



Grim Necessity

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FEATHERLIGHT AND HER PARTNER, REMY, STRODE DOWN THE corridor of the pixie wing of the maximum security prison, boots clacking on the floor. Remy tapped his billy club against his hip as he walked, a nervous habit. Full-sized bricks, painted white and stacked four high, had been used in the construction of the walls, and there was iron plating behind those bricks. Iron didn't bother Featherlight, but Remy said it felt like an uncomfortable itch.

"I can't believe Clank's getting a visitor," he said.

"Happens to the worst of us," she replied, keeping her eyes open for trouble. "I can't believe the warden's allowing her to see a visitor."

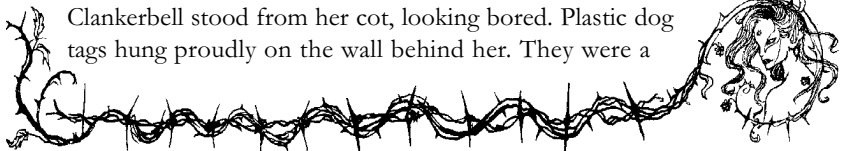
The corridor ended and P-wing opened up around them. They were on the top floor of four stories of cells, wrapped around a central, open core. The core had been strung back and forth with steel wire to keep the pixies from flying.

There were a lot of pixies inside today. The prison was on semi-lockdown because of an outbreak of fighting the day before. The warden was limiting the number of races out in the yards. Right now the brownies and faeries were out, and the pixies, ogres, and most of the dwarfs were inside.

Featherlight and Remy stopped in front of a cell. "Clankerbell. You have a visitor." Remy grunted.

She didn't agree with the warden allowing Clank to have a visitor. All evidence indicated that she hadn't been in the fight, but Featherlight knew Clank had been involved somehow. She always was.

Clankerbell stood from her cot, looking bored. Plastic dog tags hung proudly on the wall behind her. They were a



trophy, taken from the body of the rottweiler that had bitten off her right wing.

“My reputation must be growing,” she said, staring at Featherlight. “They sent the Big Pig to fetch me this time.” She fanned her remaining left wing like a butterfly and glanced at Remy. “Who is it?”

She had gotten a new tattoo on her arm, Featherlight noticed. An inverted rainbow, meaning something like an upside-down cross. No matter how hard the warden tried, he couldn’t keep the pixies from getting colors for their prison tats. They practically shat colors, so what was the use?

“I have no idea who it is and I didn’t ask,” Remy said. “He’s either a dwarf or a short, hairy man. You ready?” Clank nodded and Remy bellowed back down to the guardhouse, “Open up number seventeen.”

The bars of Clankerbell’s cell clicked and whirred on their servos and slid to the side.

Featherlight tensed up. “You know the drill. Keep your hands to yourself and I won’t crush you.”

“Chill, Big Pig. We’re cool.” Clankerbell smirked and stepped out of her cell.

Featherlight was a protean shapeshifter who could change not only her looks, but her size. She could swell up in the corridor and mash Clankerbell into the wall in a second if there were trouble. She could also close up her wounds if someone knifed her. The warden always sent her into the fights, and the prisoners respected her abilities.

Clank carelessly sauntered down the corridor, whistling the same cheery song all Pixies whistled. Featherlight heard it in her head sometimes after long days. Remy walked behind them both to stay out of the ‘crush zone’ should Featherlight’s abilities be needed.

They passed a smaller cell with a single bell hanging from the ceiling, and it rang off-key in time with Clank. An ugly gremlin peeked out below the rim and Featherlight pointed at him. “Go back to sleep, Smear.” The greasy head vanished.

They passed through security, where Clankerbell was searched from top to bottom. Featherlight then led her through a mouse hole and into the secure visiting area. Birdcages hung where pixies could talk to their visitors. More docile inmates were allowed out into the larger Visitor’s Room to meet with family members directly. Clankerbell had never been docile.

Featherlight and Remy locked Clankerbell into a birdcage securely.

“Yo, Feather.”

Featherlight looked up as an elf guard leaned into the secure room. He was holding a telephone receiver.

“What?” she shouted.

“The Man wants to talk to you.”

Featherlight quickly passed through pixie security, and, swelling to near-human size, climbed down to the floor of the guard booth. The elf, who was now shorter than she, handed her the phone.

“What’s up, Boss?” She looked out the booth window and was surprised at how many visitors were in the room. With the tension in the prison, the inmates