

Chapter 21

Upon opening the double doors, we were greeted to the sight of a grand ballroom that looked like a set straight out of some sweeping epic from Hollywood's Golden Age. The room itself was big by any standard of the word, and even skirted along the edges of being considered gargantuan as the floorspace covered the same area as a professional football field. The ceiling towered over us nearly as tall as the room was long, supported by the thick marble walls and the many columns that made up the perimeter. The pink marble of the columns contrasting against the white of the floor and ceiling as they stood proudly on their grey stylobates with their golden plinths and capitals gleaming in the waning sunlight.

As I chanced a glance at the ceiling, I was expecting to find some sort of masterpiece painted there, like the examples of High Renaissance art that graced many a cathedral's vaulted ceiling from Earth. It seemed that the Equestrian's preferred more for their architecture be the centerpiece as I marveled at the elaborate fan vaulting that looked to be made from some very rich-looking wood. Each dark beam intertwining with those of its neighboring columns, making the roof resemble a towering forest canopy. Adding to the mystical beauty of the room was a series of crystal chandeliers that hung from the roof with a single grand chandelier taking precedence in the center of the room.

Along the left wall, positioned between each column, was a series of colorful

stained-glass windows. Each one of these towering panes of prismatic glass was segmented into a succession of leaner windows depicting many different events in Equestrian history, both factual and legendary. Ambiance at ground level for the guest would be set by a series of tall candelabras that were positioned in front of each of the columns. Yet even though the room seemed to be lit by candles alone, the amount of light coming from them, in addition to the chandeliers above, proved to be more than enough illumination for the room in the waning afternoon light.

"Sure is grand," I mumbled to myself as I followed the princesses down the carpeted walkway to a stage at the opposite side of the room, where a couple was there awaiting us.

"Of course, that is why it's called the Grand Ballroom," Xam replied back to me, however by the tone of her voice I couldn't tell if she was being sarcastic or it was just her naturally informative side talking.

"Thank you Princess," I told the lavender alicorn as I bit my tongue, trying to prevent myself from saying something sarcastic.

Making our way across the vast room, we finally reached the stage where the pony couple stood. The unicorn stallion was tall, at least by pony standards, and must have been a member of some military organization if the dress uniform he was wearing was any sort of a clue. Then there was how well kept his ponytail of highlighted blue hair was and the way that his

uniform was so sharply pressed. This pinged the white unicorn right away as an officer of some sort on my enlisted radar.

A single row of golden buttons ran down the front of his scarlet coat as it was held shut by a thick black belt made of patent leather. The coat's high collar was a mustardy yellow and was decorated with golden embroidery; matching well with the yellow stripes, denoting some unknown rank, that was sewn onto the cuff of the coat's sleeves. Adorned proudly on his left breast was quite the number of medals that he had no doubt earned doing lord only knows what. Resting atop his left shoulder and crossing across his chest was a wide cobalt blue ribbon that tied together at his right hip in a bow. Situated in the middle of this ribbon, at the center of his chest, was a seal that had the same crest as Xamspona's cutie mark. Since his white dress slacks covered up his cutie mark, I could only come to the assumption from this seal that he was either part of Xamspona's Royal Guard, or they were both from the same household. The female alicorn at his side however made that mystery a little easier for me to solve as I assumed that this white stallion had to be Xam's brother, Zopupun Estyv.

Which would no doubt make the tall pink alicorn mare his wife, Princess Gehluli. To say that she was beautiful would have been like saying Leonardo Da Vinci was only a mediocre artist. I recalled Xamspona telling me at one point that one of her sister-in-law's many titles was The Princess of Love, and I found it hard for me to disagree with it as the goddess before me did indeed look like a living representation of Aphrodite herself. Yet as shallow of a man as I may be sometimes I wasn't basing my assessment on her otherworldly beauty or her dangerous curves

alone, but from the warm personality that emitted from her with such strength that it just seemed to attract you to the pink alicorn.

Her ethereal hair, like Gilzia and Pyre's, moved through the air like it was floating in a lazy stream, with colors reminiscent of a warm summer sunset as it transitioned through its ever changing shades of pinks, purples, yellows, and white. As she turned slightly I caught a glimpse of her back and took notice of another feature unique to her. The tips of Gehluli's long pink wings gradually darkened into a deep purple, not unlike a pen having been dipped in an well of ink.

Princess Gehluli's dress was a very traditional light blue ball gown. Having a high neckline yet remaining sleeveless as her arms were left bare, save for a long pair of white opera gloves. Her accessories were slightly more than the other princesses in that she had a diamond necklace around her neck and a diamond tennis bracelet on her right wrist to go with the golden tiara on top her head.

As the royal couple took notice of our group approaching down the runner, Gehluli's purple eyes sparkled as she gave us all a warm smile.

*"It is good to **(see)** that you made it aunties," she said with her warm voice, "I was **(about)** to have Zopupun send out the **(guard)** to **(find)** you."*

Gilzia let out a light laugh as we approached, *"Thank you Gehluli, but as you can **(see)** we are here with time to **(spare)**."*

Gehluli and the other princesses shared a quick laugh before the Princess of Love went and gave Xamspona a warm hug and a familiar nuzzle on the cheek. However, as I watched the two grown mares begin to break out into a little song I found myself growing slightly concerned for their mental states.

*"**(Sunshine, sunshine, ladybugs)** awake! **(Clap)** your hooves and do a little **(shake)**!"*

They sang happily together as they shook their firm asses and covered their eyes.

"What the hell was that?" I lightly muttered under my breath as Etpinego secretly pinched the inside of my arm. This caused me to cast a frown towards my date momentarily, only to look forward again as I saw the two younger alicorns approaching us.

"Oh and who is this Xamspona?" the pink princess asked as she gave me a warm smile, and I noticed her purple eyes dart down quickly to Etpinego's and my hooked arms, *"Is this the **(mysterious)** human stallion that I have been **(hearing)** so much about in your **(letters)**?"*

"Yes Gehluli, this is Eric Broussard from Earth," Xam said as she motioned towards me, *"he has been **(making)** great **(strides)** in **(trying)** to **(learn)** our **(language)**, but for now the best way to talk with him is to use the **(spell)** I **(mentioned)** to you."*

The Princess of Love gave an embarrassed giggle as she placed a hand over her mouth and spoke again, this time in English, "Oh, I do apologize Eric, I completely forgot about the fact that you are still having problems with our language."

"It is quite okay, Your Highness," I said with a smile. "I am trying to learn your language as fast as I can, but it has proven, difficult."

"I am sure it must be," Gehluli agreed with me, "I couldn't imagine what it would be like not being able to understand anypony."

"Eric, I would like for you to meet the Empress of the Crystal Empire and fellow Princess of Equestria, Princess Gehluli, and her husband, my brother, Duke Zopupun Estyv." Xamspona said as she motioned to the couple.

Stepping forward I gave them a bow, "Your Majesties."

"Oh there's no need for such formalities, Eric," Gehluli said as she gently motioned for me to rise, only to find an impish glint now shining in her eyes as she smiled at me, "especially when you could soon be family."

I paused for a moment while I tried to let my mind grasp at what she had said, "Excuse

me?"

"Oh come now Mr. Broussard. You must already know that I am the Princess of Love, did you honestly think that you could hide your relationship with my aunts from me?"

"Uh," I glanced towards the celestial sisters hoping for a little bit of help, but only received a consolatory feeling through our bond as the look on their faces told me that they were not surprised by these turn of events. Yet I was even more stunned when Gehluli quickly glanced to Etpinego.

"Or hers?"

"I'm going to have to go with, no?" I slowly told her, unsure of how to really respond to the alicorn, as I began to reconsider if Vivmay was still the most frightening mare that I new.

"Good! You have no idea how hard it has been to try and find somepony for them, and now I find them in not just one but two courtships," she chirped as she clapped her hands and gave an excited little bounce before walking past me to give Etpinego a congratulatory hug and greet the other girls. Leaving me standing there still stunned.

After she had passed her husband, Zopupun, came up to me and gave me a sympathetic pat on the shoulder, "Don't worry about it Eric. She's always like this when she picks up on new

love."

"If I recall dear, you never seem to complain about it later," Gehluli announced as she gave her husband a playful wink, causing the duke to blush a little.

After a few more minutes of me getting to know the Princess of Love and her husband some more, and after Gilzia and Pyre had put the sun to bed and brought out the moon. We were directed to our positions by an official, with the four princesses and Zopupun taking their positions at the center of the stage, standing in front of a display that had been set up no doubt for them. Behind them on the wall, flanked by a pair of ceremonially dressed Royal Guards, hung a drawn pair of red velvet curtains with the Equestrian coat of arms displayed proudly in the middle. From there, Etpinego and I were directed to stand in a spot that was a couple of feet to the right of the four princesses, while the other girls were directed to the main receiving area. Then the protocol officer, a stuffy looking unicorn mare, began to give us a brief synopsis of the events that would happen as Etpinego graciously translated the parts I couldn't understand. Once everything was in order the official directed a servant to open the doors to begin receiving the guests.

Two hours! Two whole goddamn fucking hours is how long it took for all of the guests to file into the ballroom and for the princesses and myself to greet them. Now it wasn't bad enough

that I had been literally bored to tears, but I could not for the life of me remember even one name of the over two hundred delegates and guests. This was not from lack of trying of course, but at the rate that they were coming in and the different languages that each of their names were based on it was no easy task to follow.

Each guest and their date would come in through the side door as their names were proclaimed by the announcer, before they would make their way the short distance to the stage. From there the announcer waited till the first guest had reached the halfway point before calling the name of the next guest in line. As they reached the platform where we stood they would first give a bow to the four princesses, paying respect to the hostesses of the party and the reigning rulers. After which they would walk the few steps over to where Etpinego and I stood as we thanked them for coming with a bow and a "thank you" before the guest made their way to the guest area.

Even though the process had been boring, and about as fun as rubbing my eyes with sandpaper, the exotic appearances of the guest and the imaginative names of their far off lands created a small reprieve from the monotony of it all. A most peculiar fact though that I found most peculiar that night, was that most of the different species that had arrived were humanoid in appearance, yet each still held features unique to their own race. The Minotaurs, with their towering mass of muscle and bovine features. Or the lithe Suxoi people of the plains nation of Juhd Solv from across the sea, slender and graceful with their crown of antlers branching from their heads. Each of them completely alien to me yet at the same time so familiar.

But now the greetings were over and it was time to move on to the part that I believe I dreaded the most, the social portion of the ball. I paused momentarily as I silently wished that I had a stiff drink to help ease the nerves that were beginning to well up in the pit of my stomach, petrifying me to the spot. There were very few moments in my life where I truly felt as anxious as I was now. Waiting for my father to come home from work the day that I had broken one of the house windows playing ball in the backyard with some of the neighborhood kids. Or there was the time in high school when I was sitting on a couch across the room from my girlfriend at the time's father. Yet I felt like I could easily face those hurdles again if it meant that I didn't have to leave this stage.

As I stood there and tried to will my body to move I felt the tender touch of somepony grabbing my arm. Looking down to my side I saw Etpinego standing there with a sympathetic smile on her face, silently encouraging me to give it my best shot as I also felt a wave of calm emotions begin to flow through the bond. Feeling a little bit more reassured now by my mares that it would be okay, I gently patted the back of Etpinego's hand before we both gave a bow of our heads to the four princesses. Announcing our dismissal from the stage as Etpinego and I cautiously began to make our way into the crowd to try and... socialize.

Approaching the horde of officials, I could feel all of their eyes directed towards us, and could hear their muttered breaths as they talked amongst themselves about this strange new

creature that had found his way to their world. However, as me and my beautiful marefriend approached I watched the group part before us like the powerful maws of some great hungry beast. Begging us to enter, and enter we did as they closed around behind us, sealing our fate.

No sooner did we enter the fray than we were approached by one of the guest, a Qilin, if I remembered correctly, male and his date, who began to excitedly talk with us in his native tongue. Nevertheless, as much as I tried to follow along, I was lost no sooner than when he had opened his mouth. After he had finished his statement I was at a loss for a moment on how best to respond to the male who had taken the effort to approach me, and was now eagerly awaiting my reply. I knew that he, along with all the other guests present, were able to understand me through their connection with the latent magic that flowed through the ley lines of this world. However, being as I was woefully exempt from this gift I was pretty much left to my own devices on how best to communicate with them.

Yet, as I was about to tell them that I was unable to talk with them, the mare at my side spoke up in a refined tone that I had never heard her speak in before.

*"We thank you, **(Ambassador)** Ch'o, for making the long journey here. **(Unfortunately,** **Ambassador)** Broussard is still **(adapting)** to our **(languages)**, but he **(extends)** his **(immense gratitude)** at your coming here tonight and looks forward to **(further advancing)** the good **(relations)** between your **(country)** and his when he is more able to **(convey)** his **(desires)**."*

The Qilin ambassador and his date listened attentively to the farm-mare next to me as I saw a warm smile come across their lips. I, on the other hand, was completely transfixed on Etpinego and almost missed the bow that they gave me before melding back into the crowd.

"Where did that come from?" I silently asked her as I grabbed a couple of flutes of champagne off the tray of a passing waiter, handing one to her as I took a sip from mine.

"Whatever do you mean, Ambassador Broussard?" She asked me coyly in English with that same smooth accent that was completely devoid of the usual country twang that I was used to hearing.

"That accent and your mannerisms?" I asked her again as I watched her take a refined sip from her glass as she daintily held the stem in her fingers. "Did Xamspona cast some kind of spell on you or something? Did Vivmay?"

She lightly giggled at my confusion as I watched her eyes twinkle, "No Eric, I'm afraid not. The answer is actually a lot simpler than that. Back when I was a filly I left the farm for a period of time and spent some time with my aunt and uncle in Manehattan, where they sent me off to the best etiquette schools that bits could afford. So as to, as my aunt would say, "find the jewel within". Also what kind of mare would I be if I let my stallion embarrass himself in front of the leaders of the world?"

"Well thank you my lady," I said as I lightly chuckled at the silliness of my previous assumption before I leaned in and whispered in her ear to where only she could hear me, "although I have to say I prefer the twang."

Etpinego's ear flicked as my breath tickled it, but she kept her composure and took another sip from the delicate glass before flashing me a small grin. Knowing that Etpinego would be there to help me overcome the biggest obstacle before me just made my admiration for her grow all the more, as I leaned down and gave her cheek a light kiss. While doing so I could hear the crowd around us whispering to themselves at my display of affection to my date, but I didn't give a damn what they thought. For she was mine and I was hers, and as we shared one more smile with each other we delved into the storm again.

Eventually after about another hour of socializing, the presenter announced to the assembly that it was time for us to gather in the dining hall for the night's meal. The group of nobles and politicians followed The Royal Family as we began to shuffle our way through the set of doors that were situated at the front of the room by the platform.

The adjoining dining hall was another chamber that rivaled in size the hall that we had just come from. Situated in the room were five long tables, four of which were lined up parallel to each other, while the fifth sat broadside to the others at the far end of the room. Each table looked to seat around fifty guests a piece and was covered in a long white table cloth with a

colorful runner running down the length of them. A flock of servants began to direct the guest to their designated seats as Etpinego and I were led over to ours at the far table between the other Element Bearers and across from where the princesses were already standing. All of the other guest stood behind their seats as everyone waited for the princesses to take theirs.

Once everyone was in position, the four princesses were assisted into their seats by some attendants, while I pulled out Etpinego's chair for her to take her seat as the other guest took theirs. Once my date was firmly in her seat and pushed in, I took my own as I cast a glance at the other diners at the table. Seated at the table was a myriad of species, most of the faces I recognized due to the still fresh memory of the torture that I had recently endured. Even though I couldn't remember their names, I could recall a few of their titles. Titles like Emperor, Queen, Princess, Strategos, Chieftain, President, and Sultana.

'Apparently this is the adult table,' I thought nervously to myself.

'Are you doing alright, Eric?' I heard Pyre's voice ask in my head as I cast a glance her way to where she sat across from me.

'Yeah,' I replied, trying to sound as confident as I could, but even in my mind my voice was laced with nervousness, "the whole experience is just a little overwhelming is all."

The Princess of the Night gave me a small smile as I heard her voice in my head again, 'I

can understand the feelings you must be experiencing. After my return from my exile it was a very frightening thing to be suddenly thrown into a whole new world. For while I spent those thousand years in slumber, the rest of the world continued to progress without me. Civilizations came and went, wars were fought and borderlines moved, all while countless generations grew old and died.

'I used to wonder if I would ever get used to all the changes, and for a time I even considered relinquishing my rights to the throne. For what did I have to offer? My sister, Gilzia, had been able to successfully rule Equestria peacefully by herself for the entirety of my absence. In the end I almost did it because I was afraid of failing, but it was my sister's constant support that helped me get through the hard times. To adjust to my new realities, and in that same way all of us shall be here to help you.'

'Thank you Pyre, that does make this easier,' I said to her as we both shared a gentle smile.

As the servers brought forth bowls of piping hot soup in dishes of silver, I heard Zopupun get my attention from his position across from me next to his wife.

“So Ambassador Broussard, my sister tells me that on your world you are a military stallion. Were you a member of your nation’s army or perhaps the navy?” He asked me as he laid his napkin in his lap and levitated his spoon off of the tabletop before dipping it into the

warm broth.

“Yes Your Highness this is true,” I told him as my bowl was placed in front of me, and after thanking the waiter I continued, “Princess Xamspona Tevopi’s information is correct as usual, but I am sad to inform you that I am neither part of the Navy or Army. Instead I belong to my nation’s Air Force.”

At that, a suppressed laughter could be heard coming from some of the guests within immediate hearing range of us. I nervously chuckled along with them, unsure of what I could have said that had caused such a reaction from them as I gave a lopsided smile to the former Captain of the Royal Guard, “You’ll have to excuse me, but what is so funny?”

A griphoiness, who sat to the left of Xamspona, decided to answer my inquiry before the duke had a chance, “*(We do not mean to offend Ambassador Broussard, but some of us find it amusing that an earth-bound species like yourself could ever learn how to fly).*”

I tried to decipher what she had said to me, but my attempts were futile in making out anything discernible from it. Luckily for me though, Etpinego and I had managed to develop a somewhat ingenious way to overcome my shortcomings in the language department. While I could not speak their language nor understand them, save for what Equis I had already managed to learn, Etpinego and the others, however, could. So my date would relay the message to me and I would reply to them in English, which would then be translated by the Magic of Harmony

into each of their own tongues. A complicated method sure, but it worked.

I leaned down towards the beautiful farm-mare beside me as she whispered in my ear, “She said that they’re surprised that humans could learn to fly.”

I gave a suppressed chuckle as I addressed the female sitting across from me, “Yes, you could say that we humans are a very stubborn race when we set our eyes on something.”

The corners of the griphoness’ beaked mouth curled into a slight smile as she spoke again, “*(Indeed, after seeing your demonstration of that machine of yours yesterday. I believe many of us can agree with you on that).*”

“*I (believe) that we can all agree on that (point) Your Highness.*” I heard an arrogant voice say from my left that instantly began to make my blood boil, “*But tell me (Ambassador), what about the (current rumors) and (accusations) that have been spreading around that humans, while an (ingenious species), are very irrational and (inclined) to... (violent behaviors)?*”

There sitting to the right of the princesses was that prick of an asshole Prince Isbilsh with a smug look of superiority on his face as he slowly swirled the wine in his glass before taking a light sip. I hadn’t seen the blonde little shitstain since his last ass-kicking over six months ago, and for me it hadn’t been nearly long enough. For while I continued to maintain a calm

composure on my face as he made his verbal jabs, below the table I was clenching my fist so hard that I was sure, had I had longer fingernails, I would have drawn blood. Gilzia and Pyre picked up on my sour mood right away as I began to feel their comforting presence begin to flow over me and even Etpinego must have detected something as I felt her hand lay atop my shaking fist from under the table. The combined efforts of the three mares was able to calm the inferno flaring inside me till it was nothing more than a simmering pile of coals, and I was able to finally address the prince.

While Etpinego relayed his message to me I took a final calming breath as I put on a smile and grabbed my own glass of wine, before looking at Isbilsh, “Yes, well, while I won’t lie and say that humanity is an entirely peaceful race, we try not make it common practice to attack another unless thoroughly provoked first. I believe that you yourself have experienced this practice first hand if I remember correctly,” I told him as I raised my glass to him, but refused to take a sip of the liquid inside.

Obviously the etiquette of toasting was similar here as it was on Earth as my insult to the Prince didn’t go unnoticed to him, nor many others at the table as a tense silence came over the table. If he was expecting me to just sit back and take his crap as he tried to make me out to be the one responsible for our last altercation in front of everyone here, he had another thing coming. He continued to sit there as both of us completely focused on the other. Then without a word he finished the wine in his glass before standing and turning to address Gilzia and Pyre.

“I do (apologize) aunties, but I must take my (leave) early tonight. I have important business to attend to in the morning and it seems that the wine did not settle well with me tonight. Please everypony enjoy the rest of your night,” and with that he gave his aunts and the other guest a curt bow before making his way out of the hall.

‘That could have been handled better,’ I heard Gilzia say through our bond, and I couldn’t help but pick up a hint of disappointment in her voice, ‘I had thought that maybe you two could have put your past behind you.’

‘I know Gilzia,’ I mentally told her as I cast a glance across the table to her, trying to not be too repulsed by the thought of being buddy-buddy with the stuck up prince. Still on the other hand, if I was going to be in a relationship with the celestial sisters from now on their family was going to be a big part of my life as well, whether I wanted it to or not. As they say, if you love someone you’re willing to make sacrifices of yourself to make them happy, ‘look, if it means that much to you I’ll promise to try harder at being nicer to him.’

‘Thank you Eric,’ she told me as I saw the approval in her eyes.

At that point, from further down the table, a very large male with strong reptilian features spoke up as he plucked a few gems from the bowl in front of him with his clawed fingers. As he continued to talk, all at the table gave him their utmost attention, his rumbling voice garnering respect with each syllable as Etpinego translated his words into my ear.

“Back when my brood siblings and I were but hatchlings, I remember the old ones telling us fantastic stories of the old world. How it was like an uncut jewel, raw and full of hidden beauty, but that was before the time of The Betrayal, before the time of The Fleeing.

"Then the old ones would tell us of how a creature called Mada began to spread into their neighbor's territories, eventually driving the others and my ancestors from the Cradle of Life as they were forced to seek refuge in the wilderness. For a while they thought that they were safe from the danger, far away from the Mada. But they would not be so lucky. At first the Mada returned in singles and pairs. The old ones were able to fight them off, but soon they began to come in great packs. Wearing the hides of their fallen victims and brandishing their metal claws that could pierce through the hardest scales. Desperately my ancestors fought trying to protect their hoards and their young. Sometimes they would prevail, but most times they would fall as the Mada took everything they had and left nothing alive in their path, not even the hatchlings.

"It was only by finally having their cries and pleas answered by the Great Mother that they would find their salvation on this new world. Free of the Mada themselves, but not yet free of their influence. For the Mada had introduced a new feeling in our hearts, hate. Long our ancestors fought against this plague that silently tormented us, until the daughters of the Great Mother cleansed us by defeating the Chaos."

The table was silent as the dragon finished his tale. Many of the other guest at the table

held a solemn look on their face as they took in what the dragon male had said, no doubt having similar tales in their own histories. I could assume from the version of the same story that Gilzia and Pyre had relayed to me that Mada had to be humanity, but I was unsure of the reasoning behind him retelling it.

"I am sorry for the hardships your ancestors had to endure," I apologized to him as he gave a nod in acceptance, "but I must also apologize if I fail to understand the meaning behind your tale?"

The dragon remained silent for a few moments before continuing, "There is no message to my tale of woe little human, it is merely a premise to the question I pose to you now." He reached into the bowl again and picked up a single emerald in his claws, rolling the gem slowly between his fingers, examining the gem with a critical eye for a moment, "Do we still have reason to fear humans should the barrier between our worlds fail and the link between our worlds is re-established, especially after such a sordid past?"

I paused for a moment, seriously contemplating his question before responding. It was obvious that in some of their eyes, my ancestors were nearly the cause of their extinction all those years ago. Even though man had made great strides towards peace and unity, were we really so different from our caveman ancestors? Still, I was always raised in the belief of the good of man, and that the sins of the few should not overshadow the good of the many.

"Yes," I told the dragon as a murmur began to spread among the other diners as he raised a curious eyebrow at me, "you do have reason to fear the dangers of humans. Even though I may not be as familiar with your legends of the events that happened prior to your arrival to this world, I am, however, familiar with my own species history. We are a war driven race and we are capable of performing horrifying acts that defy any sense of the imagination.

"But at the same time I do not believe that we are inherently evil. For with all of our faults and violent past I believe our greatest strength comes from our capacity to do good. Our efforts to better ourselves and those around us with each passing generation as we strive for some yet unknown goal.

"So yes I do believe that you have reason to be wary of humans, but in the same regard I believe humanity is something that you can trust."

The dragon thought my response over for a brief, tense, moment as he placed the green jewel in his powerful mouth. Crunching the hard stone like a piece of candy, before he looked my way again and graced me a smile, "And what of you Ambassador? Should we trust you?"

"Only if you believe my actions make me worthy of your trust," I replied, returning the polite smile as he gave a respectful nod of his head.

'Very well said Eric,' I heard Gilzia's voice praise in my head as I could feel the pride

radiating from the sisters as the dinner conversation moved onto another topic and I was finally able to begin enjoying my soup.

The dinner went on in relative calm for a while longer as I enjoyed my meal and the company of my three mares and friends, all the while answering the questions and inquires by the other guest. I told them a little of human history and the feats we had been able to perform. At first many of them didn't choose to believe that humans had been able to reach beyond the surface of the Earth, and were particularly astonished that we currently maintained a laboratory floating in orbit. Even Xam was absolutely giddy at the possibilities of zero-g experiments as she asked me questions with barely suppressed enthusiasm, and I was almost positive that a certain young alicorn would be probing me for more information later tonight after the ball.

Eventually the conversation led to more normal matters between national leaders as the topics went on to trade agreements, peace talks and the such. It was at that time I found myself out of my element as I instead decided to enjoy the company of my date as we continued on with our meals. It wasn't until we heard a woman, with features that were reminiscent of a silver fox, addressing us from farther down the table. She seemed to be asking me a question, although what it was alluded me as I felt the gentle breath of my lovely farm-mare on my ear.

"She seems to be askin' for your opinion on the Changeling incursions," Etpinego explained to me as I picked up on her country accent returning.

"What are Changelings?" I asked her back as the fox-woman looked on, patiently waiting for my reply.

"Changelings are a group of ornery ponies that change their appearance so as to feed off another unsuspectin' ponies emotions," she explained to me, "They tried overthrowin' Equestria a few years back durin' Princess Gehluli's weddin'. Lately though, they've been makin' attacks on other countries."

"I see," I whispered back to her as I finally addressed the patiently waiting vixen, "Well ma'am, to be honest my opinion would have to be one of neutrality on the subject until I have enough information to make a fair judgment."

*"Which is **(exactly)** why we must not be **(hasty)** in our **(reaction)** to this **(situation)**,"*
Gilzia added as she directed the attention back to her.

The unknown vixen spoke again and I could tell from her tone that she was a little befuddled at Gilzia's reply, but the sun princess didn't seemed to be bothered by it as she maintained her serene appearance.

*"It is true that the attack four years ago was **(uncalled)** for, but I do not believe it is a **(reason)** to not still strive for a **(peaceful resolution)**. **(Unfortunately)** we are at a **(disadvantage because)** we know so little about the **(Changelings)** as a **(species)** due to their*

*reclusiveness, or the motives that drive them behind these recent (**attacks**). However, I speak for me and my fellow princesses when I say that Equestria will continue to strive for (**peaceful coexistence**) between our two races for as long as that option is available to us. And if we are made the target of (**attacks**) again then we will (**defend**) ourselves as we always have."*

Many of the leaders sitting at their tables agreed with Gilzia's statement as they nodded their heads and muttered their approvals, but this was not the sentiment of everyone. Including the fox-woman as she addressed Gehluli, trying to get the Princess of Love to see her point of view. But it was ultimately a futile gesture as the Crystal Empress remained loyal to her aunt's decision and stated that the Crystal Empire would support its allies in their endeavor for peace. The vixen and her followers didn't seem too happy by this outcome but they relinquished the argument for now, if only for good etiquette if nothing else.

The rest of the meal went by without any more incidents and we all found ourselves back in the ballroom from before as I heard the sound of music as a Maestro struck up the band. As I went to ask Etpinego for a dance, we were suddenly approached by two exotic looking females.

The first one was a beautiful tiger-girl whose species name eluded me at the time, but I wanted to say it was Enilian. Her black stripes running across her coat of orange and white like an elaborate tribal tattoo all across her body. Only being covered up by her two-piece, floral print, sari with gold trim.

Meanwhile the other one was a delicate looking woman with avian features, reminding me of a peafowl with her shimmering metallic green feathers and wings that shifted in color in the candlelight from a shimmering green, to a deep blue, and even a jet black at times. Her tall crown of feathers swaying as she gently moved her head while she set her bright blue eyes on us. She was wearing a simple strapless yellow dress with a sheer yellow shawl that she had draped over her wings and shoulder that she adjusted as the two women stopped in front of us before the colorful bird-woman gave us a curtsy as she began to speak.

"(Greetings Lady Etpinego, my name is Princess Xud'i from the Fepala Empire and this is my companion Bahgali, daughter of the leader of the Enilian Federation.)" She said, motioning to her feline friend who gave a curt nod to us as the green feathered female continued, ***"(We extend to you our greetings and would like to discuss with you a matter of grave importance.)"***

"What matter is that?" Etpinego asked the two women as I saw her ears shift ever so slightly and I felt her curled tail brush up against my pants leg, showing her frustration.

"(The Princess and I would like to ask for the opportunity to get to know your stallion better in hopes of forming a prosperous union with him)," the Enelian female replied as I felt Etpinego's tail brush up against me again.

"I am sorry, but he is not (currently) available for (courting) as we are (already) in a

committed and fulfilling relationship," the farm-mare answered trying to sound as polite as possible but I could tell that she was quickly losing interest in the conversation as the two women sent me amorous looks.

Their glances stirred memories in me of the conversation I had had with Vivmay back in her boutique, about how some nations might try to persuade me with offers of power and marriage. If my date's words and actions were any indication, then I could only guess that was what was happening then as Etpinego was trying her best to politely tell the other two females to "fuck off". The women obviously were not getting the hint as they continued to persist, so I decided to take matters in my own hand as I addressed the two women while I reassuringly patted Etpinego's hand.

"I'm sorry ladies but I believe I owe my date a dance, have a wonderful rest of the night," and with that I led us towards the dance floor, leaving behind the women rejected, confused, and more than likely offended.

"I can't believe the nerve of those nags!" Etpinego growled under her breath as she slipped back into her rural accent in frustration and we walked towards the dance floor. I had to chuckle a little as I felt her tail continue to swish against my backside as she subconsciously pulled herself closer to me, "Thinkin' they can just take y'ah fer their own, just because they're some kind of fancy royalty. I mean did y'ah see that striped one. She was lookin' at you like some kind of new toy."

She suddenly let out a content sigh as I lightly nipped at the sensitive flesh of her ear, and I felt her begin to relax as I whispered to her, "Let it go Etpinego. Come on let's go dance."

"But I don't know how to do none of that fancy dancin'," she nervously said as we got closer to the crowded dance floor

"It's alright, just follow my lead and we'll take it slow, okay?" I told her as she gave me a unsure nod.

Walking onto the dance floor, I turned her to face me as I guided her left hand onto my shoulder while I curled my right hand around to cup her left shoulder, and with our other hands grasped lightly I gave her a gentle smile as I began to lead us into a simple waltz. Now, I was never one to claim myself to be the next Fred Astaire, but I could at least do a simple left box as I slowly guided my date along. I could see her nervously trying to follow along as I would catch her occasionally sneaking a glance down at our feet, muttering whenever she would make a mistake.

"Etpinego," I whispered to her, trying to get her attention, as she looked up at me with those emerald eyes of her, "you're doing great. We can go slower if you want?"

"No the speed is fine I just can't figure out what to do with these two left hooves of

mine,” she said as I saw her sneak a peek downwards again and mutter, frustrated at some minor mistake she made.

"Here let's try this then. Place your feet on top of mine and just focus on my counting," I told her as she gingerly stood on my shoes. Lucky for us, her skirt was long enough to where no one would be the wiser to our little ploy, "Alright, ready?" She nodded ever so slightly, "One, two, three. One, two, three. One, two, three..."

As I counted out our movements I moved our feet across the floor. Keeping us in a simple box formation. At first, Etpinego would try to keep looking down as she counted along with me, but I kept redirecting her gaze up whenever I would catch her. And after a song or so her confidence had grown to the point where she didn't require any assistance and she finally allowed herself to go along with the music.

We were lost in the music as we moved across the floor, my only focus on the stunning mare in my arms. In fact, we had become so engrossed in our dancing that we nearly failed to hear the end of the music as the band finished their set. Etpinego was looking a little out of breath, and looked like she needed a break.

"Whew, suga' I haven't had this much fun at a hoedown since the last family reunion," the blonde mare said as she tried to catch her breath, not even bothering with the fake accent anymore.

“See I told you that you could do it,” I congratulated her as I grabbed us some refreshments, “I never doubted your dancing abilities for a second.”

“Or, it could’a been from you being such a great teacher,” she said as she leaned up and kissed my cheek before purring softly in my ear, “maybe y’ah could teach me more later.”

"It's a promise," I whispered back to her as we shared cheeky grin.

It was about that time I noticed Gilzia and Pyre over to one side of the room with the other two princesses, surrounded by many of the dignitaries from earlier in what looked like a continuation of the conversation from dinner.

"I feel a little bad that we're having all the fun while our marefriends have to still work," I mentioned to her as I motioned with my head towards where the princesses stood.

"Not surprisin' though," she whispered back to me, "most hosts usually don't participate in the activities at a party. Preferin' instead to focus on overseein' the party. It was the same way when I hosted the family reunion a few years back."

"Well we can't possibly allow that to happen, now can we?" I said, flashing her a roguish grin, as I saw a slight frown cross her face and a single dainty eyebrow raise ever so

conspicuously at me.

"Come again suga'? Ya'h wanna run that by me again?" But we were already well on our way into the crowd as I made a beeline towards the group of leaders.

As we approached them Xamspona was the first to notice us, shooting us a smile as she spoke, "Hello again Ambassador Broussard, Etpinego, I hope that you are all enjoying your night?"

"Very much so Your Highness," I said as we gave them a curt bow, "but I was wondering if I may ask Princess Gilzia for a dance? That is if she is not too busy at the moment."

The group looked at me like I had just grown a second head, save for Gehluli who was busy whispering something in her husband's ear. The sisters in particular seemed a little confused, but didn't show it as they kept their outward appearances under control with such practiced grace. Through the bond however I was definitely having to explain my actions.

'What are you up to Eric?' The sun princess curiously asked through our bond.

'We just didn't think it right for us to have all of the fun.'

'You do realize that this is not proper etiquette to ask your host for a dance,' Pyre

interjected, 'I thought we were under the agreement to not publicly declare our relationship just yet?'

'We are, and I have no intention of making a public declaration,' I stated plainly before I vocally addressed them so that everyone could hear.

"Forgive me, Princess, if I am being taboo, but where I come from it is considered proper manners for the guest of honor to share a dance with their host. So will you be the first to give me the honor?"

"And what of your date Ambassador?" Gilzia asked, obviously trying to find a loophole to exploit, but I seemed to have accomplices tonight that I didn't know of.

"Do not worry aunt," I heard Gehluli say as she took a step closer to Etpinego and continued to address her fellow princess, "Princess Xamspona and I have private matters to discuss with Lady Etpinego that should keep her occupied while you participate in this Earth custom."

As Gehluli extended an arm towards Etpinego, bidding the farm-mare to her, I turned to my date and gave her a bow as I kissed the back of her hand and we shared a knowing glance. Before she was led by the Princess of Love over to her counterpart, the Princess of Magic, and I was left to face the Princess of the Day again as I once again slowly extended my hand to her.

By now the hall had grown deathly silent as everyone was looking towards us now. Wondering what the Immortal Goddess of the Day would say to this strange creature who had the gall to even think of asking her for anything.

'It seems you have me at a disadvantage my stallion,' I heard Gilzia's voice say with mock seriousness in my mind.

'You could always say no,' I told her as I gave her a warm smile to match the one already on her face.

"Yes."

That one single word sent a murmur through the crowd as she laid her hand atop mine and I guided us back to the dance floor, the crowd parting before us like the Red Sea did before Moses as we walked side by side. Along the way, I gave a nod to the conductor of the band as they readied their instruments.

'That was quite the sneaky move back there Eric,' Gilzia said through the bond, 'but not that it was not unwanted. I do believe that you are the first being to ask me to dance in quite sometime, if ever.'

'Then I should feel lucky. There was no way I was going to go through this thing without getting to dance with each of my girls at least once.'

'Your girls?'

'Sorry, force of habit I guess. It's a term of endearment that stallions from my world use when addressing their marefriends. I will refrain from using it if it offends you.'

'No, I actually rather like it,' she said as I felt her hand lightly tighten over mine and the faint warmth of happiness could be felt through our bond.

Entering the dance floor we took our positions as Gilzia graciously let me take the lead. As the music began to play again we began our steps and were soon wrapped in our own little world as we drowned out all outside influences. My sole focus on those magenta eyes that were smiling back at me. I also quickly found out that my leadmare was no slouch in the dance department. Quickly proving herself to be a much more skilled dancer than me as she gracefully transitioned through one change up and twirl after another. Her moves were so fluid that she seemed to practically float on a cushion of air.

Yet, before we knew it, the song had come to an end as I slowly dipped the princess, our faces inches apart and our breaths coming out a little more exerted. It was then that we heard the sound of the other patrons applauding that we realized that we had been the only dancers on the

dance floor. A light blush formed on our cheeks as we stood back up and gave a gracious bow to our audience before I began to lead her back towards her fellow princesses.

Approaching the others I couldn't help but notice the smiles on their faces, especially the look of barely suppressed glee on the Princess of Love's face. A look that sent a nervous chill down my spine as I could tell she was already deciding on what type of cake my mares and I were going to have at our future wedding.

"Thank you for the dance Princess," I told her as I lightly kissed the back of her hand.

"The pleasure was all mine Ambassador," she replied before speaking through the bond. 'A pleasure I shall have to repay soon.'

'Indeed sister, truly a fine display of stamina,' Pyre added, 'I must say I found myself a little jealous that you got to experience it.'

'Oh my dear Pyre, there's no way I could ever forget about you,' I said to her as I extended my hand to her next with a smile on my lips.

The rest of the night proved to be quite enjoyable. After my dance with the celestial sisters I extended the same offer towards Xamspona. For appearances sake if nothing else, but the young alicorn politely declined, stating something about some prior experiences that went

sour so she would have to take a rain check.

The rest of the ball was pretty devoid of drama as Etpinego and I enjoyed the remainder of the time talking with foreign dignitaries and spending time with each other and our friends. Later in the night, as the last of the guest began to file out of the hall, Etpinego and I decided to call it a night ourselves as we bid goodnight to the others. All the while trying our best to ignore the suggestive looks we were receiving from more than a few of them.

We slowly made our way down the castle corridors, back to her room, as we continued to laugh and reminisce over past events. We had both had our fair share of the bubbly that night as Etpinego was forced to lean against my body for support as the alcohol she had consumed began to take affect on her equilibrium. She hadn't had enough for her to be anywhere closed to be blitzed, but definitely more than enough for her to be a little tipsy as I felt her lay her head against my chest to try and calm her swirling mind. I on the other hand, was doing better, still being able to walk in a straight line, but I mainly attributed this to my higher tolerance to stronger drinks not available on Equus. Still, I had drank enough to be feeling the effects of a pretty good buzz as we continued on.

Finally we made it to her room as we tried to catch our breaths from a recent bout of laughter at recalling the one and only time I had tried my hand at applebucking. Needless to say, after that, I was walking a little funny for the remainder of the afternoon.

“Well here we are,” I said as she turned to face me, leaning back against the door for support. Looking into her eyes I could see the disappointment at this possibly being the end of the night, and I didn’t want it to end either but I wasn’t going to push the young mare.

“Eeyup, here we are. I had a great time tonight Eric, but,” she paused for a moment, looking down bashfully, as she lightly ran her hand up my chest. Coming to a stop over my heart, which was about to burst through my chest as she looked back up at me with those eyes filled with hope and desire, “it don’t have to end just yet?”

That was all the invitation my cloudy mind needed as I leaned in and claimed her full lips with my own. She let out a throaty moan as I wrapped my arms around her waist and pulled her close, crushing her soft curves against my solid front. Her hands quickly grabbing at my shirt and vest before ripping them open, as her earth pony strength made short work of the buttons in her quest to rid me of the bothersome garments. I made a brief mental note to make up an excuse for Vivmay later on what happened to the clothes.

Not wanting to give a free show to anyone who happened to be passing by, but not wanting to stop kissing the mare in my arms, I began to blindly fumble at the door behind her for a couple of seconds, trying to search for the door handle, before I felt the cool metal touch my fingers. Grabbing it firmly in my hand I twisted the knob and flung the door open as it slammed against the wall. Not wanting to waste any more time, I scooped the surprised mare in my arms bridal style and crossed the threshold kicking the door closed behind me.

Making my way to the bed I climbed up on it before gently laying the mare on the sheets. Our lips met again as I felt her tongue make its way into my mouth and I allowed her to take the initiative this time, but even with her current actions I had to make sure before continuing.

Pulling back ever so slightly I looked her in the eyes, momentarily captivated as she practically glowed in the light of Pyre's moon.

"Are you sure you want to go on?" I softly asked her as I stroked her cheek with my fingers.

She looked at me with a slightly shocked expression, before she started to lightly laugh at me. To say that I was a little confused by this would have been an understatement as my expression turned to one of perplexion.

"What? What did I say?" I asked her as I started to smile as well, her laughter becoming too infectious to ignore.

"Suga' that's somethin' that a mare's supposed to ask the stallion," she finally told me as I raised an eyebrow at her, "I've been sendin' y'ah signals all night since them two hussies tried takin' y'ah from me."

I sat there frozen for a second as I willed my fuzzy brain to replay all of the events from tonight in my head. Trying to recall if there was any signals I might have missed, but as hard as I tried I couldn't recall anything out of the ordinary. It wasn't until I felt Etpinego's soft lips on mine that I was broken out of my stupor.

"Even the Princes- I mean Gilzia and Pyre said it was alright," she said as she began to lightly nip down my neck.

Any further attempts at trying to unlock the mysteries of the unspoken languages of ponies was swiftly thrown out the window by the mare's attentiveness. As I basically said "Fuck it!" to everything else and turned all control over to my lower head. Who was more than happy to be in charge for the first time in a long time.

I kissed Etpinego again and I felt my pants go well beyond the realm of comfortable as she moaned for me. I moved my lips to her slender neck returning the favor from earlier as I lightly nibbled on her neck, which elicited a series of breathy whinnies from her that drove me on for more. As I went further down I finally came to the golden necklace of her element as I planted kisses along the golden length of the piece of jewelry as I heard her continue to breath heavy in anticipation. Pausing briefly to savor her scent I placed a single kiss on the apple-shaped piece of spessartite that shined so bright it almost looked like it was on fire.

Only for the jewel to suddenly ignite into a flash of orange light as soon as my lips came

into contact with it. I didn't get a chance to marvel at the sight as great bolts of energy shot forth from the gem, knocking me off of Etpinego and across the room where I came to a stop only when I hit the wall.

As my body crashed to the ground and the smell of burnt cloth and flesh began to fill my nostrils, I found that I couldn't move my body as a great feeling of fatigue began to overtake me. The last thing I remembered before the darkness consumed me was Etpinego rushing over to check on me. She yelled something to me as I saw her lips move, her eyes wide with fear, but I could hear nothing but silence. All the while her element was still shining brightly around her neck as everything went black.