8. The Rat

Eriwen had gone for walks often. It wasn't like she was unfamiliar with her new home; quite the opposite, she was addicted. Magical energy surged through her every step. Even after a year and a half, the kick from Celestia's sacrificial spell did not waver. Oh, Eriwen knew full well the alicorn's power was not infinite, but it would last decades before it finally began to waver she'd reckoned.

It was on a particularly uninspiring walk that Eriwen caught the scent of something that was not solar magic nor her own drones' hivescent. With a low growl, her wings buzzed.

[General, we have company,] Eriwen reached out through the hive mind and created a connection with her trusted General, Faryn.

[What manner of company, my Queen?] he quickly responded, thoughts urgent.

[I smell… a pony. He is alone, but I cannot be certain. Send two praetorians in case he isn't feeling friendly.]

[At once, my Queen!] Eriwen could almost feel the salute over the link, and a small chuckle escaped despite her mood. Oh, who was she kidding?! She was thrilled- a pony, a real live pony! If her nose wasn't fooling her…

With perhaps a little too much excitement, Eriwen fluttered into the air and headed towards the harmonic essence she'd picked up on… only to find herself dodging spellfire after just a few minutes of speedy flying.

"Woah!" she audibly cried, spinning in the air before righting herself. Before her, a shaggy pale lavender stallion stood prepared for a fight! His long brown mane fluttered as he charged his horn for yet another attack,

"Wait! I'm not a threat!" Eriwen shouted, shielding herself with a quick array of magic before the next missile could strike her, "I swear-!"

"Likely story, Changeling!" the stallion snarled, rearing up and stomping his hooves with murderous intent, "where's the rest of your hive, huh?! Or are you easy pickings?"

"I'd rather not be 'easy pickings'!" Eriwen laughed nervously, landing on the grass while maintaining her shield spell, "in fact, I'd rather we stop the fireballs and just… talk?"

The stallion appeared confused for a moment, before Eriwen's drones suddenly appeared from nowhere and tackled him to the ground. The crimson queen gasped and waved her hooves about.

“No! He’s not dangerous! Leave him be!” she commanded before they could knock him out, or worse. Her drones looked at her with utter confusion, as though they were saying ‘the fireballs said otherwise’, but kept the struggling stallion pinned, “he’s a guest of the crown. Please, ah, release him.”

“As you command, My Queen,” they said in near-unison. The stallion was released, and with a snarl the pony sat up.

“Real welcoming reception for a bug who just ‘wants to talk’,” he snarked bravely. Eriwen smiled nervously.

“I apologize. My drones are a little jumpy. They’ve never seen a pony before.”

“Wait, what?” the stallion scoffed, “no way. There’s gotta be others, right? What about Princess Celestia, or Princess Luna? …Princess Twilight?” He tried to propose each Princess by name, and with each shake of Eriwen’s head his hope withered.

“There was Celestia, but she…” Eriwen sighed, “would you like to come with me? To New Canterlot? I promise you won’t be harmed, on my honor as a Queen.”

“Not much good your honor does you, o Queen. The last bug Queen who came to Equestria came to conquer it,” the stallion snorted.

“Then on my honor as another being who just wants to survive,” Eriwen pleaded, “my name is Eriwen. And yours is…?”

“…Just call me Rat,” he relented, and stood up to his ragged hooves, “lead the way.”

Upon closer inspection, Rat was an unusual sort. He hadn’t been surviving out there all on his own; there were cells of survivors that had been protected by family members or just sheer luck, who were scattered and lost without their Princesses to guide them. Some had resorted to violence and savagery to survive…

Rat was not a raider, not in any sense of the word, but he wasn’t the party-loving type his fellow ponies had been either. He was ragged, he was a survivor in a world that had, up until the previous year, wanted to kill him and his fellow survivors. Rat was realistic, but not beaten down to such a degree that he’d become a lawless bastard roaming the ruins of his destroyed nation.

Turned out that the survivors renewed their hopes when Equestria was miraculously healed, they thought their ‘Elements of Harmony’ had restored the land. However, their hopes were dashed when nopony came to save them. It was Rat and two others’ jobs to locate the Princesses, or anypony else that would have a say in how to restore order.

“I’m afraid nothing remains of Old Equestria,” Eriwen explained as gently but directly as she could, “when I arrived, Princess Celestia was all who remained…”

“And you said she isn’t here?” Rat’s voice betrayed no emotion, but Eriwen could taste his grief on the air. Eriwen was quiet for a good few moments, weighing her options. She hesitated to show him the Celestial tree, where her young were being cared for in the once elegant throne room. To reveal the hatchery and nursery to an outsider, no less a pony, was taboo even to her traditions…

Eriwen owed the ponies their matriarch’s fate, at least.

“Come with me. But please, be careful. What is inside is precious to me and my hive.”

“My Queen, you aren’t seriously considering letting this pony into the hatchery?!” one of her drones exclaimed with audible disgust. Eriwen recognized him as Somnum, one of her first hatched and most loyal of advisors, “your Mother-”

“Queen Aziwe would have honored the ponies in showing her final resting place, Vizier,” Eriwen spoke firmly, causing Somnum to bow slightly in submission, “do not deign to tell me what my Mother would or would not want for my hive.”

“Yes, My Queen,” Somnum spoke glumly. Rat grimaced,

“I really don’t want to disrespect--”

“You deserve to see the truth,” Eriwen gently used a gossamer wing to guide her guest towards the castle gates. While Rat had never seen the old castle in person, the change in architecture was obvious. Very little of the old castle remained, replaced with hard dark red salve and chitinous plates along its exterior. It was wholly alien and a little unnerving, the only inviting aspect of the hive being the golden tree twisting and reaching to the sky above. The tree even from this distance was as beautiful as the mare who’d created it; multicolored leaves rustled in the summer breeze, shimmering with power.

The interior of the changeling hive’s palace was surprisingly elegant. Inside the dark red crystalline salve shimmered like rubies and garnets. Glowing red crystals lined the halls and hung from the high ceilings, no doubt powered by magic within. As Eriwen guided Rat towards the old throne room, he noticed that the amount of guards multiplied. No doubt ordered by that Vizier who’d spoken against taking him into the hatchery, or even the Queen herself.

“Woah,” Rat muttered as he finally stepped hoof into the large room. Small nymphs were being cared for by drones, and developing nymphs transitioning into drones slumbered quietly in dark red chrysalises hanging from the walls and ceilings. Patches of salve carrying eggs nestled in corners and against the bases of the tall walls. The ceiling covered most of the room, but a large portion of the ceiling was built around the absolutely massive Celestial tree that towered high above. Sunlight spilled through, lighting the hatchery with healing light and blessing the presence of all who called it home.

“Please mind your step. My nymphs are lively and may get underhoof,” Eriwen chuckled brightly, walking ahead of Rat towards the Celestial tree.

Rat followed, carefully avoiding Eriwen's young. In truth he had no idea how to feel about the alien Changeling hive. On one hoof he was perhaps a bit angry they'd taken over his ancestral home. On the other, Celestia had accepted them and allowed them to remain here to settle and rebuild.

A sense of wonder overcame him as he gazed up at glistening aurum bark. It was almost blinding. Yet, he felt great sadness. His Princess, to whom he'd been loyal and protected by since the day he was born, was dead. Reduced to a single towering tree.

"Queen Eriwen," he spoke, voice husky from grief, "what happened?"

"Princess Twilight Sparkle. Did you know of her… condition?"

"I did, sort of… Nobody spoke much of it, except that she came down with a mysterious illness," Rat spoke thoughtfully. Eriwen nodded, and sat next to the tree. She patted the space next to her, and Rat tentatively approached to sit next to her.

"Celestia told me this story, and it's only right that I pass it on in her stead…"

Rat felt sick to his stomach. He'd excused himself to retreat to the outdoors. He couldn't bear to remain in that room, where it'd happened. After he released whatever lunch he'd eaten prior to meeting Eriwen from his gut, he panted and sat on his haunches abruptly. He lost everything… to a mental break? He chuckled darkly as he caught his breath. Rat supposed it was only a matter of time until an alicorn had another fit and wrecked their fragile existences.

He was sick, he was lost, he was… angry.

"I can't tell them," he rasped as he heard Eriwen's hoofsteps, "they won't accept it. None of them will accept what's happened, they'll… they'll blame you."

"Surely you're joking," Eriwen deadpanned.

Rat laughed with a tinge of mania, "I know my people. I know they'll look for any excuse to take up arms. Not all of 'em are like me. They're afraid. They're hurt, lost and when you back a pony into a corner they'll do anything it takes to survive."

Eriwen was speechless.

"With your kind's history here… Nopony's forgotten Queen Chrysalis's invasion. They won't stop to consider any of what I've seen here," he finally turned to look at Eriwen and frowned.

"So what will you do, Rat? Will you return, lie and move on? They will eventually learn the truth. I wanted to ignore it all this time… But there's hardly any avoiding conflict. Someday surviving ponies will yearn for their home. Someday the other Queens will take advantage of Equestria's loss. Someday raiders will find their way here and try to scavenge anything they can."

“I don’t know… I-I don’t know!” Rat growled, stomping a hoof onto the cobblestone below him. The guards nearby shifted just enough to rattle their armor and set Rat on edge. He slumped, “I’m… I’m lost too…”

“But you’re not afraid.”

“What?” Rat looked at her with puzzlement.

“You came here and you attacked me, a Changeling Queen, without hesitation. You wrestled my drones even when the odds were against you. You accepted my invitation, and listened to the truth of things as best you could. You did not blindly presume anything of us…” Eriwen smiled gently, “you’re different.”

“Uh, I suppose so…”

“Would you like to stay here, Rat?” Eriwen offered plainly. Rat’s eyes widened with shock and awe.

“I- Uh- I mean-” Rat was entirely taken aback. He stumbled to find the right words. Eriwen laughed, and shook her head.

“I’m sorry for my forwardness. I’ve been observing you, and I find you to be… well, you’re kind at least. Strong. It would be an honor to provide you with shelter until you regain the strength to return to your ponies.”

It took a few moments for Rat to respond.

“I accept your offer. For now.”

Everything was a blur afterwards. He had been shown his quarters, where the amenities were and other such things. Rat was surprised to learn that Changelings did in fact need to eat physical matter to supplement their love intake, so he’d hardly go hungry due to their dietary differences.

His unease slowly melted as drones waved to him and introduced themselves. It was, strangely enough, like he’d belonged among the Changelings all along. Part of him questioned why their Queen had been so open to allowing him to stay. Doubts had been pressed to the back of his mind, but they came to the forefront of his thoughts as he laid awake that same night.

Rat really was a name he’d made up on the spot. No way in Tartarus would he give the Changeling Queen his real name! However, he grew to regret his decision to conceal the truth as the Changelings unexpectedly welcomed him. Rat didn’t even know it’d work, really; Changeling Queens were said to be able to read minds and rip memories straight from your skull! Well, in hindsight that was probably not entirely true…

Still, Changelings! The last thing he’d have expected at all! And Celestia-blessed Changelings that could sustain themselves… It was hard to believe. Yet there he laid, within the heart of their hive,

safe and comfortable in the first bed he’d laid upon in over a year.

Rat allowed himself to drift to sleep after a while, secure and at peace.

“Mother… You don’t think it's the least bit suspicious at all? That a pony conveniently arrives alone, and accepts everything at face value?” Somnum pleaded with Eriwen, begging her to see reason. The two debated deep within the depths of the underhive, where Eriwen’s throne room dominated the large caverns that were once the crystal mines deep beneath Canterlot.

“I do have my suspicions about Rat, Somnum. He only provided the barest amount of information. Nothing that could be used against him; he came prepared to face enemies and possibly combat. Anyone could see that,” she tsk’d, “it’s unlike ponies, and I’m worried. If we keep this pony close and he comes to trust us… he may reveal more information we can use to reason with these ‘raiders’ and other survivor cells he mentioned.”

It was then Somnum understood what his mother’s plan had been all along. He nodded, deeply bowing in both respect and admiration for his queen.

“Have a good night, Somnum. And make sure your sisters sleep,” Eriwen spoke with a glint of mirth in her eyes, “you know Phalanx and Syphi are restless souls.”

“Yes, Mother,” Somnum smiled to himself as he exited the throne room.

Sheltering ponies wasn’t exactly on his list of things he’d have liked to do; there were simply too many unknowns! However, his Queen had a plan, and that would have to suffice. It was not Somnum’s place to question her beyond that point, even as her Vizier. He did feel a twinge of jealousy at times, but he quickly put himself in his place. Queenly matters were not for the mind of a drone… That’s simply how it was and always would be.

Somnum did not notice the chill, nor the shadow following behind his own through the halls of the underhive.

Revision #1
Created 2024-01-24 02:21:01 UTC by oblivvys
Updated 2024-01-24 02:24:04 UTC by oblivvys