

Chapter Ninety-Four—Crystal Empire

“As far as we can tell, yes,” Watcher answered me, lowering a telescope. “As for what a city is doing in the arctic circle, I can’t tell you.”

“Got any guesses?” I asked, taking the proffered telescope and lifting it to my better eye.

“Not one. Does anyone else here know of any legends about a city up here?”

“Hold on, is that a dome over the top of it?” I asked, narrowing my eye to try to get a better look.

“A dome?” Watcher asked. The whispers that were in the small crowd grew louder when that realization came over them. I handed the scope back to Watcher to let him get another look.

“Yes sir, that’s a dome. Looks like a shield.”

“Well now... Gilda!”

Her head shot my way. “Yeah?”

“Get over there. Scout it out, see if there’s any movement. Watcher, send two of yours out as well. Don’t go through the shield. We’ll proceed at half speed until we get a signal from one of the scouts.”

Gilda chuckled and said, “You got it. I’ve been looking to stretch my wings.” She did a running jump off the front of the ship, easily speeding ahead of the boat. After a moment, two of the pegasi scouts joined her.

“What do you think, Nav?” Flash asked.

“Slow the ship down to half speed. The city looks friendly enough, but no one here knows about this place. I’d rather be safe than sorry.”

“You got it.” He turned to face the fellow manning the wheel. “Cut speed to half!” he called.

“At this speed, how long should it take us to get there?”

“I’d say an hour and a half at best,” the captain answered.

I nodded and turned to Watcher, who was still living up to his name with the telescope. “Watcher, get two squads geared up. Hopefully we won’t need them.” He nodded and barked out some orders. Five of the troops on deck went below to prepare. “I need to get ready as well. Keep me updated on any developments.”

“Yes sir.”

“Spike!” The named dragon flinched before turning to me. “Go tell everyone belowdecks what’s happening. Tell them to prep for a possible fight.”

“You think we’re gonna see action?” he asked, a nervous smile on his face.

“I think it’s certainly possible. And if we do, I’d rather go in with more people than less. Just don’t wake anyone up; tired soldiers are useless.”

“Uh... Okay!” He followed me to the staircase leading down and broke off when we got below to go tell everyone who didn’t make an appearance on the deck the news. I went straight to my room and stripped down, getting all the heavy clothes off so I could put my armor on. I

made sure to leave a nice layer on so the frigid armor wouldn't give my skin frostbite, of course.

As I started taking my armor down, of course Taya came over to my room. "Something happening?" she wearily asked.

"Yeah. Get dressed. We're going topside when I get my armor on. Something's happening and I want everyone combat ready, just in case."

"You need help with your armor?"

"If you want. Saves me the time of pulling it down." *And the possible pain of dropping a piece on my head. Trust me when I say that dropping a pauldron on your face hurts like hell.*

Her horn lit up and the ropes securing the metal began untying. "So what's happening?" she asked as the armor started floating down to the bed.

"We found a city in the middle of the arctic. No one has any idea what the hell it is, so I'm calling a full alert. It probably won't be dangerous, but I'd rather be safe than sorry."

"What do you think it is?"

What part of no one has any idea don't you understand? "A city. Whether or not there are inhabitants has yet to be determined. I can get my armor on from here, Taya. Go get dressed; I'm not going to have you out on the deck in just your fur."

"Yes, daddy... Are you going to bring the amulet?"

I stopped fiddling with the piece of armor I had and looked up at her. She had a rather nervous look on her face and seemed worried. "I always bring my magic artifacts to battle, Taya. That's what most of them exist for. Now go get ready. We'll be there shortly."

"Can I see it? Just to be sure?"

I continued putting my armor on, just staring at her. It took her about half a minute, but she finally got the hint. With a nervous gulp, she went to her room next door to mine to presumably get ready.

"I knew taking that damn amulet would be a mistake," I quietly said.

"A mistake that saved your life," Flo shot back. "It has drawbacks, but it isn't all bad. It just happened to be more addicting than we thought. You'll have to make sure that someone more experienced uses it in the future. I imagine that Watcher, if anyone, would be a good candidate."

"I don't want to risk him of all people going mad with power. At least if it's Taya, I can possibly control her. If Watcher loses it, we're fucked."

"But he probably won't. Taya already appears to be cracking. If nothing else, she shouldn't get it again."

"Fair enough. Hopefully no one will need it at all. If nothing else, I'll just put my ring on and punch whoever has it in the face until they let me take it from them."

"Assuming the ring works against it. That amulet is dark and evil, not entirely unlike the magic Blueblood apparently used on you."

"I'll just have to assume it works. That's all I can really do." With that last sentence, I finished strapping on my armor. Of course, then I had to take my gauntlet and glove off to open

the damn gene-locked chest, so I felt pretty silly. Either way, with it open, I grabbed my key, the dark alicorn amulet, and as an afterthought, the horn. I got bored while hurt and fashioned a leather loop for it, so I was able to attach it to my belt. The key went in a small pouch I had made for it while the amulet went around my own neck. After all, it can't do anything to someone that doesn't have magic, right?

...I would later come to rejoice in that decision.

Once I had all the magic artifacts arranged around me, I grabbed a more mundane one: A simple leather cloak I made for cold weather and looking pretty badass. The first one was a definite, though the second one was more of an opinion. The ponies definitely didn't much care for it, though none of them had voiced disapproval. They probably sensed an inherent wrongness in it, though they couldn't say why.

Anyway, I was ready for combat. Going to the next room over proved that Taya was as well. The nervous look she had before was gone, thankfully. "You ready?" I asked.

"Yes, daddy," she answered, looking down at herself. When she looked up at me, her eyes stopped at the amulet I was wearing. "I-is that...?"

"Yeah. Let's go." I started walking off, because I knew she would be slow to follow. We didn't pass anyone else on the way out, so I assumed everyone was already up top. Well, everyone except the changelings, the naga—cold blooded animals don't like freezing temperatures—and those that were asleep.

Getting up top proved me correct. And we were also much closer to the city. "See anything new?" I asked Watcher.

"Yes. New and perhaps troubling. This city is magical, Navarone," he replied, looking away from his telescope. "Green grass surrounds the city. And I believe I saw a single pony leaving the city, though he has yet to return."

"Anything from our scouts?"

"I watched them for a time. All three decided to make a few loops around the city, it seemed. That suggests it isn't threatening, but we honestly can't tell."

"Hm. Captain, how far out?"

"About forty-five minutes. The winds have been good to us."

"Good. Watcher, any sign that they've seen us?"

"Negative. The city's quiet, sir. If I had to say, nobody's home..."

"Hopefully it stays that way. Nobody is better than enemies. I don't suppose you could use magic to increase your view?"

"Not through that shield. I don't want to risk setting off any alarms."

"And Gilda's already scouting... Well, we'll know more when they get here. Do you know if Jak finished some of those siege weapons?"

"I did," the deep voice boomed. "Five are complete and four are ready to fire." I turned to see him carrying the pieces of another one in his arms as he came from the decks below. "This one was a rush job, but I'd rather have one in passable condition than not working at all. I will

just need assistance getting it together.”

“Spike, give him a hand. Between you and Smiles, it shouldn’t take long.” The dragon in question sighed and went to do the minotaur’s bidding as I turned back to the city. “At least if we have to fight, we should be able to.”

“I don’t really think it will come to that. If this is a city of the living, it has at least a few pony residents. And if not... Well, in my experience, those that are dead have little inclination to hurt those that are living.” He paused to lift the telescope back to his eyes as I considered what he said. He ruined it by adding, “Usually.”

“...How much experience do you have with them?”

“I’ve helped deal with two vampony covens and I’ve run into numerous ghosts. The ghosts are almost always nonviolent. One of the vampony covens just wanted to be left alone with their curse. The other put up a fight.”

“Then let’s hope these are either ghosts or just ponies, then,” I said.

Until then, Taya had been standing next to me quietly. When she sensed the silence, she said, “Daddy, doesn’t that look like Cadance’s magic?”

“The bubble is light blue, Taya. That could be anyone’s magic that also happens to be light blue. What the hell would Cadance be doing all the way up here? And if she was here, Shining Armor would also be here, and his fancy bubble is purple.”

She didn’t reply. Kumani said something, though. “Something’s flying back.”

“How can you even see that?” I asked as I squinted my eyes and Watcher moved his telescope.

“I’m a dragon, Navarone. We have pretty good eyes.”

“It’s Gilda,” Watcher said. “And my two scouts are behind her. They’re coming in easy, so I assume it’s safe.”

“We’ll wait for their word before we speed up.”

“We’re going to need to speed up soon,” the captain said. “At least, if we want to get under that shield before a storm hits. Looks like one might be pushing in from the west.”

“Then here’s hoping they’re friendly,” I sighed, leaning on the rail and waiting for the scouts to get back. Not that we couldn’t survive a storm, of course. Hell, we had been through one or two on the way in. But they’re always cold and loud, even inside the ship.

I felt a warm claw sit on my back and Kumani gently pulled me into her. “Don’t you worry, Nav. If we get caught in that storm, I’m sure we can find a way to... warm up.”

Despite me mostly getting over the horrifying trip I had, her touch still made my skin crawl. Of course, I had been fucking her anyway, but just because that was essentially my responsibility. Either way, I didn’t answer her with words, though I did wrap one of my wings around her. After all, facing your fears is the best way to get rid of them.

It didn’t take long for Gilda to get back. The ponies were about half a minute behind her when she landed next to me. “I knew I’d leave those ponies behind,” she said with a smirk.

“Yes, yes, you’re fast,” I sarcastically answered. “What did you see?”

“A few ponies. They were all just walking along with their heads low. There’s nothing dangerous in that place. Although there was that one large stallion that galloped to the west as I flew over.”

“Nothing dangerous? How sure are you?”

“I’d bet my feathers on it! Those ponies didn’t look like they could hurt a worm, let alone something like us.”

“Any military?” Watcher asked.

“Nothing that looked like it,” she replied.

The two scout ponies had landed by then, and one of them added, “No placements either, sir. That architecture is like nothing I’ve ever seen, though! It seems to practically sparkle. And the castle at the center is truly unique.”

“No military and no placements?” I mused aloud, looking to Watcher. “What do you think?”

“My first thought is a trap. But I don’t think so. I don’t have a bad feeling about this.”

I nodded and turned my head to the captain. “Full speed ahead. Let’s see if this city is taking visitors for dinner.”

“Aye aye, sir. Full speed ahead!” he called, waving a hoof forward. The ship began moving much faster, finally closing the distance. “About twenty minutes, Nav.”

“Good. When we get there, we’re going to park over the shield until we send a more thorough scouting team down. I’ll probably go with it.”

“No sir,” Watcher immediately said. “You aren’t going to risk yourself on a scouting mission into a place like that. I’ll send a squad in.”

“Fair enough. Pick the team and prep them with what we know. Have them ready in ten.”

The two teams I had requested were already up, though one of them was short a pegasus since she had been on the scouting team. Watcher walked to the one that wasn’t short any members.

“Any other details?” I asked Gilda. “Anything might be important.”

“Well, what the ponies said about the buildings was true... I think they were made out of diamonds or something. But the ponies in the city seemed really depressed.”

“Notice anything that was weird?”

“Well... I don’t think I saw anything but earth ponies. That’s pretty weird for a city that size, right?”

It gave us a few things to think about, at least. The city slowly grew closer, each of us able to see more details on the place. The shield that was covering it was massive, easily bigger than the city it defended. There would be plenty of room for the airship, that’s for sure.

Watcher had his men ready quickly enough, though I had no clue how he expected the unicorn and dirty mud pony to get down. That pretty much just began the waiting game until we were about five minutes out. Then...

“What the hay is that?” Gilda asked, looking out to the west. We all looked that way and

saw a massive cloud of darkness with two pinpricks of green and outlines of purple on the top.

Watcher immediately turned his scope on it. "Dark magic," he cursed. "And it's chasing something. I see purple, white, yellow, blue, orange, pink, and white." He looked over to me. "Elements of harmony, sir. And our mystery stallion."

I made some very quick calculations in my head. "Get the ship in the shield. All pegasi and fliers are interception. If that cloud comes after the ship, keep it distracted and break off as soon as the ship is safe. I'm going in."

"You're what?!" Kumani and Taya both blurted as I pulled my rifle off my shoulder and set it and my helmet on the deck.

"I'm not letting that thing get my friends. It's moving faster than they are. If Shining Armor is running, that means it can't be hurt normally. But my sword isn't normal and my ring protects me from dark magic. I'll see you inside the shield. *Don't* follow me." Before anyone else could bitch or whine, I jumped off the side, pushing my wings as hard as they could go.

...That turned out to be a lot faster than it should have been and I shot ahead of the ship, getting a nice blast of freezing cold wind to the face. I was just thankful I had my goggles on so I could actually see. Whatever was making me go so damn fast felt great. So great that I ignored the twinge of glowing red I could barely see on my chest.

I made it to the group of fleeing ponies in about a minute, which was just in time. The roiling mass of darkness was shooting an inky jet of its cloud toward Shining Armor, who decided it would be a good idea to stand there and take it like a bitch.

I wasn't having any of that shit, no sir. Now, I was hoping to have a bit more time to prepare, but I didn't. So I had to use a backup plan that I only ever got to test once and that I really wasn't looking forward to ever trying again: Sticking the ring around my tongue. It works to block magic, but it's uncomfortable and pretty nasty.

But it was my only choice in this case, so I pulled up in a hover right above Shiny before slipping the ring in my mouth and plummeting to the ground right in front of him, blocking the tendril with my body and forcing it to recoil. My sword made it to my hand an instant later as Shining Armor just gasped, standing there.

Since that black mass recoiled at my touch, I knew I was probably immune to it. So I just charged the damn thing, hoping that Shiny would get the hint to turn tail and run like the bitch he was.

Of course, *I* immediately regretted my decision to act as a hero. Oh sure, he couldn't actually touch me, but neither could I touch him. What he could do, however, was engulf me in a swirling black cloud that I could not for the life of me see in.

I couldn't see... but I could hear. "Crystals? Nay, this ape has none. But..." In the cloud before me, two green motes of light appeared that registered as eyes. "But this ape has a feel, a feel we recognize."

Flo sighed in my head. "Navarone, as your advisor, you fucked up. Now we're trapped in a cloud of an insane and corrupted servant of another water elemental."

What?

“Not important. Try swinging your sword around.” I did so, swinging wildly since I literally could not miss.

Nothing happened, other than the eyes starting to circle me. “So the ape doth attempt to fight? It fighteth in a manner most unfair, defending against all magic. No matter. If thou art immune to magic, there are those thee protect that are not.” His eyes disappeared from the circle of air around me.

“Nav, get that ring out of your mouth so you can talk to this thing. Just pull your gauntlet off. Oh, and start walking toward what is hopefully the shield.”

I did as Flo said, getting the ring to my finger instead of around my tongue. “So who teaches clouds how to speak?” I asked, taking slow steps to try not to trip.

The eyes instantly reappeared in front of me, seemingly furious. “We are more than a simple cloud, ape! Thou art in the presence of a god-king!”

“Dude, you’re a dark cloud. Like someone’s fart. I bet Skyla forced you out after her mom fed her some beans.”

“THOU WOULDST INSU—Nay. We are above this. Begone, ape.” The dark cloud parted in front of me, revealing the shield just a few feet away. “Be thankful thou hast a guardian in your mind, one of the same as we had some time ago. Should we meet again on the field, thou shan’t escape in so easy a manner, guardian or not.”

I continued walking to the shield, but stopped as an interesting thought struck me. “What is thy name, sir king?” I asked, turning to face the cloud that seemed to shrink.

“Thou hast the honor of beholding King Sombra, mortal. And thou approacheth our empire, built with our sweat and protected by our blood. And it will be ours again soon, along with the traitorous slaves within. They will be punished for selling us out to those holier-than-thou princesses! Maybe... Wouldst thou perhaps be interested in a vassalage?”

“Nay, my lord. I am honor bound to thine enemies. I fear that we shall soon meet again on the field.”

“Then get out of our sight. Thou wilt regret thy choice, ape. Soon, all within that infernal bubble shalt call us lord once more and the purges and digging will begin anew. And thou wilt be one of our slaves.” With that last haunting bit of info, I turned to go back inside. But he stopped me again. “Before thou goest, we have a word for thy guardian, the elemental that resideth in thy mind.”

“She listens,” I answered without turning back to face him.

“We will win this battle, elemental. And when we do, thou shalt help us save thy sister. If we must torture thy slave to ensure thy assistance, we will.”

Flo snorted and said, “I have no answer to that. Walk away.” Yeah, that was my cue to go through the damn shield. I did so without looking back, not particularly caring about what that thing might do. “Charming fellow,” Flo muttered darkly in my head.

“I guess that’s a word you could use. You know, if you were a dirty girl that liked the bad

boys. Like Eva Braun.”

“That counts for Godwin’s Law. Oh, and don’t look now, but…”

That didn’t stop me from looking then, not at all. All six girls and the seventh unofficial one were staring at me. At least four of the girls had anger in their eyes. Shining Armor had total relief. Pinkie Pie was practically bouncing where she sat. But it was the four angry ones I was concerned with.

So I just nodded and said, “Sup?”

I was not expecting to be suddenly toppled over by a blue blur slamming into my chest. “YOU BUCKING JERK!” Rainbow Dash screamed at me, slamming her hooves ineffectively against my steel plate armor.

A purple glow surrounded her and pulled her away while Rarity said, “Rainbow, *please*. The rest of us would like our turns too.” And then she walked up and fucking bucked me in the chest as I tried to sit up. That knocked me right back down into the ground, but thankfully still didn’t hurt.

“Is this really the thanks I get for saving you?” I groaned, sitting up one more time. I said that just in time, too, because Twilight was about to take her turn.

“You left without telling anypony!” she said instead.

“Hey, you knew! And so did Pinkie!”

Things probably would have gotten very ugly very quickly if Shining Armor hadn’t shouted, “GIRLS! And uh, also Nav. This isn’t the time for this! We need to get to the castle immediately!”

“And I need to get back to my ship,” I said.

All the girls’ heads shot my way, but Shiny beat them to saying anything. “Nav, we’re probably really going to need your help here. And the help of anypony you might have with you.”

“I’ll get them all disembarked at the palace. Is the weather constant?”

“So far. Cadance and I don’t know why.”

“Then I’ll see you in the palace.”

As I reached for my gauntlet to take off my ring, he nodded and said, “Thank you. And thank you for helping us. We honestly might not have made it back were it not for you.”

“Eh, you’re pretty resourceful. But you owe me an explanation when we meet up.”

All the girls snorted at that. “You better have one too!” Dash practically growled.

I just chuckled and finally got the ring off, then jumped straight into the air and shot away with the new freakish speed I seemed to have.

Thankfully, Flash followed my orders to get the ship into the shield. It was still about a minute long flight to the thing, with how large the city seemed, but I was just happy it wasn’t covered by an evil smoke-king or something.

When I touched down on the deck, all eyes immediately turned to me and a collective sigh of relief was released by a few. Taya reached me first with a hug. I think Kumani wanted to

slap me, but decided to at the very least wait until Taya was done hugging me.

“What’s the word?” Watcher asked.

“Good news: Cadance and Shining Armor rule here. Bad news: They took over from an evil god king who wants his kingdom back. Watcher, Gourd, leave a skeleton crew on the ship. Everyone else will probably be needed down below. I don’t know if Shiny has a plan yet. If he does, he’ll probably need our help. And if he doesn’t, we’ll need to make one.”

“How much time do we have?” Watcher asked.

“I don’t know, so assume none. The weather here is supposed to stay constant, so drag the changelings and the naga out of bed and get them down as well.”

“Yes sir,” Watcher said, nodding. “You heard him, everyone! Get your tails moving!” He started giving more orders to his group as Kumani, Spike, Gilda, Kat, and Taya crowded around me.

“Those orders go to all of you as well,” I said. “Spike, Gilda, Rainbow Dash and the others are down there. So get ready for a little reunion. Now go and grab all the stuff you might need.”

Spike seemed rather horrified by that news, but Gilda just smiled. “Cool. Wasn’t expecting to see her for a while.” She elbowed Spike and said, “Come on, big guy. Let’s get ready to see some friends, eh?” With that, she pulled him off.

“I need to get back down there,” I said. “I know all of you are able to get down. See you on the ground.”

My wings spread to take off, but a field of magic stopped me. “Daddy, that amulet was glowing when you landed.”

“...What?” I asked.

“She’s right,” Kat said. “It was faint, but definitely there.”

I reached down and wrapped my fingers around the amulet, lifting it for a better look. “...*Alicorn* amulet. Not *unicorn* amulet. It reacted with my wings...”

“Daddy, you need to take it off.”

“I don’t know about that. It let me save the others, didn’t it? And I feel fine!”

“They’re correct,” Flo said. “Take it off, or I will do it for you.”

“Daddy, listen to yourself. You know that thing is evil, don’t let it do this to you!”

“...Shit, this thing *is* addictive!” My hand didn’t even want to pull it off, but I forced its vile form off my neck, holding it up by its chain. “It’s unsafe. But unfortunately, necessary.” I shoved it into one of the pouches on my belt. “But I do need to leave. Again, I’ll see you all at the bottom.” With that, I fell backwards over the railing, allowing myself to freefall a few feet before stretching my wings to catch me and soaring toward the castle.

Kumani almost immediately caught up with me, flying next to me in the air. Thankfully, Flash anchored the ship fairly close to the palace, so it wasn’t a long flight. We got there just as Shining Armor and the girls did.

“Oh, don’t *tell* me that this is *Spike*,” Rarity said with some mild disgust.

"It's not," I answered for her. "Introductions later. Business now. Shiny, what the hell is going on?"

"You met King Sombra outside the shield," he said, walking up to one of the four pedestals holding the massive castle up. There were two doors placed on each of them. I don't think some of the mares behind us were paying attention, based on how they were talking about the damn castle and architecture. "He apparently used to rule, but then Celestia and Luna ousted him a thousand years ago." One of the doors opened for him and he walked in, revealing stairs.

"Back up, that's impossible. Luna was on the moon a thousand years ago," I pointed out.

"I said the same thing," he replied. "But at this point, we all know Celestia for a liar. There's no telling what the real story is. Long story short, Sombra is mad and he wants his power back. He's also evil, so we're going to stop him."

"Alright, cool. What's the plan?"

That's where he sighed, shaking his head. "We don't know. Cadance and I got here two weeks ago and have been struggling ever since just to keep him out. None of the citizens are useful and there wasn't time to bring anypony from Canterlot."

We finally got up the stairs to reveal a nice open room with another spiral staircase going up. Various doors led off to other rooms. "So you don't know what to do?" Twilight asked.

"We were hoping you would," Shiny answered. "Celestia just sent us here to get rid of us. Me, because I was making Luna's life miserable. Cadance, because she was asking the kinds of questions that Celestia doesn't like to hear."

"Shining Armor!" Twilight said in an accusatory tone. "You know that's not true! Princess Celestia had a very good reason to send you both here, I'm sure of it!"

"Right. I'm sure." He looked back my way. "What brings you here, Nav? I thought you were abandoning Equestria?"

"I thought I was too. My quest brought me this way."

"And what quest is that?" Rarity broke in.

"Business first, pleasure later," I shot back. "So here we are. Very convenient, too. So how do we kill Sombra?"

"*We* don't," Twilight said. "*I* do. Princess Celestia sent me here as a test! I'm supposed to save the Crystal Empire!"

I actually had to take a few seconds to process that and it almost made me stop walking. "Do you realize how *conceited* and selfish that makes both you and Celestia sound?" Every pony there but Shiny gasped. "There are lives at stake here! I met Sombra, I spoke to him! He's evil and insane and would not hesitate to put everyone in here to death. And you say that Celestia sent *you* here as a *test*."

"W-well..." she stammered, trying to think of an excuse.

Shining Armor saved her, for the moment. "We're here," he said, opening the door at the top of the stairs. Inside of it was a slightly smaller room than the one at the bottom. This was the actual throne room, with a very haggard looking Cadance sitting in the single throne.

Twilight immediately gasped happily and galloped forward, happy to see her old babysitter. “Cadance!”

The mare in question looked up and a smile came to her weary face as she hopped off the throne and met Twilight. They did some silly little ritual as the rest of us followed more sedately.

When their short merrymaking session was over and the rest of us were closer, Twilight realized just how terrible Cadance looked and gasped. “Are you okay?”

Shiny took his place by his wife. “Cadance has been able to use her magic to spread love and light, the barrier you see. That seems to be what’s keeping Sombra at bay... But she’s barely slept or eaten since we got here. I want to help her, but my protection spell doesn’t do much to Sombra...”

They continued talking about stuff, but I leaned over to Kumani and whispered, “Go get me something from the ship. It’s in the cargo hold, labeled ‘Do not take or I will fucking cut you, bitch.’”

“...Will you cut me?” Kumani whispered back.

“No. Now go and get back here quickly.” She nodded and spared a moment to caress my face before running back the way we came.

“Navarone?” Cadance asked. “Is that really you?”

“I’m afraid so,” I answered. Three of the other girls gave me short dirty stares for that. “I happened to be in the neighborhood and remembered a favor I promised you. I figured you might be willing to cash it now.”

She smiled and nodded. “Seeing a good friend is enough... But we definitely need some help.”

“Then you’ll get it,” I answered. “I have a few things for you in my hold that you might like. And Shiny, I have some troops that might help organize an evacuation plan if all goes sour.”

“Now just a minute!” Twilight interjected. “This is supposed to be my test!”

I narrowed my eyes and my wings shot back, a sign of anger I never could quite control. “Are you truly so fucking childish, Twilight? Is some damn test more important to you than the life of every being in this city? Is your *personal record* so important to you? Then by all means, get to work. But don’t expect the rest of us to sit still while you twiddle your damn hooves and gallivant around. Saving a kingdom is more work than one person can handle. Help if you want, but I’m not going to wait on you.”

Pretty much everyone in the room was just staring at me in raw shock. After a few seconds, Twilight started storming away.

Applejack quietly said, “He’s right, ya know. And you know I can’t lie, Twilight.” That stopped the purple mare in her tracks. “I know you don’t like it, but this never was a job you could do on yer own. That’s why we’re here. And maybe that’s why some weird fate sent Nav here, too.”

“As... rude as he was, he’s definitely right,” Rarity said. Twilight’s head sunk low. “And as much as I hate to say it, I believe Princess Celestia made a rather large miscalculation when

she tried sending you here on this test of hers alone. You're capable and able, Twilight, but nopony can do everything themselves."

And now Shiny weighed in. "The most important thing a leader can do is put the right ponies in the right places, Twiley. Nav didn't even discuss getting rid of Sombra. He doesn't know how, he doesn't know magic. But he does know the military and you don't. Just let us all help you."

That should have been the part where I gave my two cents, but I didn't give a fuck.

It didn't seem to matter too much, thankfully, as Twilight turned back around, her face set in a determined glare. "Then let's do it," she said. "What's everything you know about the Crystal Empire?" she asked Shining Armor.

"Very little," he answered. "Just that the place didn't need a spell like Cadance's before Sombra took over. It was protected, but we don't know how or why."

A clatter from the front door of the throne room got everyone to look that way. In walked my team, Watcher at their head. It seemed that everyone from the ship was there, minus a few crewmembers and two of the squads. "Reporting for duty," Watcher said with, for whatever reason, a salute my way.

"At ease," I said, getting him to relax.

At the same time, Twilight and Rarity both yelled, "Spike!" and rushed toward the poor dragon. I don't think he knew what hit him when they started hugging him.

"Kumani, you get the package?" I asked over the noise.

"Yep." She hefted the thing with a smile and walked my way as the girls began talking amongst themselves. "So what's in this thing, anyway?"

"Coffee," I answered, taking it from her. "Doppel!" The changeling jumped and quickly flitted over to me. "Take this and find the kitchen. Make one hell of a strong mug of coffee, load it with sugar, and bring it up here."

"Yes, master," she said, taking the box.

As soon as she heard the word coffee, Pinkie eyed the box with a ravenous hunger. "C-can I have some?" she quickly asked me as Doppel trotted off.

"No. God no. Jesus, I don't think we'll kill Sombra by partying at him." I turned back to Cadance, who was looking at the horde of weird creatures in her hall with some confusion. "Cadance, when Doppel brings that coffee back, drink all of it. You hear me? Every drop."

"What? Oh, right, coffee. I... Are you sure?"

"You're tired. This will make you not tired. And if I have to, I have a certain artifact that might help. But I want to avoid using it if at all possible," I added, my hand going to the pouch where the dark amulet resided.

"So Nav, how about that *explanation*?" Dash asked in a rather threatening voice.

"Did you have an adventure?" Pinkie asked.

"Did you get hurt?" Fluttershy almost whispered.

"And why's that dragon dotin' on ya?" Applejack added.

I sighed, rolling my eyes. “Look, we’ll have time for all that after our lives aren’t in danger. When we get Sombra six feet under, we can talk. Until then, I think surviving is more important.”

Of course, Kumani didn’t leave it at that. Her claw reached around my shoulder and pulled me against her as she looked at Applejack. “But to answer your question, we’re dating.” Given that Twilight and Rarity managed to drag Spike our way, the silence that one statement brought would have fit well in a senior class after the teacher asked for volunteers. After a few seconds passed, Kumani said, “What?”

“This calls for a party!” Pinkie suddenly shouted, a large smile coming to her face. She hopped in place and was about to take off before stopping. “Wait, is there a party store here?”

Thank God she forgot about her cannon. “We don’t have time, either way,” I said.

“It does, at least, call for congratulations,” Cadance said with a warm smile. “I’m glad you found somepony—one, Nav.”

“Er, yes,” Rarity nervously said. “Um. Congratulations?”

“Save it,” I sighed. “So Twilight, you’re apparently the expert. How do we kill Sombra?”

Thankfully, that got most of the attention off me and Kumani, though a few eyes were still darting toward us. “Well, we know something used to protect this place, but we don’t know what. We need to find out whatever it was and get it back. We should ask everypony in town, see if any of them know or can help us.”

“Go for it,” I said with an encouraging nod. “I need to talk strategy with Shining Armor.”

“Uh, alright? Let’s go, girls! Spread out and talk to everypony you see, try to find out what they know.” She got five acknowledgements and then they all started trotting out the door, my group splitting up to let them out.

“Now that the kids are gone...” I said, turning to Shining Armor. “You said the people here are useless, right?”

“Yeah. They all have amnesia.”

I nodded, suspecting something like that. “Watcher, work with Shining Armor. Figure out an evac plan if everything goes to shit. Then leave a squad with him and Cadance and start searching the palace for hidden rooms—all shitty cliché villains have them. Kat, you work with them on that.”

“Alright,” she said with a shrug, starting to walk around the throne room tapping at walls.

“Yes sir,” Watcher said. “What will you be doing?”

“I’m taking everyone else here down to a library, as soon as we can find one. If you happen to find any hidden rooms, be very careful. Sombra seems like the kind of asshole that would leave traps. I trust you can deal with some dark magic?”

His eyes flashed green and purple for a moment and he nodded. “I have some experience with it.”

“You really fucking scare me, Watcher.” A thought struck me and I dug the alicorn amulet out of my pocket. “Shining Armor, if the worst happens, put this on. You’ll know what to

do. But for the love of God, don't leave it on for longer than you have to and don't put it on unless Sombra is kicking the palace doors down."

"What is it?" he asked, taking the proffered amulet.

"Something called the alicorn amulet. It's a dark and evil item that boosts power at the cost of corruption. Worth it for a short time, if it's an emergency."

"...Alright."

I nodded and looked back to Watcher. "Send word if you find anything important. Hopefully we can find a library quickly."

"Yes sir," he said with a short salute. "Squads one and two, with me. Three, go with Nav." Five of the night ponies stepped forward. Two were his command squad and the others were another squad.

"Everyone else, spread out around the city and look for a library. Go in pairs. When you find it, come back here. Everyone, listen for a horn. If you hear it, come back to the palace. Now let's go."

The soldiers saluted, the crew members nodded, and everyone else used various acknowledgements. And then they all went to do as I ordered, leaving me with Kumani, Taya, and those that were supposed to be at the palace.

"That order goes for you two as well," I told them, crossing my arms. "The more eyes we have searching, the faster we'll find it."

"Why aren't you going?" Kumani asked.

"Because I have the magic horn that tells everyone to regroup. Why haven't you already left?"

"I can't read," she answered with a shrug.

I sighed and shook my head. "You're going to learn when we get back to the ship, then. Take Taya. She's your partner. Now get looking. Kumani, you can cover ground quickly. Just carry her and run or fly around."

"Really, daddy?" Taya asked.

"Consider it a bonding activity," I said. "Now go." They were both grumbling, but left. "Bitches be trippin'," I muttered as I started following them.

"So what *really* brings you here?" Cadance asked. I looked back to find that Shining Armor and Watcher went somewhere else, leaving the five soldiers behind. Two were helping Kat look around and three were sort of looking like bodyguards.

"Honestly? Blind chance. I was expecting nothing but tundra up here. My job was to get in, grab something from under the ice, and get out. It got... complicated."

"I'll say," she sighed. "It has been a long, long month. Everything immediately went to Tartarus when you left, Nav. This is just the latest problem."

"And it will be weathered, just like the others. By some strange twist of fate, I'm here. And while I'm here, I'll help. Besides, I need Sombra dead before I can start mining."

"So what are you here to find?" she asked.

“Are you really sure you should be talking? Honestly, you look like shit.”

“It helps keep me awake,” she said with a tired shrug. “And honestly, I’m really curious. What could’ve brought you here?”

“Look, I can tell you when Sombra is dead and gone. I might need your help with it anyway. But until then, just consider it not important.”

Flo whispered, “You could tell her, Nav. If you can trust any of them, it’s Cadance.”

I could, but it honestly can wait.

“Alright,” Cadance answered. “Unimportant it is. For now. But what about that dragon of yours? At least tell me about her.”

“Name’s Kumani,” I answered. “You met her at that party in Paris two years ago. I bumped into her last year and told her if I managed to stay single up through this year when I was planning on leaving, I figured we could give romance a shot. And so we did.”

“And so you did... How’s it working?”

“I... had and have my doubts. Everything I hear is about how dragons are so possessive and greedy. She’s definitely shown signs of it. But on the same vein, it looks like she’s working on it. It’s been mostly interesting, aside from that one really terrifying night when I got dosed with heavy hallucinogens. Jesus... I almost killed myself to get away from her that night.”

“What happened?”

“Got stabbed with a cursed dagger. Someone aboard the ship made something to cure me, but it had the side effect of giving me the worst hallucinations possible. Let me tell you, never look in mirrors when you’re like that.”

“Alright...? What about the rest of your crew? Anypony that colorful?”

“A few. You already know most of them.”

We talked a little about my interesting crew until a certain adorable bug pony showed up. “Coffee’s ready, Master!” Doppel sang, fluttering up the staircase. “Hey, where’d everyone go?”

“Out,” I answered. “And I really need to join them. Cadance, drink all of that coffee. Doppel, stay here with her and help her stay awake.”

“Yes, master,” she said, walking over to the two of us at a more sedate pace.

“Cadance, I’ll be downstairs under the palace if you need me. At least, that’s where I’ll be until they find the library.”

“Alright, Nav. And good luck.” And so I went back downstairs to wait for my well-trained crew to find our destination.

It didn’t take that long for the squad of two soldiers to come back carrying something. “We found a map, sir,” the unicorn said. His horn lit up and pulled the large granite map off the earth pony’s back, who seemed very relieved to lose that weight.

“Very good. Wait, did you rip this off a wall?”

“No sir,” the earth pony said. “We ripped it off a statue.”

“Good job,” I said with a nod, studying the map. Several public buildings like the palace, library, and courthouse were all marked. “Yeah, this’ll help.” I pulled the horn to my lips and let

out a loud, clear note on it.

Well, it was supposed to be loud and clear, but I didn't hear it. I lowered the thing and peered into the larger hole on the top to check for stoppages.

"Did you guys hear that?" I asked when I didn't see anything inside the horn.

"Yes sir," the unicorn answered. "Loud and clear. Why?"

"...I didn't. Well, hopefully everyone else did. You two stay here and direct them all to the library. I'll meet everyone over there."

"Yes sir," they both answered as I spread my wings and took off, flying toward where the library should be.

I got there in good time, which wasn't that hard since it was just a few blocks away. My metal-clad feet hit the crystal street with a loud clatter that was just going to get more and more annoying the longer I spent in that place. On the face of the building were two large crystal griffin statues, both with a paw raised in salute as they guarded that institute of knowledge. Between them and above the door was a crystal book open to some page that I was too lazy to read as I passed into the double doors beneath it. Into the library I went, wondering about what horrors might be contained within.

"Oh fuck me," I sighed as I got my first look at the inside of the massive library. Rows and rows of books shot off away from the entrance, with stairs going up and down to even more rows. The entire place was made of crystals and there didn't seem to be any kind of desks, tables, or counters.

And worse, no card system for finding books.

"Can I help—Oh my word, what in Equis are *you*?! " an old female voice asked, going from friendly to horrified.

I looked toward her and saw a very old off-white mare staring up at me with a large pair of spectacles on her face. Her hair was a darker grey than the fur on her body and she looked like she had seen considerably better days.

"I'm here from the Planetary Defense Force, ma'am. I'm afraid you have a severe xenos problem. The tyrannid are pounding at the gates and there's information here in the library to help stop them. So do you happen to know where the history section is?" I asked.

She didn't understand most of the words that just came out of my mouth. To be fair, most humans probably wouldn't understand them either. But her overloaded mind did latch onto the last part of what I said and sent her brain into overdrive trying to process it. "...History, history..." she turned her head a few times as she mused before looking back to me with a confused smile. "Yes." *Holy shit, really? Maybe my luck's looking up.*

"Then take me there, please."

The smile on her face immediately disappeared. "Oh... Hm. Where is it, again?" she whispered to herself, looking around once more. "I just can't seem to remember!" *Go fucking figure.*

I snorted and started walking into the library proper. "Call me if you fall down and can't

get up, old lady.” *God knows I could use a good laugh.*

“Y-you too,” she called weakly as I walked away and started to check shelves.

The first group to make it to me was Kumani and Taya, unsurprisingly. They wasted no time in finding me. “So what now?” Kumani asked.

“Since you can’t read, go wait at the door and tell everyone to start tracking down Crystal Empire history books and encyclopedias. Bring them all to the middle and stack them up. We can go through them when we get a good amount of people here.”

“Can’t we just use the catalogue?” Taya asked.

“There isn’t one. There’s no telling the damn organizational scheme this place has, if it even has one. Kumani, take my horn and wait outside. If anything big happens, blow on that thing.”

“Ugh. Why do I have to do it?” she grouched.

“Because you can’t read. Taya can. If we ever have to start fighting, you’ll have something to do.”

She rolled her eyes and snatched the horn out of my hand, slinking back up the stairs to the exit.

“I think she’s upset,” Taya quietly said.

Kumani called back, “What gave you that idea?!”

“Dragon ears,” I whispered with a chuckle. We just heard a “Hmph,” from the dragon as she pushed the door open. “I’ll make it up to her,” I said in a normal voice as she pulled the door shut, hoping she could hear me.

“Why’s she even mad?” Taya asked.

“Because women are really, really weird,” I answered, tousling her hair affectionately. “Now get to looking for books. I want to get in and out of here before Twilight realizes she should have been looking for a library instead of talking to people.”

“Why the rivalry?” she asked as we both started pulling some books down. “I thought we were working together.”

“Oh, we are. But I don’t want her to get in my way. *She* wants to pass her test. I want to help Cadance. Because her goal is something that only she can do, she might try to stop me from accomplishing my goal. So I’d rather get my information and get out as quickly as possible.”

Of course, it wasn’t as simple as that. There were hundreds, maybe even thousands, of books in that library. Even when all fourteen of us that I had searching the library started looking, it took us an hour to find something even slightly useful.

“I found one!” Sunny Disposition called over the quiet clamoring of people tossing books aside. I rushed her way, flying over a few piles of books. “*History of the Crystal Empire*,” she read from its cover.

A few people crowded around us, happy to finally discover something at least partially useful. “Get back to searching,” I called. “This is one book. There are thousands left unsearched. Who knows what else might be there?” Several sighs accompanied that declaration, but they all

started searching again as I carried the incredibly large book off a short ways away and began reading.

Whoever originally wrote that book didn't seem to believe in organization. There were a few chapters, but no index or appendix. So I started from the beginning and started going back.

The actual history portions of that book... Oh my *God*. It was extremely obvious that Celestia had not been around to purge this library yet. It actually detailed the truth of what happened in the founding of Equestria, how the Crystal Empire was the last remaining branch of the original Equestria. Those that remained in the frozen and forsaken lands, choosing to stay in the familiar rather than risking a change to the new.

It was not a pretty time, their first few years. But they slowly built up their strength and became more powerful, finding ways to survive in the freezing north. Eventually, an extremely charismatic and intelligent leader rose to power, one King Sombra. He revolutionized the kingdom, finding some manner of power source below the ice that allowed the city to push the cold away.

Each building was remade of that substance, that crystal. And the purest of it was forged into an artifact called the crystal heart, that was infused with the love and adoration or some bullshit like that of the crystal ponies. It changed every single one of the ponies into something new, something previously unseen.

Something the book described as glorious.

What's weird is that the book's history section stopped at that point, just making a mention that the wonderful King Sombra would continue the digging efforts, promising there was something even better down below...

After that was just some chapters about local customs that were apparently designed to infuse the crystal heart, which itself was only mentioned in passing. *We can skip that process with Cadance's magic, I bet.* With the crystal heart at the forefront in my mind, I dove back into the book, looking past the customs section for anything about the artifact.

Only to find nothing. The chapter about the heart had been ripped out. *Well well. Looks like Sombra took a page from Celestia's book. And also this one.*

I tossed the book aside and hopped up to call out, "Alright, everyone! New goal! Look for anything you can find about the crystal heart! Check encyclopedias and grimoires!"

A chorus of acknowledgements answered me as I joined them in the search.

It took another half hour, but Ames finally called, "Found one. A mention of the heart."

I quickly flew over to him as he coiled back down lower to the floor, pulling away from the top shelf that was probably six feet above his head. "You read it?" I asked as he handed me the book.

"I saw the mention. I... am not a good reader."

"But at least you *can* read," I answered, flicking the encyclopedia open. I swear I heard some kind of roar from outside, but that might have just been me hearing things. This one, at least, was listed in alphabetical order, so it didn't take me long to find the entry. It even had a

hoof-drawn image. "Let's see..."

'An artifact of vast power, the Crystal Heart was created by King Sombra, may his name be forever remembered, and his minotaur smith, Terios. It is used to keep out the cold, harsh wasteland surrounding the glorious Crystal Empire, allowing the nation to more fully rebuild. Already it is the cultural capital of the known pony world, though the pony princesses to the south dispute the issue.'

"Ugh, politics," I groaned, skimming through the next few paragraphs until I found another one that looked important.

'The Crystal Heart must be placed at the base of the palace where all the ponies may see it. It is an item that can only work to its full potential if the ponies it protects feel the hope and love it inspires in their hearts. Should their hope fade or their love be shattered, the Empire would be lost. And should the Crystal Heart ever fail or be stolen, there would be no helping us.'

"Oh great, so we're fucked," I muttered.

"Sombra wouldn't have destroyed the heart," Flo whispered. "He must have hidden it or spirited it away. No one would destroy something like that."

Which just means we have to find it. How the fuck are we supposed to do that?

"What in Celestia's name is going on here?" Twilight practically yelled.

Every head in the room turned her way and we beheld her and all five of her friends standing at the doorway. "It's the biweekly book club meeting," I answered, closing the encyclopedia with a snap.

Twilight snorted, stomping a hoof on the ground. "And just what are you looking for?" she asked.

"Books. It's a fucking library. What did you think we were here for?"

I flinched back as a slapping sensation erupted across my face. "Stop it!" Flo hissed.

Twilight just damn near growled and looked behind her. "Girls, get looking. We have to find something!"

"Tell her," Flo demanded. "She may be insufferable, but you can't talk. Withholding information that you could both use is childish, conceited, and selfish."

"Bah! Twilight, come here. We need to talk."

"Oh *no*," she said in a tone as sarcastic as she could get it. "*Saving the city is more important than talking!*"

Well, I was going to save her some time and give her the rundowns on the books. She can read them herself, now. I walked over to where I had left the history book and grabbed it before carrying them both to where Twilight was using her magic to float books past her, pulling them off the shelves and reading the titles as they passed.

"Save yourself some time," I said, dropping the two books on the ground in front of her. "Everyone, let's go! We got what we came for."

"What are these?" Twilight asked as I started walking to the door.

"Read them and find out," I called over my shoulder. That was when I stopped caring, so

I didn't pay attention to whatever she did.

"So what now?" Taya asked when we got outside. Kumani flew down from the roof to join us, repeating the question before I could answer.

"We go back to the palace. We need to find some artifact called the crystal heart. If anyone knows where to start looking, it would be Watcher. Wait, where's Spike?"

"He stayed back in the library," Gilda answered with a shrug. "Probably wanted to talk or something."

"Ah. Maybe he can distract those girls for a little while, then. Keep them out of my damn hair."

"If these six are so bad," Jak said, "why not just... take care of them?"

"Because I don't kill unless I have to. And in another time, they were friends. Jak, is there a way to trace artifacts other minotaurs created?"

"Nay, not that I know. However, you spoke to Watcher of finding hidden rooms. It would not take much effort to devise a resonance method to scope all hidden rooms in the palace. Maybe hints could be found in one, if there are any."

Really would have been nice of you to have said that three hours ago. "Then when we get there, start working on it. If we find any hidden rooms at all, there are bound to be several more. Crazy bastards like Sombra do seem to enjoy those."

Flo sighed and said, "Nay, you're basing all of that on TV."

Well, isn't this a TV world? Clichés run rampant and stereotypical villains like Sombra take over willy-nilly. So yeah, I'm basing my knowledge off TV. But look how far it's gotten me.

That shut her up. But she'll have me know, as I write this, that she just stopped talking because she felt her point was made, not because I was obviously right and she was floored by my genius.

Anyway, we got back to the palace quickly enough to find that the map was still on the ground. Personally, I didn't consider that a problem. "So what do you need, Jak?"

"I'll need to examine the building for a few minutes. Once I have, I will probably be able to use the map to find the things I need."

"Excellent. Fucking steal things if you have to. I don't think they'll mind too much. I'm going up to talk to Watcher, see if he's had any luck."

I walked on over to the stairs we originally went through to get up. Of course, Taya and Kumani followed me, though the rest were content to wait outside to look around. Actually, I think Smiles wanted to follow me, but he knew leaving Jak behind would be a poor life decision.

So it was that the three of us went up the stairs into the incredibly non-foreboding castle. As we walked up and up, we slowly became aware of what sounded like... giggling? "Do you hear that?" I asked, topping the first flight and seeing two of the night guards assigned to watch Cadance holding each other and giggling like kids.

"Yeah, I do," Kumani answered, also making it to the top. "And there's the source."

"What the hell happened?" I quietly asked, walking over to the spiral staircase going up.

From up there, I could hear sounds of fighting. My eyes opened wide and I sprinted up the staircase, bursting into a scene that honestly should have been what I expected.

Cadance was extremely jittery and had a massive, disturbing smile on her face. She was shooting hearts at Kat, Doppel, and the remaining guard, all of whom were dodging them like experts. As I watched in strangely fascinated surprise, one of the hearts struck Doppel and she froze, her eyes going wide.

The remaining half-heart shot off toward Kat, who saw it coming. Terror grew on her face, but that didn't stop her. She did a frankly amazing flip over it and landed behind the guard, using the force of her flip to kick him toward the heart that was coming back around. It barely caught the poor guy and absorbed into him. He was soon making out with Doppel as Kat stood to her full height, baring her claws and hissing in rage at Cadance.

"What is the meaning of this?!" I shouted, slamming both doors fully open as I entered.

That is the exact opposite of what I should have done, as Cadance's head shot toward me, the smile growing wider. "Navarone! And Kumani! Just the *couple* I wanted to see!"

I wasn't having any of that bullshit this time, not after the hellish race through the castle at Canterlot. So as she kept talking, I pulled my gauntlet off and kept walking until I was right in front of her. Before she could react, I slapped her full across the face.

It actually took her a second to recover from that hit. When she did, I almost hit her again just because it would be funny, but I couldn't justify it given that the recognition was back.

"What... what happened?" she asked.

"Me deciding to never give a pony coffee again," I answered. "Now undo your bullshit love magic." I stepped aside so she could see Doppel and the guard making out on the floor.

She gasped at the sight, her horn lighting up even brighter to undo the damage. "I... Nav, how do you always do this to me?"

"Because it's funny, I guess. There's another pair downstairs. Go take care of them."

"...Right," she said, stepping over the pair on the floor who were still making out.

What? Doppel's a whore. She'll take what she can get.

"What just happened?" Kat asked with a scowl, watching the taffy pony walk past a similarly confused Taya and Kumani.

"Cadance's special talent is love magic," I answered. "Like, spells that make ponies fall in love and shit. And nonponies, as it happens. Apparently, coffee and ponies don't mix, so it sent her a little over the edge. To be fair, it did the same thing to Pinkie." But on a wholly different scale.

"So what was she trying to do to us?" Kumani asked.

"Probably hit us with the spell so nothing happens to our relationship," I answered with a shrug. "Kat, you find anything?"

"Yes. There are—"

"Wait, why didn't you let her?" Kumani demanded, grabbing my arm and turning me to face her.

“Because any relationship that is forced by magic isn’t a relationship. If we are to fall in love, I want it to be natural, not something brought on by magic. Spending a long time like that with someone that you only love because you have to would be miserable.”

“...Alright. That makes sense.”

I looked back to Kat and nodded for her to continue. “There are several hidden areas in this chamber, but I don’t know how to access them. Watcher is checking out Sombra’s personal rooms now.”

“God, I don’t even want to imagine what sick things he might find there. Do you know where that is?”

“I think so. And if not, I can find it easily.”

“Alright, lead us to him.” She nodded and started walking to a side door. “Doppel! Get your ass off the floor and go back to watching Cadance. You too, soldier. There will be plenty of time to fuck later.”

They unlocked faces and pulled away, both sighing. “Yes sir,” the guard said.

At the same time, Doppel replied, “Yes, master...”

I nodded at their compliance and started following Kat. Kumani and Taya once more both followed me like lost little puppies. “You know,” I said as we walked through relatively dark halls that still glittered, “this castle is really cool. Not in the cold way, in the awesome way.” Saying that actually made me notice how hot I was getting in my armor. I was expecting to have been out of it by that point, so I wasn’t worried so much about the heat wearing heavier clothes under it would generate.

“It is,” Kat said with a nod, looking to an alcove where a crystal dragon posed off in a combat stance against a row of soldiers, a black crystal pony at their head. “I certainly wouldn’t mind living here.”

“We probably will, for at least a week or two,” I replied. “We just need to get Sombra out of the way and then our job here can truly begin. Hopefully Cadance and Shiny will be gracious enough to allow us to either stay in the palace or at least keep our ship here.”

“They better,” Kumani said with a snort of steam. “After all this? I’d be a little upset if they asked us to leave.”

“Cadance wouldn’t do that, daddy,” Taya added. “You let her live with us for so long. It’s only fair that she return the favor.”

“Life ain’t fair,” I muttered under my breath as we took a turn. “So how big is this place, anyway?” I asked. “From the outside, it looks pretty damn huge.”

“It’s huge on the inside as well,” Kat answered. “I haven’t seen much of it, but Watcher found a map. It goes a few hundred meters below the ground, but we haven’t found a stairway going down yet.”

“I’m not certain I want to,” I said. “Sombra sounded like a sadistic little fuck. Ain’t no telling what kind of torture stuff he has down there.”

“A tortured population is a useless population,” Watcher replied, coming from a room

somewhere in front of us. “I found a few hidden compartments in his room, Navarone. Small comforts, bottles and things. Books. Treasures. Nothing that seemed important.”

“Did you find a blue heart made of crystal?” I asked.

“No. What is that?”

“It’s what protected this place back in the day. I have no idea where it is, but I suspect it’s hidden somewhere. Probably in the palace.”

“Hm... Maybe there’s something in one of those books he had hidden. All the compartments are open, if you want to check. I can get to looking for other hidden places.”

“Kat found a few in the throne room,” I said with a nod toward the kitty.

“Would he really hide an artifact of power in his throne room, of all places?” Watcher asked. “They do bear investigation, but only after we check all the studies and the vault, if we can get to it.”

“Alright, fair enough,” I said with a shrug. “Take Kat with you. I’ll stay here and start reading. Oh, and Jak is working on building a device that should help with finding hidden rooms. Hopefully he’ll have it working soon.”

“That would be nice,” he said. “But until he does, we should keep looking. Come, Kat. Let’s find the treasury.”

“Ooh, I like that idea!” she answered. “Lead the way.”

“Well now, the treasury?” Kumani said with a chuckle. “Can I go? I can’t read anyway, after all!”

Damn dragon greed. “Whatever,” I replied with a shrug. “Just don’t take anything. I’ll be forced to give you a spanking if you do.”

“So be sure to take something,” she said with a nod. “Got it.” Pretty much everyone rolled their eyes at that answer as Watcher started leading them further down the hall. Taya and I went into the door Watcher had come out of, which led to a staircase that just went up and up and up.

“What is it with this fucker and stairs?” I asked when we had been walking for damn near five minutes.

“I don’t know,” Taya gasped, struggling for breath at that point.

“I really need to get you out more,” I sighed, shaking my head. “I’m in full plate armor and doing better than you.”

“You’re part tree!”

“And? You’re young and spry.” She couldn’t easily answer, too out of breath. “Alright, yeah. We’re going to start going running together. I don’t think I could carry both you and this armor, so you better keep up.”

“Just... go on without me,” she breathed, collapsing in mock drama on the stairs.

“Alright. Catch up when you can.” I continued on, just waiting for her to start acting indignant.

“What?” *There it is.* “You can’t just leave me!”

“You told me to. And we’re kinda in a hurry. So yeah. Catch up when you can.”

She just groaned and I saw a flash of light and heard a pop before she disappeared. I shrugged and started running up the stairs, finally able to actually hurry. And there she was at the top, rubbing one of her front hooves against her chest before inspecting it casually. “What took you so long, daddy?” She still had hints of being tired in her voice, but was doing her best to hide it.

“The stairs. Duh. Now let’s see what Sombra has hidden in here...”

The room itself was very lavish and pompously decorated, as I expected from any kind of royalty. His bed was a rather large thing, taking up a large portion of the area. Rich red-velvet sheets covered it. Several well-crafted crystal desks and tables lined the walls, along with a few bookshelves covered with treatises, atlases, and general things of that nature.

All of the hidden compartments were rather obvious, since they were the only parts of the place that weren’t made of sparkling blue crystals on the inside. Instead, they seemed to be made of some black crystal substance. Skipping over the treasures—crowns and jewels—I instead went to the books, hoping to find some manner of journal or other plot convenient item.

“So what should I be doing?” Taya asked.

“Look around, see if you can find anything useful. Just don’t touch any of the shiny things that were hidden. No telling if some of them are magic or not.”

“...Alright,” she answered as I went back to checking the books.

The first few on top were fiction, presumably guilty pleasures from back when the monarch was still a decent person. Or maybe from after. Who knows or cares? I casually tossed them aside after doing a quick check to see if they had pages cut out to fit things in.

One of them did, but all it had inside was a locket. Knowing that the rules of TV were currently active, I tossed it aside because it would only humanize Sombra by giving him a sad past. I don’t want my enemies humanized. I want them dead.

The last book in the stack was, thankfully, a journal. As soon as I started reading it, lances of pure pain slammed into both of my eyes. That made me yell in surprise and drop the book as I stumbled backwards, covering my eyes with my hands and trying to figure out what the hell happened.

“It’s a trap,” Admiral Ackb-er, Flo matter-of-factly said as I pulled away a wet and sticky hand, trying to see anything. Neither of my eyes picked up anything, but both were wet with warm fluids.

“Daddy!” Taya shouted, presumably running at me from some side room. She gasped in horror when she got to me. “W-what happened?!”

“Book,” I forced out, using one of my hands to feel around for it. The filthy thing was still open, so I forced it closed before Taya could risk the same damage I had. “Can’t see,” I added, holding one of my wet hands up.

She drew in a shuddering breath at whatever was on my hand. “I... I can fix this!” Her horn touched the side of my head, shooting off pain in the already aching area. A second later,

some manner of healing magic hit me that soothed some of the pain, but did little else. “T-there! All better, right daddy?”

“I... still can’t see,” I quietly answered.

“Just a little more, then! You’ll see, I promise!” Despite myself, I snorted at that shitty joke. Her horn once again poked my head and more magic poured in, doing absolutely nothing. “There!”

“...Taya, go tell Watcher to be extremely wary of traps. And then get Zecora.”

“I can’t just leave you!”

“You can and *will*, Taya. Just... help me to the bed, okay?”

“I... I can carry you with me!”

I slowly stood up, doing my damndest to make sure I didn’t fall over. “Taya, help me to the bed. Then go tell Watcher about the traps. And then go and tell Zecora to come to me.”

Something slowly lifted me up and I had a short sensation of movement before I was very gently placed onto the bed. “I’ll be right back, daddy! I promise!”

“I know, Taya,” I quietly answered. Then there was the pop of teleportation, followed by silence. “Well *shit*.”

“I... don’t want to be the one to tell you,” Flo said, “but your eyes are... rather damaged. They *might* be fixable with magic and Zecora’s help.”

I sat up on the bed and reached around until I found my boots and pulled them off. Then my gauntlets. All of my armor came off relatively quickly and it got piled up on the floor. When the last piece hit the ground, I fell back on the bed, slipping both hands over my ruined eyes.

“Nav, talk to m—Wait.” For some reason, she suddenly stopped. And that’s when I heard it as well, a faint laughing. I slowly sat back up, uselessly casting my eyes about the room.

“Hubris,” a deep voice whispered right next to my left ear. I spun that way, reaching a hand out to punch. Nothing connected. “And thou paid for it,” the voice whispered in my right ear. I tried swinging again with the same results. “We know thy fear,” the voice said in both ears, stronger and louder. “Afraid to be useless, afraid to be weak... Afraid to be a *burden*. Without thine eyes, thou art all of the above.”

Something reached out to my chest and easily forced me back onto the bed. “Getting out of this room would be smart,” Flo warily said.

“Weak. Worthless. It would almost be a waste of time to kill thee.” As the voice said that last line, I heard a blade drawing from a scabbard in the pile at the side of the bed. “*Almost*. Goodbye forever.”

Before the blade could strike true, the door slammed open and what sounded like Kumani shouted, “NAV!” At her entrance, the blade clattered to the crystal floor and I let loose a sigh of relief. “What... was that?” she asked.

“Don’t know,” I quietly answered, despite knowing precisely what that was.

She seemed to get over her confusion and rushed to the bed, gently propping me up and drawing in a surprised breath. “Your eyes... Taya was right...”

“Flo says there’s hope. I’m listening to her.”

“...Right. After all, Zecora was able to heal that shoulder thing.”

“Yeah. I’ll be right as rain soon. Just gotta get her to help me.” I didn’t know who I was trying to convince.

Thankfully, it didn’t take Zecora all that long to get up to the room. Taya was, of course, with her. “What caused this big problem in your eye? It might be fixable, just some dye.”

“There’s a book on the floor over there, a journal,” I said, waving my hand in what I thought was the general direction it came from.

“Your ache came from a book? I must take a quick look...” Her hooves started clip-clopping that way.

“Be careful,” I said. “I don’t want two blind people in here.”

“I am much smarter than I might look. I will not risk letting my eyes cook.”

“You might be smarter than you look, but I *can’t fucking see*.”

Well, that got a giggle from her, at least. Kumani just gently pulled my head to her chest, probably quite worried about my form of humor. After a few seconds of silence, Taya hopped up onto the bed next to me and leaned against me, pressing her warm and furry body against mine.

“Yes, this curse should be extremely easy to break. It doesn’t even require anything to make! Throw this book in a very hot fire, and that will lift this dark curse most dire. There is no actual damage to your eyes. It is merely an illusion that tells lies. But it comes at a very small cost: all the info in the book is lost.”

“Do it!” Taya blurted, and I suddenly felt Kumani grow much warmer.

“Hold on, Taya. Can it be read safely, without fucking someone’s eyes?” I asked, suddenly feeling extremely relieved.

“If one was wearing your magic ring, they could safely do anything.”

“That is... absolutely wonderful news, Zecora. My ring is in one of the pouches on my belt in that pile next to the bed. Grab it and take it and the book down to Watcher. Give him both and tell him to destroy the book when he’s finished.”

“That should not take me long. Let us hope I’m not wrong,” she said, walking over to my pile of armor and rifling through it.

“I’ll be really upset if you are,” I sighed, my wings sagging more than they already had been. “Going from hopeless to hopeful is tiring enough. Going back again will just piss me off.” She just chuckled again as Kumani pulled me closer still.

“If you keep laughing at this,” she growled, “I’m going to remove your white half and make you all black.”

“Your dark dragon greed must never win,” Zecora sagely answered. “To let it do so would be a sin. Your lover will soon be fine. Now I should go and find mine.”

She left with that oddly worded statement. Now, I wasn’t going to press them for details, but it made me wonder if Zecora and Watcher were porking. I mean, I could see that working out for them. All the luck to them, I guess.

With Zecora gone, Taya hopped onto her back legs and wrapped me in a hug, her furry face tickling mine. “You’re gonna be okay,” she whispered.

I wrapped an arm around her, holding her as well. “Yeah. It’s best to never underestimate me, I’ve found.”

Kumani snorted, finally loosening her grip. “That’s for sure. But I have a question, one that might not fit. How close are humans to their offspring? I know dragon parents are fairly apathetic toward their hatchlings.”

“For the most part, humans are extremely loving parents that will do everything they can to make a better life for their children. It’s the same for most species out there. But dragons don’t much need that, because they can survive just about anything with no problems. Human children are basically helpless until around fifteen or so, and mostly complete twats until around twenty. And that’s years, not months. Just, you know, don’t tell any of *them* that.”

“Hm... So how would *you* raise a dragon?” she asked in a voice that shouldn’t have been seductive at all. But the fact that it was and that one of her claws was trailing down my wings told me that her question was loaded.

“The same way I would a human. Taya, I know you’re feeling happy, but can you let go? If you keep twitching, you’re going to make me sneeze.” She sighed and did so, resuming her spot leaning against me instead. “I think it’s a fairly moot point anyway, Kumani. I don’t think either of us even want kids. Shit, we can’t even *have* them.”

“I was just curious. You know, this is a very nice bed... Taya, why don’t you go make sure Watcher burns that book, hm? I would like some uh... *alone time* with your father.”

“Ugh. Can’t it wait?” Taya asked.

“One way or another, I am about to have sex with Navarone. Either you can be in here to see it or you can be outside. I think everyone here would prefer you outside.”

Taya snorted and I felt her hop off the bed. “You’re right, daddy. Women *are* weird.” With that last phrase, she walked off in a huff, slamming the door behind her.

“Was that really necessary?” I asked when she was gone.

“No. But I’m feeling hot and you’re my relief. Now just you lie back and let me take care of you, my sweet little lover.”

When we were basking in the afterglow on the very comfortable bed, I was suddenly able to see again. My eyes beheld a beautiful dragoness holding me close, her scales shining brightly in the warm light of the room. A few feathers dotted the bed, signs of where she had been a little rougher than she should have.

And when she noticed my eyes back to normal, a larger smile appeared on her beastial yet pretty face, sharp teeth gracing her mouth. “You can see,” she sumptuously sighed.

“That I can,” I answered with a nod and a smile of my own. “And as much as I would love to stay and cuddle, we still have a job to do.”

“Must we go?” she sighed. “The bed is nice and this feels so... right. You have a good

crew. Can't you trust them to get the job done?"

"I probably could," I answered, pulling away and sitting up. "But if I can do anything at all to help, it is my responsibility to. There will be plenty of time for us to share later, Kumani. But for now, we have a king to kill."

"Then let's make it fast," she replied, sitting up as well. "I assume you want to get back in your armor?"

"I'd like to, yeah. It didn't do me much good against the book, but it might help against other dangers."

"Then I'll help you, my brave sir knight."

I snorted as I took the gauntlets she offered me. "If I was a knight, the princess you kidnapped would be very confused when I ran off with you instead of rescuing her."

"Oh, I think the look on her face would be worth it..."

It didn't take me long to get suited up. "And now?" she asked as I did one last check on all my gear.

"We kill a king," I answered, tightening my sword belt.

After we figure out how...