Chapter One Hundred and Fourteen—Homecoming

Of course, like it or not, I could only avoid actual work for so long. Lounging around with Pinkie and Doppel was somewhat fun, especially after what I had been through, but I needed to deal with the miners and I needed to get some fresh air.

Because of that, I shooed Pinkie off after another few minutes of resting. Doppel had already departed with Spike's mess, so I didn't have to get rid of her. After the intense exertion Pinkie put me through, I realized most of the wounds I had were superficial, so I removed the bandages and took a quick shower to remove the musky smell.

Since Taya wasn't around for me to torture this time, I dressed much more professionally, putting on my big girl panties (stark white, though also silk since that's all Rarity had). I also made sure to put on some long pants and a shirt, deciding to skip the bra since I didn't expect to be doing all that much. Finally, I strapped a dagger to my side.

When I was good and ready, I strode out of my room and knocked on Taya's door. It seemed that she had been waiting, because as soon as my knuckles touched the door, magic tossed it open. "Ready to go, daddy," she said, happily noting my lack of a skirt or blouse.

"How did you even know that was me?" I asked.

"You're the only one that knocks so high on the door," she answered with a shrug.

"Well, I'm feeling a lot better now. Guess there were just a few aftershocks left from that ghost thing, or something. Anyway, I have some people I need to talk to. You can come with me, if you want."

"Like I said, ready to go," she answered, stepping out of her depressingly bare room and closing the door with her magic.

"You ever think about taking up painting?" I asked as we started walking toward the smithy.

"Why painting?"

"To put some life in your room. It's pretty empty at the moment."

"...I guess. Maybe I can do something with magic?"

"Maybe. Anyway, this is our first stop." There were a few miners waiting outside the smithy's door, presumably for minor fixes on tools or something. Since I technically owned the damn place, I walked right on in like it.

Smiles was sitting on the floor, a strange look on his face. I didn't want any part of that, so I just started walking past him to Jak's door. He didn't let me get there, though. "Ice wants to talk to you," Smiles said.

"Then I'll find him after I talk to Jak," I said.

"No need to wait," Smiles said, blinking. When he opened his eyes again, they were blue instead of the normal gold of a batpony. *Oh, you've got to be fucking kidding me.*

"I found a host!" Ice happily said, smiling. "Having four legs is strange, but I can get used to anything."

Great. Two weirdos in one little package. "Well, you found your host. What did you want to talk about?"

"Well, mostly just to tell you I found a host. But now that I have a body… There are so many things I want to try! Can we have sex?" *Direct, much?* Taya and I were both rather taken aback by that.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" I asked.

"Hey, you and Sunny said the same thing!" He stopped for a moment, his eyes going unfocused. "Oh… OH!" Just like that, his eyes went gold again.

"Sorry about that, sir," Smiles awkwardly said, looking away and rubbing at his neck. "He's uh… really curious. About everything."

"If you can stomach the thought of your body being sullied by a girl, find Doppel and put that curiosity to rest. If he starts asking random people on the ship if they want sex, I'm going to have to crack down on you since I can't do anything to him."

"...Yes sir," he sighed, still not looking at me.

"Part of taking one of these things into your head is working out a partnership," I said. "He is usually there to help you, not the other way around. Remember that, and don't let him get you in trouble. I suggest not giving him control until he understands how things work, or at least won't make a damn fool of himself."

"I will definitely be doing that," he said, nodding.

"Good. Is Jak in his room?"

"Yes, but he doesn't want anypony to see what he's working on. Especially you."

"You see, when you say *that*, it makes it sound like he's working on something overly dangerous," I said, crossing my arms.

His ears flicked back and he looked away again. "Can you… not do that?" he asked. "It uh… it makes me feel weird."

I rolled my eyes and stopped pushing up my boobs. "Fine. Tell Jak I stopped by to ask about his golem."

"Oh, that? He already has the body finished up on deck. He was just a few runes away from finishing it when he got a special request."

"...Then why the hell did he stop? Unless this request is helping the ship, I want him finishing that damn golem. The sooner he gets it done, the sooner he can start making more. Then the next time we get boarded by spiders, we all hide belowdecks while the iron golems wreck shit."

"I'll be sure to let him know, but I don't think he'll agree. It isn't every day he gets to work with… materials like these."

"Whatever. Tell him quickly. I have other shit to do today."

"Er, alright. Say, what *happened* while you were gone, anyway? I don't think anypony knew…"

"Don't worry about it," I said. "Already told the story once and don't feel like telling it

again."

Taya decided to chime in, sadly. "He was in an underground bunker haunted by cursed humans that hated him for being alive and wanted to kill him so he'd be there forever like them."

"That's the short version, yes," I sighed, hoping Smiles wouldn't think hugging me would be a good idea. He did start leaning up, but I put a hand on his head before he could do anything. "Remember what I told you about hugs, Smiles?"

"...That you aren't a pony?" he slowly asked.

"Correct." He stopped straining against my hand, thankfully, so I let him go.

As soon as I did, he jumped up and hugged me. "But I am," he whispered with a giggle.

Since he was on his hind legs to hug me, that meant his balance was currently very messed up. I used that knowledge and grabbed him, spinning my body around and making him fall. He almost dragged me down with him, but his lack of fingers made escaping his grasp easy.

"Don't forget to tell Jak," I said as Taya and I left the room. He was too busy rubbing at his newly aching head to respond.

When we were walking down the hall toward our next target, Taya asked, "Was that really necessary, daddy? You don't mind when I hug you!"

"That's because you're adorable and not obnoxious. Smiles is only occasionally adorable and almost always obnoxious, so getting hugs from him is usually annoying."

"Oh." Before we could go any further, she hopped up and hugged me, wrapping her front legs around my waist.

"Really, Taya?"

One of the miners in the hall snorted and said, "Well, you were kinda asking for it."

I sighed and knelt down to hug her back. After a few seconds of hugging, she let me go and we continued walking. "And daddy?"

"Yes, dear?" I sighed.

"I am *not* adorable."

"Are too," I replied. "The cutest filly out there. And every time you say you're not, you get *even cuter*. So just remember that."

She snorted quietly and muttered something under her breath, so I made sure to tousle her hair before knocking on the door we were now standing in front of.

A somewhat irate Crabapple answered a few seconds later. "Oh, you're awake. What do you want?" she asked.

"I was mostly wondering if your company would try to back out of the contract since you guys didn't find anything."

"Contracts are legally binding," she coldly answered. "The job of you and your crew was to protect us while we conducted preliminary mining operations. Your crew protected us while we conducted preliminary mining operations. The board will be very disappointed that we didn't find what we were looking for and that we lost a few miners, but you will be paid."

"Excellent. Did Watcher tell you about the Crystal Empire?"

"He did not."

"Well, you got the ship outfitted for cold weather journeys, now. You might want to turn your eyes north instead of south. There's a new pony city up there and they have absolutely no way of mining or obtaining much of anything, save for importation. Tell your board if they want to recoup their losses, they could look for jobs up there."

"I will do so. We'll need to do *something* after this disaster. Is there anything else you need?"

"Nope, I'm good. Though if you could ask your miners to stop crowding the hall, that would be nice."

"We're passing the equator and it's blindingly hot out there. You might not notice it…" her eyes flicked to my mostly hairless arms, "...but we do. I can tell them to go outside, but after what they just saw and had to go through, I think it's fair they have some time to relax."

"True enough. And there's nothing going on right now, so they're not too much in the way." I shrugged. "Whatever. That's all I needed."

"Then I shall speak to you later." With that, she closed her door.

"Did you know we were passing the equator?" I asked as I started walking to the door leading to the deck.

"I haven't been on deck since we left," Taya replied. "And I didn't really care where we were."

"Well, I'm certainly tired of being cooped up inside," I said. "If it gets too hot for you, go inside."

"I managed just fine before, the first few times we passed it. And after so long in the cold, this'll be nice."

We were already heading up the stairs, so it's not like I was going to stop her. Thankfully, the deck was nice and shady since there was a giant balloon over us, so I didn't have to worry about wincing too badly from the sun. Because of that, I was able to quickly glance around to discover who all was on the deck. Namely, Ames, some of the crew, some of the miners, Gourd, and Kat and Spider were scaling the masts.

Ames was at the front of the ship facing forward, so he hadn't seen me yet. I didn't want to deal with him at the moment, so I went up the stairs to the wheel to talk to Gourd.

"Finally awake?" he asked when he saw me coming up.

"Figured I was pretty enough to stop beauty sleeping," I answered with a shrug. "Heard the ship had some problems."

"You heard right. But we're flying steady. Watcher's plan was that we'd stay in Canterlot for a few weeks. Is that still the plan?"

"Yep. Plenty of time to get this thing fixed, right?"

"Oh yeah. Now that we're out of the snow, we're fine. Just don't ask me to push the engines that hard."

"Certainly not planning on it. If we have to, we can get Dash and Smiles to bust up

clouds for us so we don't have to work too hard."

"That shouldn't be an issue, but I'll let you know if it is. How long are we planning on stopping when we let these miners off?"

"Just long enough to drop them off and get paid. I kinda wanted to stay longer, but honestly, I'd rather be home. Or at least, to as close a home as I've had for years."

"Understandable. It'll give the girls a chance to spend some time with their families before they have to go off again, too."

"Yeah, sure, whatever. I'm gonna see what I can do about leaving them behind. They've been useful, but they really don't belong with us."

"That they don't. How do you plan on convincing Celestia?"

"Hopefully by fucking her silly. If that doesn't work, I'll have to resort to trying to reason with her, and that just doesn't work on women."

"Remember what you are now, *mommy*," Taya somewhat unhappily said.

"Hey, when have I ever been reasonable?" I asked. She huffed and looked away. "Alright then. I wouldn't be surprised if I couldn't convince her. If not, oh well. If so, awesome. How much do you think fixing the ship will cost?"

"Dunno for sure. Few hundred bits, maybe?"

"Well, my plan was to give you what you needed to fix the ship from the money we're getting from the contract and split the rest up among the others. I ended up not being there to help defend, so I don't get any of it."

"Well, that's hardly your fault…" he said.

"I also don't need any of it. Didn't earn it and don't need it means the others get it. I'll leave it up to Watcher to divvy out, since he was the one in charge and knows who earned it."

"Seems fair to me. So what happened to you, anyway?"

"Fell down a deep hole and found some things that wanted me dead. Story of my life, you know?"

"Yes, I know how you feel," he quietly said. We shared a silence over past pains for a moment before he asked, "Still, I gotta know, what left that weird burn across your face?"

"Either acid or steam. I don't know which you're talking about, since they're all mostly gone now." *Thank you, Flo.*

"You didn't mention acid in your story, daddy," Taya said.

"I didn't want Dash or Twilight to know. I ran into some more… *solid* things down there, other than ghosts. One was a butcher that had acid for blood and wanted to put me on the menu. The steam came later, when I was running away from a slaver or something that wanted to put me on a leash."

"...I think that place should be forgotten," Gourd slowly said.

"I think that place should be destroyed," I replied. "That's something else I need to talk to Celestia about. But I definitely don't want anyone going down there. If they almost killed *me*… Well, I don't want to know what they'd do to a pony."

“I doubt the princess wants to find out, either. She’ll probably just quarantine the whole area and blame it on the undead we found.

“Good riddance, though I feel bad for the troops that’ll have to quarantine the place.”

“If she found troops willing to guard Tartarus for the rest of their lives, I imagine she can find a few that won’t mind the cold that much.”

Before I could ask him about the Tartarus troops, a large hand on my shoulder cut me off. “Human, we need to talk,” the naga quietly said.

Oh boy, here we go. “I’ll talk to you later, Gourd.”

“Of course, Nav. Have a good… talk.” Just like that, the naga put his other hand on my other shoulder and picked me up, slithering back down the stairs.

“This is really unnecessary, you know,” I sighed, crossing my arms as he carried me down into the ship.

“I was told you were tired before, so I did not disturb you. You seem fine now, but I will not allow you to tire yourself before we may speak.” It seemed he was carrying me down into his room for some nefarious purpose. Taya was still following me, though, so I knew he wouldn’t be able to do anything too bad.

“So what do we need to speak about?” I asked as we crossed the threshold into his chamber. He set me on his bed and closed his door before answering.

“A few things, starting with what happened to you. What happened to you?”

“Fell down an elevator shaft into a haunted human bunker where almost everything wanted to kill me.”

“And you fought them?” he asked.

“I wouldn’t be alive right now without your training, yeah. They did not like my enchanted blade.”

“And yet you were injured.”

“I was down there for almost a fucking week, fighting every step of the way. No *shit* I was injured. Those motherfuckers didn’t just attack me. They attacked my mind. Gave me flashbacks. Made me *do* things… In my mind, I opened a present next to my sister. In real life, I was arming an explosive that went off before I could get far enough away. In my mind, I was given a cup of coffee. In real life, it was acid. Mannequins shot raw pain into my mind. That place was *hell*.”

“A hell you should not have had to venture through alone, Cain,” Ames slowly replied, putting his hand back on my shoulder.

“Should and would build no bridges, Ames,” I coldly replied. “Many things that shouldn’t have happened did and many things that should have happened didn’t. The past is the past. Focus less on what should be and focus more on what you’ll do in the future.”

“It was my job to protect you. And once again, I failed.”

“A lot of people seem to think that their job is to ‘protect’ me, like I’m some kind of damsel in distress. Yeah, I get into problems. There are times when I need help. But I think I’ve

done more than enough on my own, protected myself more than enough times, to know I don't need a damn guard. At least, not all the time. You're free to continue protecting me, since I know it's an honor thing with you. But don't expect me to go out of my way to accommodate you."

"I don't. You are, after all, a warrior. Your survival attests to that. But even warriors have battle-brothers. Or…" His eyes flicked to Taya for a moment. "...battle-sisters or daughters. I would like to be by your side in any situation you expect danger. Truly, I grow weary of light duty. The fight against the undead warmed my blood, but most of that trip was mind-numbingly dull. At least with you, I wouldn't have been bored."

"If you had been with me, it's likely neither of us would have survived," I sighed, rubbing my eyes. "I don't think you can climb ladders or fit into some of the places I had to go. In an open battlefield, I would gladly have you by my side. But something like that? You would have no place in that kind of fight, Ames. Besides, I had no food or water the entire week I was down there. You can't tell me you would have survived that."

"...Perhaps. What did you have to fight?"

"A few skeletons, a demonic butcher with a knife for a hand, several ghouls, a demon dog, and a slave-master. Mostly, it was me running the fuck away or finding other problems."

"Retreat is… a viable option at times. Especially when your opponents are already dead. Did you have any trouble with them?"

"Yeah. One on one, or with just me against a small number, it's not that bad. But one against five is fucking hard. They ganged up on me like that a few times and did a lot of damage."

"Then I will have to find some way to simulate group fights for you. Truthfully, if you find yourself in a situation like that, retreat is the best option. One warrior cannot fight several if the several are working as a group. But you can increase your awareness and your reflexes to make surviving possible, at least. Any other problems?"

"Fighting without being able to see. I got blinded by blood, once."

"If you can't see, all you can do is rely on sound and hope you are lucky. There is no way of practicing for that."

What, no Jedi-like warrior tricks you can show me? So much for being true warriors or whatever. "At least I'm not alone, then," I said. "Other than those, I didn't really have much trouble with fighting. No one I dealt with down there really knew how to fight well in melee."

"At least it gives me some idea of where to take your training now. You've learned most of what you can learn from me."

"Well, at least there's that. You need to talk about anything else?"

"I do. I trust you have learned by now that Kumani has departed?"

"Yeah. I wasn't too surprised."

"Then you know that now you can begin your search for a proper mate. A proper *male* mate."

"I'm not having this discussion with you, Ames," I said, narrowing my eyes. "First, I'm

staying away from relationships for a while, if possible. Second, *I'm still a guy* and I still very much prefer the touch of a female. Third, there are absolutely no guys on the ship I could go for and not have it be weird. You're married, so that's out. Smiles is gay. Jak's far too old and I think he's also married. Watcher's far too old, he's with someone, and he'd probably immediately leave if I even tried asking him. The crew and the soldiers are off limits. Spider's a kid and a fucking spider. Spike knows full well I'm a guy and I knew him when he was a kid anyway, so that would be creepy. So fuck that shit."

"...I see. And your *carnal* relations? I assume those will not continue?"

"What I do in the bedroom is none of your business, Ames. I'm done talking about this. Is there anything *else* you need?"

"...No."

"We'll probably be passing by your clan's home on the way to Canterlot. If you want, we can drop you off as well so you can spend that time with your family. That's what I suggest, because I'm not planning on leaving Canterlot or the ship that often and I have a feeling you'd get bored."

"I will think about it. I trust you would pick me up before continuing the journey?"

"Yeah. Get me an answer before we get there."

"I will."

"Good. Then I'm going back to the deck. I need some fresh air."

"I suppose I shall stay down here and try reading again, though it is rather difficult."

That reminded me that he had trouble in the past with it. "What exactly are your problems?" I asked. "Do you have trouble seeing things that are up close?"

"No. The words… do not read correctly. The letters are jumbled, strangely ordered. I've always had trouble."

"You might have dyslexia, dude. Are the letters out of order?"

"That is what I just said."

"Yeah, sounds like dyslexia…"

"So there is a name for it. How do I cure it?"

"Not a fucking clue. I'll do some research, see what I can find." *I wouldn't be surprised if a certain laptop has the information.*

"It does," Flo whispered.

"It would be appreciated. There is little else to do on this blasted boat."

"Then I suppose I shall see you later," I said, standing. He didn't reply as Taya and I left.

A few days later, we were pulling into the city to drop the miners and Crabapple off. They were all very happy to get away from our ship, and most of us were very happy to have them gone. It meant more room on the ship for us and less wait time at the kitchen.

It also meant we were getting paid, and word had somehow leaked out that I was planning on giving everything to the crew and troops. Since they all knew we were headed to

Canterlot for a few weeks, the morale on the ship was higher than usual, not that many of them showed it.

Crabapple, Watcher, and I were all in Watcher's office that last day as her miners gathered up all their shit and started unloading. "So how we gonna get paid?" I asked, leaning against the wall somewhat awkwardly. "Five thousand coins is pretty heavy."

"Well, coins are the currency," she said. "Unless you feel like converting it to salt, as if anypony would ever accept *that* here."

"Two of my troops can carry it easily enough," Watcher said. "Or one, with magic."

"Send Spike and a few pegasi," I said with a shrug. "He can carry it, they can fly interference. Where they picking it up?"

"I will fly with them to the bank," she answered. "And with that, our business will be concluded, unless you wish to extend your contract as our private military."

"Not interested," Watcher and I both said. I continued, "Our interests happened to coincide. Nothing personal, but we're not really cut out for defense. And *fuck* the cold. If I ever see snow again, it'll be too soon."

"Agreed," she answered, shivering slightly. "There is one more matter that I need to discuss before I depart. One of the stipulations of the contract was a nondisclosure agreement. If a reporter asks you what work you did for us, what will you tell them?"

"I'll ask him what the fuck he's smoking," I said with a smile. "If someone wants to ask *me* about the work I did for *you* instead of what happened with Luna, that reporter's a stupid piece of shit. And then I'll tell him that if he doesn't stop asking me questions and get out of my sight, I'll find an excuse to have him arrested."

"...I see now why reporters had a hard time quoting you," Watcher said, a hint of a smile on his lips. "My team and I are used to dealing with reporters. They'll be no problem for us. Besides, we're going across the country as soon as we get our money anyway, and we'll probably be gone from there before word even hits anyone about our part in your… venture. We'll be sure to remind the others to stay silent."

"Excellent. Aside from your payment, that is everything. It was a pleasure doing business." She sounded more relieved than anything. After being in her position, I could certainly understand that.

"If you'll just wait on deck, we'll have some troops meet you," I told her. "Shouldn't take too long."

"I will need to remove some bags from my room anyway. I'll meet your soldiers topside." She turned to go, but stopped, then turned back. "This may be… preemptive, but are you hiring? After this debacle, getting away from this coast might be wise."

"We're a mercenary company," I said, crossing my arms. "Unless you've been hiding some impressive fighting skills this entire time, I don't think you match our required skillset."

"...Very well."

"We will, however, offer you a free ride to Canterlot," I said. "Least I can do, for getting

us a contract like that. And I can put a good word in with the princess for you, if you want. No promises, but at least you're not on this coast anymore."

"That would be… more than acceptable. Hopefully it won't be required. I will know within a few hours, if you're going to be in town that long."

I looked at Watcher, to find him staring at me with a somewhat similar expression. "Think we can wait a few to get some supplies?" I asked. "Gotta be low on food after that."

"We are and I think we can. Let some of the troops and crew put their hooves on land again."

"I'll tell Gourd. You get Spike and some pegasi to the deck to pick up the money."

"Understood."

I looked back to Crabapple, who was wearing what was probably the first real smile I had seen on her face the entire time I knew her. "You don't get word to us by… oh, nine or so, we're leaving."

"Of course. I understand a full schedule. Thank you, Lady Navarone."

"No problem. Just please don't ever call me Lady again."

"Very well. Until tonight, then. Maybe."

"See you later," I said, nodding. She finally left, heading down the hall to her room.

"We *could* use a manager," Watcher said.

"To do what?" I asked. "We have a supply officer. We have you, me, and Gourd. If we ever need a public relations officer, I can turn on the charm and I'm sure even *you* could put a smile on that dour face. We don't need another mouth to feed, we don't need another civilian, and we definitely don't need someone like her on board for longer than necessary."

"All true points. And I suppose helping her get a job in Canterlot would be better for her in the long run. Anyway, we have things to do. Go talk to Gourd."

"And you go find Spike and some troops," I said as I walked on out. He didn't reply, not that I would have really stopped to listen. Or *could* have stopped to listen, since the ship was actually bustling with activity again. Most of the miners had done their best to get off the ship as quickly as possible since it was kind of starting to stink from a bunch of mostly unwashed guys everywhere, but plenty were stuck dealing with luggage and equipment that they needed to pull out of storage. Thankfully, Gourd's almost always on the deck during the day.

Sure enough, that's where I found him this time. He was watching over the miners as they went about their jobs, making sure none of them broke anything topside. "You need something?" he gruffly asked me when I approached.

"We're staying here a little longer than planned," I told him. "Decided it might be wise to stock up on supplies. And we might be taking a passenger to Canterlot."

"If we're taking one, you mind if I put out word that we're taking passengers in general? Fast and well-protected airships can make some good money pulling fares."

"Go for it. I want to be gone at nine, though. And no fucking reporters. Apparently part of the contract we signed was a nondisclosure agreement, so I don't want any of the crew talking

to reporters."

"Got it. We're used to giving them the runaround, after… how we obtained the ship."

"I could see Celestia wanting to keep that under wraps. You know where the supply officer is?"

"Yeah. I'll go talk to him, tell him to get looking. It'll give me a chance to put out a quick bulletin about passengers."

"Make sure you tell him to be back by nine."

"Of course, Nav. We want to get to Canterlot just as much as you seem to. I'll go find him right now. You might want to get back below, though. You're lookin' kinda… pale."

"I just spent over a month inside with no sun. My skin colors with melanin, which needs sun to get darker. I'll be pale until I get more sun."

"Ah. We…" he looked back over himself, at all of his fur. "...don't have that." He looked back to me and smiled. "Just do me a favor and drink some water, then. We all know you went through some trouble and you don't want to worry anyone by passing out on us."

"Water's always good," I said with a shrug. "Just go talk to the supply guy."

"Yep. See you later, Nav."

"See you." He started walking off and I turned to go to the side of the ship. When I turned, I found Rainbow Dash and Gilda right in front of me.

"We couldn't help but overhear…" Dash started.

"...That we're staying here for a while," Gilda finished with a smirk.

"You have until nine," I said, crossing my arms. Dash's eyes moved in on my breasts, which got pushed up when I crossed my arms. They still weren't overly substantial, even with that boost, but I wasn't wearing a bra at the moment, so they were more noticeable. "My eyes are up here, Dash," I said.

"I've made my choice," she replied, still looking.

"Ugh. Do whatever you're doing quickly," I said, turning away. "I'll wait if I have to, but I'll sic Pinkie and Applejack on both of you if you make us wait."

"Don't you worry," Gilda said, grabbing Dash's tail and spreading her wings. "When have we ever let you down?" I just snorted and started walking away. She took that as her cue to jump up and fly off, dragging Dash with her.

Before I could go to the side of the deck, another voice called me. "Hey Nav!" I rolled my eyes and turned to Spike, who was on deck with three of the batpony pegasus guards.

"What do you need?" I asked, walking over to him.

"Do you know what we're doing?" he asked. "Watcher just told me to get up on deck, but he didn't say why."

"You're following Crabapple and then picking up a package," I told him. "A very important package. Way we figured, having a dragon to help protect it on the way back was a good idea. As badass and scary as batponies are, their reputation isn't as solid outside of Canterlot as that of dragons."

“If it’s so important, then why aren’t you going?” Spike asked.

“Psh. Because I have people to send instead of me. Perks of being in charge, man. Hey, when you four get back, feel free to head into town if you want. We’re leaving at nine, so you have a few hours off if you want.”

The three guards smiled at that, but Spike blinked a few times. “What about you?” he asked. “Are you uh… ‘going to town’?”

“Nah. Oh, and while you’re gone, don’t tell anyone about what we found down there and don’t tell anyone about the miners.”

“Didn’t you sign an NDA?” one of the guards asked.

“Exactly.”

“NDA?” Spike asked.

“Nondisclosure agreement. It means you’re not allowed to talk about what happened. So don’t talk about what happened. And there’s Crabapple now, so listen to her. Nightshade, don’t you have seniority?”

“Yes sir,” she said, nodding.

“Then if Watcher didn’t put anyone in charge, it’s you. That package is your pay, so make sure it gets back here.”

That got all three of the guards smiling again, so she nodded and happily said, “You got it, sir.” The three of them started walking toward Crabby, who was coming out on deck and blinking slightly at the brightness now that our balloon wasn’t blocking the sun.

Spike, however, was not. “We’re getting the gold?” he asked, his voice incredulous.

“Keep your fucking voice down,” I said, not wanting any of the miners to hear it. Most probably wouldn’t give a fuck or even be paying attention, but I wasn’t about to put it past any of them to want five thousand bits. “Go talk to Crabapple, not me. That’s an order, Spike.”

“I’m not a soldier!”

“Then I guess you don’t want a soldier’s pay?” He blinked a few times before sighing and walking over to Crabapple. Whatever his problem was, he needed to get it fucking sorted.

A few minutes after I got to the side of the ship, Ames slithered up next to me. “You don’t want me going with the troops to get the money?” he asked.

“Did you suddenly sprout wings?” I asked, not looking back.

“Fair enough.” He pushed something into my side. “Then we have plenty of time to practice.” I shrugged and took the practice sword he was holding for me. I didn’t have time to put on armor, but really, I didn’t need it that much anymore. After so much practice so often, I learned the most important lesson of all when it comes to sword fighting: How to not get hit.

Not that it’s worth much to any of you bastards that are reading this (I’ll fucking cut you), but I suggest against trying to fight like that without a bra. I used the arrival of the large bag of bits as an excuse to call it quits, not that Ames was overly sympathetic with that. I pulled the rank card again to make him shut up.

When they landed, two of the guards were holding the very large bag of money between them. All the miners were gone at that point and the ship was clear, so I wasn't too worried when the bag made a very obvious clinking noise when it hit. "Where do you want these, sir?" one of the ones carrying it asked, panting slightly.

"I'll take care of it," I said. "You're all dismissed."

"You're… you're not going to carry that *yourself*, right?" Nightshade slowly asked. "I mean, no offense, but…"

"That's what he's for," I said, jerking a thumb at the naga.

"Why not me?" Spike asked as Ames moved forward to grab the large bag.

"No offense to you, Spike, but you're a dragon. I saw how you got around my gold hoard at home."

"I can control myself!" he shot back, taking a step forward.

"I know you can. But you don't wave a steak in front of a starving man, no matter how loyal he is. The naga can carry it just fine." I turned to Ames and said, "Let's go find Watcher."

"That won't be a hard search," he grunted, following me. "It seems he's always in his room."

"When you get to be his age, you'll understand," I said. Spike was grumbling behind me and almost definitely watching us walk away. I didn't want to treat him like that, but what I said was true; he's a dragon and you don't show a lot of gold around dragons without a very good reason.

"Perhaps, though naga seldom live to be that age. True, surviving to be an elder is a sign of a truly great warrior, but dying in battle is seen as a greater honor, especially if it's in defense of the clan."

I am so glad I didn't grow up in that kind of culture. We were in front of Watcher's open door by that point, and we were able to see he was in there with one of his subordinates, the only female unicorn. I'm pretty sure she also happened to be his second in command.

"If you're sure, sir," she said as I made my presence known by leaning against the doorframe.

"As sure as I can be," he said. "But keep an eye out. Let me know if you see anything else. If nothing else, we can point it out and hope for the best."

"...Alright, sir. But for the record, you said the same thing about Luna."

"Noted. Dismissed." She nodded and let herself out, walking past me and the naga without too much of a glance.

"We made bank," I said, walking in after she left. The naga hovered by the door, the large bag over his shoulder. "Where do you want the gold?"

"In the corner, for now," he said, nodding at the only empty corner in his room. Ames tossed the bag over there. "I'll deal with it after I get word from Gourd about the repairs."

"Bitchin'. Did anything else come up?"

"No. Sentinel and I were discussing something personal."

"I meant anything else. I know how the chain of command works. If you need me, I'll probably be on the ship somewhere. Oh, and Gourd's looking around for other passengers, so don't murder the first person you see that you don't recognize."

"Of course. Just make sure he doesn't get enough, so you can get Spike his own room again."

"Don't gotta tell me twice, man. I swear, something about me makes everyone cuddle against me. Taya's nice and soft, so that's perfectly fine. But Spike is all scaley and hard and also a dude."

"Is it traditional for human… children? Children to sleep with their parents?" Watcher asked.

"It's not unheard of. It usually stops as they get older, though. Though now that we're over the equator and back into summer, I don't suppose it matters that much."

"It would raise some brows here. Incest is rare, very rare, but you are known to be… loose."

My eyes narrowed slightly, even though I knew he wasn't insulting me. It still angered me to think that there might be people thinking I was fucking my daughter. "I'll keep it quiet. See you later, Watcher." He nodded as I left.

"Back to training?" the naga asked.

"Need to get something out of my room first," I said, stepping into it. Once again, he hovered in the hall, too tall to enter without bending over. I pulled my shirt off and walked over to one of my drawers.

"Should I be seeing this?" Ames slowly asked, not taking his eyes away from me.

"You're married, so I know you're not lusting over me. And if you *are*, you'll keep it in check," I answered, pulling on a bra.

"Your confidence in me is comforting," he sighed, looking away as I finally pulled my shirt back on.

"Monogamy and marriage is extremely important for you guys, right?" I asked. "I know that one bitch got killed for what she did to me. Wouldn't the same happen to someone who cheats?"

"Yes. It would. And it is likely I would split you in half should I ever forget my vows anyway."

"Don't worry. I would never let that happen. One of my rules is no one that's married."

"That is a very good rule to have. Though it's also very disturbing that you even *have* rules. Sex should be—"

"Let's go practice," I said, pushing past him. He snorted and began following me again.

Sure enough, a very unhappy Miss Crabapple came aboard right at eight, with an escort of two miners carrying a few bags. I was sitting on one of the masts at the time, looking down at the city with my scope. As soon as I realized she was there, I swooped down. "So?" I asked.

She sighed and quietly said, “It was… *suggested* I find employment elsewhere. It seems a scapegoat was needed for the debacle, and I happened to be the perfect target. Though I imagine *you* might be a target as well, should you stay in the city for long.”

“They’d be hard-pressed to lift a finger… or *hoof* against me,” I said. “But that wouldn’t stop them from trying. Welcome aboard. No one’s claimed the room you had, so feel free to take it back. We’re leaving in an hour, so if you have any goodbyes to say, say them quickly.”

“No family. Few friends. These bags are… all I have, really.”

“...I see. Listen, if you need anything, just find me. That includes someone to talk to, because I’ve been there.”

“Getting *rejected* from the perfect life you had?” she bitterly asked. “Forced to leave everything behind but what you can carry? Being told… your special talent *isn’t needed*?”

“I was ripped from my life. I’m… not from around here. An out of control spell brought me here and with only what I had on me, so no chance to pack. Another spell grafted wings on my back. And for the coup de fucking grace, I got cursed into the body of the wrong gender. So if you’ve been wondering why everyone’s calling me sir, it’s because I’m definitely not supposed to be a girl. So yeah, I’ve been there.”

“...Then how do you go on?” she quietly asked.

“You look forward. You *always* look forward. No more ‘could have been’. No more regrets. You have one life to live. Don’t waste it being miserable. We both have long journeys ahead of us, fraught with their own dangers and pitfalls. And when we fuck up or when life fucks us over, we’re going to keep going anyway, because wasting time thinking about what could have been only slows you down.”

“And that works for you?” she asked.

Hell no. “I’m still standing here, aren’t I?” I asked. “Female. Winged. The only one of my kind in existence.” Technically. “Cursed and alone, I still stand and I still move forward.”

“That is… something to think about,” she said, at least slightly less unhappy. “It will hopefully bring me some comfort tonight, as the shock wears off.”

“Well, if you ever want company, just find me,” I said. “I’ll probably be awake. Now, you should probably get settled in.”

“Yes. Would you two help me a little longer?” she asked, turning to the miners.

“Can’t,” one of them said, having already set all of the stuff he was carrying down. “I’m going to go ask somepony to marry me.” Before anyone could reply, he galloped off to the main tower of the sky dock.

“...At least somepony took your words to heart,” Crabapple said, gathering up the bags he left. “Shall we?” she asked the other one.

“Of course, ma’am,” he said, nodding.

“I shall see you later, Navarone,” Crabby said. “And… thanks.”

“No problem,” I said as she walked off, the miner following her.

The next day we were well on the way to Canterlot with a few passengers. None were overly noteworthy and most were opting to stay in their rooms, having made the journey enough times that the sights of the wasteland didn't excite them.

Taya and I also opted to stay in my room. Me, because I didn't really want to be seen by the passengers and have them spread the word that I was a chick when they got to Canterlot. Taya, because she's antisocial and possibly emotionally dependent upon me.

It seemed she hadn't slept very well the night before, which was partially expected since she wasn't sleeping with me. Given that she was asleep on my lap, I figured I definitely needed to figure something out to help her sleep in the future. Either way, she seemed to enjoy me gently petting her, though I zoned out rather heavily while doing it, just… thinking.

A knock on the door forced me to zone right back in, though. "Yeah?" I called, not bothering to stand.

The door opened and in walked a beaming Spike. "Nav, I have something… What happened to Taya's hair?"

I blinked and looked down at the sleeping filly on my lap. Her mane and tail had both been braided. "...I have no idea," I slowly said. "It… wasn't like this when she fell asleep!"

"So you braided it," Spike said.

"I have no clue how to braid hair," I said, looking up at him in confusion.

"Obviously you do, unless you're saying somepony else did it."

"It definitely wasn't me!"

"So what, a ghost did it?" Spike asked, smirking.

My face paled. "...Flo?"

"It wasn't me," she replied. "Which only leaves…"

"Ava," I growled, my eyes narrowing.

"...So it *was* a ghost?" Spike asked.

I sighed and carefully lifted Taya up, setting her on the bed. Somehow, she managed to stay asleep. Or maybe she was just faking. Either way, I stood and walked over to where I left Athena's book. "Coming?" I asked.

"Uh…" I shrugged and opened it, not really caring. After all, I wasn't planning on staying long. As usual, the tentacles ripped me into the dark book world.

Not as usual, I was immediately hugged from behind, a finger pressed against my lips. "Shhh," Athena whispered before I could protest. Her other arm was wrapped around my stomach. That was the first time I got to feel how horrifyingly bony her body was, something I never really wanted to learn. She held me for nearly a full minute in complete silence, her head pressed against one of my wings. Finally, she whispered, "You smell nice."

"...Thank you?"

"Why did you come here?" she asked, still holding onto me and making me seriously question some of my life choices.

"I just accidentally braided someone's hair and I have no idea how it happened."

"Some of the ghost's memories and habits may have passed onto you. If she frequently braided hair, it's not impossible that you could do it in moments wherein you aren't paying much attention."

"So when I zone out, I might do things she did."

"Correct."

"...Is there any way to avoid that?"

"Don't zone out. Is there anything else you need?"

I might regret this, but… "Athena, do you want a hug?"

"...That would be nice." Her grip on me eased up, so I turned around and carefully wrapped my arms around her, trying not to squeeze too tightly for fear that she might break. Once I had a good grip on her that wasn't hurting her, I wrapped my wings around her as well. She sighed in contentment when I had her wrapped up. "It has been a very long time since I had friendly physical contact with something living…"

"Well, this world isn't exactly the most accessible of places," I said, my gaze going to a paper golem that was blankly staring at me, as if daring me to hurt its mistress.

"It makes me realize what I lost," she quietly said, pushing me away. I let her go, of course. "But then, I'm not the only one here who has lost a big part of their humanity." I very much wanted to tell her that *I* didn't lose myself in the search for power. I didn't lose my humanity to hide away forever. I didn't run away. But there are things that are better left unsaid to those that are as powerful as she is. "Tell me, have you been learning magic?"

"I tried. Couldn't figure it out. It's not like it's possible to turn me into a guy anyway, so I figure, why bother?"

"If I suddenly turned hostile to you right now, what would you do?"

"Try to seduce you, probably. I can't imagine there would be a thing I could do to you, even if I did know magic."

"I will… keep that in mind, should I ever desire more friendly physical contact with something living." *Ugh.* "However, in time, you could learn to resist me with magic, at least long enough to escape. Swords and spears are no danger to me. Surely you must desire that power."

I shook my head. "Power means little to me. It might be interesting to have, but I really doubt I could learn it without a dedicated teacher that isn't also my daughter. I could probably make Celestia teach me, but I'm not going to be in Equestria for long and she's busy being a ruler."

"There is little to teach. Either you can think the required way or you cannot. Once you truly understand the mindset required, you have learned most of what there is to learn." She stepped forward and put both of her hands on my face, one on either cheek. I just barely stopped myself from shivering at the feel of her weird claw-thing pressing against my flesh. "You *can* do it. It's harder for adults to learn than children, but you *can* learn." And just like that, she disappeared. "New books are here," she whispered into my mind. "Leave me."

This woman really, really worries me. Of course, I acquiesced to her desire, turning back

to the pedestal with the book and opening it. The tentacles pulled me out and deposited me, strangely enough, in Spike's arms. "Spike, why are you holding me?"

"Er… When you went into the book, it started falling. I grabbed it since I didn't want you to get thrown around inside. Then I just held onto it. Then it opened again and here you are."

"Weird. Put me down." He carefully did so, though I had no clue why he was careful about it. "Now what did you need?" I asked.

"I have something to show you!" he happily said, some of his earlier excitement returning. "Come on."

I pulled Athena's book from his claws and set it back where it had been. "For the record, no one in there feels whatever happens to the book."

"...Oh."

"Anyway, lead the way," I said. We both left, with Taya still somehow asleep on the bed. As we walked down the hall, I resolved to get her a teddy bear or something so she'd have at least something to snuggle with when I'm not around. "So what am I going to see?" I asked.

"It's a surprise, but I'm sure you'll love it!"

Despite the promise of some kind of surprise, my mind went back to Athena and Ava. Athena, because she was scary and rather worrying. Ava, because I couldn't help but wonder if I was showing any of her other mannerisms. Without knowing her, it would be impossible to tell. It just meant Flo and I would have to pay more attention and try to isolate the things we knew weren't like me.

With Athena… The way she reacted when I joked about seducing her was very, very frightening. That lady was seventeen different kinds of creepy and I didn't want to put any part of me near any part of her, dick or not. And then there's the whole magic angle, which I imagine she'd incorporate into anything she did.

But Spike was holding something up for me, so I had to cut my trains of thought short. "I forgot, Celestia sent you something," he said.

I took the letter he was holding and opened it. A quick read showed that it was just the letter I sent her, with the 'yes' option circled. I smiled and put it away, suddenly looking forward to getting to Canterlot.

"What was it?" he asked.

"Don't worry about it." He probably wanted to ask about it even more, but he suddenly stopped in front of a familiar door. "The smithy?" I asked.

"Yep!" Spike happily answered, pushing the door open and gesturing for me to enter. "Ladies first!"

"Spike, I'll turn *you* into a lady if you don't stop that shit."

"But the stones are broken…"

"I would use a knife." His eyes widened as he caught my meaning, but by that point, I was already walking through the door. I stopped after entering, because I honestly didn't know what I was looking at. "Is that… armor?" I asked, staring at what looked like a black carapace.

"Yeah!" Spike answered, stepping up next to me. "After I fought that dragon, there were a whole lot of scales left that hadn't been destroyed, so we all decided to do something with them. So first, we made you armor!"

As if I didn't have enough suits of armor. Still, the thought was nice. I stepped up to the chest piece and put one of my hands on it, feeling the seams between the molded scales. "I would have thought dragon scales would be less malleable. Especially after being on a zombie."

"Jak had some problems working on it," Spike replied with a shrug. "But I think it looks great!"

"It definitely looks scary," I said, looking at the other pieces. The entire thing was black, since that was the color of the original dragon. It was also made for my female frame, which put it a step above the other two sets I had. Despite being modified, the metal armor was still uncomfortable in a few noticeable places. And of course, the human-made armor was fitted for my male body as well, making it tight across the chest. This wouldn't have that problem, presumably. "Any special properties?" I asked.

"Dunno. I mean, it *should* be good against fire, right? All dragon scales are."

"And it won't… I don't know, turn on me? You got these scales from a zombie, Spike. You sure it's even safe?"

"Well, none of them have tried to hurt Jak yet. And they didn't do anything while I was pulling them off."

Yeah, but you weren't covered in them. "Well, I guess I should try it on…" I said, hoping I wouldn't have to tear it off. "So where's Jak and Smiles?" I asked as I removed my shirt.

"On deck, I think," Spike answered. "If you really think the armor's dangerous, I could go get Twilight. If it tries hurting you somehow, she could save you."

"And let her see my innocent body? I'll be fine."

"...You're letting *me* see your innocent body."

"How many times did you see it while we were dealing with those damn monkeys?" By that point, my pants were also off, leaving me almost entirely naked.

"Well, you didn't really seem interested in showing me much on your own…"

"And I can't imagine you'd really be looking. You know I'm still a guy." I grabbed the greaves of the armor and started pulling them on, going slow in case they started to catch or got too tight suddenly.

"What I know and what I see… aren't always the same things." If I turned around, I imagined I would see his eyes very intently watching me in certain places as he said that. Of course, I didn't turn around, just finished pulling the armored pants up. They fit my body almost perfectly. *It's like… pants. Much softer than I'd imagine dragon scales to be.*

"Screw your cognitive dissonance," I said, pulling up the breastplate. "I am what *I* am, not what my body is. I would say you need to get laid, but Gilda already told me all about that." Long story short, she was impressed by his body, but not so much impressed by his passiveness and general dislike of the situation. "Sounds to me like you need more of an emotional

connection. You try making other friends on board?" I started working on how to get the chest piece on.

"Well… I've been helping Jak and Sunshine around the smithy some, since my fire is useful here. Sunny is always smiling and he's really close, but it's kinda creepy sometimes. And he gets really hoovesy at times. And I spend a lot of time with the naga, but I still don't even know his name! Doppel… I went down that road before, and I won't do it again. Aerie is also really creepy, so I have to avoid Pinkie a lot. The other girls are all there for me, but… Well, they feel betrayed that I left them like I did."

"There's always Kat and the soldiers," I said. "I know they had to be impressed by how you handled yourself against the undead." After twisting and turning it in several ways, I finally figured out how to open the armor so I could put it on around the wings. Turns out it was split on the left side, using a nearly invisible seam to open. Soon enough, it was on as well. The pauldrons looked much easier, thankfully.

"It's been a little while since I did anything with Kat," he slowly said. "There's Spider, who's always with her, but she seems lonely… I *could* talk to her, I guess. But what about you?"

"What about me? You can have more than one friend." Both the pauldrons got on, so I started pulling up the gauntlets.

"Aren't you lonely, now that Kumani left?"

"Nah." After the gauntlets, I reached for the boots. "Turns out that I'm bad at relationships. And really, it got in the way of a lot of stuff. Kumani was useful and fun, but having to deal with her was draining at times. No offense, but you dragons are fucking possessive as hell. I think I'll enjoy my freedom for a little while." With the boots on, all that was left was the helmet.

"...Oh."

"So feel free to talk to Kat. She probably needs someone to distract her from Spider anyway. I think half the crew is arachnophobic and the other half doesn't really like kids, so having someone else around would be nice for both of them." The helmet wasn't all that difficult to figure out, though it was closed-face. When I got it on, I had a very disturbing feeling of being watched, but I shivered it off. "Fits… well. Strangely so."

"Jak got the measurements from Rarity, and I double-checked them while you were possessed. What do you think?"

I finally turned back to him and found that he was predictably smiling. "Light me on fire."

"What?!"

"Hey, you thought it was fireproof. Makes sense to me. Let's find out."

"But that's… I don't want to hurt you!"

"You won't." *If we're right.*

He gulped rather noisily before sighing. "Alright. Ready?"

"Yep." What he didn't know is that I made sure I was standing right next to the barrel

Smiles had to quench metal in. If it turned out that the armor wasn't fireproof, I'd be jumping in it.

As soon as he got my assurance, he took a deep breath, then released it and asked, "Are you *sure*?"

"Just do it."

He shrugged and spit a burst of flame at me. It hit the armor and I could feel the pressure and a tiny bit of the heat, but most of it just washed over me and died. After a few seconds to make sure I was just fine, Spike's worried expression disappeared. "It worked!" he shouted, a smile lighting up his face.

"Yep. Let's see how well I can move in this stuff."

"Should be just fine," Spike said and I started to walk around the room. "Jak's really experienced and he had to use runes to hold the scales together, so he made sure you could move normally in it."

"It's definitely light, which makes sense. After all, you guys have to be able to fly. And I know it can mostly stop a crossbow bolt, because I shot Kumani with one before."

"You… you what?"

"It was at one of the Europe competitions, so she didn't get hurt. Doesn't block my sword, but I shouldn't have to worry about that. I wonder if it'll help me deal with the cold."

"I know I never feel cold."

"Yeah, but you're a heat generator. The fire in you keeps you warm. I doubt these scales would help me out, unless that would come from the whole 'undead' part."

"Well, we can't really test that out here," he said with a shrug.

"Yeah. I can walk just fine, so at least there's that. It's definitely tighter than I'm used to, though."

"It's uh… not *that* noticeable. But Rarity definitely seemed to think you were smaller than you actually were. Or maybe she was just making clothes that were really tight for some reason. But you can probably just wear a cloak over it or something, right?"

"Yeah. Well, it fits and I can move well in it. Thanks for this, Spike. It's nice to have armor I can comfortably wear in this body."

"You're welcome. I definitely don't want you getting hurt."

"Me either. Also, something you said earlier, that this was the *first* thing you did with the scales. Is Jak doing something else?"

"Nav, that was an entire adult dragon covered in scales. There were enough to make armor for all the soldiers and then some. I just asked him to make your set first, since the soldiers already have armor they can wear just fine."

"...Well, at least we'll finally all have matching armor. I'm gonna go put this in my room and then make sure Taya doesn't freak out when she finds her hair braided."

"You don't want to spar in it?" he asked.

"Not right now. We're going to be at Canterlot for two or so weeks. I doubt I'll need to do

much fighting. I'll have plenty of time to practice later, when there aren't passengers on deck."

"What's wrong with passengers?"

"I don't really want word of my… *affliction* spreading too far. I already get enough trouble with the press and people bothering me. I don't want the attention a gender swap would bring."

"What would it bring?"

"I dunno, reporters? Suitors? People trying to see what I look like? People trying to sympathize with me? Trannies looking for a poster child? Just people in general bothering me. I don't want to deal with it. My main plan is staying on board the ship for most of the stay, aside from when I go to speak to Celestia. Even then, I might use Doppel as a scapegoat."

"That's boring. Can't we at least go hunting?"

"We'll see. But for now, I'm going to go back to Taya. I shouldn't leave her like that anyway."

"Nav, she's not a foal. The way you treat her is… kinda weird, sometimes."

"Man, everyone's always on my case about Taya. Either I'm too distant and need to spend more time with her or I'm too close and I need to back off. Maybe you and everyone else should let me and Taya decide what we should do."

He quickly held up his hands in a placating gesture. "Hey, I wasn't trying to tell you what to do. I'm just telling you what I thought. There's no need to be upset."

Honestly, I wasn't mad at Spike anyway. I knew he was probably just repeating what others had said. It just meant I needed to smack some bitches around. After Taya woke up, of course. "I'm not mad at you, Spike. I'm mad at everyone who forced me to be a father after I told them I would be a terrible one, and then complained when I was a terrible one. I mean, really, what did they all expect?"

He was silent for a few seconds, since there really wasn't a good answer for that. Finally, he said, "Well… it's not too late to be a good mother."

I grabbed one of the knives that Smiles or Jak was working on and held it up. "What was that, Spike? Did you say you wanted an impromptu sex change?"

"N-no!"

"Because it sounded to me like you just asked me to make you a pretty little dragoness. Oh, I bet Rarity would be so happy to play dress up with you again!"

His little ear tuft things shot straight down and his eyes went very wide. "Never!"

"Then stop treating me like a fucking woman." I set the knife back down and started walking to the door. "I'm going back to my room." He didn't try to stop me that time.

Thankfully, the halls were clear, so no one tried to stop the strangely dressed tall person wandering around the halls. Not that it would have mattered, since all I had to do was take off my helmet to be recognized, but meh.

When I got to my room, Taya was still asleep on the bed, though now she was curled up instead of spread out. Since she was out of it, I closed the door and started taking off the armor.

At that point, I had three sets of the stuff on the ship, so I was really running out of room. Thankfully, we had a large room in the cargo bay that was no longer being used, so I resolved to just dump the old metal armor in there so I could keep the new dragon armor on my ceiling.

That could wait, though. The stuff is heavy and there's a lot of it, so moving it would take a few more trips than I was currently willing to give it. Besides, I wouldn't be surprised if a passenger or two was staying in that room.

Since this was a cartoon world and I was due for a reminder of that, Taya began stirring as I put up the last of my armor. "Daddy?"

"Right here," I said, sitting down next to her. "Sleep well?"

"Bleh. Wait, my head feels… heavy." She reached a hoof up there and felt the braid. "What…?"

"Yeah, I sort of accidentally braided your hair," I said with a shrug.

"You *accidentally* braided it? I didn't even know you could!"

"*I* can't. Ava can. Some of her passive memories came out, I guess, and now your hair is braided. And also your tail."

She turned her head to look at the only thing that always followed her, then swished it. "Weird. Does it look nice, at least?"

"Yeah." It made her look even more adorable, but I knew saying that would make her want to undo it. "Do you know what a teddy bear is?"

"Uh. Some kind of ferocious bear that likes eating people?"

"Sort of. Replace people with monsters and ferocious with cuddly. I'll show you when we get to Canterlot, I suppose."

"I really don't want to go to a zoo."

"That won't be a problem. Now, you should go get ready for the day. Brush your teeth, take a shower, eat, all that good stuff."

"Do I have to?"

"Yes, because you don't want cavities. Trust me, I've had a few. And I know after a few days of not washing, all that fur will get greasy and nasty looking." At least, if she sweats a lot. "I'm not having a greasy and nasty daughter when we can do something about it. And you need to eat since I'm sure you're probably hungry."

"Ugh, *fine*. But only if you've eaten too!"

"So demanding. Go take a shower and we'll talk."

She rolled her eyes while hopping off the bed. As soon as she hit the floor, she stopped. "What about the braids?"

"Pull them out if you want. It's your hair, not mine."

She just hmm'd as she walked out. With all my shit essentially done for the day, not that I had anything really planned in the first place, I just fell back on my bed and wondered how much longer it would take to get to Canterlot.

We ended up dropping Ames off near the naga's cavern. He told us not to fly over it or too close, because most naga don't like flying things. He also advised me that it would be wise to stay on board and not go with him, what with the whole wrong gender thing. The other naga wouldn't have accepted me as easily, he said.

I wasn't planning on going there anyway. We had a schedule to keep with the passengers, after all, and I was tired of being stuck on either the ship, a bunker, or a fucking mining outpost. As little as I expected to travel or go out while in Canterlot, at least I wouldn't be completely stuck inside.

Finally, the day of days came. Saying it like that makes it sound dramatic, but I had been away for nearly half a year at that point. The girls had been away for about five months. A lot can change in that time, especially since I left the place in all kinds of turmoil.

Since I'm nice, I made sure to drop Twilight's five friends off in Ponyville before we went to Canterlot itself. Rainbow Dash offered to carry a message for me to Lyra and Bonnie, so I made sure to have her tell them I was back in town, though I probably wouldn't be stopping by unless I needed to get some money.

The others were just happy to finally be home, though I think Pinkie was really tempted to stay with her parents while we were in the area instead of going back to Ponyville. Still, it was nice to have them off the ship, even though that did leave me with Twilight.

As for the rest of us, we were all headed directly for Canterlot. The passengers were eager to depart, Gourd was eager to get their money, most of the guards wanted to see whatever family they might have had, Twilight probably also wanted to see her family, and I wanted to fuck Celestia again, for old time's sake.

"So we're finally home again," Twilight quietly said, watching Canterlot rapidly grow closer.

"Yep. Figured you'd want to stay in Ponyville," I replied.

"I have… things to discuss with the princess," she said. "And I wouldn't mind seeing my parents. I'll go back to Ponyville while we're here, just not right now." She paused for a few moments, just watching the city. "It's like… nothing really changed."

"It always seems like that," I said, turning my back on the city. "But if I've learned anything…" I started walking back to the stairs to get my bags. "...it's that homecoming's a bitch."

She didn't have any reply to that.