

Chapter Sixty-Three—This is why I don't follow orders

"Nav, we need to talk," Celestia told me.

"I ain't saying a damn word until we go somewhere that isn't this room," I answered. We were in the sitting room. *The sitting room.*

She rolled her eyes. "Don't be a foal."

I crossed my arms and just stared at her. I was wearing my ring, so if she didn't give in after a few minutes, I was planning on just leaving.

Thankfully, she wasn't in any mood to deal with waiting. "Fine. If you're going to be like that, we can go somewhere else."

Her horn lit up and the large window opened. She walked over to it and jumped out into the garden. I followed her. She sat beneath a magic cherry blossom tree that seemed to be in bloom all throughout spring. I joined her.

"Now, what's this task that I'm going to hate?" I asked.

"We will get to that. First, I want to... I want to talk about what happened yesterday."

"You mean Cadance drunkenly barging into my room and demanding I fuck her?"

She blinked. "...No. Well yes, but later." She took a deep breath and slowly let it out. "You've become a monster. I can count the number of times that I have cried in the last three thousand years on one of your hands. When Starswirl died. When Ponero burned." *Wait, what?* "When I had to banish my sister... And now, when I've treated you like a monster until you finally became one. There are no words for the regret I feel."

She sounded depressed, that's for sure. "Okay." She waited for more. "So are we going to talk about what I have to do now?"

She hung her head. "I don't understand you, Nav... I just wanted to be your friend..."

"Then maybe you should talk to Twilight about what friends are, because you obviously failed that lesson. Friends don't make friends go to shitty hellholes to get raped. Friends don't make friends kill. Friends help friends, they don't cover up the actions of others. Celestia, you're a terrible friend. By all rights, I should call you a terrible person, but I'm not going to. Not like you'd change anything anyway. Honestly, I don't even know why we're talking about this. Yeah, I know you feel bad. But you're not going to do anything about it. So how about we stop playing the 'fish for good feels' game and get on with it?"

I think she wanted to cry again. I didn't care. Even if they *were* real tears, I felt justified in causing them. *At this point, most people would probably either start hugging me or start trying to get away.* Her front legs were twitching, like she wanted to.

Her horn lit up and her crown floated away from her head, landing in the grass. "I never wanted to be a princess," she sighed, flopping down onto the grass. "I just wanted to save ponies... Be a healer. I was the best in so many years... Then *he* came and tore it all away... Life isn't fair, Nav, and it certainly isn't easy. I know that better than you can ever imagine. But when you're all that's left of an entire advanced race and all you're left with are the dregs..."

Somepony's gotta take over." She rolled onto her side and curled up. "We knew it would be hard, rebuilding. It was more than we could ever imagine. All the ideals the alicorns strove for were lost in the break. The ponies were hateful and jealous of us, since we were still whole. And the changelings..." She let out a disgusted noise. "Chrysalis deserves extinction and worse for taking that deal. But we persevered until we got to where you see us today. And not a single day goes by that I don't wish he never showed up and that I became a healer and died six thousand years ago of old age."

I had no idea what the fuck she was talking about. I could make some connections between that and what Chrysalis said, but I was still pretty lost.

I reached over and grabbed her crown. "Back where I come from, we have a saying. 'Life sucks and then you die.'" I put the crown back on her head. "You aren't dead yet, so you better believe it's gonna keep sucking. I think we both know what would happen if you quit."

"I want to live in your world for just five minutes, to see what it's like that it could create such phrases."

"We have worse. Now stop whining and tell me what I have to do so I can get it over with."

She unbalanced herself and sat up. "I hate you sometimes," she said with a sigh. "But your advice is usually good, even if it's harsh and painful. Explain what happened with Cadance."

I did. If Celestia had hands, she would have been rubbing her temples. "Have you spoken to her since?" she asked after a few moments.

"Nope. I wouldn't be surprised if she was sleeping off a hangover. Shouldn't be that hard to deal with her. She shows up blushing profusely, stammers an apology, promises never to do it again, I say we pretend it never happened, and things go back to cat and mouse between us."

"And Shining Armor?"

I shrugged. "Not my problem. He seemed understanding, though I don't think he was actually interested in me fucking his wife. Understandable, honestly. I seem to have a way with women." Not usually on purpose.

"I still can't believe Cadance would even do that. And it was because of her heat cycle?"

I shrugged. "That's what Shiny said. I think it was also because I told her no. She's a princess, not used to hearing that word. It made her seriously want me. That's my guess for the reason, at least. Enough of her. What is this task I'm going to hate?"

She finally put a smile on, which I knew was a bad sign. "Do you remember the assassin that tried to kill Cadance?" I nodded. "We believe we know who sent her. You're going undercover to find proof."

"I see a few problems with that plan already," I said when she paused. "But go ahead. Tell me why I'm going to hate it."

"You obviously can't go undercover as a human. That would be silly. And a stallion would be too noticeable. A single mother desperately seeking any job she can find, though..." Her grin turned into a smile. "What do you think about working as a maid?"

“Okay, this plan just went full retard. Keep going, so I can explain why every single aspect of it is wrong.”

“The griffin you’ll be working for believes that ponies are inferior in almost every single aspect. The only servants he hires are ponies. He tends to treat them rather well, or so our sources say. He just doesn’t think ponies should have any kind of power at all. He has a position open that has now been filled by one Feather Duster, an inexperienced maid that’s hurting for bits. She’s been allowed to bring her daughter with her. When you get there, you are to snoop around as best you can while still doing your job until you find any proof that he was the one that ordered the assassination. If you are unable to find any evidence after three weeks, you’ll report that you’ve been offered a better position and leave.”

“Alright, and here’s why that’s retarded: No one would stop you from teleporting in, ripping the information from his mind, and teleporting him out to be judged for his crimes. And if you find out that he wasn’t guilty, you could remove the fact that you were ever there from his mind and teleport out again just as quickly. Here’s another reason: I don’t know how to use my hooves to hold a damn thing. I can’t even put clothes on as a pony. I just don’t know how. You pick things up with your hooves like it makes sense, but it just doesn’t. So I couldn’t be a maid. Here’s a third: If anything happened, I couldn’t defend myself since I can’t fight as a pony at all. I couldn’t fly away because I don’t get much flight practice as a pony. And a fourth: I don’t have a cutie mark. Fifth: You’re just doing this to get me in a maid outfit. Sixth: There is no number six. Seven: If I get caught, I’m fucked, and you better believe I’ll sell your ass out in an instant. Eight: You could get a changeling to do this, a changeling that’s actually used to infiltrating. Nine: You could get a royal guard to do it. Ten: Did you even fucking think about this? Seriously.”

“I can’t just pop in and steal away a citizen of another nation. I need proof before I act.”

“Fuck yes you can. You’re a tyrant, Celestia. You’re so politically powerful that you can do whatever you want and the griffins couldn’t do a damn thing. Especially if you could find proof that it was him. And if you find that he wasn’t the one that did it, just make him forget and no one would ever know.”

“It would be a scandal that I can’t afford.”

“Because using a spy is any better? There is absolutely no reason to send me to snoop for evidence when you could teleport into his bedroom while he’s asleep, steal the information from his mind, find the proof that he’s the one that ordered the assassination, and then give the information to the king or whoever you would have to give it to. You would never be caught and you might as well have just used a spy. In fact, you could tell everyone that’s what you did. You’re sending me there to send me there and for no other reason. Shit, an even easier way to do it: Teleport in, cast your lie detecting spell, and ask him if he’s the one that did it.”

Silence ruled in the garden. Celestia was just staring at me. I was just staring right back.

“Navarone, it should come as no surprise to you that Luna was normally the one that dealt with problems of this nature. I dealt in the open politics while she handled the problems,

big and small. What you just said is exactly what she did two thousand years ago to a small-time political rival that was making a lot of noise. I did not even think about that until now. It was in a case similar to this one, too.”

“How did it end?”

“Perfectly. The stallion wasn’t guilty of what we thought he was guilty of. Oh, he was a rabble rouser, but he was an innocent one.”

“If this is Luna’s domain, why am I even dealing with this? Shouldn’t she be doing it? Or shouldn’t I be getting the orders from her?”

“She has not picked up all of her duties yet,” she answered with a shrug. “You don’t take a thousand year break and remember everything perfectly. I imagine that she’ll start getting back into the groove soon, but she’s still doing some catching up.”

“Back to the task at hand, though: There’s no reason for me to do this charade. You admit that doing it my way works perfectly.”

She sighed. “Yes. Very well, Navarone. However, I still need a focal point to get there. You will be that focal point, which means that you will have to continue the act until night falls. You are scheduled to arrive in the early morning.” She paused. “This was supposed to be a punishment, Navarone. This was not supposed to be a lecture on how much better humans are at dealing with problems.”

“I can’t imagine it’ll be that fun anyway. I still have to fucking get there. And pretend to be a pony for some time.”

“You know, I could just turn you into a maid here for a week or two since you talked your way out of the punishment up there.”

“That’s just sadistic. You would torture me just to torture me. I wouldn’t be surprised if you molested me, too. A task? Yeah, that makes sense. A task that requires me to be a maid? Stupid, but I could make it work. Making me a maid for the sake of making me a maid? No. That’s just inviting disaster. I’d probably fail anyway, just because I can’t snoop as a pony because I can’t open anything with hooves. I can’t even open doors.”

“Nav, do I need to show you how to do things as a pony? Shouldn’t it be common sense?”

“No, you don’t, because I have no plans on ever being a pony longer than absolutely necessary. Absolutely fuck that noise.”

She shrugged. “I can’t say I agree with you, but I know I felt terrible as a human. I would not ask anypony—or anyone—to live as something they were not born and raised as.” I opened my mouth to retort, but she added, “For any longer than is necessary.”

I shrugged. I always considered the willing betrayal of one’s race in such a manner as the worst kind of evil, and the forceful act of turning someone into another race the second worst kind of evil. Well, not *always* considered it as that; that belief only started when I realized that it was possible. But that’s a subject for another time. “So when am I supposed to leave? And how am I supposed to get Taya there?”

“You leave tonight. You’ll carry Taya on your back, like a normal pegasus mother with a nonpegasus child. You’ll have a spy lead you to where you’ll camp, and he will fill you in on the details. You’ll go to meet the griffin in the morning.”

“Awesome. Now, one more thing: If you don’t show up the first night, I’m going full inquisitorial agent on this fucker and kicking his ass until he gives me the details. So you better fucking show up. No saying you’ll come the first night and then making me cool my hooves for a week so you can giggle at me as a maid. That’s just a warning for you.”

She blinked in surprise. “I have not had a servant as wily and intelligent as you since Starswirl himself was alive. Very well, I will hold to my word. One question, though: What is an inquisitorial agent?”

“Back on Earth, there was a group called the Inquisition a few hundred years before I was alive. They worked for the Catholic Church. Their job was to root out heresy and witchcraft and all that fun stuff. They had the authority to do pretty much whatever they wanted. This did not usually end well.”

She sighed. “Every time I speak to you, more and more questions are raised. What is heresy? What is witchcraft? What is the Catholic Church? Whenever you speak to a pony, it is as though you assume we know what you know.”

“Usually when I don’t explain things it is because I don’t want you to know. Heresy is something that goes against a religion. Witchcraft is consorting with the devil or with spirits for magic that didn’t actually exist. The Catholic Church was the biggest religious group in Europe for a very long time.”

“Even more questions! What is religion and the devil?”

I waved a hand. “Not important.”

“No. It *is* important. You have brought up religion multiple times and you have never once explained it. Do so.”

I popped my neck. “Humanity is inherently flawed for one reason: We refuse to accept ignorance. If we find a mystery, that mystery will be answered, even if the answer does not always make sense. In recent years, we have begun to use science to answer the questions we have. Before we had the tools to use science, though, we looked at each other and asked, ‘Where did we come from? How were we created?’ The idea of a higher power was made, something above us humans that created us and the Earth and the stars. However, humans were and are fragmentary. There was a time when some groups on the planet thought they were alone, or that there were no people farther than the next tribe over. So, many of the ideas of a higher power are vastly different. But anyway, this idea of a higher power was taken to another level by some groups. If this being created us, it has the power to destroy us. If it can destroy us, we must give it a reason not to do so. And thus, worship of those higher powers began. The higher powers are gods and the worship of them is religion. Some religions stayed powerful and grew past the boundaries of the original tribe as groups grew and expanded. The Catholic Church was one branch of a larger religion called Christianity, which was itself an offshoot of a religion called

Judaism. The entire history of religion is convoluted, long, and we could sit here and talk about it for hours and hours. But in a nutshell, that's religion."

Celestia thought for a moment before narrowing her eyes. "You're leaving something out."

"I just gave you ten thousand years of history in two minutes. No shit I left some things out."

"No, something big. Something you should have mentioned."

I shrugged. "War. It always boils down to war. Religion has been used as an excuse by humanity to do terrible, terrible things. You are reasonable, and would not judge an entire race by the actions of a few. The same can be said of religion. You can't judge a religion for the actions of some people in it. Most of the humans that have ever lived were not evil. They used religion as a way of defining their life, of giving them morals and meaning. They learned from the books of religion—the Bible and the Torah and the Quran and others—not war, but how to be a better person. Some took the lessons in the books the wrong way and turned to war. This was not the original intent, it was just a bastardization of it."

"I know, Navarone. I may be a tyrant, but I am a benevolent tyrant. If the subjects have been misled by a ruler, I do not blame the subjects. That is why I took mercy on the changelings and the night ponies my sister commanded a thousand years ago. I do not condemn you or humanity for the actions of a few. From what you have told me, I do not assume humans are evil. There is a hint of chaos within you, but that does not mean you are evil or bad. It just means that you are different from ponies, who seem more aligned with order." She shrugged. "But we have gotten off topic."

"You're the one that asked and then demanded that I answer."

"One more question. Do you believe in any religions?"

"When I got to Equestria, I was a Christian. I lost my faith less than a year later. I still believe in him, but I know he doesn't believe in me. So why worship?"

She looked away. "Oh." She sounded a little hurt.

"Anyway. So when we cap this mofo, my debt is paid?"

"...What?"

"When we find out if this guy is guilty or not, is my debt paid?"

She blinked. "Give me a direct translation of what you said. I am interested in the language you keep using, the one I can't understand."

I sighed. "This is what I said: So when we capture this motherfucker, my debt is paid? What I originally used was a heavy dialect. I've done that before a number of times. It's a bad habit that I need to break, but I'm so used to talking like that it's hard to. Now, answer the question."

"Yes, Navarone. When we determine his guilt or innocence, you are free."

"Bitchin. Imma go take a shower, unless you need me for anything else."

She sighed. "Translation?"

“Awesome. I’m going to go take a shower.”

She nodded. “Very well. I need to return to my court anyway.”

“Oh, and don’t tell anyone else about what religion is. I don’t want to deal with that shit.”

She nodded. “As usual, our conversations are private. There are many that would hate you for what you have told me, and I would not have that.”

Well, that’s comforting.

When I got to my room, I found that Taya was now awake and reading through what I had written while I was in Flankfurt. “We’re going to griffin lands,” I told her. “We leave tonight. Long story short, Celestia went full retard. I’m going to be a mare and I’ll have to pretend to be a maid for a day. Don’t tell anyone. Be prepared for anything and if I give you an order, you need to follow it. Alright?”

“...What?”

“Look, it’s not important. The important thing is that you need to do whatever I tell you to do when we get where we’re going. Can you do that for me?”

She slowly nodded. “That’s easy enough. Will you be in danger?”

“Probably not. I’m bringing a few surprises, just in case. And it’ll only be for a day. Now, think of something you want to do when I get out of the shower. No reason to be cooped inside all day.”

She went back to reading as I walked into the bathroom. A shower later, I walked out with a towel around my waist, having forgotten to get clothes. I walked in to find Cadance trying to apply a hair bow to a struggling Taya.

I sighed, undid my towel, rolled it up, and popped Cadance on her ass. She spun around with a loud yelp, letting Taya go. Taya scrambled to my side as I reapplied the towel. The bow was quickly thrown onto the ground and burned. “Don’t light things on fire over the carpet, Taya,” I admonished. The fire petered out and what was left of the bow melted. “Better. Cadance, what do you want?”

She had been glaring at Taya, then staring at the bow as it died. When I said that, she moved her eyes to me. Her mouth dropped when she saw how emaciated I was.

“Hey, my eyes are up here, you pervert.”

She flinched and looked up at me. “Are... are you healthy?”

“No. Now what did you want? And why are you fucking with Taya? Do I need to slap a bitch?”

She blinked a few times and shook her head. “I... I wanted to apologize. I wasn’t in my right mind...”

“You were drunk and you were in heat. There is no bad blood here. Just don’t do it again. But why me?”

She looked away. “You’re always... Well, talking about it. I assumed you of all ponies would help.”

I sighed and went to sit on the bed. Taya followed me, edging away from Cadance. “I gave Shiny some advice and tips. I can give you some as well, but Taya will have to wait outside if you really want them. Either way, I am not a whore and I do not fuck everything that moves. Now, why were you bothering Taya?”

“She would be much cuter with a bow!”

I looked to Taya. “Do you think you would be much cuter with a bow?”

Taya nodded.

“Do you *want* to be much cuter?”

She shook her head.

I looked to Cadance. “There you go.”

Cadance looked rather confused. “Why wouldn’t you want to look cuter?”

We both looked to Taya. She looked pained. I pulled her to my side. “You don’t have to answer that if you don’t want to.” She was silent. I looked back to Cadance. “Do you know anything we could do today, before we leave? I don’t know anything about Canterlot other than that I don’t like it.”

She was looking at Taya with concern. I felt the same concern, but if Taya didn’t want to talk about it, I wasn’t going to make her. I myself know how hard it is to discuss something that pains you, and I know from Chrysalis that Taya had been through something terrible, though I didn’t know the details.

After a moment, Cadance answered, “There are a number of parks in town and around the palace you could go to. And two of my bride’s maids—your friends, I believe—are in town, if you want to do anything with them.” I thought they had left. “I don’t think you would be interested in any of the plays that are showing today.” I saw a smile show up on her face. “If you wanted to do something with your friends, I could watch Taya for you.”

“That would not be necessary. There is really nothing to do in a city the size of Canterlot but go to a park or a play?”

She hummed. “Well, if you’re interested in magic, you could visit the Tower of the Unicorns. It is where the most powerful magic is done. The entire place is covered in protective wards, because some of the spells they practice inside are so dangerous that they could annihilate half the city. If you’re interested in debating, you can visit the Rhetorician’s Hall. All manner of subjects are discussed and debated there. If you like history, there’s the small museum. There are only a few curators and they’re all weird, though. If you prefer art, there’s the art museum. If you like fighting, you could watch the guards practice or you could watch the wrestling matches. There’s also a few libraries, a few public pools, going on walks, going shopping... There’s a lot to do here, it’s just that some of them take more knowledge of the city to know about and some of them only pertain to certain interests.”

I nodded once. “We’re going to the Unicorn Tower thing. Where is it?”

She looked at Taya again for a moment before looking back to me. “You aren’t going to let her decide?”

“Taya is interested in magic anyway, but I have questions for some of the unicorns there. If I had known there was such a place, those questions would have been asked sooner. Now, where is it?”

She shrugged and gave me directions. It was actually outside of town, presumably for safety reasons. “What kind of questions do you want answered?”

“Nothing you would be interested in, I’m sure. We can talk about your bedroom problems later. I want to get them working on this before I leave.”

She raised an eyebrow. “And just *what* is so important?”

I grinned. “Opening a portal between your world and mine. If it’s possible, just think of the applications. If nothing else... I could finally say goodbye. I could give my family at least that little bit of closure.” *And maybe say fuck you to the ponies by never coming back.*

She looked pensive, understandably so. “Wouldn’t that be risky? What if your people don’t like us?”

I shrugged. “Then the ponies will all die. But that won’t happen. Everyone on my planet has been dreaming for ages of meeting another race, of finally finding that we aren’t alone. If we could link our worlds, just think of all that could be shared! I know it’s unlikely. I mean, if Twilight couldn’t send me back, what are the chances these guys could open a portal like that? Still, I have to ask them.” Besides, even if they do manage to figure out how to open the portal, there’s a good chance Celestia would stop them before it could be done.

Cadance shook her head. “It still seems like a bad idea to me, but I won’t try to stop you. Are you sure you don’t want me to watch Taya?”

I looked to Taya. “Do you want to be watched by Cadance?”

There was a long moment of silence. Finally, she said, “Yes.”

I blinked. “Wait, what?”

Cadance was just as taken aback. “Really?” She sounded shocked and happy.

Taya weakly nodded.

“Well then. Cadance, I trust you know how to deal with her?”

She grinned. “I’ve been taking care of fillies for years, Nav! Don’t you worry.”

Taya looked slightly worried, but she hopped off the bed anyway. She gulped before saying in a weak voice, “I’ll see you when you get back, daddy...”

“Uh... Have fun, I guess?” I was kind of unsure about this. I had no idea why Taya was doing it. She chose it, though, and I wasn’t about to stop her. “Remember, her wings are sensitive, so if she starts doing anything you don’t like, use magic to break them and run for it.” Cadance lightly kicked me. “Yeah, yeah. You two go on, now. I need to get dressed.”

“I’ll bring her back before you have to leave, Nav,” Cadance said. I nodded, and with that they both left.

“Strange as fuck,” I muttered when the door closed behind them. I shook my head as I went to find some clothes. Thankfully, it looked like one of the servants took my dirty clothes and did laundry. Those saints don’t get enough recognition.

Fully dressed and appropriately covered in nonmagical weapons, I jumped out the window to fly to the tower thing. I was able to save a lot of time in getting there since Taya wasn't with me, but I still think I would have preferred her going.

According to Cadance, there was an official and very heavily enforced no-fly zone over the tower, so I landed in front of the gate and walked up to the two unicorn guards. "Can I go in?" I asked.

They looked at me. "Purpose of visit?" one asked.

"Questions to be asked and perhaps services to be requested," I answered.

"Length of stay?"

I looked up at the sky for a moment to judge the time. I looked back at him and said, "Less than six hours."

The two guards looked at each other for a moment before turning back to me. "Can you be more specific?"

I shrugged and said, "No. It depends on how long it takes to find someone who is able or willing to answer my questions. But I'm leaving before night falls."

They shared another short look. "The reason we ask is because we have to hit you with a ward that protects you against magic. We can give it a time, but once it's there it's there. You will not be able to fly as easily with it on you."

I waved a hand, "That's not a problem. I have a ring that'll do it for me."

"Prove it."

I slid my hand into a pocket and put the ring on. "Give me your best shot."

Both of their horns lit up and fire shot at me. Nothing happened. It abated after a moment. They both nodded. "Very well. You may enter. If you need assistance, the secretary at the front desk will be able to direct you to where you want to go."

"Thanks, mate." The gates opened and in I went. I was able to see some of the grounds when I flew in, but actually getting inside and seeing the ground view gave it another level. The ground surrounding this place was a fucking warzone. There was no grass anywhere. The ground that wasn't singed black and burned was crackling and dry, presumably washed clean by rain. Holes of various depths dotted the landscape like artillery rounds between the no-man's-land. Even as I was watching, I saw a lightning bolt arc away from a window in the tower and strike a massive hole in the ground. I could feel the earth shake from where I was. Two unicorns were practicing some kind of combat magic to my right, with a third standing by presumably to heal either one if something went wrong. Closer to the tower, four unicorns were doing some manner of moving obstacle course with a mix of teleporting and blasting things out of their way. From what I could tell, the one that moved his body the least was the one winning. I could see another group doing something. If I had to guess, I would say they were practicing illusions that I couldn't see because of my ring.

There was a floating rock above and to the left of the tower, tethered to it by a chain with links the size of ponies. The rock looked big enough to house at least two hundred people, if it

was hollowed out. A staircase was carved into the rock, spiraling from the door in the bottom to one near the top. It reminded me of the floating rock above Vivec from Morrowind. I could see a pony traversing the staircase, going to the top.

That's not even describing the tower. Long story short, I could not believe I had never noticed this place before. I say tower, but the tower was only a part of it. It was a building of sorts with a tower rising to the heavens. The entire thing was glossy with some kind of protection enchantment. If I had to guess, I would say the building material was raw steel. It looked like metal, at least. Archaic runes were carved into the building every few feet. I had no idea what any of them said. The building did not have the typical fanciful Canterlot building style, but was instead built in a utilitarian fortress style, to either keep something in or keep something out.

And then there was the tower. It rose straight up into the sky. There were several offshoots and balconies on it, some with plants and some seemingly empty. Near the top, several floating orbs of various colors circled the top, floating and twirling around each other. I could just barely make out ponies sitting on some of them. The tower had to have been forty storeys tall. As I looked on, I saw one of the ponies on an orb jump off. My mouth dropped, but halfway to the ground, I saw his eyes open and glow a pure white and his horn light up like the sun as his body was consumed by fire. Wings of fire burst from his back and he gracefully caught the wind, pulling out of his dive and skimming the blackened ground before his horn lit up again and he disappeared, the wings continuing on in his wake for several feet before dissipating.

I had a feeling I was going to like this place.

I took a quick look around when I got inside and noticed how comfortable the place looked. It wasn't like the perfectly well-kept lobby of a bank, but more like the homey anteroom of a large mansion. The only odd addition was the front desk with a bored looking pegasus behind it. She looked up when I walked in and her eyes went wide. "You!"

I sighed. "Yeah. Me."

She grinned. "I remember you from a party last year! You and that dragon were something else!"

I blinked. I wasn't expecting that at all. "Yeah... I got drugged and don't remember any of it. Did you enjoy it, at least?"

She nodded, her grin going lecherous. "Oh, you could say that... Have you ever thought about doing it again?"

I fluttered my wings. "Doing... what? Getting drugged? I think I'd prefer to be sober, especially if there's going to be a big orgy afterwards."

She sighed wistfully. "I don't know if it would be the same... You were just so dominant!" She was wearing a smile that I could only describe as kind of creepy. "Are you sure you don't want to do it again?"

I was saved from having to answer by a loud gasp. "AN ESCAPEE!" That was followed by a spike of ice flying directly at me. I dodged before I even realized what I was doing and

jumped behind the nearest cover I could find. I didn't know where the attack was coming from, but I quickly loaded my crossbow just in time to hear a bolt of magic hitting my cover.

I stood up to aim at where I thought it was coming from, but a screamed, "STOP!" halted me. The pegasus was hovering in front of a unicorn that was staring daggers at me. She was frantically gesturing in my direction, a hard feat with hooves. His expression quickly turned into confusion, then embarrassment. The pegasus flittered over to where I was in cover. "Sorry about that. Some of the researchers here don't get out much."

"I've been here for more than four years!"

She shrugged. "Like I said, they don't get out much."

I sighed and slung the crossbow. "No harm done. Tell me, is there a research area that specializes in interdimensional travel? Or, failing that, temporal mechanics?"

She grimaced at the second one. "Ever since the dragon incident, the temporal researchers aren't accessible by just anypony. I can let you talk to the interdimensional researchers with no problem. They don't do anything anyway."

"Would a knight be able to talk to the temporal guys? It's kind of important."

One of her eyebrows rose. "Personal kinda important or princess kinda important?"

"Personal."

She pursed her lips. "I'll ask. In the meantime, I'll send you to the interdimensional ponies. You should get bored of them soon enough. Come this way, please." She turned and walked toward a platform I hadn't noticed until now. "Step right up into the circle." I did as she asked and took my ring off. "This might feel uncomfortable if you aren't used to teleportation."

"I'll be fine."

She shrugged and said, "Level five." She pulled a lever and everything went white.

I shook my head clear and found that I was standing on a platform presumably five levels up. There was no one else in the room with me. I shrugged, put my ring back on, and left that room. On the other side of the door across the hall was a directory. I quickly found out that interdimensional studies were given about the same respect in this culture as underwater basket weaving was given in ours. I spotted rooms for things like quill improving, bookbinding, theoretical zombie killing—no joke—and the science of humor in magic. I sighed and started walking to the interdimensional room, hoping this trip wouldn't be a waste of time.

I saw no one at all in the halls as I walked. It was eerily silent.

And then a tentacled eldritch abomination destroyed a door and lurched into the hallway right in front of me. I jumped backwards, screaming and pulling up my crossbow.

"NO, BAD FLUFFY! WE DON'T BREAK DOORS!"

I heard a loud whimpering coming from the middle of the mass of tentacles.

"What the fuck is wrong with this place?!" I gasped.

A pony squeezed his head past the tentacles and saw me. "Oh, hi! I see you met Fluffy. Don't worry about him, he's a softy." His front hooves squeezed past and he pulled himself out of the room. "He gets stuck in doors sometimes, though. But when you gotta go, I guess you

gotta go.”

I felt my wings sag as I put the crossbow up yet again. “Whatever. So are you the interdimensional guy?”

“One of them, yeah. There are four of us, now. There used to be more, but... Well, not all of them got along with Fluffy here after we accidentally summoned him. We also used to have a much better office space. But if you want to talk with the others, just go right on in. I have to take him outside before he makes another mess.”

I felt like face-palming so hard. “Yeah. I’ll just... wait until you get out of the way. I don’t want to touch that thing.”

“Oh, he’s not so bad. A little slimy, but you get used to it. Fluffy, come!” The unicorn started walking down the hall and the eldritch abomination finally got out of the doorway and started rolling down the hall. I saw two eyestalks watching me.

“...Flying spaghetti monster?” I quietly asked.

It raised one of its tentacles to what I assumed was a mouth kinda thing. From the looks of things, he was telling me to be quiet. I shrugged and entered the room. Everyone looked up when I stepped in.

“OH CELESTIA NO! THE GOVERNMENT FINALLY CAME FOR ME!” one of the unicorns screamed before immediately teleporting away.

“That’s it, I’m done.” I turned around and walked out. I heard more teleporting behind me and came face-to-air with a unicorn that was staring at me in the hall. I looked down at him. “Yes?”

“Don’t mind him. He’s always been really paranoid about the princess and her knights. Don’t know why. Please don’t go. We get few enough visitors that we wouldn’t want to scare any of them away.”

I sighed and walked back in. I saw the paranoid guy was back and he flinched when he saw me. I looked around and saw a relatively large lab type area with a massive animal feeding bowl in one corner with Fluffy engraved into it. Several pieces of equipment were scattered around. I had no idea what most of it did, but I was familiar with some of it due to Twilight.

“So how can we help you?” the reasonable guy asked as he followed me in.

“Long story short, I have two theories for where I came from in relation to here. Half of those theories involve me coming from another dimension. If that is the case, I want to know if a portal can be opened between the two dimensions.”

They shared looks. The reasonable guy said, “For those of us that don’t know your history, can you tell us about what brought you here?”

“Twilight motherfucking Sparkle.” Everyone got a glint of recognition in their eyes and some made a few noises of sympathy. “She got bored one day and decided to cast a spell that would summon the most dangerous thing in the world. Here I am. Clearly, she fucked up. How bad her fuckup was, though, is the question. My other theory is that I came from a time so far distant in the past that only relics remain of my people. I’m planning on talking to the temporal

guys later.”

“So you want us to try to open a portal between our worlds?” the reasonable one asked.

“Yeah. Well, I want to know if you can do it, and if you can, will you?”

“It’s certainly possible...” one of them mused. He walked over to a table with paper on it and started writing something. “How close is your world to ours?”

“Change all the sentient races here to humans and remove all the magic and there’s no difference at all. There are a number of geography changes, I think, but the continents seem to be in mostly the same places.”

He started writing. “That points to two possibilities. One, Sparkle’s spell was powerful enough to reach through time. Two, her spell was able to reach to dimensions very close to ours. Or a third option that involves her just really, really bucking up. Knowing Twilight, we can’t discount that.” He looked up. “Do you have an anchor?”

“Do I look like a fucking boat to you?”

He blinked. “No? I mean, do you have any objects from your home?”

I opened my mouth to tell him no, but paused. I checked my pockets. “Holy shit, how do I still have these?” I pulled out a glove and passed it to him.

He fiddled around with it in his hooves for a few moments. “What is this made of? I’ve never felt anything like it.”

“Um. You don’t want to know.” He looked up, an eyebrow raised. “Alright, you have to understand first that humans are the only intelligent species on the planet. Nothing else has sapience.”

“...And?”

“That’s dried animal flesh.”

He dropped it like it was on fire.

I shrugged. “You asked. So do you think you can open a portal or what?”

One of the others stepped up to the table. “It’s certainly possible. The only real success we had was with Fluffy, but that ended up being considerably more of a failure when we found out that he preferred eating interns over puppy chow. We managed to wean him off them, but the damage to our reputation was done at that point. Ever since then, we’ve been trying to find a way to regain what we lost. Having an actual item that might be from another dimension... If we can pull this off, it’s sure to put us back on level one!”

“Assuming he’s actually from another dimension,” one of the others said, stepping up to the table. “But even if he’s not, we might be able to work with temporal. We’re better at dealing with portals than they are, after all. Who knows? Maybe that can at least get us off this terrible floor.”

I love interfactional politics. Especially when I’m not involved. “Can you guys send me any word if you make any progress? I’m based in Ponyville as of right now. And please don’t hurt that glove. That’s one of the only things I have left of my old life.”

“No promises about the glove. We’ll send word if we make a breakthrough of a literal or

metaphorical sense.”

“So what floor are the time guys on?” I asked. “I’ll stop by there before I leave.”

“First, of course,” one of them said without looking up from the calculations or whatever.

I shrugged and stepped over the broken remnants of their door. I had the small kindling of hope burning in me for the first time in a long time as I walked back to the teleporting pad. I knew it was probably going to be quickly doused, but it was still worth holding onto.

I got back to the teleporting pad and said, “Floor one,” and pulled the lever. An instant later, I was standing back in the lobby. I popped my neck as I walked back up to the desk. “Any word on me getting permission?”

She nodded. “I checked. As a knight, you have the right to enter almost any part of the tower. The only place that’s off-limits is the Orb.” At my raised eyebrow she explained, “The big floating rock. I don’t know why it’s called the Orb since it isn’t an orb, but that’s what it’s called. That is where the most powerful magic of all time is performed.” She shrugged. “The place gives me the creeps. It just hangs there, unmoving.”

“Yeah, it’s definitely not normal. Where are the guys I want to talk to?”

She pointed to a door behind her. “I have to warn you before stepping into that hall... It’s different. Oh, the hall itself looks fine. It doesn’t even look all that long. But it’s a mix of magic and visual tricks that essentially makes the entire thing seem endless. Without knowing any of the shortcuts, you have to just keep walking until you find the room you’re looking for.”

I looked at the door for a moment and shrugged. “I’m used to walking.”

Half an hour later, I was very bored of walking through an endless empty white hall. The building had no right to be that big. When I finally found the correct room, I let out a sigh of relief. This place had been starting to piss me off. I opened the door and let myself in.

I immediately found myself looking back at the hall. I turned around to the hall that I left and saw more hall. I leaned back and looked at the plaque next to the door. It said ‘Temporal Mechanics.’ I backed up and closed the door. I kicked the fucker in and found a few very surprised looking ponies. “Sup?” I casually asked as I walked in.

“Why did you kick in our door?” one of them asked.

“Because when I opened it, I found more hall. That shit pissed me off. Can you help me with something?”

“You kicked in our door!”

“Yeah, that’s what it gets for pissing me off. I don’t see what that has to do with you helping me or not.” It was at that point that I decided to actually take a look around the room. A few windows showed various scenes from places all around the world. When I actually thought to look closer, I realized they were all the same location, but in different times. Some wildlife was actually moving in them. The room itself was a cozy place with a few bookcases full of old but well-maintained tomes and the occasional scroll. Various couches and lounges were scattered around the room, and it looked more like a philosopher’s den than a laboratory. Seven ponies

were sitting around the couches. Two of them had pipes and funny hats. One of the funny hat guys was the one that was talking to me.

The one that was speaking sighed. "What do you need help with?"

I stepped in farther, gently kicking the door closed. "I think that when I was summoned, I was summoned from the past. I want to know if this can be confirmed and if it can, I want a portal to be opened so I can go back."

He rolled his eyes. "Even if you did come from some time in the past, sending you back now could disrupt the entire timeline. The effect you would have is unimaginable. It isn't worth the risk."

"That's not even how time travel works," I answered.

He scoffed. "And how would *you* know that?"

"Because I live with Twilight motherfucking Sparkle." They all groaned. "She was actually stupid enough to send herself back in time by, like, a week. It was then that I realized that time is not a river with separate branches of different things happening. Time is an ocean. If I get sent back in time now, that means I already did whatever it is I would do when I was sent back in time. So there are absolutely no consequences of time traveling. Either you did it and what you changed was already changed, or you didn't do it and nothing goes wrong. The only point of contention I should have to argue is why you should help send me back in time, not if time traveling is too dangerous to even contemplate."

The fellow in the hat that wasn't talking smirked at the one that had been. "I always told you! Ever since we started, I told you! Consequences my flank." He jumped up and walked over to one of the tables. His horn lit up and some books flew over from a bookcase. "Even if it took a mare as dangerously single-minded as Twilight to prove me right, I'm *still* right." He opened one of the books, read a few lines, let his horn light up, and he popped out of view. He reappeared a second later. "And now I just told myself when I was despairing three years ago to hold onto my belief that I was right." He turned to face the others and myself. "So how can we help you?"

I have no idea what just happened. "Long story short, Twilight used a spell to summon me. That spell was supposed to only get things from this world. It got me. I have two theories. One is that she fucked up and pulled me from another dimension. The other is that she fucked up and pulled me from the past. I don't know yet which is true, but I'm leaning toward the past. I want to know if a portal can be opened to connect the past with the future."

He grabbed his hat and pipe and set them on the table before beginning to pace. "It is *possible*... But if you come from the past, something had to have killed off or changed your kind. We don't know what that something is or when it happened. If we open a portal, it is entirely possible that we would run into whatever it was that did it. It's too risky to even contemplate." He stopped and turned to me, pointing a hoof at me. "That does not mean we can't send you back." He set his hoof down and went back to pacing. "There is a spell that allows a pony to go back in time, but the duration of the spell is short and casting it even over short periods of time is hard. We would need a general time period to aim at and we would need a

massive amount of magic power. It is not an easy task you propose. Why do you desire to return?"

"I wanted a portal for cultural and technological exchange. Humans are scientific geniuses, but we have no magic. Ponies are magical and all that, but have no ambition or drive to increase technology. Together, the two races could become powerhouses. And even more importantly, I wanted to save some humans from whatever kills us. Even if it's just a few... That and I'm really getting tired of being alone. Even if I can't stay long in my time, I want to go back home. Selfish, perhaps, but that's what it is."

"Not perhaps," the pony answered, nodding. "Definitely selfish. But there is nothing wrong with that. If you are from the past, you are the only definite link we have to that time. I wouldn't give the chance to check up for anything in the world. Do you know how long ago it might have been?"

I shrugged. "Absolutely no clue at all. I know that if I did come from the past, the Morpheus statue that Luna owns is an artifact from my people. The spear of destiny is probably an artifact of ours. I don't know about any others. And I do have an item that came with me." I pulled out my other glove and held it up. "Do you think any of them would be useful?"

His horn lit up and I let the glove fly to him. "We... might be able to do something with this. If not this, then perhaps one of the other objects. Sadly, there is no test to see where or when a pony—or a human, in this case—comes from. We can tell how old you are, but that isn't the same as when you come from if you skipped a large portion of history." He shrugged. "We'll do what we can, but no promises."

"I never expected any. Doing what you can is enough. If you make any progress, can you let me know?"

He nodded. "Of course. It has been a long time since we had an actual project to work on!" He grinned darkly. "It's about time, too. Now, can we help you with anything else?"

I looked back at the broken door for a moment before looking to the guy. "How do I get back to the entrance?"

He pointed to a closet door. "Take that and go to either end."

I shrugged and stepped through the door. I was put into an identical hallway that was a lot shorter than the others. *Flo, does this place make sense to you?*

"Yes, actually. I could not replicate it or explain it, but it makes sense. To put it in a way that you can understand, reality is folded in this location. I don't know if the ponies did that or if reality was already folded and the ponies took advantage of it."

"Why have you been so silent lately?" I asked as I started walking down the hall.

"You haven't been listening to my advice anyway. Why give it if I am just going to be ignored?"

"So you can say 'I told you so' when it all goes wrong."

She sighed. "That won't make me feel any better when your head is on the chopping block. I know that you've been driven to and beyond your limit, but you really need to start

being more careful with what you say and do.”

“I have no intention of getting killed until after I start saving elementals. Then, all bets are off.”

“If I didn’t know you were joking, that would make me very angry. Even then, you should not joke about something like that, Nav. Life is sacred, and you should not look for ways to throw yours away. Especially if it endangers others around you!” She sighed into my mind. “I suppose it is my due for taking such a torn soul into my service. I can’t wait until I am free, and can protect you the way you deserve.”

“Whoa, now. Shit like that raises red flags with me, you know that.”

“I know, Nav. I would not do anything to you that you would dislike. Even if you are thinking about abandoning me.”

“I never planned to stay home forever. With these wings, I would still probably end up in a lab if I was there for too long. Though if I’m just going for a limited amount of time before we’re automatically pulled back, that shouldn’t be an issue.”

She let out a petulant hmph. And just so you readers are aware, she informed me when I wrote that line that she wasn’t being petulant. Also just so you readers are aware, you’re all terrible people and are going to pony hell for reading my diaries.

Anyway, I reached the end of the hallway with silence in my head. I opened the door and found that I was in the lobby somehow. I sighed and just walked on through. The secretary chick stopped me. “Did you find everything you were looking for?”

“Yep. Got two groups working on my problem now. Hopefully at least half of them will turn something up. Thanks for your help, too.”

She smiled. “You know, I can think of a good way for you to repay me...”

I grinned, knowing where this was going. I opened my mouth to respond when the door exploded and a tentacle monster burst in, holding several squirming ponies in its grasp.

“DAMMIT FLUFFY, WHAT DID I TELL YOU ABOUT DOORS! AND PUT THOSE PONIES DOWN!”

She sighed and said, “Another time, perhaps.” She bent down to grab a rolled up newspaper and flew off toward the abomination. She smacked a few of its tentacles. I figured they knew what they were doing, and skirted around the writhing monster and left the tower.

All in all, that place was weird as fuck.

On Flo’s advice, I walked through Canterlot instead of flying above it. She gave the reasoning that if Taya asked to stay with Cadance, she had a reason, and that I shouldn’t rush her by showing up to get her too soon.

I didn’t really care, myself. If Taya wanted to do that to herself, I wasn’t going to stand in her way. I couldn’t help but wonder if that made me a bad person.

Well, I already knew I was a bad parent, so I guess I don’t really need even more reasons for it.

I got back to the palace with plenty of time to spare. It wasn't even dinner time yet. I was tempted to go and find something to do for a few hours, but I knew Taya would probably be aching to escape Cadance by now. As I walked down the hall to Cadance's room, I was honestly kind of surprised that I didn't hear general bedlam.

I got to Cadance's door and knocked. A moment later, Cadance answered it, her ears low. She perked up a little when she saw me.

"I trust she was no problem?" I asked.

"You... you could say that." She pulled the door open farther and ushered me inside. Taya was sitting in the middle of the floor, staring at Cadance.

I crossed my arms. "Have you been staring at her the entire time?" Taya blinked and rubbed at her eyes before looking at me and nodding. "Taya, that is what we call rude. You could have proven your point just as easily by refusing to stay with her. Now you've gone and spooked one of the few people I have that I can honestly call a friend." She looked away when she realized she was being rebuked. I really didn't want to say this next line, because it always made me feel like shit when I was a kid. "Now what do you say?"

Her ears drooped and she whispered, "I'm sorry."

Cadance hopped over and wrapped her in a hug. "It's okay!"

Taya looked up at me, fear in her eyes. I sighed and said, "Taya, would you kindly wait outside? I have something I need to talk to Cadance about."

Cadance released her and Taya wasted no time in making herself scarce. I claimed a seat and Cadance sat across from me. "So..." she said.

"Some of what I'm about to say is going to be very awkward and you are going to have a hard time even imagining yourself doing them. Listen anyway. Let me tell you about the joys of BDSM and giving rather than receiving..."

A few hours later, a very reluctant Taya was being fastened to my newly feminine equine back. "This is a terrible idea," she announced when she was safely tied onto me.

"For what it's worth, it was an even worse idea twelve hours ago," I answered.

"Stop complaining," Celestia told me. "You're lucky I'm not making you stay there for three weeks."

"Taya, was I complaining?"

"No, you were stating valid issues."

"That's what I thought."

"Navarone, I am very capable of making this worse on you and I have every right to do so. Do not tempt me." I mumbled something mean spirited but didn't say anything too loudly. "That is what I thought. Now hold still, this will sting."

I looked back in time to see her lower her shining horn to my ass. I stiffened as white hot pain seared into my back leg. "FUCKING BITCH!"

"I told you it would sting. Now stop squirming, I have to get the other side." I tried

kicking back at her, but she caught me with magic. The same searing pain hit my other leg. “There. I’ll have to heal you when you get back, but those should pass casual inspection.”

I now had two matching dusters on both flanks. “And why,” I asked through gritted teeth, “did you wait until Taya was on me?”

“To make sure she was securely attached, of course. You didn’t jump around nearly as much as I was expecting. You’re a good little pony, aren’t you?”

I let out a deep breath. “Taya, do something to her to express the hate I feel inside of me right now.”

She turned her head to look Celestia up and down. “She’s not even worth the effort of coming up with an insult.” Celestia jerked back.

“True,” I said with a shrug. “Where are we going? The sooner I can get off my legs the better.”

Celestia looked very deeply insulted, and I took a minute to feel happy that we were the only ones on the balcony. She quickly put on a neutral face again. “You will meet the contact at an inn in Gryphus. The Gilded Griffin, it is called. A silly name, but I’ve heard worse. He will tell you where to go and what to do. Navarone, remember your vocabulary. Everypony, somepony, anypony. If anything goes wrong, call my name. I will be watching, but my attention might be elsewhere. Luna will come at the stroke of midnight tomorrow night. She will wait until you two are alone, if possible. This will be good training for her, I think. Do you have any questions?” I looked over at her and she blinked. “Oh buck, I forgot your eyes.” Her horn lit up and my eyes went through a stinging sensation as my pupils returned to their normal shapes. The shadows lengthened and what was before clear as day was now dark and dreary. “Now, again, do you have any questions?”

I stretched my wings. “None. Taya, you ready for this?” She gripped me tighter. “Let’s do this.” I jumped off the balcony that led straight off the side of the mountain. My grin grew and grew as we hurtled to the ground. There were two things that made me lift my wings and catch an air current, sending us shooting up and forward, over the large plains and low hills away from Canterlot. “Sleep while you can!” I called over my shoulder. “We’re in for one long fucking flight.”

Over hills and forests and villages and mountains... Looking back, the only reason I was able to make that flight was because I am unable to grow tired. I went full speed the entire way there. I had no reason to stop. It was then that I realized I could probably free the elementals and whatnot by myself, if I really felt up to it.

I arrived at Gryphus a few hours before sunrise. I had no idea what the streets would be like at that hour for someone that looked like I did, but I knew if push came to shove, I could wake Taya up and she could turn anyone that looked at me funny into paste. I landed near a bored looking guard.

He flinched when he heard my hooves hit the cobblestones. He blinked and rubbed his eyes when he saw me. When he confirmed that I was real, he said, “It isn’t safe for a lass like

you to be out here alone.”

I nodded. “I am aware. I was supposed to meet a friend at an inn here, a place called The Gilded Griffin. His directions were terrible. Can you point me to it?”

He sighed and stretched his wings. “Follow me. I haven’t moved much in the past five hours anyway, might as well take you there.” With that, he leapt into the air. I joined him, sadly; my wings were very stiff at that point. Even if I don’t get tired, that doesn’t mean my body can’t get sore. He shot off and I followed him, straining to make my wings work.

I lasted long enough to get to the inn, at least. “Here you are, ma’am,” he said with a nod. “It’s a comfortable enough place. A word of advice: Don’t drink mead and don’t let your hatchling have any either. It never agrees with those that aren’t used to it.”

I nodded back. “Thank you for your help and advice.” He sketched a weak salute and jumped into the air to return to his position. I entered the inn.

It wasn’t until I was inside that I realized that, holy shit, I actually managed to open the door. I looked at my hoof in confusion before my attention was called by the only person in the room. “Either get in or get out but either way, shut the damn door.”

I kicked the door shut behind me and stepped further into the dim light of the tavern. There was a single griffin awake, looking at me with a very bored expression that perked up when he got a good look at me. “He didn’t tell me he was waiting on a *pretty* mare.” He grinned. “How about you ditch him and come to my room instead?”

We heard the sound of a cleared throat from the staircase. We both looked up and saw an earth pony descending. “It is about time you arrived, Feather. Why are you late?”

I rolled my eyes. “If the directions you had given me were better, I would have been here sooner. I had to ask a guard to show me the way. The next time I need a job, I’ll ask somepony else.”

He sniffed. “Think about that the next time you get run out of Trottingham. Now come on. You don’t have much longer before you have to get to work.” I rolled my shoulders and followed him up the stairs. Knowing the griffin was watching my flank, I let my tail swish considerably more than I should have.

The earth pony pulled me into a random room and shut the door behind us. “She didn’t tell me she was sending someone that looked like *you*!” he whispered as soon as he could.

“I am what she had to send,” I answered just as quietly.

He took a deep breath and let it out. “What orders were you given? How long are you supposed to be here?”

“I have to last until tonight. Why?”

He finally smiled. “You should be safe. The griffin you are going to be working for has a few lecherous guards that would harass you, as they do the other maids. I do not know how far the harassment goes, but most of them do not have foals. With her there... Let’s just say that it’s good you aren’t going to be there long. One more word of advice: The griffin you are working for is not married and would not feel bad about stooping to sleeping with his maids. As far as I

know, none of his flirts have gone anywhere, but just beware that he might try flirting with you. Just don't drink anything he gives you."

"What, mead? I'd drink him under the table."

He barked a laugh. "You are welcome to try, but if you wake up with an aching hindquarters and a burning skull, you have only yourself to blame." I've heard horror stories of having sex with griffin males. I had no intention of ever trying it. "Now, how are your wings? Are you able to fly?"

I tried moving them to find that they were thoroughly stiff. I shook my head. "I flew in from fucking Canterlot. I'm grounded."

He grimaced and reached up to my back to pull Taya down. He gently set her sleeping form on the bed before turning back to me. "This means nothing," he said before somehow kicking my legs out from under me and pulling my wings up. He straddled my back and stretched them awkwardly, doing his best to avoid hitting any of the stronger pleasure spots. It still felt awesome, though I sadly knew I needed to pretend to keep it professional. After a few minutes, he stopped and got off me. "Try now."

I didn't trust my legs just yet, so I stretched my wings. They still felt sore, but I could actually fly. I sighed in delight. "I don't suppose we can try that again, but with it meaning something?"

He giggled. "I think my wife would disapprove. Now come on, you need to get moving if you want to reach the manor in time."

"Shit, don't tell me it's more hours of flying. I sure don't feel like going that far."

"It's around an hour of flight. You need to get there early, to scope the place out. First thing's first: Your uniform." He walked over to a drawer, opened it, and pulled something out.

"...You're joking, right?"

He grinned. "Nope. It seems our griffin friend took a trip to Prance and fell in love with their uniforms. Don't worry, you'll fit in with the other maids." He looked me up and down. "Well, sort of. The princess already sent your specs here, so this should fit well. If not, what's one day?" He walked over to the small bag that he removed from me while removing Taya. He opened it up and blinked. "Why do you have a belt of knives in here?"

"Because fuck you, that's why. I ain't going nowhere I might get molested or worse without some weapons. Stuff the outfit in there and tell me where I need to go."

He shrugged and carefully folded it up and stored it in my pack. That done, he walked over to a table. "This is the map," he said, unrolling a page. I walked over as he pointed things out. "We're here. This is his mansion, to the west. It's nestled in a valley between a mountain and a large hill. You'll probably have a hard time spotting it, which is why you're leaving so soon." He gave me further directions. "Now, how tired are you? Do you think you can last all day?"

I nodded. "I'll be fine, as long as I don't have to do much flying. I have a lot of stamina."

"Good. When the sun comes up, go down to the mansion. You should have no trouble finding the head maid. Now, do you have any questions?"

“Yeah. What will I have to do?”

He blinked. “Seriously?” I shrugged. “Maid things. Dust. Clean clothes, if there are any to be cleaned. You might be called to wait on the master of the house. Be polite and respectful and do not anger anypony. Remember to call him Master or whatever other name the first maid tells you to call him. What kind of act are you going to use?”

“The ‘keep my head low and don’t say anything more than necessary’ one. Taya and I are going to stay out of the way and not say a damn thing unless asked a direct question. Speaking of which, what is she supposed to do?”

“Who, her?” he asked, looking at the filly on the bed. “She can stay in the room you are given. Or, for most tasks, she can be with you as long as she stays out of the way. There are also a few other foals she can play with, if you believe she can stay silent about your mission.”

“She won’t be a problem. Now, we need to get moving again. Can you reattach her to my back?”

He walked over to where she had rolled into a filly ball and picked her up again. A moment later, she was trying to curl around my back. Given that she was getting tied down, it wasn’t working out well for her. I swear I heard the stallion mutter something about diabetes, but I think I misheard him.

“You’re good to go,” he finally said. “Good luck, and remember that if push comes to shove, the griffins respect strength.”

“Hope I won’t need that. I focus on dexterity rather than strength.”

“There is a valor in being able to avoid combat and blows, but that is something the griffins will probably not respect. Either way, good luck. Go out through the window; I don’t want the innkeeper to see you leave.”

I stretched my wings one last time as he opened the window for me. I nodded once and hopped out, quickly angling my body to the west and looking for landmarks.

An hour later, I alighted on an outcropping on the mountain behind the mansion. Night still reigned, and I could hear Taya’s low breathing on my back. I looked down on the mansion and cursed my new lack of night-eyes. I could not see nearly as much as I should have been able to.

From what I could see, the manor—village was more like it, honestly—was nice and comfortable looking. There were only two noticeable guards, and they didn’t seem to be doing much of anything but sitting around and talking. No one else was out and about. I knew right then that if I had been in my human body, I could sneak down there and steal the information I needed.

In fact... “Luna, I know you’re watching. How about we save ourselves a few hours and just go and get the information we need now? I know you have some creepy magic that can get us inside that place unseen, now that we’re close enough. We can sneak right past everyone that’s awake.”

A minute passed before I got any kind of response. A mass of inky blackness appeared and grew beside me and Luna slowly materialized silently next to me. Together, we peered down at the manor. "My sister is not going to be pleased, Navarone," she told me, still looking down.

"And?"

"There was no and. She will not be pleased. That is for you to deal with. Remain here, out of sight. I will be back momentarily." With a short glowing of her horn, she imploded into shadow again. I saw her darkness swirling down the mountain toward the manor. In seconds, she was inside. I settled down on the mountain to try to watch. When I realized that honestly I couldn't see a damn thing, I turned my eyes to the sky. The Canadian night out in the wilderness is a beautiful thing.

I felt Taya jump and heard her mutter something. Soon after, I felt her legs wrap around me. "Are we there yet?"

"Yes. And we are probably going home very soon. We got here just in time to skip doing anything."

"Good. So what are we waiting for?"

"Luna. She should be back shortly."

It didn't take her that long to rejoin us. "He is guilty. I was given the authority to arrest him. Remain here, Navarone. I will be back shortly."

She teleported out and was back an instant later with the male stone, my axe, my armor, and two sets of shackles. "Get dressed," she ordered, pulling Taya off my back and turning me back into a human.

I grabbed the blue stone and put on the armor, wishing I had something to go on underneath it. I reached into the travel pack and pulled the knife belt out from around the maid costume and buckled it around my waist. I put the chains around my neck, hanging down my chest. Finally, I pulled the axe over my shoulders. I looked up to Luna. "One more thing," she said. Her horn lit up and I felt my eyes return to their cat-like state. I also felt my wings turn bat-like and a moment after, I felt my gums explode as my fangs burst out. "You are my knight and you will look the part." She grinned. "And I suppose I should remove the brands on your flanks." I felt a burst of healing soothe my aching ass as the damage done was removed. "Taya, wait in my room. We will be back there shortly." Her horn lit up and Taya disappeared before she could say a word. "Are you ready?"

I tried stretching my wings. They were stiff as hell. "I can't fly like this. I just flew from fucking Canterlot."

She shrugged. "Then we will ride the darkness. It is not like teleporting. Do not even try to control it. Bad, bad things happen to those that try and fail."

"Wait, wha—" Her horn lit up and the world melted into brightness. What had been shadows was now light and what had been light were now shadows. Luna skirted the edges of the torches, sticking to what normal people would call darkness. We floated over everything effortlessly. I wasn't about to test what she said about controlling shadows, especially since I had

no idea what she was talking about. I just let myself be pulled along. We landed outside the entrance of the main manor.

“Navarone, this door is in my way.” I glanced at her. She was looking disdainfully at the door. I shrugged and opened it for her. It was an easy feat, seeing as how it was unlocked.

There was a guard in the foyer, though. “Who goes th—” He choked when he saw us. “Wh-wh-what do you want?”

Luna seemed content to stay silent. “Where is the master of the house?” I demanded.

He seemed to grow a backbone. “And who are you to ask such a thing?”

Luna stepped forward. “Do you dare?” she hissed at him.

He gulped and said in a voice tight with fear, “Master Hestra is in bed. If you like—”

“Take us to him. Now.” I was having fun scaring this guy. He gulped and quickly started leading us through the mansion. “And if you are considering leading us to the barracks in an attempt to fight us,” I calmly said, “you will want to rethink your plan. Neither of us will hesitate to end you in the most painful way possible.”

He gulped and quickly took a side passage. Luna nodded approvingly. The griffin stopped outside of a random door and lifted a talon to weakly knock at it. I kicked the door open and let myself inside. The griffin on the bed right inside jumped up, forced awake. “Hestra, you are under arrest for the attempted assassination of Princess Mi Amore Cadenza. You can come quietly or you can go to jail with a few broken bones. Which will it be?”

That woke him up quietly. “W-what? What right do you have to arrest me?”

Luna stepped forward and he gasped. “You may not remember the agreement signed, but I do. As per the Kestrel/Equine Treaty, you are under arrest. I suggest you come quietly.”

He scowled, hopping from his bed. “You will not take me so—” A punch to the beak from a gauntleted fist shut him up. He reeled back before leaping forward at me. I caught him with one hand and slammed him onto the floor.

“Something fun I learned about griffin anatomy the last time I fought one,” I idly commented as I wrestled his talons together. “You fuckers have hollow bones. Oh, you’re plenty strong, but if someone is well armored and fast enough, you can’t do a damn thing.”

He was steadily screaming griffin obscenities and insults, demanding that his guards come and assist him. A crowd was growing outside of his room, ponies and griffins looking in to see what was going on. Occasionally he would manage to hit my armor with his talons, but all it did was make a nasty screech and put a few scratches in it.

Soon enough, I had him suitably damaged and worn out. I had a few scratches on my face, but he had several broken bones and a very damaged beak. His talons were shackled together and I quickly flipped him onto his back to shackle his wings together as well.

“Now then. Hestra, you are hereby under arrest for the attempted assassination of Princess Mi Amore Cadenza and for attacking a royal knight in the execution of his duty. Long story short, ya dun goofed.”

I stood and turned to face Luna. She nodded once and turned to the gathered residents of

the manor. “I suggest finding a new place of employment. Now stand aside.” A hole quickly appeared in front of the door. “Sir Navarone, come.” I grabbed the chains around his talons and dragged the groaning griffin out into the hall behind her. When we got back outside, her horn lit up and we teleported to the dungeons under Canterlot.

“So what was the point in me dragging this bastard through the halls? He’s fucking heavy, you know.” Light bones or not, they have a lot of muscle.

“To make sure that the guards and servants know that we won.” Her horn lit up and the griffin floated to a wall. His shackles attached themselves to a hook and he hung there limply.

“Alright, I’m not cool with this,” I said, looking at him. “It’s one thing to kick his ass if he resists arrest. It’s another thing to hold him here like this. We have the information we need, right? Heal him and put him in a cell.”

She looked at me, surprised. “Is that truly normal practice these days? Fifteen hundred years ago, we had methods of punishing those that went against our kingdom.” She grinned darkly. “Very *fun* methods.” *That explains a lot, actually.*

“Luna, torture is illegal. Like, really illegal. You can’t tell me that Celestia didn’t inform you of that.”

She looked pensive. “That explains why I do not have a head custodian on my staff...” She looked at the groaning griffin. Her horn lit up and he was slowly lifted from his position on the wall and brought down to a table in front of her. Her horn lit up brighter and some of the damage on the griffin was healed away. She nodded to a few key hooks on the wall. “Bring me a set of keys. It will be easier to heal him if he is in a natural position.”

“Whoa now. We need to get him in a cell before we do all that. I’m not going to risk him jumping up and trying to fight again.”

“I accede to your wisdom on this matter, Navarone. Get the keys. I will put him in a cell.”

I walked to the wall and grabbed a set and followed her to where she was putting him on one of the shitty little cell beds. I stepped inside and undid both sets of shackles, removing them from him and stepping back. “Do your thing,” I told Luna with a nod.

Her horn lit up and more of the damage repaired itself. She let the healing trickle die shortly after. “I do not have that much strength left. Teleporting three ponies back and forth so much and so far is draining. He will have to live with the damage he has for now. Perhaps that will teach him to use his brain when it comes to trying to stand against an alicorn and her knight.”

“Awesome. So what now?”

She turned to me with a grin as we exited the cell. “How about you put on that maid outfit for me?”

I rolled my eyes. “First, Taya is waiting for us in your room. Second, no. Third, *hell* no. Fourth, maybe later, but only if you do it first. I will freely admit that French maids were a fetish of mine back home, and I have to say that I’m curious to see how a pony would look in one of the outfits. I would kill for a wing massage, though. You don’t go that kinda distance without

getting sore.”

She looked at the bat wings jutting out of my back. “I thought you got rid of those because they didn’t feel as good as feathered wings did.”

I attempted to ruffle the feathers I didn’t have. “I had planned to get turned back before we did anything fun.”

“And why should I?” she asked as we traversed the dungeon. “The deal that we had was broken. You are no longer promised as my special somehuman. Why should I not have you redo the oath and leave you like you currently are?”

“Because if you even try to make me swear another oath you will never see me again. That was done when my choice was swear an oath or submit to whatever punishment you and Celestia had for me if I decided not to. I have Celestia’s word that I am to remain a free man, and I fully intend to remind her of that if either of you slip up.”

I do not think she was amused by that.

And when Celestia woke up, she was most definitely not amused to find the three of us chilling in the royal breakfast nook. Well, she was okay with Luna being there, but not me or Taya. “And just what,” she demanded in an icy tone, “are you two doing back here?”

I shrugged, leaning my chair back on two legs. “Chillin’. You?”

Her horn lit up and my chair flipped back the rest of the way, sending me to the floor. “You *know* what I meant. You are supposed to be working right now!”

I rubbed the back of my head, sitting up. Taya was glaring at Celestia, Celestia was glaring at me, and Luna was impassively watching.

I stood, setting my chair upright. I plopped myself back down in it, bat wings settling behind me. “Luna and I decided on a change of plans, since I arrived earlier than expected and everyone was still asleep. Long story short, the griffin guy is in the dungeon.”

You could hear a pin drop before Celestia exploded. “WHAT!?” She gripped me with magic and threw me against the wall. “YOU WERE TO FIND EVIDENCE, NOT ARREST HIM!”

I was trying to catch my breath; being forced into the wall definitely takes your breath away. Before I could recuperate, Luna stepped forward and her horn lit up. The field of magic around me disappeared and I fell to the floor on my hands and knees, gasping for breath.

“He was following *my* orders, sister,” Luna calmly said.

Celestia calmed immediately. “Navarone, go to your quarters. You will not leave until you have spoken to me. Luna, you will come with me.” Celestia walked out and Luna followed her, leaving me and Taya alone in the room. I achingly got to my feet. Taya jumped to help me, though there was little she could do.

“As much... as I want... to tell her to fuck herself... that would be... a bad idea,” I gasped, shaking my wings to make sure nothing was broken. I let myself catch my breath and sighed, “Let’s go.”

I unsteadily left the room, Taya at my side. A small part of my mind wondered what the servants that usually fixed breakfast would do. Most of my mind was concentrated on making sure I didn't fuck up the coming conversation and making sure to not get my ass tossed in prison.

I sighed, seeing one unpleasant option present itself. If it came down to it, I would appeal to Cadance for assistance. I probably would not like her price, but I would pay it if it meant that I got out of prison.

We arrived at my room ten minutes or so after I was banished from breakfast. "My everything hurts," I sighed as I fell onto the bed, letting my leathery wings droop around me.

"So does mine," Taya said. "Being tied onto your back like that hurt after a while." She hopped up and joined me on the bed. She arranged herself so that she was under one of my wings. "We need to get these changed back. They aren't nearly as comfortable as the feathers."

"Don't you worry. I fully plan on it. I also need to get my fangs turned back."

She just sighed and wrapped my wing around herself, for some reason preferring me to a blanket. I let her have it, since there was no chance of her accidentally molesting me or something.

Sadly, Celestia did not want to let us have our moment. She entered with no preamble and kicked the door shut behind her. When I sat up, I saw that she had calmed down quite a bit. Her horn lit up and her crown fell off and clattered onto the ground. As she walked to the bed, each of her shoes stuck to the ground and fell off her feet. When she finally got to us, she just collapsed onto the bed, using a wing to pull me to her grasp. She wrapped me in a hug and just held me.

Taya was probably very, very confused. She was not alone, as I had no idea what was happening.

After a few minutes of silence, Celestia said, "By all rights, the griffins could very well declare war on us now. What Luna did was not illegal, but it was unheard of. The first war in almost seventeen hundred years... And it would be Luna's fault. Navarone, why did you help her?"

"She told me she had a right to arrest him. How was I supposed to know she was lying?"

"Oh, she had every right to arrest him. Just because she has the right does not mean that she should have exercised it. She had the right to challenge me a thousand years ago, but she should not have done it. There are channels that must be used these days. The world is more ordered than the world she is used to. Yes, she is able to sneak into his house and find the evidence. However, she must give that evidence to the griffin king and allow him to arrest the griffin and give him to us. Barging in as you did and violently subduing him and then dragging him out embarrasses the griffin king and makes him look weak. That is a direct insult. And for you to have been the one to do the assaulting... Navarone, Bloodbeak has every right to demand your head. You were following orders, but he can't very well demand that Luna be punished."

"He is welcome to attempt to remove my head. I can't promise it would end well for him now that I know how to fight griffins. Besides, he's a pretty chill dude. I'm sure he'll be fine."

She let me go and rolled out of bed. “If he demands your head, I will give you three choices. Seek asylum with the changelings, flee and attempt to live your life on the run, or submit to your punishment. I will not be able to help you. I can’t risk war for any one pony, Navarone. Or one human. As you said, I do not think it will come to that, but I suggest being ready to run.”

“Celestia, I am always ready to run. If there is anything I have learned, it is how to start over. This will blow over, though. Don’t worry.”

She grinned sadly as her crown floated back up to her head. “I hope so. Now, before you go back home to Ponyville, do you want me to fix your wings and teeth?”

“Yes. No reason to risk terrifying the ponies back home.” Her horn lit up and I felt my wings grow feathery and my teeth retract.

“There. Now, you are free to go home. I believe that some of your friends want to talk to you.”

I sighed. “I’m not surprised. I don’t suppose I could get a chariot to take me back or something?”

She nodded. “Go to the chariot pool. They will be expecting you by the time you get there. Now, I fear I need to go deal with this crisis before it explodes. I will see you both later.” She trotted back out into the hall.

“So... what just happened?” Taya asked.

“I got snuggled by a pretty pony princess,” I answered as I stood and began getting all my shit together.

“I think there was more to it than that.”

“You are welcome to think that.” Thankfully, my bags were mostly packed already. I took one look at the bag with the maid outfit and almost threw it away. After a moment of thought and the realization that I was probably going to regret it, I stuck the bag in with my other stuff.

She teleported onto my torso and latched on, looking me in the eyes. “What happened?”

I sighed and sat on the bed, peeling the filly off me. “Long story short, Luna fucked up. The guy we were supposed to get dirt on was guilty, but we weren’t supposed to arrest him. My job was to act as a focal point for Luna to teleport in so she could pick the guy’s brain while he was asleep and then we would get any evidence that he was guilty and give it to Bloodbeak, who would then arrest the bastard and give him to us. Instead, Luna skipped the getting evidence and giving it to the king part and had me skip straight to the arresting him part. I kicked his ass and we dragged him off to the dungeons under Canterlot. When the griffin king learns of this, the political ramifications will probably be severe, because we violated protocol.”

“But the end result is the same! He’s in jail.”

“I know. But we violated protocol. It doesn’t matter if the end result would have been the same. You don’t snub the middle man, because it insults them and pisses them off. Even if Celestia is the biggest political power on the planet, we still have to be leery about messing with the smaller powers, especially one that rules a carnivorous power that borders your land. I do not

think that anything will happen. But if it does, there is a chance that all of the fallout will hit me. That could result in a few things. One, that I get arrested and thrown into a griffin prison, whereupon I would be offered a full pardon if I accepted an advisory position to the king and renounced my allegiance to Equestria. Two, that I accept some manner of public penance or punishment. And three, that my head gets chopped off. The second, I could deal with. I will not let the other two happen. Now, we need to get ready.”

She hopped off the bed and just watched me as I continued putting everything in a manageable location. When I saw the pile, I sighed. “Teleport all that shit home. I don’t even want to deal with it.” Her horn lit up and everything disappeared. I took a moment to lament the fact that I just sent most of my weapons home, but I got over it when I realized that we were in the palace and going home soon anyway.

As we rode the chariot back to Ponyville, I cast my mind ahead and couldn’t help but wonder what kind of new horrors coming home would bring for me this time.