

Chapter One Hundred and Seventy-Seven—Hurray for Bad Decisions!

By the time I woke up the next morning, the ship was already on the move. I couldn't even see Gryphus from the window, so we had likely been going for a while. *I guess we left as soon as everybody was aboard last night.*

Taya was still cuddled up against me, so I very gently eased out of bed. Her legs started twitching, looking for something to hold onto, so I placed the Celestia plush where I had been sleeping. She grabbed it with a happy sigh and pulled it close. With her placated, I started quietly putting on clothes.

Once my body was ready, I eased out the door and closed it back behind me. The halls were still quiet, so I assumed most of the guards and crew were sleeping off hangovers. I didn't want to risk waking anyone, so I went up to the deck. At the moment, the only people out and about were the red cat Felix, a few griffins, the helmsman, several water elementals, and the two fires. The griffins were talking to the fire elementals and Felix was speaking to Brook.

I went up to talk to the helmsman, because I really didn't feel like dealing with any of the elementals. He had some pretty hefty bags under his relatively red eyes. "Long night?" I asked with a grin.

"Something like that, my lady," he hoarsely replied.

"You know we have a few unicorns who could heal you up, right? And, like, a dozen water elementals that can do the same thing?"

"I... did not think about that."

I leaned over the railing leading down to the bottom deck. "Oi, any of you watery tarts feel like helping my boy out?" Aqua snorted.

"What's wrong with him?" one of the waters asked as she started oozing over.

"Hangover. I imagine most of the crew's feeling the same."

"That's an easy fix," what I recognized as Waterfall said as she started sliding up the stairs. "I'll fix him up, then head downstairs to heal the others before they awaken. I won't be able to fix the worst of the dehydration, though."

"That's fine," the helmsman said. "Just getting rid of the pain would be nice."

"Then sit still." Waterfall placed a hand on his forehead. A few seconds later, he shivered as some of her water forced its way in. When she pulled away, his eyes were no longer fairly red. "How is that?"

"Much better," he sighed. "Thank you."

"I am pleased to assist. How about you, Nav?"

"I'm fine," Aqua made me say. "I didn't go out drinking last night."

"Well, if anything ever ails you, feel free to ask for our assistance. We would all be happy to help. Now, I shall go aid the others." Instead of sliding down the stairs, she slipped through the cracks in the wood under her.

"I like those things," the helmsman said. "They're always so eager to help!"

"Sometimes. What's our ETA for the bunker?"

"As the pegasus flies, it would be four days," he replied. "With the mountains in the way, it might take up to a week. We aren't completely sure of what path to take yet."

"That's not too bad. Did Princess Gilda end up getting the radio installed?"

"She did. It's in the planning room. She said she wasn't finished setting it up just yet, though. Apparently there's a long metal pole she'll need to put somewhere."

"That would be the antenna. We'll help her get it set up today. Is Jak with us?"

"He is, but we left Sunshine Smiles behind."

Score. "What about the naga?"

"I'm afraid not. When he realized how cold it would be, he decided to stay at the mansion. Doppel also elected to stay behind."

"Good. I wanted her at the house anyway." *I wouldn't mind the naga's big, strong arms keeping me safe, though... Even if I'd probably assign him to guard Princess Gilda.* "Did I miss anything while I was gone?"

"Not really. You had a guest or two stop by, but I don't know the details."

"Well, they probably weren't important. I'm gonna go check out the radio."

"If you need anything else, just let me know."

"Kay." I walked past him and into the planning room. The radio appeared to be the same one from Gilda's workshop. It was set up on the table with wires and whatnot dangling all over the place.

Before I could walk up to it, Luna teleported in front of me, accompanied by what sounded like thunder. I only jumped a little, thankfully. "Good morning," she calmly said.

"...Howdy. Um. How's Tartarus?"

"Bleak and depressing. How's Canterlot?"

"About the same. Did you really just teleport all the way here from Tartarus?"

"No. I went through the gate to Equestria first. How did the others take the news that I would be joining you?"

"Fairly poorly, all things told. You might hear a few unpleasant things."

"That is acceptable. Are you still interested in hearing how Shining Armor's dream went after you left?"

"Yeah."

"It turned golden about an hour later. Apparently he enjoyed the idea of being feminized and impregnated by Chrysalis. Last night, I asked Cadance how he felt in the morning. She told me that he claimed he had the best sleep in years, though he left quite a mess in the bed."

"Wow. Did you tell her what he was dreaming about?"

"Yes. She commented on how hot it was and said that it gave her all kinds of ideas."

"Huh. Well, whatever."

"I think Cadance might have some mental problems."

"Oh yeah. But she loves her husband and he seems to love her back, so whatever. If she wants to shove stuff up his butt, that's certainly none of my business."

"Until they invite you to partake again."

"They better fucking not. Anyway, you want the tour of the ship?"

"Not at the moment. I would, however, like to know more about this radio."

"Then you'll probably need to ask Princess Gilda. She's the one who built it and set it up."

"Did you not give her the plans?"

"Kinda. I got them from the laptop I got when I went back in time. I don't really know much about how it works, though. I know that you can talk into this end and whoever has the receiver will hear what you say. They'd also be able to reply."

"Fascinating. Like dragon's breath, but with sounds instead of letters."

"Yep. They're really useful when you get a satellite up and running."

"A satellite?" she asked, tilting her head.

"It's a device that sits just outside of the planet's atmosphere. They can take the signal from this radio and shoot it just about anywhere on the planet. If you get a ring of satellites, they can transfer the radio signal from one to another, giving you even wider access. We had enough of them in my time that someone in what you call Equestria could talk to someone in Tartarus with almost no delay at all."

"Astounding! Why haven't you built any such devices?"

"They require fuel for course corrections. They also require a way of getting power, like solar cells. Plus, making them with your current technology levels would be either extremely difficult or straight up impossible."

"Hm. You are very lucky that Twilight did not take the reports of your technology levels seriously at the beginning. Celestia likely would have acted much sooner if she had."

"I'm not complaining, even if Twilight was apparently super condescending about it."

"You are courting her now, are you not?"

"I'm in an it's complicated with a few women at the moment. She's one of them."

"Ah, you are going for a herd. Good luck, Navarone."

"I'm really not," I sighed. "I'm just bad at saying no to people. And unfortunately, all three of the bitches I'm currently boning are super needy."

"Perhaps you should consider whittling that number down."

"Yeah, probably. Have you eaten breakfast yet? We probably don't have much variety, but you're welcome to whatever we have."

"I have not, no. I actually only just woke up. When I saw that you were on the ship and that it was away from Gryphus, I prepared myself as best I could. Once you were alone, I joined you. I would be interested in breakfast, especially if you have any meat."

"Then let's go." I led the way out onto the ship.

She followed me out, though she quickly walked over to the railing. "I missed the color green," she quietly said, watching the pine forest we were passing over trail by.

"Is nothing in Tartarus that color?" I asked.

"Not on Mount Oberon. We keep the vegetation burned back all the way to the entrance of the peninsula. If we didn't, it would be easy to sneak up on the fortress. Outside of the peninsula, it's a very mixed bag. I have done very little exploration, but I've heard reports of vast jungles, huge plains, large deserts, and everything in between."

"So about the same as it was in my time. I'll have to try and find a map before I go, or summon a familiar who can draw one for me."

"That would be wise. When I return to the fortress, I will begin compiling information. We will go over everything when you finally make it to Tartarus."

Before we could continue talking, the ship suddenly tilted, throwing both of us off balance. Luna grabbed me with magic before I could fall off the side, then rushed to the wheel to stabilize it. That's when I noticed that the helmsman had jumped away from the wheel and was staring at Luna in pure horror.

"What's the matter?" I asked as the ship recovered.

"What's she doing here?!"

"Did Gourd not tell you?" I asked. "She's joining us for the trip to the bunker."

"B-but—"

"This is non-negotiable," I said. "So deal with it. Luna, let him take the wheel."

She backed away from it, but the guy didn't seem to want to move. "I am here to work with you," she said. "I am here in an attempt to make up for my wrongdoing. Your lady is willing to give me a chance. Will you trust her judgment?"

Before he could reply, Gourd teleported up to the deck. "What's going... Oh. Get on the wheel! We talked about this!"

"What do you mean, we talked about it?!" the guy asked.

"Watcher and I very specifically told everybody that Princess Luna would be joining us," Gourd said.

"It is princess no longer," Luna said. "I have abdicated my position. Now I am merely Luna."

"This is what happens when you get too drunk," I said, crossing my arms. "You forget shit. Will you *puh-lease* take the fucking wheel? Jesus." He very slowly eased

forward, watching Luna the whole time. When he finally got to the wheel, he did his best to keep it between him and her. "Get over yourself, dude. She isn't going to do anything."

"You don't know that!"

"Gourd, lie detector spell." He nodded. "The sky is green." His horn lit up.

"Luna?"

"I am loyal to Navarone." The light around his horn disappeared. "I mean no ill-will toward her or any of her crew, soldiers, or friends."

"Boom. Now chill the fuck out. If you flip the wheel again, Gourd's gonna spank you."

"No I'm not," Gourd said. "But I *will* be upset. Ugh, I'm gonna go back below and explain everything to the others."

"Is there a room available for Luna?" I asked.

"The naga's. We figured it would be the only one large enough for her."

"Then we'll head there first," I said. "Once you let everyone know she's here, come tell us."

"As you wish, my lady," he said. He finally trotted off down the stairs. The helmsman stared at Luna for a few more seconds before easing back into a relatively normal position. I rolled my eyes and then walked down the stairs. Luna followed.

"So those are water elementals," she said. Most of them were still on the deck, watching Luna like a hawk. "And two fire elementals."

"That they are," I said.

"I would like to speak to one before I return to Tartarus. The thought of an intelligent machine intrigues me."

"You already spoke to Blaze in the dream place." *And yelled at Flo in the other dream place.*

"True, but not in depth." We finally started going down the stairs into the ship itself. Since the entire thing just got thrown around, a lot of heads were poking out of doors. Gourd was explaining things, but all of their eyes shot straight up to Luna as soon as we started walking down.

I ignored all of those eyes and continued into the cargo hold. The door to the naga's room was open, so I just let myself inside and sat on the bed. Luna followed in behind me and looked around. "This is where you'll be sleeping," I said. "There's another bedroom across the hall that Twilight's been using as a necromancy lab."

"So my sister has begun teaching her dark arts. A curious decision."

"It's to help me, actually. A forsaken soul attached itself to my soulless body while I was trapped in the bunker in Antarctica. Twilight is trying to learn how to get rid of it."

"Ah. Perhaps Grogar can assist, if he is still in Tartarus."

"Maybe. Want me to rub your belly now or do you want to wait?"

"Now is fine. Shall I lie across your lap or lie next to you?"

"Either or." I slid back further onto the bed, giving her more room to work with. After a few seconds of thought, she teleported across my lap, presenting her warm and fuzzy belly. She sighed in pleasure as I began stroking it.

"Your hands... they're *marvelous*," she whispered.

"Yeah, they're pretty great. Your tummy is nice and soft."

"Hmm, indeed..."

Unfortunately, we didn't really have much time to enjoy it before Taya showed up at the door. At first, she seemed a little bit peeved. When she noticed my hand on Luna, she got straight up pissed. "What do you think you're doing?!" she demanded, slapping a hoof on the floor.

"Rubbing a belly," I replied with a shrug. I didn't stop, of course.

"Why are you rubbing *her* belly?!"

"Because it's soft and she said I could," I said. "If you wanna hop up here, I do have another hand!"

"I think she might be upset," Luna said.

"Taya, are you upset?" I asked.

"Yes!"

"Why?"

"Because you're rubbing your rapist's belly!"

"You don't mind when I pet Kat."

Her mouth opened, then closed. Finally she said, "That's different!"

"How?" I asked.

"Kat's your vassal!"

Luna slid off my lap and bowed down before me, her horn lighting up. "I will swear myself to your service if you will have me," she said.

"I don't have my noble seal with me, I'm afraid," I said. "It's something we can talk about later, though. I don't want you to jump straight into it."

"I have considered it for a while now. Once upon a time, it was common for one who hurt another to swear fealty to them in an attempt to undo or make up for the damage. I would be honored if you could make use of me."

"Well, at the moment, the seal is in Canterlot," I said.

"No it's not," Taya replied, a wide grin on her face. "Watcher told me to pack it, just in case. I'll go get it!"

"Wait—" She immediately started trotting off. I sighed and looked back at Luna, who was gazing up at me with a very hopeful expression. "Do you really think this is wise, Luna?"

"Why wouldn't it be?" she asked. "With me sworn to serve you, there would be none who could claim I seek to harm you. Should I ever return to civilization, it's only fair that it be in the yoke of the one to whom I did the most harm. At least I would finally be sworn to one with strong morals, a personal honor, and pride in what she seeks to accomplish."

"I mean... We have no idea how long we'll be alive. Is swearing yourself to another person really what you want?"

"I could not pick a better lady to serve," she replied. "Once we deal with Celestia, you will become the most powerful person on the planet. At that time, you will need my help more than ever. There is not one iota of doubt in my mind. If I am to swear myself to anybody, it should be to you."

"You don't *have* to swear yourself to somebody. That's what I'm getting at. You've been in Celestia's shadow all your life. Do you really want to tie yourself to another person so quickly? Don't you want a chance to discover yourself?"

"You will allow that. Not only will you allow it, you'll *encourage* it. Whoever I decide I am to be, you will help me fulfill myself and then find a place for me at your side." *Shit, she's got me there.*

Taya zoomed back in and held my noble seal up with a grin. "Here you go, mommy!"

I slowly took it and stared at it for a few seconds. I finally pocketed it and looked back at Luna. "I'll make a decision before we get to the Crystal Empire."

Her smile dipped slightly, but she nodded. "Very well, Navarone. I understand your hesitation."

"Then explain it."

She blinked and slowly leaned back. "You mistrust my intentions and still harbor pain due to my actions."

Way to listen to literally nothing I just said. "Nope. Well, yes to the pain, but that's not influencing my decision. I don't want someone immortal to swear an oath to me because that kinda traps you if you ever decide you don't want to be my servant anymore. Eternity's a long time to feel regret."

"That's dumb," Taya immediately replied. "You have her, mommy! Just let her swear the oath!"

"After I have a chance to think it over," I said. "And after she has a chance to reconsider."

"I have made my decision," Luna calmly said. "All that is left is for you to make yours. Even if you won't accept my oath, I would still be pleased to serve you in whatever capacity you require."

"You always do this!" Taya said, slapping a hoof on the floor. "Stop doing what's best for everybody else and just do what's best for you for once!"

"Alright." I patted my lap. "Hop back up, Luna. I think a belly rub would be best for me at the moment."

She grinned and teleported back into my lap. "As you wish." Taya groaned and stomped off while I continued rubbing the ex-princess's belly. "Should you really make a habit of angering your daughter?"

"Should she really make a habit of pushing me into choices I'm not ready to make?"

"I suppose not... The fact that your sole consideration for not accepting my oath is concern for my future well-being only confirms the choice as the correct one in my mind. My sister is a fool for spurning your advice so quickly and casting you aside in such a manner. One of my biggest regrets is that I did not see your true value until it was too late. Now, I desire only to follow you and help you build a better world for all sapient life."

"Surely you can aim higher than living life as a permanent follower."

"I sought to rule once. It ended poorly for all involved. There are none who would follow my lead now, so I must make peace with following. It is a decision I did not make lightly, nor one I made quickly. But it is a decision I am now at peace with."

"There's always the option of neither. You don't *have* to participate in the world. You have five thousand years of servitude under your belt. No one would fault you for retiring or trying to find your own path."

"Hm... There aren't many who would deny an alicorn's oath of fealty."

"Well, I'm not many. There's nothing wrong with being afraid of going your own way, Luna. Especially not after everything you've been through."

"You would release me from the oath immediately if I but asked. And again, you would help me find whatever path would make me happiest. Swearing myself as your vassal merely protects us both from any accusations that I am escaping punishment for my crimes against you. It is the only way I would feel comfortable returning to the world."

God dammit, I'm not going to let her guilt me into this.

"Good," Aqua replied. "I believe it would be wise to accept her offer, but not because of guilt. Do not allow her to manipulate you so easily. Take time to decide, if you must."

Wow, that might be one of the first semi-reasonable things you've ever said. Are you feeling okay?

"Go fuck yourself, Nav," she flippantly answered.

Twilight was the next pony to come barging in, though she didn't immediately flip shit. "There you are, Nav," she said. "Gourd wanted me to tell you he's informed the others that Luna is here."

"Good. Do you know if they're serving breakfast yet?"

"They are. That was going to be my next destination, if you'd like to join me. I need to see if she has any cinnamon."

"Why?"

"Because you said you'd forgive me if I ate a spoonful of it. It's only fair that I do that if you are going to make amends with Aqua."

"I say we do a trade," I replied. "You skip the cinnamon challenge, I skip dealing with that H2Hoe." Luna snorted.

"No can do, Navi," she said. "But I *will* let you wait if we don't have enough cinnamon. It's only fair."

"Why would you make her eat cinnamon?" Luna asked. "She would likely vomit, assuming she doesn't cough her lungs out first." *Way to ruin it. See, this is why I don't want to make you a vassal!*

"Um. What?"

"You didn't know?" I asked. "Eating a spoonful of cinnamon is almost impossible and extremely painful."

"...I see. And you were just going to let me do it?"

"Yeah. It's only fair, since you were going to make me talk to that raving cunt-canoe."

"I believe I am missing something," Luna said. "Who is Aqua?"

"A water elemental," Twilight replied. "One Nav doesn't have a very good relationship with. I want the two of them to make amends."

"And I want her to fuck right off," I replied. "But what we want isn't always what we get. Now that you know the truth about the cinnamon challenge, you sure you don't want to just call it even?"

"I'm tempted to just tell you to apologize to her to make up for tricking me like that."

"In that case, you can just stay mad at me."

She pursed her lips for a moment before rolling her eyes. "Fine, I'll do your stupid cinnamon challenge."

"This will certainly be amusing to watch," Luna said as she finally slid off my lap and back onto her hooves. "Before you do so, I would like to ask how you perceive my presence here, Twilight."

"I understand Navarone's reason for accepting your help. It isn't the choice I would have made, but it wasn't my choice *to* make. I will work with you because I recognize your value. I have no intention of doing more than cooperating with you in a strictly professional sense."

"I appreciate your candor," Luna said, bowing her head for a moment. "I have made many mistakes. I am grateful that Navarone is giving me a chance to attempt to

rectify them. In the interest of openness and honesty, I feel it is fair to inform you that I have requested permission to become one of Nav's vassals."

Twilight stared at Luna in silence for a few seconds before moving her eyes to me. "What did you say?"

"That I'd think about it," I replied. "What is your opinion on the matter?"

"That, once again, it is not my choice to make. I'm not interested in getting involved one way or another. Your choices of vassals are of no concern of mine."

"Way to take a cop out," I said. "I'm asking your opinion as my marefriend. What do you think I should do?"

"I think you should tell her no. Now, I am going to go get breakfast. You're welcome to join me." She walked off before I could answer.

Luna looked at me and said, "I believe I am not invited."

"You're free to join us anyway."

"...I shall pass, for now. I have already caused you trouble with your daughter. I shall not compound it by causing trouble with one of your marefriends. For now, I believe I will return to the deck. Some more fresh, cold air that doesn't hold the scent of corruption and decay will do my mind good." Her horn lit up and she teleported away.

"I do hope they have cinnamon in stock," Aqua said with a horrific little giggle. "I'd love to hear your heartfelt apology!" I decided to go join Twilight. It was certainly better than being stuck with only Aqua for company. "That hurts my feelings."

"So why do you want almost all of my cinnamon?" Sunny was asking as I entered.

"Because Nav wants me to eat a spoonful of it," Twilight replied.

"Uh. Why?"

"Because I made her mad. Watching me suffer is revenge for her."

Sunny's eyes moved to me. "We don't keep a lot of spices like cinnamon on the ship, my lady. Our space is very limited. I'll give her a spoonful if you order me to, but can it wait?"

Hallelujah. "It can," I replied. "I don't know if we'll be using the cinnamon we do have for anything, but I'd rather have it just in case."

"I was planning on making provencal stew," Sunny replied. "And Spike was talking about baking a few pies with fruit he picked up at Gryphus."

"Chicken goes great in that stew," I said. "Shame you guys are all vegetarians."

"I'll make a special pot of it with some chicken Gilda picked up before leaving," she said with a big grin. "I never realized there was so much you can make with meat!"

"Sounds amazing. But it does mean that apology will have to wait, I'm afraid."

Twilight huffed. "You know it would help our relations with the elementals, Nav. I shouldn't have to push you to do it."

"Yeah, well, them's the breaks. So what's for breakfast?"

When we had been served, we both wandered on down to my room. A part of me was surprised that there wasn't a line of needy ponies wanting my attention, but I certainly wasn't going to complain. She pulled the door shut behind her and we settled down.

"So how was Luna's belly?" she asked.

"Nice and soft. I recommend rubbing it for yourself."

"I'm... surprised to see you partaking her belly after everything she's done to you."

I sighed. "I understand why Luna did what she did, Twilight. She was in a lot of pain. It doesn't excuse her actions in the slightest, but I do understand. And because I understand, I'm willing to give her a chance to make things right. I'm not going to ask everybody to treat her well or even forgive her. But I'm going to try my best to treat her fairly and, if possible, forgive her."

"...Why?"

"Because a good friend of mine once spent a very long time teaching me the magic of friendship. Part of that is forgiveness."

"Oh."

Oh, indeed. She didn't seem to have anything else to say, so we started actually eating. It was pretty dank, even if I wasn't all that hungry. When we finished, she teleported the plates away.

"So why were you asking about her belly?" I asked. "Feeling jealous?"

"I don't like seeing your hands on any other mare except your daughter."

"What about stallions? Or females of other races?"

"I don't mind stallions or males that much, since I know you aren't interested in any kind of relationship with one. But I did mean female instead of mare. I don't like seeing your wonderful hands on any other females except for Taya."

"So you *were* jealous!"

"Yes, Nav. I was jealous that you were giving Luna a belly rub."

"Alright, cool. I just wanted to hear you say it. So, you wanna go help PG set up her radio?"

"PG?"

"Princess Gilda. OG is Original Gilda. That's how I differentiate them."

"Ah. I'd actually prefer a belly rub. I think it'll help my stomach settle!" Before I could invite her onto the bed, someone knocked at the door. "Ignore it," she whispered.

"I can't ignore my subjects," I replied, hopping up. "That would be irresponsible of me." She sighed as I opened the door, revealing PG herself. "Good morning."

"It would be better if your useless helmspony knew how to steer. Or if he didn't panic every time he saw a monster. I need help setting up the antenna for the radio. Once I've tested it, we'll return to your room for a... *talk*."

"Why my room?"

"After how much you made me..." She finally looked around me and saw Twilight.
"Ahem. I believe your room is more... homey and comfortable."

"Uh huh. I'll supervise the antenna thing, but it'll mostly be either unicorns or the elementals setting it up. How sure are you that it won't act as a huge lightning rod?"

"Oh, it very well might," she said. "But this ship has pegasi, does it not? Clear the weather before trying to travel through it."

"Eh. Twilight, you down to help?"

She sighed again before saying, "I guess."

"What's *her* problem?" PG asked.

"She's jealous that I was giving Luna more attention than her."

"Was not!" Twilight immediately replied.

"Be wary of mares," Gilda said. "They are generally extremely possessive."

"So I've noticed. That's not always a bad thing when they're being possessive of my vagina. In fact, it usually feels pretty good."

"Don't make me hold you down and molest you in front of the princess," Twilight said.

"And don't you threaten me with a good time. Now let's go get this antenna thing done."

"I mean... it could wait," Gilda said. "I actually wouldn't mind watching."

"...What?" Some purple magic dragged me back into the room. Gilda smirked and followed me in, kicking the door shut behind her.

Twilight was in a much better mood when we went up to the deck. She was humming and practically prancing. Gilda also seemed fairly impressed with what magic was capable of, so I wouldn't be surprised if it was going to be a semi-common occurrence.

Honestly, I didn't know how to feel about that.

"So where's this radio?" Twilight asked once we were outside.

"In Nav's puny planning room," Gilda replied. "I would be happy to show you how it works once we get the antenna set up."

"Why *puny*?" Twilight asked.

"Compared to mine, it's tiny and insufficient."

"You're a princess living in a palace," I replied. "This is an ex-pirate carrack that's been converted into a flying fortress. We're working with limited room."

"Always an excuse," she sarcastically said. I flipped her off. "What does that mean?"

"It means fuck you."

She snorted and walked over to one of the sides of the ship, where a long metal rod about three meters long had been secured. "I was thinking it might be best to attach it to the rear of the ship."

"Why the back?" Twilight asked.

"It will be easier to run a wire to it from the back, since the radio is closer to the back."

"What is this made out of?" Twilight asked.

"It is a copper core with a silver coating," Gilda replied.

Twiley's eyebrows lifted. "*Silver? And copper?* Why not something stronger, like steel?"

"Resistance," I said. "Silver has the least heat resistance of easily acquirable metals. Copper has the second least. That makes it a much better conductor of electricity and signals. Using silver as just a coating gives it a good advantage while using copper as the core greatly decreases the cost."

"...Huh. Would increasing the length of the antenna increase its range?"

"Indeed. As would increasing the amount of power to it, to a point," Gilda said. She began unstrapping it, but stopped when Twilight undid all the straps and just grabbed it with magic. Since it was clear, Gilda began leading the way to where she was presumably wanting to hang it. "You know of a spell that will give you wings, do you not?"

"I do," Twilight said. She set the rod on the deck for a moment and put a hoof on it so it didn't roll anywhere. Once it was safe, her horn lit up much brighter and two butterfly wings appeared on her back. "This spell is so useful!"

"And it makes you look even more adorable," I said, booping her on the nose.

She bore it with a quiet indignity, then grabbed the pole with magic again. "So we'll need to fly in order to get this where it needs to go?"

"We will," Gilda said. "But first we will need to drill a hole through the planning room." Once we got to the door, we let ourselves in. Watcher and Jak were both poking around the radio. Neither were actually touching it, thankfully.

"Good morning, ma'am," Watcher said, nodding to me.

"What manner of device is this?" Jak asked.

"It's a radio," I said while Gilda and Twilight continued walking to the back of the room. "It allows for near-instant communication between two points using electrical signals to convey speech."

"Electricity?" Jak slowly said. "So it is human technology?"

"It is. I gave Princess Gilda a ton of plans for human tech a while back. This is one of the things she recreated."

"Gilda is a *princess*?" he asked, honestly sounding flabbergasted.

"That Gilda," I said as I pointed at the Gilda in question. "Not the Gilda that Spike is using as a sex doll."

"Ah. That makes considerably more sense. I ask that you give the same consideration to Minos, then. Or if not to them, to me. Allow me access to the same information. Unlike most griffins, we appreciate technological advances."

"I'm working on starting a number of academies where technology and magic will be intertwined. Once I get things settled down in Canterlot and once we're done in Tartarus, I will make plans to visit Minos. It's something I've been putting off for too long anyway. While there, I'll fund the start of an academy that will focus on technology, magic, and probably runes."

"Excellent. So how does this device work?"

"No fucking clue. Gilda?"

"I will be happy to explain it once to any on the ship who are interested in learning," she said. "But I dislike repeating myself. Once it is functional, I shall explain the mechanics to any willing to listen."

"I suppose I can wait. Do you need any assistance?"

"We will soon be flying to the other side of this wall. When we do so, we will need the cable pushed through." She walked over to the radio and grabbed a spool of copper cable. "Feed this through the hole Twilight is about to make. We will seal it later."

"You aren't gonna insulate the cable?" I asked. "That thing might get really hot."

"We'll place a sign." Jak took the cable and Gilda walked back over to the wall. "I believe here will do," she said, pointing at one of the corners of the wall. "Just large enough to feed the wire through. We will also need some manner of welder."

"I can assist with that," Jak said. "Give me one moment. I will go fetch a tool that I can use to engrave a rune onto the end of this wire. It will instantly weld with the next metallic object it touches."

"..Rune?" Gilda asked. "Nav did just mention those. What are they?"

"Symbols you can carve into objects that give the object magical properties," Jak replied. "I have built a fully functional iron golem entirely from runes."

"It's horrifying," I said. "And I've fought a paper golem made from runes before. They were also horrifying."

"And magically resistant," Twilight added.

"Well then. It seems you have even more to teach me, Navarone."

"Hey, don't look at me. Jak's learning that shit from Athena, the ancient human mage Twilight and I found in a pocket dimension hidden in a book."

"Oh. Then you will introduce me."

"Will?" I asked, lifting an eyebrow.

"Is that what I said?" she sweetly asked.

"It was what you said," Watcher replied. "I feel safe warning you that princess talk doesn't work very well on my lady."

"I'm well aware, I'm afraid. It's proven to be most annoying. She's far too valuable to be running free and wild."

"And you really felt like right in front of me was the best place to say that?" I asked, crossing my arms.

She turned an annoyed gaze up to me and said, "I *am* just an immature little princess, after all." Her eyes moved back to Twilight and she said, "Bore the hole." Jak decided to go ahead and leave. I was tempted to join him.

Twilight's horn lit up and a hole started burning its way through the ship. A small tuft of smoke drifted up from the area. Soon enough, light from outside started poking through. Once the hole was complete, it began expanding. Thankfully, the smoke was getting sucked out. When the hole was the right size, the light around Twilight's horn vanished. "That should do it. It will be hot for a minute or two."

"Let us go hang the pole," Gilda said. "By the time we get it in place, the minotaur should have returned." The two of them started walking out. I decided they didn't really need my supervision that much, so I hung back.

Once they were out the door, Watcher pulled it shut with magic. "Wow, what a bitch," he immediately said.

"Right?"

"How is she in the sack?"

"No comment."

"Fair enough. So how was the trip, truly?"

"Honestly? Not that great. Twilight was super needy and possessive, which kept pissing me off. It kinda got feedback-loopy there for a bit. It feels like I have to keep reminding her *not* to act like a control freak about me and everything else."

"Some ponies find it difficult to differentiate what you want in bed and what you want in a relationship. Kumani was also like that, in some ways. If you've been having problems even after you tell her to knock it off, you should consider sitting her down and explaining it in more detail. If she still can't understand, she probably isn't the one."

"Yeah, I know," I sighed. "I keep meaning to, but I don't like hard conversations. Maybe I should make Doppel do it in my body..."

"And if you're too immature to have a conversation with your marefriend, *you* aren't the one. So what happened between you and the princess?"

"She asked me a question. I gave her an answer. She didn't like my answer."

"Ah. Was it rude and condescending?"

"Probably. She asked why I wouldn't date her and I told her the truth."

"Oooh, I bet that wounded her princess pride. Was immaturity part of it?"

"Uh huh."

Jak finally walked back in, ducking under the door frame. "Are they already setting up the pole?"

"Yep."

"Then I shall waste no time," he said as he walked to the wire. He had a small wrap of tools in one hand that he laid out on the table. First he pulled out a vice to clamp the wire to the table. Next he pulled out a very fine scalpel. Finally, he grabbed a monocle so he could see better and got to work scratching something into the metal. As soon as he was finished, he pulled off the monocle and set the scalpel aside, then released the vice and started pulling it to the hole.

"We're really gonna need to secure that thing better," I said. "And hopefully find a way to insulate it."

"First we need to get it working," Jak said as he began feeding it through the hole. "Refinements come later."

Someone from the other side finally grabbed the wire. He released it as they pulled it to wherever it needed to go. Once it was in place, the entire wire jolted. Twilight and Gilda returned a few seconds later.

"That should do it," Gilda said as she approached the radio. She grabbed the receiver and taloned it to Twilight. "There is a small switch on the bottom. Flip it to talk. While it is flipped, you won't be able to receive. First, I shall talk. Then you shall reply."

"Got it." She walked outside and closed the door.

Gilda finally turned the radio on and said, "Testing. Testing."

A few seconds later, the speaker started spitting static. Twilight replied, "Sounds like it's working." The static cut off.

"Come back inside."

The door opened and Twilight walked back in, smiling widely. "That's amazing! It really is just like Nav's little radios!"

"Now we will need to test the range. I'll go order one of my griffin soldiers to scout with the receiver."

She walked out, Twilight once more in tow. When they were out of earshot, I said, "While those nerds do that, I'm gonna go talk to my daughter."

"Good luck," Watcher said. I walked out and hopped over the railing so I could get downstairs before Twilight or Gilda could spot me leaving.

Taya wasn't in my room or her room, which kinda stumped me. I started walking down the halls, checking open doors. Before I found her, I bumped into Nightshade's room. "How was your vacation, my lady?" she asked with a big grin.

"Interesting. I hear I have you to thank for my numb vagina."

"I bet it was *amazing* until that part, though!"

"It was. It also has the royal stamp of approval."

She gasped, leaning up. "Princess Gilda used it?!"

"Nope. Shining Armor swapped bodies with his wife. Cadance used the poison to fuck Shiny. He very much enjoyed getting railed in his wife's body with the poison coating her vag."

"That's... something, I guess. Do you think they would be customers?"

"Yeah, probably. We'll be stopping there before we return to Canterlot, if you want to speak to Cadance about it."

"Well..." She reached into a bag next to her bed and pulled out a vial. "Would you like to test my new recipe before Cadance?"

"Absolutely not. I didn't want to test the *first* one. Twilight twisted my arm until I did."

"She... she *hurt* you?"

"It's a figure of speech."

"Twist your arm... What does it mean?"

"That she kept badgering me and badgering me until I agreed to it, using guilt and other emotional abuses to whittle me down."

"Ah. Twist my hoof. I'll remember that. Would you mind telling me why you don't want to try it? This version doesn't seem to have any numbness."

"I don't like putting poison on any part of my body. I especially don't want to put poison on the only saving grace of this otherwise shitty female body. I don't want anything happening to the sensitivity of my funhole."

"Ah. I can understand that." She gently placed the vial back in the bag. "If you ever change your mind, let me know!"

"Kay. Do you know where Taya is?"

"She walked by earlier, but I don't know where she went."

"Then the hunt continues. See you."

"My lady."

I started walking again, looking for my cuddly daughter. She had to be *somewhere*. Sure enough, she *was* somewhere. I found her in Zecora's room, rocking back and forth on a stool while the zebra was making some green potion. "'Sup?"

"Done giving your rapist nice things?" Taya sweetly asked.

"For now, yeah. I thought it might be a good time for a talk."

"About what?"

"Why you went to Athena's realm."

The grin that spread across her face wasn't very comforting. "You're just in time, mommy! Zecora's almost done with the potion."

"I am," she confirmed. "But I am going to give the potion to Navarone. What she chooses to do with it is none of my concern."

Taya's rocking stopped and she glared at Zecora. "What?"

"I know her opinion on this matter already. She does not desire you to jump into such an important decision."

"I'm not jumping into anything! I decided to do this months ago! I wanted to use an elemental, but *noooo*, mommy wouldn't let me! And then I wanted to use that vampire lady, but she wouldn't do it either! So this is my next option. I'm gonna stay with mommy no matter what!"

"Which I'm absolutely okay with," I said, making her slightly manic gaze turn back to me. "Honestly, I'd like having you by my side. But don't you want to wait until you're older and more mentally mature? This slows down your aging by a *lot*."

"No, of course not. The whole point was to do it as quickly as possible so I can be your little filly forever!"

"Why?"

"So I can confuse your enemies with my cuteness. I also like being your little filly. Or as you put it to Gilda, your daughter-pet!"

"Do you want a family?"

"No."

"No kids? No husband?"

"Nope! All I need is you, mommy!"

I really shouldn't encourage this behavior, but if it's what she really wants...

Aqua snorted and said, "What she *needs* is a mother who won't allow her to make permanent, life-altering choices while she's still just a filly."

"So you read the book all the way through?"

"I did," she said with a nod. "I really think you should read it yourself, though."

"I was planning on it. Give me the rundown. What can we expect?"

"The more injured you become, the more treelike you'll become. If you lose any full limbs, they'll eventually come back mutated."

"What are the consequences of that?"

"More energy when you're awake, whatever benefits the mutations provide, and you'll need to sleep more. You can stay awake in the spring and summer now, but if you mutate too much more, you'll start sleeping in those seasons as well. You'll also become more... *fey*, whatever that means. The guy... well, he also eventually became a girl, so I guess the *lady* ended up dancing in the rain without even realizing it. Your eyes might also change color and your hair might start sprouting flowers. In some cases, various types of bugs or animals will be attracted to you. As time goes on, you'll be able to hear the songs of the forest, though I'm not really sure what that means."

"So nothing that's really *too* detrimental."

"Nope!"

"And you promise that nothing you've said is a lie?"

"I sure do," she said with a nod.

Aqua?

"She didn't lie, but I couldn't tell you if she omitted anything."

"This isn't something you can come back from, Taya. I honestly think it's a really irresponsible move."

"You do irresponsible things all the time!"

"I know. Some of them, I regret. Others, I don't. *I* don't think it's a good idea, but I do recognize that it's your body. I also understand that you'll keep looking until you find a way to do it anyway. So if we have a way that's safe, that we know will work, and that we know all the ins and outs of... I'll allow it on two conditions."

"Anything!"

"Promise me this is what you really want."

"I promise," she said with no hesitation.

"And promise me that you'll never get mad at *me* for letting you do this."

"I promise. I made the choice. You just gave me permission!"

I just hope you're mature enough to remember that. I sighed and looked at Zecora.

"Give it to her when it's done."

Taya squeed and leapt off the stool to hug me. "Thank you, mommy!"

"As you command, my lady," Zecora replied with a nod. Her face was unreadable.

"Your lady?" I asked, lifting an eyebrow.

"I am a part of your tribe, Navarone. You are the leader of this tribe. Thus, you are also *my* lady."

"Then I guess that makes you my shaman."

"No. I am shaman no longer. I am something new, something greater. I am a speaker for the dead."

"You just love drama, don't you?"

"You can't talk."

"...I suppose not." I finally knelt down to hug my daughter back. She was giddily giggling. I couldn't tell if it was adorable or creepy, so I started tickling her so I could hear cute laughter instead. When it looked like she might start fighting back, I hugged her close again. "So what will happen once you drink this potion?"

"Athena just said it would turn me into a tree sister like you. I even used a cherry blossom seed as the base!"

"So you'll be my little cherry blossom?" I asked with a smug smile.

"Yep!"

Aqua sighed. "Now I can't use that on you anymore!"

I know. Eat shit, bitch. "I love you, Taya."

"I love you more, mommy!"

"Prove it."

"Um."

"Yeah, that's what I thought."

"Well... prove I don't!"

"The burden of proof is on the one who makes the statement. Lacking any evidence, I'm forced to assume we love each other equally." She looked so confused and defeated, so I nuzzled her nose and made her happy again.

"Truly, such a role model," Zecora sarcastically said.

"Thanks, I try. Have you ever considered having kids?"

"Such a thing is forbidden to shaman. And while I was cursed, I was too focused on finding the cure. Now that I am free of the shamanistic path and my curse, my mind has begun to... wander. It is not too late, though my time is rapidly running out. I have not yet decided either way."

"I think zorses are adorable. But if you want a ride back to Africa, I'm sure we can arrange that as well."

"Hm. This potion will likely take another ten or so minutes to complete. I'm not completely positive, since it is a new recipe."

"Is that your way of asking me to leave?"

"It is my way of informing you how much longer the potion has to brew. You can interpret it however you choose."

"Can I rub your belly while we wait?"

"You may." She walked over to the bed and hopped up onto it before presenting her belly.

"Awww yes, first time with a zebra belly!" I let Taya go and walked over to start rubbing Zecora's belly. "Hm, more bristley than most ponies. Do you use conditioner?"

"Oooh... R-rarely... Your hands are... amazing!"

"They're the best," Taya said, bumping up against me warmly. "I usually like watching her do it to other ponies. The faces they make are usually the best!"

"Well, I do have two hands," I said, plopping down next to Zecora on the bed. Taya immediately jumped up to my lap and I soon had both of them cooing contentedly. It was pretty fucking nice.

A few minutes in, Taya shifted and sighed. "So why was Rarity so angry the last time you rubbed her belly?" she sleepily asked.

"Because she's a dirty skank who doesn't like nice things, especially when I'm the one giving them," I replied.

"Makes sense."

I'm such a good parent. Aqua snorted in disdain, which only confirmed my internal statement.

"Have you rubbed Watcher's belly?" Zecora asked.

"Nope. I might offer, though. Having a whole crew addicted to them might be useful."

"Until we imprison you and force you to rub our bellies for eternity."

"That's an acceptable fate."

"I wouldn't allow it," Taya said. "At least, not unless *I* got priority rubs."

"Love the loyalty, honey."

She only answered with a giggle.

The final few minutes until the potion were done were only filled with gentle sighs and soft moans as I continued treating the two equines under my fingers just right. It felt pretty good and I know they were both happy for a moment to relax.

All good things have to end eventually, though. The potion finally made a crackling noise and thin plume of green smoke started drifting out of the top of it. Zecora rolled off the bed and walked over to it. As soon as she got there, she grabbed the vial and slowly lifted it to her eye to get a better look.

Apparently what she saw satisfied her, because she nodded and turned back to us. "It's done." Taya hopped off the bed and floated it over with magic. "I'm not sure how it will taste or what side effects it might have. I followed the recipe precisely, but..."

"I'll live." Taya immediately started drinking it. She flinched as soon as she tasted it, but swallowed every last drop of the thick, gooey liquid. Once it was empty, she lowered the flask and blinked a few times. "I... I don't feel so..." The flask fell to the floor, shattering on impact. Her eyes rolled up in her head and she started falling, but I caught her before she could hit the glass-covered floor.

She was only out for a few seconds, thankfully. When her eyes fluttered open, I noticed that they were now dark green, almost the same shade as mine. Before I could ask her how she felt, she screamed and clutched at her head. Her hair turned shock white. I was expecting her coat to follow shortly after, but it stayed the same color for some reason. I looked back to check her tail and found that it was also white now.

Once her hair was completely white, her eyes opened wide and she started vomiting blood. I turned her over so it would drip straight to the floor. After a few seconds, chunks started falling out and she began crying in pain. All I could do was hold her hair back and pray to whoever might be listening that she would be alright.

Finally, *finally*, it was over and I clutched my sobbing, shuddering daughter. "How do you feel now?" I quietly asked.

"It... it hurt so much..." she hoarsely whispered.

"Yeah, I fucking bet. Are you still hurting?"

"N-no, but... I don't feel right..."

"You just replaced the vast majority of your organs," I said. "My process was a lot more gradual, so it was generally less painful." *Minus getting poisoned, at least.* "You'll feel different for a while, until you adjust." I gently picked her up and looked at Zecora. "I'll send someone to clean up this mess once I get her to a bath."

"I will grab one of the ship's unicorns," Zecora said. "Take care of your daughter."

I carried her to the closest shower and carefully set her down in it. When I tried letting her go, one of her hooves grabbed my hand. I let her hold onto it as I turned the water on. It was freezing cold at first, but it didn't seem to bother her in the slightest. Once it was at an acceptable temperature, I started washing the blood off.

While I was doing that, Taya finally blinked and grabbed some of her mane. "It's... It's white!"

"So is your tail," I said. "And your eyes are green."

"I didn't know it would turn my eyes green..."

"Having regrets?"

"Never. I'll be with you forever, no matter what it takes!"

I booped her on the nose. "Good. How are you feeling now?"

"Better, I guess. I feel kinda tired, though..."

"Once we get you all cleaned up, we'll head to the deck and chill in the sun and fresh air. Your body needs sunlight for energy now."

"Just like my mommy," she softly sighed.

"So what do you want to tell the others?" I asked.

"About what?"

"Why your hair is white and your eyes are green now."

"Who cares? It's too late for any of them to keep us apart now!"

"Right, I get that. But you know this decision won't be popular."

"So? You're their lady. They *have* to accept it."

"Well, the truth is generally better than fiction, so... fuck it, I guess." I finally stepped back from the shower to look my daughter over. All the blood on her was cleaned away, thankfully. "Do you want to check your blood?" I asked, pulling a dagger out.

"No thank you." I slid the thing away. "So how does being a tree sister actually feel?"

"Pretty fucking good, for the most part. Running out of stamina is hard, you won't feel hungry that often, you'll no longer need to use the bathroom, and you'll likely lose a lot of your inner voice."

"What does that mean?" she asked.

"You know how you usually have a constant stream of thoughts running in the back of your head?"

"Yeah."

"That goes away sometimes. You can stare blankly at a single spot for hours on end without moving or thinking."

"Oh. That explains a few things. Neat! So can I just start starving myself like you do instead of running?"

"We'll talk about that when we return to Canterlot. The main reason I wanted to get you in shape was to increase your stamina in case we ever did have to run. Now that you also have a ridiculous amount of tree stamina, that probably doesn't matter anymore. We'll test it thoroughly when we get home."

"That works, I guess. So when can I become human permanently?"

"Belly rubs don't work on humans."

"Oh. Never mind, then. I think I'm clean now, mommy. Do you want me to get the blood off of you?"

I finally looked down at myself and discovered that I was also covered in it. "Wow. Yeah, if you don't mind." Her horn lit up and it all disappeared. "Alright, you ready to head out to the deck?"

"Yep!" She turned the water off and then used magic to make the water slide down her body. Once she was dry, she hopped out. "Much better. I still feel kinda weird, but not as much anymore."

"Hopefully the sun will help with that. Shall we?" She grinned up at me, so I tousled her white mane and walked out. When we got to the deck, more soldiers were out and about, doing various soldier-like calisthenics. They all grinned when they saw me, but did double-takes when they saw my daughter. I led her to the side facing the sun and leaned against the railing. After a second of thought, I undid my ponytail, letting the wind take it. "How do you feel now?"

Taya slowly inhaled, held it for a few seconds, then eased it out. "Wow. That was *fast*! I feel completely awake!"

"Yep. Having some time in the sunlight really helps. I have to warn you, though: Snowy days will drain you like a motherfucker. Rain isn't as bad, but if it keeps going for days on end, it'll make getting out of bed tough. Spring is great, summer is mostly awesome, fall is shit, winter is terrible."

"I always knew how you felt, but I never really understood. Now I'll be right there with you!"

"Yep. We can cuddle in bed on snowy days."

"Ahem." We both looked over and saw a very confused Twilight. "Taya... why is your hair white? And why are your eyes green?"

"I'm a tree sister now, like mommy!" Twilight's mouth dropped. "Isn't it great?"

"I'm... I'm sorry, you're a *what*?!"

"Tree sister," I said.

"But... how?! And *why*?!"

"I went into Athena's book and got a recipe from her," Taya said. "And so I can be with mommy forever!"

Twilight's eyes moved up to mine. I couldn't tell if she was still shocked or angry. "And you *let* her?"

I shrugged. "She went into Athena's book while we were in Gryphus, using Kat's help. She knew the potion recipe. Do you really think I could have stopped her?"

"Yes! You're her mother, Nav! That's literally your *job*! You're *supposed* to stop her from doing stupid and irresponsible things!"

"I would have found a way," Taya said. "One way or another, I would have been mommy's little filly forever! At least this way, we match."

"Taya, this... this isn't *good*!"

"It's also not really *bad*," I said. "It is what it is. And it's definitely not something that can be undone."

"How are you okay with this?!"

"Because it wasn't her choice to make!" Taya yelled, slapping a hoof on the deck. "It was my choice and mommy let me make it!"

"You're just a filly! Nav, how could you be so irresponsible?!"

"Pretty easily, actually. I mean, I honestly don't know why you're surprised by this. I don't have a track record of making good, healthy decisions."

"You know what? You're right, I'm not surprised. I'm just more disappointed than I ever expected I could be. You let a filly make a major, life-altering decision."

"That I was gonna make anyway," Taya said. "One way or another, this was gonna happen! Mommy just picked the lesser of all evils!"

"Taya, your relationship with your mother is incredibly unhealthy."

"So? Mommy loves me and I love her! That's all that matters. Who cares what anyone else thinks?"

Twilight sighed and facehooved. "I swear, talking to you two can be worse than talking to a brick wall. At least it wouldn't constantly frustrate me!"

"A brick wall also can't do this," I said, reaching down to scratch her ears. She sighed and dropped her hoof, staring at me disdainfully. "Come on, Twiggles. Relax! It'll all work out in the end."

She finally slapped my hand away. "Nav, this is *wrong*."

"Why?" Taya asked.

"Because you chose to stay a filly eternally!"

"And why is *that* wrong? I don't want a husband or children of my own. I don't want to build a family. I'm not interested in any other adult things. I'm happy right where I am!"

"And do you think you'll feel the same way in ten years? Fifty? A *hundred*? Do you really want to be stuck like this for five hundred years, Taya?!"

"Yes," my little filly confirmed with a nod.

Twilight sighed, shaking her head. "Well, Nav's right. It's not like we can undo this. *You* will have to live with this choice, Taya. I hope for your sake it'll be easy."

"I can do anything with mommy by my side!"

"I hope so. I really do." She shook her head one more time before walking off in a huff. I flipped her the double birds as she left. Once that got old, I turned to face the scenery.

"That went marginally better than I was expecting," I said.

"What were you expecting?"

"Her to break up with me." *Although the day is still young.*

"And you let me do it anyway?"

"Twilight is a marefriend. You are my *daughter*. You trump her any day."

She pressed up against my leg and we went to watching the scenery pass by. It felt pretty fucking nice.

Well, until Spike ruined it by hugging me from behind, lifting me up. I elbowed him as hard as I could in the gut, then kicked backwards, cutting out one of his knees. He dropped me and almost fell to the ground. I finally spun around and kicked him hard in the chest, sending him to the deck.

As he struggled to get up, I walked forward and put my foot on his chest, knocking him back into the ground. "I hope you learned a very valuable lesson from this," I said.

"H-hug you lower, so you c-can't elbow me!"

I pulled my foot back. "Taya, throw him off the side." Spike's eyes widened right before Taya tossed him overboard.

"He'll be fine, right?" she asked.

"I really hope so. I'll feel kinda bad if not."

Sure enough, he swooped in about half a minute later, looking none the worse for wear. "That was mean!"

"And hugging me from behind after I keep telling you to knock that shit off isn't?"

"Well... not when compared to beating me up and throwing me overboard!"

"So what else am I supposed to do, hm?" I asked, placing my hands on my hips. "If you don't listen to my requests and you don't listen to my orders, what other means do I have of enforcing my will? Especially on one of you high and mighty dragons!"

"Uh. Learn to accept hugs?"

"Throw him overboard again." Spike had time to sigh before Taya tossed him out. "This is surprisingly satisfying."

"Can we solve all our problems this way?"

"I'll think about it." Spike showed back up much sooner this time, at least. "Did you learn your lesson this time?"

"Honestly? Probably not. Come on, Nav! What's not to like about hugs?"

"What's so hard about listening to a friend's request? Do you really care so little for my feelings?"

“Because I know you’re just requesting it to remain aloof and reserved, not because you dislike hugs. Everyone knows you love hugging people, especially ponies. You’re really bad at hiding it. Why else do you think Pinkie does it all the time?”

“Throw him over again.” Taya grabbed him and tossed him over, but he was ready this time. As he passed us, he grabbed me around the wrist, dragging me over with him.

Thankfully, I had a kind and loving daughter who teleported me back before I even fell three meters. I was standing there with my arms crossed by the time Spike landed again with a smile on his face.

As soon as he opened his mouth, I said, “Again.” Taya giggled and tossed him over one more time. He tried grabbing me again, but I jumped back. “Let’s go below.” Taya continued giggling as we hastily went back belowdecks.

When we got to my room, it was occupied by Princess Gilda. She was perusing my very small library, several of which were the books Taya brought from Athena’s labyrinth that I had been meaning to look at. “So you have finally returned,” she said. “What are these books about? I recognize this writing as human, though I do not know what it says.”

“They’re history books,” I said. “One is a diary.”

“Hm. Why is your daughter’s hair white now?”

“I’m immortal now, like mommy.”

“Ah. How did you achieve immortality?”

“With a potion,” I said. “It gave her the essence of a tree, like me.”

“Interesting. You will... *Will* you explain it in detail later?”

“Yes.”

She actually smiled. “Excellent. Could we perhaps speak privately, Nav?”

“Anything you can say to mommy, you can say to me!” Taya proudly said. I knelt down and whispered something to her. She blinked. “Oh. Have fun!” She trotted out, pulling the door shut with magic.

“What did you just tell her?”

“What she needed to hear to leave.” I walked closer to her and she started leaning up for a kiss, but I grabbed Athena’s book behind her. “Want to meet someone neat?”

She only seemed a little bit disappointed that I didn’t meet her kiss. “I... had something else in mind.”

“You sure? She’s another human.”

“Is this the mage you spoke of?”

“It is.”

“I am not prepared for a meeting of that... magnitude at the moment.”

“Fair enough.” I set the book back on the shelf, then casually threw Gilda onto the bed. “Then I hope your body is ready.”

"It most definitely is," she tried to huskily reply. She only ended up actually sounding constipated, but I got over it quickly and started ravishing her.

Once the magical crystals powering the hitachi wand died, I finally called it quits. The princess was a panting mess and my bed was thoroughly defiled. "So how do you feel?" I sweetly asked.

She replied by dragging me down for a kiss. It didn't really feel all that great on her beak, but I don't think she cared that much. Once she was tired of it, she tugged again and forced me onto the bed with her. When I was at her mercy, she wrapped her arms around me and sighed delightfully, cuddling up close.

"I guess you feel good enough to cuddle, then."

"Indeed. Mmm, you are something else, Navi..." Since I figured we were probably going to be there for a while, I hugged her and started gently rubbing her back. "Ooh yes, you definitely know how to treat a hen..."

"Yep. Did your brother tell you he asked me to join his harem?"

Her grip tightened and she stared at me in shock. "He *what*?!"

"Well, he asked me to become a royal concubine."

"That sniveling little rat bastard! You are *mine*!"

"I am, huh?"

That actually made her blush. "I mean... You certainly aren't *his* to take!"

"You're right, I'm not. I turned him down. Now..." I spun her over, making her squawk in surprise. She got over it when I began rubbing her belly, though. "I think if anything, it's more accurate that *you* are *mine*. You certainly do seem to react quite well to my ministrations. And after all that begging I had you doing, I'm surprised you think you'd have any ownership over me."

"W-well..."

"That princess's pride, right?" She sighed. "I do so enjoy hearing you *sing*, my pretty little birdy. Maybe I'll make you sing loud enough that we'll break you of that disgusting *pride* you have."

"F-fat chance," she muttered.

"I could always tie you to one of the masts and leave a few vibrators in you. I bet that would hasten the process."

"...You wouldn't dare."

"Hm, maybe not. But maybe I would. I guess it'll be something for you to look forward to, my pretty little princess. You know, if you want a *really* fun time, you should talk to the water elementals. If you find any of them willing to fuck you, they'll be able to do all *kinds* of things that I can't."

"Hm... Such as?"

"Turn into a tentacle monster and ravage all of your holes at once. Or fill you completely, turning you into a moaning mess. Or hack into your brain and give you orgasm after orgasm without even touching you. Really, they can do all kinds of fun things to you. And if you're *really* interested in getting kinky, I can hop into your dreams one night and be whoever you want me to be."

"Yes, I am interested in getting kinky. You are always welcome in my dreams."

"Good to know. I can also become a water elemental, so you can avoid having to deal with any of those awful things."

"Wonderful," she dreamily sighed. "I almost want to try it now..."

"Oh? Did I not satisfy you?"

"You most definitely did. But I somehow feel there are still so many sensations left to try, so many different ways to be filled..."

"I'm sure Twilight would also be willing to help. She's been writing a series of books and could use a few different types of partners."

"A... series of books?"

"About BDSM and sexuality in general. They're incredibly popular in Equestria at the moment. If you're interested, I'm sure she can get you a few copies. I've been her partner for most or all of the books, but she's been interested in trying a griffin for a while. It'll be completely anonymous, so there's no reason to be worried about getting identified."

"That is... something I will keep in mind."

"In fact, she probably has one or two of the books somewhere around here. If not, some of the crew might."

"Hm. Perhaps some research is merited..."

"And if you're interested, you can borrow any of my toys, as long as you clean them when you're done."

"I would be interested, yes. Where can I get my own?"

"A shop in Canterlot. I'll take you there next time you're in town."

"You'll... take *me* there?"

"Yeah. They're very serious about their clientele's privacy. They have a back entrance and everything. I usually go in the front because I'm a wanton slut, but not everybody is as shameless as I."

"What a world it would be if we were," she sighed.

"A much better world, that's for sure. You wouldn't have to hide being a lesbo, for one."

"And we wouldn't have to hide our activities."

"Hey, there were plenty of griffins doing lewd things in public at the festival. I'm sure if you had asked, Twilight could have turned you into a pony so you could join us. We got up to all kinds of kinky fun things."

"That... is an interesting offer. Hm. I will certainly remember that."

"She can also turn you into a human, a changeling, a dragon, and a housecat."

"A human, you say...?"

"Yes, I *did* say." *Now that I think about it, I wonder what Athena and Hera would say if I showed up with a few more humans.*

"I will most definitely be having a few conversations with Twilight soon. I assume, given your suggestions, that you do not mind?"

"You assume correctly. I'm no hypocrite. You know, usually. If I can sleep around, it's only fair that she can, too. At least until I ever get serious with someone, at which point that'll be stopping."

"So you say. I find myself wondering if you could truly limit yourself to one partner."

"I find myself wondering if I want to. Long-term faithful relationships aren't my jam. To be honest, I'm happy enough as things are now. I'd need a very good reason to give this up."

"If it meant our activities could continue, I certainly wouldn't complain." In fact, her tail began wrapping around one of my legs.

"You could always name me an honorary royal concubine," I sarcastically replied.

"You're right, I can. That's a wonderful suggestion and it will absolutely solve this problem."

"You're not actually going to do that."

She snorted. "I'd like to see you try and stop me." I removed my hand from her belly. "On second thought, perhaps we can work out an alternate solution."

"Uh huh." I started rubbing her wonderfully soft princess belly again. "So how long do you want to bask in the afterglow this time, hm?"

"Until I'm no longer horrifically sticky, at the very least. Hm, we will need a set of eyes in the hall to ensure none of my soldiers see my walk of shame to the shower."

"Want me to get Taya? She can clean this up in a heartbeat."

She was silent for several long seconds before slowly saying, "I would not like your pet daughter to clean the sexual fluids from me or her owner mother."

"Fair enough. Want me to go get Twilight? She might be willing to clean this up in a heartbeat."

"That would be more acceptable."

"Then give me just a moment." I slid off the bed and walked to the door.

"Are... you not going to get dressed?"

"Are you?"

It took her several seconds to process that one. She finally shrugged and said, "Very well."

With her permission, I walked out into the hall and immediately bumped into Amber Night, who turned to stare up at me in surprise. A few seconds later, her face turned bright red and she struggled to keep her eyes on my face. “Wonderful timing,” I said with a grin. “Would you be willing to help me clean up a little mess?”

“M-mess?” she faintly said, sniffing at the air.

“Yep, just a teensy one. Shouldn’t be a problem for my favorite crewmare!”

Her face lit up and she eagerly nodded. “Anything for you, my lady!”

“Come on in, then.” I backed up, granting her entry into my room. She happily trotted in, then froze when she saw Gilda on the bed. I eased the door shut behind her. “We were working on something and spilled something all over my bed and each other. Would you mind...?”

“W-what were you... what were you working on, my lady?”

“Strengthening relations between species,” I casually answered. “Super important and secret stuff, so I’ll have to ask you to keep quiet about it.”

She gasped and then nodded. “Of course, my lady! I won’t tell a soul!” She walked over and placed her horn against the bed. A moment later, it lit up and all the lascivious fluids on it disappeared. A few seconds later, Gilda found herself cleaned as well. Amber turned back to me with a grin and very gently poked me in the stomach with her horn. Another wave of cleanliness hit me and just like that, all proof of our activities was gone.

“Thank you, Amber,” I said, tousling her mane. Her tail hitched slightly and she squeed. “I’m glad to know I can always count on you.”

“Of course you can, my lady! I’m your most devoted employee!”

“You sure are. And if there’s any way I can ever reward you for your services, you need only ask.”

“R-really?!”

“Really.” I reached out and booped her. “Now, I don’t want to take up any more of your time. I’m sure you were on your way to do something important.”

“W-well—”

Gilda cleared her throat. “We also need to get back to work.”

Her face fell slightly. “Oh, r-right...” She perked right back up and said, “If you need anything else, just let me know!”

“Will do,” I replied, opening the door for her. She pranced out, head held high. I eased the door shut behind her.

The princess snorted as soon as it was closed. “You enjoyed that a little bit too much.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. Give her a minute or two to wander off and then you should be good to leave.”

"Well... I don't *have* to leave. It doesn't seem like there's much to do on this ship, aside from reading books or talking to others. To be quite honest, you're the most interesting one here."

"I mean, you're free to stay if you want. I was just about to try contacting Moonbeam, though."

"...How?"

I walked over to the bookshelf and opened the cabinet under it. That's where Taya stored the magic mirror. I pulled it out and held it up. "She gave me this magic mirror. It allows me to communicate with the one in her room."

"How does it work?"

"By holding it up and saying her name. Moonbeam."

Her face instantly appeared in it and began talking. "So you've finally decided to try out the mirror. Well, first you'll have to get through this message. So let me detail every little wonderful thing I'm going to do to you the next time we meet, my succulent little morsel..."

The message continued and described a number of extremely lewd and honestly fun sounding activities that made both me and Gilda blush like schoolgirls. They also gave me quite a few ideas for things to try out with either the princess or Twilight.

I'm not sure how she managed to get enough material for a ten minute message, but it really made me look forward to our next meeting even more. Once it was finally over and I could see my own face in the mirror, Gilda very awkwardly cleared her throat. "Well. That was... something."

"Yeah, it was fucking *hot*," I said. "God damn. Moonbeam." My reflection disappeared and I was left staring at a roof. "Anybody home?" After a few seconds of silence, I shrugged and continued, "That message got me all *kinds* of wet. It actually makes me happy to give you some dark and unpleasant news: Luna thinks Celestia's planning something unpleasant for when I return from the Zone. I'm planning on heading to the Crystal Empire before returning to Canterlot to meet with a few other allies. I'd like for you to be there. Call me back whenever you can. We can play phone tag until our schedules match up and we can arrange for a real conversation." I stared at it for a few more seconds before clearing my throat. "I'm uh... not really sure how to hang up. Moonbeam?" The mirror continued defiantly showing me her ceiling. "Fuck, maybe if I..." I set the thing on the bed and her ceiling was replaced by my own. "Perfect."

"You always have the best toys. Can it go to anybody but that monster?"

"It doesn't go to any monsters, just a cute and cuddly bug queen." She rolled her eyes. "But I'm pretty sure it *just* goes to her." I picked the mirror up again and set it back in the cabinet. "So, what would you like to discuss? How we can... strengthen relations between the races, perhaps?"

"I would like to discuss humanity."

"Can we discuss griffins instead?"

"No. In particular, I would like to learn more about you and your life before Equestria."

"Oh. I'd rather not."

She lifted an eyebrow. "Why?"

"Because there's not much to tell and most of it is depressing. Some things should just stay in the past where they belong."

"Hm. I am interested, regardless. I would be honored to—"

"No."

"...Nothing? Not even a scrap?"

"Nothing. All that I was, all that I could have been, all that I knew... is gone. Leave it that way."

"As you wish," she slowly said. "I thought you would be interested in speaking of your past. It seems that you never discuss it."

"There's a reason for that. The ponies have learned to stop asking."

"Are you ashamed, perhaps? Or—"

"Tell me about your mother."

She blinked. "I would... rather not."

"Want me to keep pestering you about it, then? I wouldn't mind. You don't seem to, after all."

"...I suppose there are just some things one does not wish to talk about. I understand."

"So tell me about your oldest brother, Hooters. I wasn't able to get a good feeling for his personality. Is he a good leader?"

We managed to talk about the rest of her family until somebody finally knocked. I hopped up to open it, revealing Watcher. His eyes looked over my nude body with hurtful disinterest before meeting my eyes. "My lady."

"Howdy. Luna wants to be my vassal. What do you think?"

"I believe you should accept her offer. I'm here to talk about Taya."

"What did she do this time?"

"Don't play coy."

"Oh, is this about the tree thing?"

"Yes. Why did you allow her to do it?"

"Because she would just keep trying to become immortal until she finally figured it out. At least this way, our immortalities are directly compatible. I figured there was no reason not to allow it."

"Aside from her being a lot younger than one would expect for making such huge, life-altering decisions."

"Yeah, well, you know."

"No, I don't know. Please explain it."

God dammit, what is with you people? "What part of *she was going to do it anyway* do you find difficult to understand?"

"The part where you're fully capable of reining her in, if you want."

"Bullshit. She does stuff she *knows* will piss me off all the time. If I told her not to do this, she would probably make the potion herself just to spite me. Honestly, I'm not really sure what you want me to do about this. Why complain if it's already too late?"

"I feel that you're setting a very bad precedent by letting her do this. If you keep letting her make major choices that she has no business making at her age, she's going to get hurt or traumatized."

"And when she falls, I will pick her up. People don't grow by being coddled, Watcher. They grow by making choices, being allowed to fail. If those choices go poorly, their friends and family pick them up and they learn from them. I do not and will not let Taya get her way all the time. I'm afraid that there are times when I can't prevent her from doing something, and I think this was one of them. I decided it would be better to give her my blessing and allow her to do it safely than tell her no and have her seek it out behind my back. I will never just mindlessly give her what she wants. It will always depend on context."

"...So you decided, based on this context, that she should be allowed to stop her aging as a filly."

"Yes."

"I disagree with your decision, my lady, and believe you will come to regret it."

"Noted. Is there anything else you need?"

"Please put on clothes. If any of the griffin soldiers suspect what you two have been up to, there will be repercussions."

"Kay." He bowed before walking off. I left the door open and started pulling my clothes back on.

"I'm surprised you allow your subjects to speak to you in that manner," Gilda quietly said.

"Sometimes it's annoying. Usually it's valuable. When you surround yourself with very wise, intelligent people, it often pays to listen to them. There's no reason to pay them, otherwise."

"Hm. I suppose."

When I was finally dressed, I quickly checked my pockets. Once that was done, I nodded. "I need to go find Gourd. You're free to stay on my bed if you want, but I don't know how long it'll take me to get back."

"Then I shall go speak to the minotaur. I would like him to explain runes to me."

"His name is Jak. His room is attached to the smithy."

"Excellent. I'm thankful for your time, Nav. I hope we can spend more time together soon."

"I think that'll be doable. Don't forget to spend some time with Twilight, too."

She grinned. "I won't. Perhaps I will borrow a few of her books as well."

I bet you'll be featuring in some of them, too. "Good. See you soon, Gilda." She nodded and walked past me, running her tail along my side as she passed. I followed her out and pulled the door shut behind me. She started walking toward the smithy and I began walking up to the deck.

When I got outside, I took a quick look around the deck. Luna was standing at the front of the ship, watching the horizon. Spike was sparring with Char, which reminded me that I needed some practice before we got to the bunker. Felix was speaking with one of the crew members. Several of the guards were talking to water elementals. Gourd was nowhere to be seen.

I walked up the stairs to the second level and found him ponying the wheel. "Good evening, my lady," he warmly said.

"Howdy. Do you want to complain about what Taya did, too?"

"Nope, I'm good."

"Baller. Luna asked to be my vassal. What should I tell her?"

He shrugged. "As you said before, nobody *wants* to work with Luna, but we all recognize her value. If you can stand having the mare that caused so much of your pain around, I say she would be worth having."

"Alright." I spun back around and went down the stairs.

Before I could get too far along the deck, Felix the kitty stepped in front of me. "Hello again, my lady," he said with a charming grin.

"Hi."

"Your crew has quite a lot to say about you. I must admit, I'm quite impressed!"

"Okay."

His confident expression took a small hit, but he powered through. "I have to say, as much as they've told me, I'm still curious for more."

"Well, there are plenty of people here you haven't spoken to, I'm sure."

"There are... but I was hoping to hear tales from the lovely lady herself!"

"I'm never, *ever* going to have sex with you. The only reason I'm even talking to you right now is because you're part of Princess Gilda's retinue. I hate thieves, I hate people with absolutely no honor of any kind, I hate cowards, and I hate con artists. Get out of my way before I have Spike incinerate you."

The look on his face very rapidly went away. When I was finished, he stepped aside and bowed. I continued walking.

"That wasn't very nice," Aqua said. She was right next to us on the deck, so she actually got a front row seat for it.

"I'm not a very nice person," I flippantly replied. Soon enough, I was standing behind Luna. "Like what you see?" I asked.

She finally turned around with a small smile. "I do, Nav. It's been far too long since I went on an adventure. Feeling the wind in my coat after so long is... refreshing."

"Something happened with Taya that accelerated a few thought processes in my mind." I finally pulled my noble seal out of my pocket. "I've made up my mind. Kneel and swear."

"...Is your daughter well?" she asked.

"Yeah, she just took on the life of a tree, like me. After talking to her about it and after talking to Twilight and Watcher about it, I made up my mind. Forever's a long time to suffer for a mistake, but if it's a mistake you want to make, I'm not going to stand in your way. I'll admit that I will absolutely find you useful. If you want to swear to me, I'll accept it."

She knelt and pressed her horn against the seal. "I swear to serve and protect you to the best of my abilities. I forgo all other oaths and swear to serve only you. I swear to treat all your employees fairly and never quarrel with your other vassals."

The seal flashed and I felt a small pulse in my hand. "Rise, Luna." She stood, finally wearing a real smile. "I got dibs on telling Celestia. I wanna see the look on her face."

"Please do it while I'm there," Luna replied. "I also want to see her expression."

"Deal. When's the last time you got some fire in your blood?"

"It has been too long. Do you propose a practice bout?"

"Yes. Challenge Blaze and determine his lethality, then try your luck against Char. I want to know what these things are really made of. Celestia whooped Blaze's ass all up and down the palace, so you should have an easy time of it."

"As you wish," she replied with a short bow. "Though I would also like to help you grow as well."

"And you will. But for now, I have several books I need to get caught up on. If I'm going to be forced to rule the world, I need to do some research."

"Understandable. I would offer historical texts about Equestria's kingdom, but I'm afraid they no longer exist."

"Yes they do," I said with a grin. "You just have to know where to look. Burning books is easy. Burning *all* books is hard. Censoring an idea is easy. Killing an idea is impossible."

"Not for lack of trying, I'm sad to say," she sighed.

"I've seen the mistakes of the past," I said. "I know what to watch out for. Authoritarianism must be avoided. All people must be free to make their own choices, including the choice to remember the past. Otherwise, they will never *learn* from the past. When we cast your sister down, we will teach them what a tyrant she was."

"Good. Ruling might be difficult, however..."

"Oh, don't get me wrong," I said. "I'm not going to create a democracy or even a republic. We are going to rule the world, *period*. Democracy has some redeeming traits, but I *know* I won't fuck people over. I know what my morals are and I will strive to always wear my heart on my sleeve. I'm not going to give my power away to somebody I'm not sure about, even if that's what the people think they want."

"And what of the griffins?" Luna asked.

"The king still has the final say in most matters. Parliament just gets to dictate some things. That isn't necessarily bad, as long as the king can check their power and is just about it. The problem my people ran into is that the ability to vote divided them in the end. Those who lost blamed those who won for all the problems in the country, which created a huge partisan gap. I'm not interested in seeing that happen again. We will rule and the people will fall behind us, end of story."

"And those who try to defy us?"

"That depends on how. I'm not going to restrict the press or freedom of speech. I'm not going to kill those who question or critique us. But any who rebel will be given one chance to surrender before being utterly and totally annihilated. There will be no room for discord in the world we build."

"And annihilating our enemies isn't discordant?"

"It's better than the alternative of allowing them to continue spreading mayhem. The other option is imprisoning and reeducating them."

She looked over my shoulder, at the water elementals who were staring at us. "They have the ability to enter minds. Do they have the ability to *change* minds?"

"Yes, but that's just as good as murder."

"Hm, perhaps. A dead pony is useless to all but vermin. A living, subservient pony could be very useful." I narrowed my eyes. "Of course, it will be your choice to make. But I was under the impression you tended to seek out advice from those around you."

"I'm not a fan of direct subjugation and mind-wipe."

"That doesn't mean you can't use it anyway. You can feel squeamish about a tactic but still recognize that it's the most viable means of dealing with a problem. And as an answer to the question of how we deal with rebels without causing more discord, using water elementals to make them passive is a decent one."

Aqua giggled in my head and whispered, "I *like* this one!"

"That is a bridge we will cross when we get to it," I said. "With luck, we will have a good alternative that *doesn't* involve forcefully modifying somebody's mind."

"Perhaps luck will be on our side," Luna said. "It matters little to me, I suppose."

"It should. You may be my vassal, but that doesn't mean you won't have to use your critical thinking skills once in a while."

"Excellent. Celestia rarely sought my opinion. She ordered and I unquestioningly obeyed."

"Yeah, that's not gonna happen with me. If I tell you to do something, I want you to think about the best way to *actually* accomplish what I'm telling you. If you can think of a better way, suggest it."

"As you command, my liege lady."

"Nav is fine. Do you have any suggestions for better determining the lethality of the fires?"

"I believe a few practice bouts will do the trick. With your permission, I will begin immediately."

"Granted." She bowed again and walked past me. I thought about taking her position at the front of the ship for a few minutes, but decided to follow her instead. I got as far as turning around before realizing two water elementals were right behind me, Flo and Brook. "...Ladies."

"We couldn't help but overhear a few of your... future plans," Brook said.

"Oh?" I said, crossing my arms.

"This isn't a confrontation, Nav," Flo warmly said. "We've long thought that Celestia was leading the world poorly. We're hoping you will accept our guidance going forward. Ruling the world will not be an easy undertaking."

"Something tells me I'm not gonna have much of a choice," I sarcastically replied.

"There is always a choice," Brook said, her eyes turning pink. "But we stand with you, if you would have us. I understand that you are wary of us after some of what has happened, but you know that none of us would ever seek to hurt you or circumvent your will."

Dramatic irony at its finest, folks. "Uh huh. And what did you think of Luna's suggestion, then? Mind washing inconvenient political prisoners?"

"I believe it is morally bankrupt," Flo said.

"And I believe it is better than the alternative," Brook said. "Killing a person standing up for what they believe in is vile."

"Uh huh. I wonder what the Jews would have to say about that." Her eyes went from pink to blue. "There are evil people in this world that have *vile* beliefs. Some of them espouse harming others. There are also professional criminals in this world like that scum Felix who live by taking what others have rightfully earned. We'll have to find a way to analyze how to mitigate the evil in this world. If that involves killing those who seek to harm others or feed off their hard work, so be it. But if we decide that destroying who they are as a person and replacing it with something socially acceptable is better, then that is the path we will take. Neither option is pretty, but I refuse to build a society that allows scum to run free with no consequences."

"I'm afraid that the higher one rises in rank and social standing, the more difficult their choices become," Flo quietly said. "You are seeking to rise to the very top. I'm sad to say that many of your choices will devolve into dark matters such as this."

"Which is why advisers become all the more important," Brook added. "You are surrounded by several long-time rulers. We offer you our wisdom, Nav. Please don't reject it out of hand. I once proposed to you a choice between the water elemental way and the way so many others have tried and failed. You stand at a huge precipice with two bridges leading into the future. Which path will you take? You will have to make a choice soon."

I'm afraid it's already been made for me. "Then I will do my best to think quickly."

I began walking past them, but Flo grabbed my arm. I almost flinched back, but managed to stop myself. "May we... speak, Nav?" she asked.

"I'm listening."

"Privately?" she added, turning pink.

"As you wish." She wrapped one of her arms around mine as I continued walking down to my room. *Oh, all the things I wish I could say. But alas, I'm a prisoner in my own body...*

"You say that like it's a *bad* thing," Aqua giggled. "You really should be more grateful, Navi."

And you should really consider suicide.

"Destruction of my main form wouldn't really do much to help you or Celestia, you know. I'd still control you both and could slowly rebuild."

I guess it really would be too good to be true, even if it would be surprisingly satisfying. Hell, why can't the others even sense you? I thought they could sense hosts.

"If we wish to be sensed. If not, we can hide, even from others of our own kind. Should they ever seek to invade your mind, they would find me instantly."

Then I guess it's a shame the others actually have morals.

"For you, perhaps. I'm not complaining."

"You seem more stressed than usual," Flo warmly said.

"I've had a lot on my mind. The vacation didn't help."

"You have the weight of the world on your shoulders, Nav," she sighed. "You expect to take Discord on by yourself."

"No I don't. I'm building an entire team to do it for me. I don't expect to be able to do a thing to that monster, at least not until I get a soul."

We finally got to my room. She let me in first, then followed me and eased the door shut. "Have you thought on my offer? I am part of your extended team, I know, but I would like once more to be in your inner circle. I miss you, Nav."

And at this point, I miss having a sane elemental in my head. “I want you to act as my guard when we touch down in front of the forest. Help get me there in one piece. We’ll talk about what happens after that on the way home.”

“With pleasure. I never once meant to hurt you, Nav. Not truly. I hope you will come to understand that in time.”

“I already do. And I know I’m going to need you and the rest of the elementals in the coming years. I don’t like the way things are going, but I honestly don’t think I have a choice anymore. Celestia needs to go and I’m not sure who else I’d trust to replace her but me.”

“The others may have their doubts, but I know you are making the right choice. It is too late to redeem that demon. I would be pleased to be at your side as an adviser and friend once things finally settle down.”

“Good. I’ll need all the trustworthy help I can get.”

“And... if you are ever interested in becoming my host once again, I will always be open to it.”

“It’s an offer I’ll keep in mind,” Aqua said with my mouth. “But for the moment, I want to keep my head to myself.” *If only.*

“I understand, even if it is saddening. Would you like to discuss what happened with Taya? Or what your long-term plans are for Luna?”

“There’s nothing to discuss about Taya. And we’ll see how Luna pans out. She seems wholly devoted to me, so I’m not too worried, but I’m not sure how she’ll be received by the rest of the world. I’m also very concerned about what the others will think about me so casually accepting her oath.”

“From what I saw, it wasn’t casual. At the very least, you made her sweat for a few hours.”

“Tell that to Twilight and Blossom.”

She bowed her head. “As you wish.” Before I could stop her, she slid under the door.

Well, at least one of you fuckers obeys me.

“Don’t you worry your pretty little head about the others,” Aqua said. “Celestia and I are working on a way to put them under my control. Then you truly *will* be mine forever!”

I knew she was just trying to beat down my willpower, so I tuned her out and grabbed Athena’s history book, the one Taya got from the maze. Much to my surprise, I could actually read it, though I don’t think it was actually written in English. I wouldn’t be surprised if she had some kind of automatic translation spell on it.

Either way, I fell onto the bed and started reading.

A few hours after I started reading, I heard something from my cabinet. It only took me a second to realize what it was and I set the book down so I could pull the mirror out. Moonie's face was staring back at me. "Ah, there you are," she said. "I got your message."

"Cool beans. You down to meet us at Cadance's pad in a few weeks?"

"That will be doable, but I will need a more accurate timeframe than *a few weeks*."

"I'll let you know as soon as I find out. I'm not sure how long this trip is going to take, but her palace will probably be our next destination."

"Excellent. I hope to make good on my promises. I trust your body will be adequately prepared."

"I'm always ready for your gentle touch, Moonie."

She smirked. "Yes, I know I am your favorite." *I wouldn't go that far, but...* "I'm looking forward to seeing you in person again, my cute little pet."

"Hey, what did we decide about calling me pet?"

"That I could only do it if I recognized that you weren't *actually* my pet, and that it's only an endearing nickname."

"Good, just wanted to make sure you remembered. If you're lucky, it might soon be wife."

"Only if Celestia tries playing her hoof, of course. We shall see which way the wind blows. With enough allies, you might not even *need* my support."

"Maybe. But I always like having you around anyway. Your bright smile just lights up the room."

"Flattery will get you many places, including straight into my bed. Keep that up and I might forget all the times you used that horrid short version of my name."

"You know you like it, Moonie."

"...Perhaps. Apparently edging you isn't as much of a punishment as I thought. I'll try to think of something else. It shouldn't be difficult."

"I look forward to it, Moonie," I sweetly replied.

"Then until we meet again, my succulent morsel." She placed her mirror down before I could reply, leaving me looking at my own slightly blushing face.

"Man, she is so fucking sexy."

"You have problems," Aqua stuffily replied.

I couldn't really deny that, so I put the mirror back in the cabinet and continued reading.