

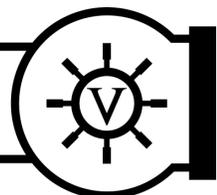
Happily Ever After

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PONY FICTION VAULT



This is everything I ever wanted. I married the girl of my dreams, and she loves me with all her heart. My life should be perfect. Why do I feel so empty?

Cadence turns her head towards me, making the sunlight shimmer across her three-toned mane. I can't hold her gaze. Instead, I look out over the turquoise waves marching endlessly towards the shore. Everything is pristine, here on the beaches of Hawaii, just as it was during our honeymoon eight months ago. I haven't seen a cloud since we arrived. The sand under my belly is soft and warm.

Coming here was her idea. A getaway will help us fix our marriage, she thinks. Love is her special talent, so she ought to know. Sun and Moon, but I hope she knows how to fix this. We're off to a decent start, I guess. It's easier to think out here, without worrying about the royal guard all the time.

"What's on your mind?" she says. She's stretched out on the sand next to me. Our sides are almost touching, but not quite.

"I'm thinking about the first time we were here," I say. "Remember that second day, when I dragged you out into the shallows? That was the most fun I've had in years."

"I remember." She smiles at the memory, but I don't; it just reminds me how I haven't felt that carefree in months. "We were playing like foals all day. And then there was dinner, that night. I forget, was that actually a karaoke bar, or did we start the singing ourselves?"

"That was us," I say.

"And the night after that. Just us, lying right here and watching the stars until the sun came up." I remember; it was the most beautiful sunrise I've ever seen.

We fall silent. I'm trying not to brood, and she's trying not to hover.

"What's changed, Shine?" she says. "Why can't we do that anymore? What can I do to bring us back to that place?"

"I don't know," I say. "It's not you. You're the same now as you were then."

"You've changed, though." She's the one who looks away, this time.

I nod, even though she can't see. "I'm scared, Cadie. Those were the best days of my life. The months before that... you made me the happiest pony in the world. Why can't I feel that anymore? Why am I moody and sad?" I grind a forehoof into the sand, as if I can force answers out from underneath. "Stars above, what's wrong with me?"

"Don't," she says. "Don't do that. Nothing's wrong with you. Feelings aren't a duty. I didn't marry the pony you think you should be. I married the real Shining Armor. Whatever you're feeling, it's real, and it's right, and we'll figure out what to do." She glances at me for a moment, then looks back out to the sea. "Do you still love me, Shine?"

"Of course!" I say without thinking. "I need you like... like... I don't know. I need you. You make everything better, just by being there. I love you, Cadie. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I don't know what I'd do without you. I'm not just saying that, I actually don't know what I could do."

She stays still. Silence descends with all its oppressive weight. I start talking again, just to end the lull.

"It's just, back then, everything was so *exciting*. I felt alive like never before. Just being near you was enough to fill me with the most amazing joy. And, and now I still love you but it's not *powerful* like it used to be and I don't even know why. How can I be your husband if I don't love you more than I did before we married?"

"Oh, Shine." She shakes her head. "My sweet, faithful Shine." Cadence's wing reaches out and drapes itself over my back. "You have nothing to be ashamed of. That's just how love works. The beginning is all about passion and excitement and new experiences, but it can't last. Love becomes part of life, and things settle down. It's less dramatic, but it's just as real. If new love is like a bonfire, then mature love is a hearth that keeps a pony warm for a lifetime. That's what you're moving towards. It's not a bad thing, and you're not doing anything wrong."

My head sinks until I find my eyes inches away from the sand. I can count the individual grains. "You're saying I'll never feel that way again."

"Look at me." When I don't, I hear her get up and move to stand before me. "Shining Armor, I said look at me."

There's no disobeying that voice. Sometimes I forget she's a princess, but every now and then, she reminds me. I look and see Cadence, my beautiful perfect wife, standing above me in all her seraphic glory.

“I’m worried, Shine,” she says, looking down at me. “There’s only one way to find that energy you’re looking for. I know what happens when ponies chase after it. I’ve seen them, bouncing from one love to the next, moving on as soon as that first burst of passion wears off. They’re usually not happy ponies.”

“No!” I feel my stomach plummet at the thought. “Cadie, I would never... I can’t let that happen.”

“I know,” she says. “That’s not a road you’d ever choose. You know where it leads, now. You can avoid that.”

I can’t even bear to imagine it. “Right. I can avoid that. We can avoid that, no matter what it takes.” I realize I’m standing up and I’ve started pacing. My hooves kick up tiny puffs of snow-white sand.

“What do you mean?” she says softly.

“This is your special talent, Cadie! You create love, and you change love. I love you, but it’s... it’s the wrong kind of love. You can fix it!”

“You aren’t broken.” She rests a hoof on my shoulder, stopping my frantic pacing with the barest touch. “I fell in love with you for a reason. I don’t need to change you.”

“But you change ponies all the time,” I say. “You make them better. It’s a good thing.”

“That’s different. I don’t change their love, I just bring out what’s already there.”

“That’s all I want you to do! I already love you.” I can’t stay still. I’m walking towards the surf. “It’s the same thing.”

Cadence follows behind me. “But we’d know. It works for other ponies because they don’t know I helped them. They think they did it all themselves. If I do this to you, we’ll both know that our relationship is different. We’ll know that just loving each other wasn’t enough. You can’t build a marriage on that.” She swallows. “And it’s not true. We can make this work for real.”

A wave crashes and throws droplets against my legs and chest. “You’re the one who knows all about love.” I’m almost whispering. “If we don’t do this, is there really a chance? Is there even a small chance that I’ll... that I’ll...” I have to force myself to say it. “That I would leave you.”

Silence. I look back at her, and the dejection etched across her face is answer enough.

I feel my legs wobble under me. “No.” My voice comes out thick and choked. “No, I can’t. Please.”

“It’s okay.” She steps forward and nuzzles her neck against mine. I melt against her, falling to my knees. “There are other ways,” she says. “We can work through this.”

“Hopefully. Maybe. What if we fail? I can’t take that chance, Cadie. I couldn’t live with myself if I did that to you.” I clutch at her. “Please. Don’t let me be that pony. That’s not me. Please. I need your help.”

She looks down with a face like a blank slate. “Okay.” Her voice is flat. “Okay, Shine. For you.”

“Thank you.” I bury my face in her chest. “I love you. I love you so much.”

“I know,” she says. Above me, her horn begins to glow.

“Cadie! There you are! I’ve been looking everywhere for you.” My husband walks up to the banister beside me. We’re on the mezzanine above the Summer Ballroom of Canterlot Palace. Up here, we have an unobstructed view of the dance floor. Dozens of ponies spin in time to the orchestra. They look so happy. I should be among them.

“Sorry, Shine.” I raise my eyes. “I needed to get away for a minute.”

He leans a shoulder against the balcony and grins at me. “Just tell me next time, is all.” That smile... I know it’s for me. I don’t know if it’s from my husband. Is it really him, or is it the thing I planted in his head?

“Of course,” I say. I look back to the dancers below. With their fabulous dresses and dashing suits, they look almost as good as we do. The two of us must look perfect from the outside. “It’s a beautiful view, isn’t it?”

“Mm hm.” His eyes haven’t left my face. “Beautiful.” Would he have stared at me like that, before? I think I remember that look from our courtship. That’s probably the real Shining Armor looking at me. I lean in to kiss him, but by the time I’m done analyzing, the Wonderbolt captain has showed up. I smile politely while my husband introduces us.

She launches into a joke about tactics or something. Shining Armor does a good job of feigning interest. I’m pretty sure the Wonderbolt doesn’t notice how his eyes keep darting towards me. Was he always this impatient when somepony came between us? Maybe I’m just seeing it more, now that I’m looking for it. I don’t know.

Shining Armor deftly extracts us from the conversation. I take hold of his shoulder and steer him towards the wide marble stairs that sweep down to the dance floor. “Come on, Shine,” I say. “Let’s show those ponies how it’s done.” He always loved to dance, even way back before he found his cutie mark. I’m sure that part of him is really him.

We join the dancers just as the orchestra strikes up a stately waltz. I lean my left shoulder against his right, and it begins. The three-beat tempo suffuses me, and we canter in harmony, reading each other’s movements almost before they begin. Forgetting everything, I throw myself into it, savoring a rapport with him that transcends words, transcends magic, transcends doubt. I barely notice when one song ends and another begins, and another, and another. I’m floating, buoyed up by his touch and the force of the music.

And then the music stops. The ball is over. Some ponies have left. The rest are leaving.

I wipe the sweat from my brow. I'm grinning like a filly. "That was wonderful," I say.

"As always," he says. "Wait here a moment. I have to do something."

He trots away. I stand there, wondering what he's up to. He grabs one of the garlands adorning the walls and picks through it.

Flowers. He's bringing me flowers. Shining Armor was never this trite, before. He never tried to prove he loved me. He didn't have to. This isn't him at all.

I can't keep doing this.

No. I have to do this. Leaving now would destroy him. If I had been braver, if I had left before, then the wounds would have healed, even if it took years. It's too late for that now. I don't think he can ever stop loving me, no matter what happens. Even more, I did this to him. It's my fault. No, don't think that. It's my responsibility.

It would be easier if I didn't love him anymore. Then I would only have to fake it. As it is, I can't stop myself from reaching out again and again, never knowing if I'll find my Shining Armor or the facsimile I put in his place. He has no idea. As long as he loves me like this, he has to think I'm happy.

Wait. There might be a way out of this after all. If I did this to him, maybe I can undo it. I've never thought of using magic to remove love before. I hate that I'm even considering it. It would be kinder, though. I could stop living like this. We could go back to the way we were before. He would be in control of his own life again. That would be worth it. Wouldn't it?

I focus. Magic builds behind my forehead. It feels wrong. Of course it does. This goes against the core of who I am, against everything I've ever done. The realization doesn't even slow me down.

I wonder if I'll be able to control the enchantment. It took practice before my magic could create exactly the amount of love I wanted. If I'm too clumsy with this spell, he could come to hate me. That might be easier. We'd both be able to move on.

I try to release the magic. Nothing happens. The spell won't come together. I try again, harder. Pain flares in my temples. Nothing else. It seems my magic doesn't work like this. I can only create, not destroy. That should make me happy. I let the power dissipate unspent. I feel hollow.

Soon enough, he comes back with his bouquet. He's picked out deep violets, pink lilacs, and pale yellow peonies. He bows as he presents them to me. "I've been looking at these all night," he says. "They remind me of your mane. I was thinking, I get to look at you all day long, but you don't. It doesn't seem fair. Maybe these will give you some idea of how beautiful you are to me."

This is all wrong. The words are lovely, but I married a hero, not a poet.

"That's sweet," I say. "They're delightful."

This is everything I ever wanted. The evening couldn't have gone better. We haven't danced like that since the wedding. My life is perfect.

I'm about to climb into bed. I stop for a moment to admire her. She's already asleep. The sheets trace the soft curve of her shoulder. Her coat almost glows in the starlight. I could stare at her for hours. Some nights, I do just that.

I slip under the covers and snuggle against her. She murmurs into my neck. The sound makes my heart soar. She loves me with all her heart, and the world is exactly the way it should be.

I remember that I once had trouble loving her. I can't remember why. She saved me, though. She was so worried about changing who I am, but that didn't happen at all. Her magic brought back the real me, the one that loves her like she deserves. She is such an incredible pony. Her love is everything to me. I'm so lucky to have it.

I wonder what our children will look like. I hope they have her eyes.

I am the happiest pony in the world.