked brow, though the expression was tinged with concern. "You have to shapeshift to roll over?" she asked, looking over the doughy bug-pony, "Star... Pectin, are you sure you're okay?"

Blushing harder, the changeling grunted as they pushed themselves up into a seated position again. "Yeah, I," they started, before sighing and rubbing their frilled neck, unintentionally revealing more of their rotund flank, "I'm alright, Dawn. A little bit of... okay, a lot of extra weight isn't going to hurt me. Besides, I can have any figure I want, remember?"

The changeling smiled reassuringly to their companion, though they could still see the worry in her features. "I'm just concerned. This shack doesn't have much room, you know," Dawn pointed out, trying to speak delicately, "What are you going to do if all the town's love keeps making you bigger? You already got big enough that you can't roll over in your natural form. What happens if you get so big you can't move at all as a changeling?"

Pectin's gaze lowered at the unicorn's points, taking in their broad midsection once more. It was a legitimate concern. The shack was tiny, and at the rate they were putting on weight, outgrowing the shelter didn't seem so outlandish. Letting out another sigh, the changeling looked to their friend with a forced smile. "I'll, um, figure something out," they said, though it didn't seem to reassure the unicorn.

"Star, I'm serious," Dawn insisted, her hoof still gently holding Pectin's own, "Ever since last night, I can't stop worrying about what might happen if someone walked in on you sleeping, or saw you change shape. You're constantly in danger here, just because of what you are. It isn't fair, you shouldn't have to hide like this. You shouldn't... have to be alone like this. You're smart and sweet, and I don't want to see you hurt." The unicorn wrapped her forelegs around the changeling, embracing them tightly, "I'm scared for you, Pectin."

The changeling was wide-eyed in the embrace. Not just because of Dawn's words; the color of the unicorn's love shifted, something they'd failed to fully notice the night before. "Ludus... Pragma?" Pectin breathed near-silently, trying to comprehend the change in flavor that washed over them from the hug.

Dawn lifted her head, looking at the changeling with confusion. "What was that?"

Pectin's whole head brightened, hastily waving their hooves. "I-it's nothing, just... h-heh, your love changed color a bit," they stammered, quickly adding in the most casual tone they could muster, "You, uh, you're worried? So... what do you think I should do?"

Dawn regarded the changeling for a moment, hovering between curiosity and concern, though the latter eventually won out. "I mean, you live on your own in the woods," she stated, looking around the pair, "And sure, being out here means you're away from most visitors, but it also means that if anything happens, you're alone with nobody around to help."

Pectin couldn't argue with the unicorn, rubbing their forelegs anxiously. "You didn't answer the question," the changeling pointed out, "Of course I live on my own, I don't have a choice. Who would want to live with a changeling?"

Dawn fidgeted in place, looking off toward the door. "I, um... might know someone," she murmured, her cheeks reddening at feeling Pectin's eyes on her, "You know how Tender Oak... how you saw me trying to drop something off in your mail a month or two ago?"

Pectin tilted their head. "Yeah, but the mailbox was empty when I checked," they replied, shaking their head and regarding their companion bemusedly, "Also, tangent?"

"It's... not, actually," Dawn mumbled, looking toward her bag, "I've been trying to work up the courage to drop this off, and that's actually why I came yesterday. I wanted to give it to Evening Star in person, but I got embarrassed when I thought someone else was here. And then the whole finding out you're a changeling happened, and I found myself hesitating. But you're still you, so, um..."

Pausing, the unicorn levitated a red envelope from her bag, floating it over to the changeling. "I, er, pretend it's addressed to Pectin instead of Star," Dawn said, holding the letter to the changeling.

Pectin regarded the letter that was held in a golden aura, the magic turning green as they took it in their own grasp. "D-Dawn... you...?" the changeling started, looking toward the unicorn with wonder.

Serenity was momentarily confused, before her eyes widened as her face reddened. "Oh Celestia, changelings can sense... so that's what you meant by the color changed," the unicorn realized, giving a sheepish smile, "Um, could you pretend it's a shocking revelation when you read the letter, please?"

Pectin found a chuckle rising in their chest, nodding as they carefully opened the envelope, reading it to themselves.

"Evening Star,

We've been friends for a while now, and I'm so proud of all the progress you've made in your studies. More than that, you're funny and sweet, a real joy to be around. When you're gone, I find myself missing you every day. I miss your laugh, I miss how clever you were, I miss your weird points of view and how you light up at discovering something new, even if it seems pretty common to me. You're always so full of wonder and I think I'm starting to ramble.

What I'm trying to get at is that I think you're pretty amazing. And maybe, if it's not too weird, we could go get a milkshake together or whatever it is ponies do when they feel the way I do about you. I'd say all this to you in person, but when I try I get cold hooves. So I hope a letter isn't too tacky a way of asking,

Will you go out with me?

Signed, Serenity Dawn"

Eyes wide, Pectin lifted their gaze, staring at Dawn. "See? That look of wonder, exactly," the unicorn blurted out a little too quickly, before blushing and grinning sheepishly, "Sorry, I practiced that line too much, I think." The changeling continued staring in stunned silence, their companion fiddling their hooves, before gently asking, "Um, Star? Are you, uh, okay?"

Pectin took in a deep breath, setting the letter on the table. "This... explains how violent you got when you thought a changeling had stolen Star's place," they chuckled, Dawn giggling along.

"I think I have a solution to you being alone," Serenity stated, smiling hopefully, "You could stay with me. I've got plenty of room in my home."

Pectin couldn't contain a soft laugh. "Dawn, look at me," they directed, gesturing at themselves, "I'm a changeling. You know, public enemy number one? I'm not Evening Star, I'm not even a pony; I'm a bug with fancy magic. And I know you, you can't stand bugs. Do you honestly still feel this way, knowing what I am?"

Dawn bit her lip at the changeling's words. Tentatively, the unicorn scooted in close again, gently resting her hooves atop Pectin's own, the shapeshifter once more feeling their face warm at the touch. "Even if Evening Star isn't who you really are, these last few hours have shown me that your heart is still the same," she declared, resting a hoof on Pectin's chest, before frowning at the lack of a tangible pulse, "Uh, where's your heart? I need to prove a point."

The changeling laughed in spite of the situation, smiling and lighting up their horn, a green aura guiding Dawn's hoof from their chest to the small of their back, just above their hips, where a faint pulse could be felt under the chitin. "Hah! You do have one!" the unicorn grinned, before clearing her throat and resuming her thought, "This heart, right here, is what I find so appealing. And this b... okay, is your brain where it's supposed to be?"

"Yes!" Pectin laughed, their mirth only growing at the unicorn's indignation.

"Your bug anatomy is making my attempt at a heartfelt confession difficult," Dawn grumbled, before giggling as she reached up and touched Pectin's brow under their horn, "This heart and this mind are what I love about you. I don't care what you look like, I don't care if you're a changeling or a minotaur or whatever. I just think you're great. And I'd be happy to have you living at my place. Where you'd be close, and where you'd be safe."

Pectin felt their eyes welling up, a hoof wiping the building moisture. "Do you always ask crushes to move in this soon?" they commented affectionately, tittering at another shove against their shoulders.

"You'd be the first!" Dawn laughed, before giving a gentler smile, "I'm serious, Star. It scares me knowing you're vulnerable out here on your own. You don't have to go out with me if you're not comfortable or interested, but even if you don't, the offer still stands. Move in with me, it's safer for you."

Pectin smiled, glancing toward their window. "So, changelings need dark, somewhat damp places for sleep. That's why this drafty shack in the woods is great for me."

"I have a basement, and there's plumbing pipes down there and a water heater," Dawn replied, "Dark and damp, it can be your bedroom."

Pectin hummed, still fiddling with their hooves. "Second issue," the changeling added, looking down to their midsection, resting their hooves on the swollen plates, "Just the ambient love of this community has me like... this. What do you think is going to happen if I move in with someone who has a crush on me?"

Dawn's expression fell, regarding Pectin's abdomen with a clouded expression. "Oh, right," the unicorn rubbed her neck, before perking up, "There's got to be some spell that blocks love, right?"



"Dawn, you're a pony, what reason would any unicorn have for making such a spell?" Pectin pointed out, "Besides, if we get it wrong, I might lose my ability to feed altogether and end up starving."

Dawn's gaze fell, ears wilting as she tried to think, yet the gentle grasp of green magic under her chin had her lifting her eyes to meet Pectin's. "I'm not saying no here," they clarified, smiling lightly, "To living with you, or to... how you feel about me. I'm just telling you; if I get the true love of a pony like you, I'm not going to get any skinnier. So, I'm asking you; are you sure you have room for me? And if so, are you sure that me getting more, um, 'well-fed' won't bother you?"

The unicorn considered, taking Pectin's hoof between her own. "The basement is pretty big," she answered, brushing the hole-pocked hoof in her grasp, "And I own the property, so I can just expand the basement if I need to."

Pectin nodded, their head tilting. "And the other thing?"

Dawn was quiet for several moments. If she got together with the changeling, it could make them huge. They could shapeshift to get around that, but it wouldn't change the reality that Pectin would be beyond obese before long. Did that thought bother her?

Taking a breath, Dawn eventually gave a smile as she patted Pectin's hoof. "The only reason it worried me was the thought that it might force you to sleep out in the open where you could be caught by someone who doesn't know you," the unicorn answered, "I don't care what your buggy physiology does when exposed to love. As long as you're safe and happy, that's what I care about." There was a pause, the pony flushing as she glanced aside, "Besides, I told you; it's kind of adorable, in a weird way."

Pectin blushed as well, tittering as they brushed their middle sheepishly. "Okay," they said softly, before smiling and lifting their voice, "Okay, yes. Let's do it!"

Dawn beamed immediately at the words, only to falter slightly as the changeling lifted their hoof, adding, "I do have a condition, though. I'm not like you ponies; I can only physically handle so much love, you saw that last night. So if I need to excuse myself because I'm full, please don't be offended, okay?"

Dawn gave a nod, smiling back to her companion. "I completely understand, I don't want to hurt you," she affirmed, head tilting with a little grin, "So, this means you...?"

The changeling nodded, taking Dawn's hoof in their own. "As long as you understand this isn't going to be exactly like a relationship between ponies," they reiterated, before giving another soft smile, "Then... yes. Yes, I would love to go out with you. But um, 'going out' as a changeling isn't exactly feasible. So, I'll be Evening Star when we go out. But at home... at home, I'll be Pectin. As long as you don't mind a lot of curtains."

Dawn giggled, pulling the changeling against her. "I can live with that."