

## Chapter One Hundred and Ninety-Seven

Taya and I appeared back in the neutral glade. Our guide was waiting for us. “So what did you learn?” she asked with a smile.

“Friendship is magic,” I replied as sarcastically as I could.

“Bingo! I didn’t even have to torture you for it.”

“Will you ever be able to say that without being sarcastic?” Taya asked.

“I hope not,” I said. “Things that are super spooky and challenging to me alone are much easier when faced with people who can melt faces with their mind. Not only does it give me extra combat power, but I also have bait when things go awry.”

“Shouldn’t we volunteer to stay behind, since we can respawn?” Taya asked.

“Not against the undead, because fuck that shit. I don’t want the last thing this body experiences to be getting eaten by zombies. You can stay behind if you want, though. Your legs are shorter, so they should catch you first anyway.”

“Gee, thanks,” she said, doing her best to sound as sarcastic as me.

“So, have we gotten any messages?” I asked. “That one was pretty long. Surely someone’s come by to bitch.”

“Time stopped when Taya entered,” the guide said. “And will stay stopped until you are finished. That is what happens when there are two present.”

“Shit, I wish I had known that,” I said. “How healed up is my body, Taya?”

“It’s fine,” she said. “But uh... I’m not sure you’ll approve of the replacements. I guess we’ll have to see how they work first.”

“Oh boy.”

“Your wings are a lot like Moonbeam’s now,” Taya said. “But Twilight and Athena said your wings have a lot of magic in them, so you should have no problem flying. Your tail’s like a vine. We don’t really know if you’ll be able to move it, but Flo and Aqua are inclined to think you can. It’s also full of magic.”

“God dammit, I really did get fairy wings... Oh well, whatever. I’ll take stock when I get out. So, we won’t be getting any more messages. At this point, we only really have one or two more bad things up ahead, my horrific drug trip in Africa and the trip to Iceland. I say we knock this shit out and get back to reality.”

“It’s your coma, mommy,” Taya said. “If time really is standing still for us, we can take all the time we need for it.”

“Is there anything about the bunker you want to discuss while we’re here?” the guide asked.

“Can you see Ava?” I asked.

“I can’t. I also can’t make her appear.”

“What do you think of her?”

“My assumption is that she was in her thirties when she died. That gave her much more time to live and mature among humans. I think that experience is very valuable to someone who, for one, was not raised very well and for two, was deposited unceremoniously in another world before being left essentially to her own devices. Ava could be extremely useful and I don’t see why you haven’t worked to build up a stable line of communication with her yet. She could act as a true human counterpart to Flo and Aqua, working as an assistant that only you could see or understand. Given how much else she has going on, she would likely be open to the idea since it would give her more time to try to better you.”

“After what happened in the bunker and the mine, I distrusted the undead. After having more time to speak to her and discovering that she’s more interested in passing on than stealing my body, I realized that distrust is unwarranted in her case. I hadn’t considered actually trying to work with her more, but it’s an interesting idea. I’ll see if I can figure out a way to talk to her later and see if she’d be open to it.” Taya’s hoofpump annoyed me. “I’d want it so that only *I* could perceive her, of course.”

“I know the spell that lets me see ghosts and I know the translation spell,” Taya said with a smirk. “I’m *so* talking to her all the time now!”

“I forbid it. I don’t want her twisting your mind with that filthy Jesus talk. Next thing I know, you’ll start demanding I tithe!”

“...What’s tithing?”

“Fuck if I’ll tell you, then you’ll make me do it! Let’s get moving before she gets any ideas.”

“Is your body prepared for what is to come?” my guide menacingly asked.

“Ye—Wait, why are you asking like *that*?”

Unfortunately, she giggled. “Oh, no reason. So, are you ready?”

“My body is ready!” Taya proudly replied, a big grin on her face.

“Wait wait wait, right after the bunker was... Oh no. Please tell me it’s not...”

“Oh, it is,” my guide said with a smile.

“Well, fuck. Taya, Twilight and I may not have told you the *whole* truth about what happened with Trixie.”

“Didn’t you say you beat her, freed the alphyn, grabbed Fluttershy, and escaped?”

“Yeah, that’s what I *said*. And all of that *did* happen. We just... happened to get captured first. And we didn’t exactly *kill* Trixie...”

“This sounds fun! So what *really* happened?” she asked.

“Let’s see what the coma shows us,” I said.

“Oh, don’t be like that,” Taya said. “C’mon, mommy! We’re here to share your memories, aren’t we?”

“Yeah, so let’s get to sharing. We’re both ready.” The guide’s eyes lit up and we left the comfy glade behind.

I had to sigh as soon as we appeared. Trixie was sitting at a fancy dining table, Phinny was sitting next to her, sullenly staring at a food bowl, and I was standing next to her in a super skimpy French maid outfit. To be fair, seeing it in third person showed me just how hot I could be, but it still wasn't something I wanted my daughter to see.

Her giggles were reason enough why. "I-is this what you meant by *captured*?" she asked, completely failing to hide her amusement.

"She turned Twilight into a stuffed animal and threatened her to make sure I obeyed. There's a reason I left details out. I also got a spanking."

"Serves you right!" she said, covering her flank with her tail.

"I deserved it a lot less than you did. Anyway, I think I can guess why we're here. Is it because of how we defeated Trixie?"

"Gee, ya think?" Pain asked.

"Though it's not the only thing we'll discuss," Reason added.

"After all, you also purposefully snubbed Luna after she helped you," Fear said. Hearing that in Luna's own voice was kinda weird.

"On the order of Celestia. I coulda disobeyed, but I didn't really want to see her anyway."

"Wait, how does Luna fit in this?" Taya asked.

"I contacted her in the dream world to get her to contact Celestia. Once Celestia was asleep, we met up in her dream. The price for Luna's help was a meeting in the dream world after I was rescued. When I told Celestia, she told me not to go. It ended up being moot because we freed ourselves anyway. It did save us from walking back, though."

"It sounds like you left out more than half the story!"

"I leave out more than half of all of my stories. I really don't like telling them."

"And you can't forget abandoning Fluttershy after she was kidnapped," Pain said. "So are you ready to get started?"

"Yes." Pain jumped forward and kissed Taya. One of her hands reached over and groped me. I wanted to comment on that, but we were whisked away before I could.

We appeared in a large room. The walls, floor, and ceiling were all made of black stone. Runes were carved all over the floor. Several alphyns were milling about.

"Are those demons?" Taya asked.

"They're alphyns," I said. "Regular denizens of Tartarus."

Before she could ask anything else, Phinny and Trixie appeared. As soon as they did, Trixie started screeching in terror. Two of the alphyns pounced on her instantly, forcing her to the ground. One of them finally forced her mouth shut.

"It's about time," another alphyn said, this one larger than Phinny. "That's your second-longest summon yet, isn't it?"

"It was," Phinny replied. "And I'd like to be removed from the list immediately."

“With this slave, your contract is complete,” the large one said with a nod. “You’ll be removed as soon as she’s processed. So what’s the story with this mare?”

“She’s a real bitch,” Phinny said, making the large guy blink. “Sorry, that’s what my... I guess *partner* used to describe her. She first summoned me a few years back to get revenge on another unicorn for some stupid nonsense. After that attempt failed, she got picked up by some powerful demon my partner called Discord.”

“Discord?!” the large guy shouted, his eyes going wide. “Are you sure?!”

“That’s what he said. I think I heard her mention the name once, too.”

The large guy looked down at the two alphyns holding her down. “Send her to Grogar immediately. I’ll do the processing paperwork myself.”

“You got it,” one of them said. They started dragging her off and she finally began fighting back.

“Do whatever’s necessary to make her comply, as long as it isn’t permanent damage,” the large one said. “Grogar pays well for any intel on Discord.”

“She won’t move a muscle by the time we’re done,” one said with a dark chuckle. Trixie started crying and struggling even more.

“So how did you take down a servant of that demon?” the large guy asked Phinny.

“She summoned me to fight against the same unicorn and her partner again. This partner is apparently some race called a human, who looked like some manner of mostly hairless ape.”

“Go see Grogar immediately,” the large guy said, suddenly seeming much more serious. “He pays well for information about Discord. He pays *astronomically* for any information about humans. And the description he gave me matches what you said almost perfectly. If there’s a human out there, that lich will stop at nothing to get his hooves on it.”

“...He never mentioned that to me,” Phinny slowly said. “I was his summon for a while and I never heard a word of it.”

“You were his servant before he came here. Apparently right before he came to Tartarus, he went to a land of ice on the bottom of the world and found something there that piqued his curiosity in the so-called humans. He came to Tartarus because there’s supposedly human ruins here. Oddly enough, he’s *still* insisting he’ll leave when he finds what he came for, even though we all know it’s impossible.”

“Nothing is impossible for that lich,” Phinny said. “He has all the time in the world, after all. Why does he want this human?”

“Apparently they were incredibly powerful and lived ages ago. I don’t know why he’s interested, I just know he is. You need to go see him.”

“I’m hesitant to throw Navarone to the lich’s mercy. Not after she went out of her way to help me. I know what usually happens to the living who become subjects of his interest.”

“I imagine the first thing he’d do to someone like that is ask her questions. He *probably* wouldn’t blow her up to see her insides. You know, at least not immediately.”

“Hm. Well, when he hears what that awful mare has to say, he’ll find out about Navarone anyway. I might as well do my best to find out his intentions for the human and make some money while doing it.”

“Wise. I’ll go fill out the forms and pull you off the list. If you’d like, I can send a runner to let your family know you’re back and that you’ll be home with a large bonus soon.”

“I’ll tell them myself when I get back. How are the roads right now?”

“Fairly clear. Grogar’s general has been working with the local roos and crocs to keep the main roads safe. Just move quickly, because you never know when a raiding party might show up. Or worse, when it might start raining.”

“That’s one thing I’ll miss from outside,” Phinny said. “Running in the rain was an amazing feeling. Alas. Farewell for now. I think I might help the others make that mare submit.” The memory finally went grey.

“So you sent Trixie to Tartarus?” Taya asked.

“I sure did,” I said with a nod. “Twilight was super pissed.”

“That’s because she hates fun,” Taya said with a shrug. “I think that’s perfectly reasonable. I mean, look at what she made you wear!”

“Right?”

“Is that truly the best thing?” my guide asked. “You have no compassion at all for your enemies?”

“I do for some of them. But Trixie was literally only pissed because Twilight stepped on her pride a little. So because of that, she illegally summoned a being from Tartarus and forced him to attack me and Twilight. And then when she won, she tried to rape me before realizing I was a chick. After that, she tried to get the alphyn to rape me with this thick, hard knot, but he found a way out of it. She was also working for Discord. So I don’t see why I *should* feel any compassion for her.”

“Is that any reason to condemn her to a fate worse than death?” Reason asked. “You literally sent her to this world’s equivalent of hell.”

“Honestly, no. But I wanted to help the alphyn because I felt sorry for him. I also wanted his cooperation.”

“Wasn’t Celestia coming to rescue you?” Fear asked. “When you finally got back to the real world, you appeared right in front of her. Had you but waited, Celestia would have taken custody of Trixie instead.”

“And she might have killed Phinny while she was at it. They might also have failed to get to us. And it’s likely that Trixie had alarms set up to alert her when there are intruders, so if they came in, she’d have time to surround herself with hostages. Not that I’d expect Trixie to be better prepared than Equestria’s elite, but still. Also, I feel like Celestia would have held it over my head forever.”

“Sounds like a whole lot of justifications for repressed guilt, to me,” Fear said, patting my shoulder with a wing.

“What do you think, Taya?” I asked. “Truly and honestly.”

“I think a Tartarus sentence is a little harsh, to be honest...” *Yeah, well, who asked you?* “Why did you make a deal with the alphyn? Weren’t you afraid it was just tricking you?”

“No, Flo told me he was legit. He also had plenty of chances to hurt me where he chose not to. He didn’t seem like a bad guy, just someone in an unpleasant circumstance. Because of that, I wanted to help him. Trixie being an ubercunt made the decision easier.”

“Do you feel guilty?” Taya asked.

“I mean... maybe a little. In hindsight, I would have locked down her dream and let Celestia come in and capture her. But at the time, I took what I thought was the best option available for us to escape as quickly as possible. It just so happens that the path I took also involved the worst revenge I could think of. It... may not have been a coincidence.”

“How do you feel about revenge, now that you’ve seen some of the consequences?” Reason asked.

“It feels pretty good in the short term. The long term depends on said consequences. In Trixie’s case, I mean... *Eh*. We all know what happens to people like Trixie in the religion I grew up in when they die.”

“I don’t, actually,” Taya said.

“They go to hell to suffer eternally,” Fear said. “Are you calling yourself a divine agent now?”

“Oh no, not at all. Doesn’t mean I can’t do my man G a favor every now and then and send one or two where they belong. Especially when they slight me. After all, I think that Jesus guy was all about forgiveness and turning the other cheek, not about seeking revenge. I guess I can say that I do feel a *little* guilty, but she had it coming so I’m okay with it.”

“Isn’t this coma supposed to be about bettering yourself and all that?” the guide asked. “Is deciding that revenge is acceptable truly okay?”

“Why wouldn’t it be?” Taya asked. “What’s right for mommy might not be right for a water elemental, after all...”

“Even though Trixie was likely tortured by Grogar and turned into an undead? Or returned to the alphyns to do who knows what?” Pain asked.

“If Trixie was ever going to move forward in life, her pride needed to be shattered,” I said. “Killing her would accomplish nothing. But now that she’s had a chance to see what comes from siding against me, she might be more amenable. If she’s still alive when we go to Tartarus, I’ll see what I can do about freeing her. That’s only fair.”

“So should we talk about the rest of that?” Taya asked. “You know, like the part about Grogar possibly blowing you up?”

“We should,” I said with a nod. “We essentially have confirmation that Grogar caused the horde of undead in Antarctica while trying to get into the bunker. We also know he’s likely working against Discord.”

“And he might want to blow you up,” Taya said. “Can’t forget that part.”

“No, I’m not human anymore. He’ll probably have a lot of questions, though. If I can survive Arachne, Luna, and Hera, I’m sure I can manage him. Besides, I have some questions for him anyway. It’s possible he could detach Ava from me.”

“If you still want that by the time we get there,” the guide said. “She might grow on you.”

“Like a parasite. It’s also interesting to find out Grogar summoned Phinny. I can see why Trixie would be a huge disappointment after that.”

“Was she really that bad?” Taya asked. “You keep saying she was a bitch, but how bad is that?”

“It was bad,” Pain said.

“Really bad,” Fear added.

“There’s a reason we aren’t chastising Nav for siding with revenge on this one,” Reason finished.

“That answer your question?” I asked.

“I guess. I was kinda hoping for some examples.”

“She made me dress up like a maid and spanked me for asking a question. She turned Twilight into a teddy bear. She tried to rape me before she realized I was a chick and then tried to get the alphyn to rape me. Like, were you not paying attention?”

“Yeah, but some of that is just rape. You obviously don’t care about that too much, since you still hang around Luna, Kat, Pinkie, Rarity, and probably a few others I haven’t found out about yet.”

“Don’t be a twat,” I said, thumping one of her ears. “I’m ready to go on to the next one.”

“As you wish,” Fear said, stepping closer. She enveloped us both with her oversized alicorn wings.

Once again, we appeared in Tartarus. This time it was at Mount Oberon and we were looking over Luna’s shoulder into a magic mirror. “Is Nav safe?” Luna asked.

“She is,” Celestia said. “Safe and sound back in Ponyville.”

“Ponyville? Why is she not in the palace with you?”

“...Because she didn’t want to come to the palace with me?”

“That’s absurd,” Luna said. “She just dealt with one of Discord’s lackeys! Does she truly think being in Ponyville is safe right now? She should be by your side!”

“Nav’s a grown-up, Luna. You somehow keep forgetting that. She’s quite capable of taking care of herself.”

“Obviously not, if she needed to be rescued.”

“She *didn’t*,” Celestia said with a small smirk. “Nav forged a pact with the demon Trixie summoned. Together, they worked to take her down. In the end, the demon took Trixie to Tartarus with him.”

“Nav escaped without you?”

“We did unlock the exit to let them out, but I’m confident it would have only taken Twilight half an hour at most to figure it out. And the only reason they lost is because Nav’s armor was cursed. Apparently, it was made using scales from an undead dragon. Eventually it came alive and took over her body.”

“That’s... interesting. I had never considered making armor from dragon scales, but it makes complete sense. Armor from an undead dragon just sounds... Actually... Hm. I bet you could graft a control rune on one and turn it into an undead knight.”

“Nav has no intention of using it anymore, but Twilight has already claimed it. I’d rather not risk animating something like that, even if it can supposedly be controlled. If the rune ever got damaged and it stayed active, there’s no guarantee we could stop it.”

“Regardless, putting it on was an unwise decision,” Luna said with a sigh. “I was hoping the gender stone incident would have taught her a lesson.”

“She cleared it with me and Reginald,” Celestia said. “I honestly didn’t foresee any issues and apparently he didn’t either. I mean, it didn’t seem like the best of ideas to me either, but I couldn’t sense anything wrong with the armor. Apparently, it was a gift from Spike, so Nav was trying to put it to use.”

“Perhaps Nav should take the scales from him to make a new set of armor, then. I imagine it would teach that hatchling his place.”

“You know I wouldn’t allow that, silly! Besides, Nav would claim any armor that’s purple is gay or something stupid like that.”

Luna snorted and rolled her eyes. “Probably. So if you weren’t able to rescue her, I guess she won’t feel as grateful to me...”

“It’s a moot point,” Celestia said. “I forbade her from seeing you except in emergencies.”

“W-what?” Luna whispered, eyes going wide. “How dare you!”

“I will not force Nav to be beholden to an agreement she made while under duress. If she doesn’t want to see you of her own accord, any meeting you might have would be unproductive and miserable for you both. You must wait until Nav is ready.”

“While you keep her all to yourself!”

Celestia giggled and said, “I made sure to rub her wings nice and slow to help her calm down! Let me tell you, that got her really riled up...” Taya giggled and Luna started grinding her teeth. “I’ll spare you the details, but Twilight walked in on something truly scandalous!”

“There will come a time when Nav sees you for what you are,” Luna coldly replied. “And when that happens, I would *dread* to be in your hooves.” With that, she set the mirror down. “That... that *harlot*! She knows full well that Nav is *mine*!”

“Of course,” I said, rolling my eyes.

“Ugh. I need to do something to get my mind off this... I bet I can find more of the soldiers to scare! They’re always so jumpy that it’s almost cheating, but at least it passes the time...”



When everything faded to gray, Taya snorted. “So what’s it like to have the two most powerful ponies catfighting for your attention?” she asked.

“Pretty fucking scary,” I said. “There were times it was fun, but I’ve seen things you couldn’t even imagine.”

“Spooky things?”

“Lewd things, some of which were spooky and some of which were painful. So, I’m guessing the takeaway here is something about how I shouldn’t have trusted Celestia?”

“Close,” Reason said. “You shouldn’t have trusted either of them.”

“Although you should have met Luna as she asked,” Pain said. “You did agree to it.”

“She wasn’t in a position to forgive Luna yet,” Fear said. “So talking to her wouldn’t have been very productive, as Celestia said.”

“I still should have kept my word,” I said. “Even if I didn’t want to, I should have at least heard her out. That doesn’t mean trusting her, obviously.”

“Even though she was crazy and wouldn’t have had anything useful to say?” Taya asked.

“Yeah. If you say you’re going to do something, you should do it. I’ve not seen any evidence yet that she’s a true threat to me in the dream world, so I can freely talk to her there. I just didn’t want to and when Celestia ordered me not to, I used that as an excuse. The only way Celestia ever would have known is if Luna or I told her.”

“I’m surprised the sisters were at each other’s throats,” Taya said. “Were they like this the whole time?”

“Apparently,” I said. “Celestia’s been destroying Luna emotionally for a while now. I was just another avenue she could use. Some of the things I’ve heard her say to Luna have been brutal. I’m glad we decided to kill her.”

“I mean... isn’t that what Luna gets for being creepy and insane?”

“No, that’s what made her creepy and insane. When I say a while now, I’m guessing it’s somewhere around fifty-two hundred years, with only a short gap of a thousand while Luna was on the moon. And even that would still be considered psychological warfare, since she was in solitary confinement for ages.”

“...Oh.”

“So, I shouldn’t have trusted either sister. I feel like we probably already covered that, but it’s good to have a reminder of why. What’s up next?”

“It’s time for your heart to burst,” Pain said. “Are you ready?”

“Let’s do it,” I said.

“I don’t want my heart to blow up!” Taya said.

“We don’t have hearts,” I said. “Remember, most of our organs got replaced with weird plant stuff.”

“Oh yeah. So let’s go, I guess. Just don’t kiss me again, please.”

“Fine, I won’t,” Pain said. Instead, Reason jumped over and kissed Taya. One of her hooves poked me on the belly button.

We appeared in Fluttershy's cottage. "Alright, we're ready to move on to the next one," I immediately said.

"Too bad," Pain replied.

I sighed and finally looked around. There really wasn't much to see. Fluttershy was sitting on her couch with Angel, her evil rabbit. There weren't any other critters present. It was dark out, so she had probably just gotten back.

"It's so quiet," Fluttershy whispered. "I miss the noise... All my little friends running about and playing..."

Her eyes turned blue as Flo took over. "You know Nav would allow you to have a few pets on the ship, as long as you didn't go overboard."

"I couldn't take them from the forest," Fluttershy said. "Especially since it's so dangerous. I tried keeping a few birds around, but Spider and Kat..."

"Do you have any speculation about why you were targeted?" Flo asked.

"I'm all alone out here next to the forest," she said. "Most of my pets are gone and even if they weren't, no one else knows how to understand them. I should probably pack a few things and go to Ponyville like Nav suggested, but I can't seem to find the energy..."

"Applejack's farm is closer and she has plenty of rooms," Flo said. "She needs to know that she has a target on her back, too. She isn't *as* isolated, but if she goes out to one of the fields by herself, it would be easy to nab her."

"Oh, I doubt anyone would target her," Fluttershy replied with a small smile. "She can defend herself."

"Not against magic. Rainbow Dash will also need to be warned, but her home is farther away so it can wait until morning. I imagine Nav will warn Pinkie and Rarity himself."

"I really wish Nav had just stayed here tonight..." Fluttershy whispered.

"Yeah, well, he's too much of a coward to tell you the real reason he won't," Flo said. "He'd probably get mad if I told you, but I'm mad he kicked me out, so I'd be happy to explain if you want to know." That made Taya giggle.

"...I'd like to know as much about Nav as you're willing to tell me."

"Good, because I know more about him than he does. To put it bluntly, Nav thinks he is pure, irredeemable scum and that you are a holy saint. In effect, you're way too good for anything he could ever become. Because of that, he's horrified that you like him and want to spend time around him, because he thinks all he can do is corrupt or scare you. What's worse is that he expects everyone to think the same."

"That... doesn't make any sense," Fluttershy said. "He's done so many great things! Sure, he does worry me sometimes, but I could never be afraid of him! And I could never think that I was too good for anyone."

"I didn't say it made sense," Flo said with a cute giggle. "I just said that's what he thinks. That's why he's scared of the idea of a relationship with you. He thinks it could only end in heartbreak, with you finally giving up on trying to fix him."

"I already told him I was never interested in that!"

"Yeah. He didn't believe you. I'm going to let you in on another little secret. When you're talking with Nav, you need to remember that you aren't dealing with someone who's sane. His mental health has deteriorated a lot since he got here, and it wasn't very good to begin with. I know more about Nav than he does, but I still can't predict him half the time. Most water elementals can manipulate their hosts with ease, but there are times when nothing I do will sway his mind. This comes with the obligatory warning to do nothing to provoke him, obviously."

"Nav may have a different mind, but I don't think he's *crazy*!"

"I don't think he is, either," Flo said. "I *know* he is, and you can take my word for it. I know he won't do anything overtly dangerous in a place where it might get him in trouble, but he's started to enjoy killing." Fluttershy's ears twitched, even though Flo was in control. "I'm telling you these things for both of your sakes, Fluttershy. Forget about Nav. Deal with him as little as you can. Until he's less volatile, it's best you just avoid him."

"I'm afraid I can't. If Nav is in pain, isn't it my responsibility as a friend to help him?"

"Well, you're not my real host anyway, so let's try that again..." Fluttershy's body went slack and Angel squeaked. She picked herself back up again quickly, though. "Forget about Nav. Deal with him as little as you can."

"I can't *forget* about him, but if you really think being around him would make things worse, maybe I could avoid him for a little while..."

That really set Angel off and he started squeaking up a storm. Well, until a droplet of water from Fluttershy hit him. He settled down and went to sleep, leaving Fluttershy none-the-wiser.

"So let's talk about more of Nav's secrets..." Flo said as the memory went gray.

"How's that pure waifu of yours?" my guide asked.

"What's a waifu?" Taya asked.

"A naughty word," I immediately replied. "Besides, the only one adorable enough to be a waifu is Blossom. I will absolutely admit that Flo did a few things I didn't approve of, like this and what she did to Kat."

"What did she do to Kat?" Taya asked.

"Brainwashed her to be loyal to me. I thought it was an isolated incident, but apparently not."

"Why be mad if all she's doing is helping you?" Reason asked. "Everything she told Fluttershy was true, after all."

"Uh, because brainwashing people is usually wrong unless they're actually dangerous?" I said. "I mean, am I still the only one who believes that?"

"So why do you hate yourself?" Taya asked. *I guess I am.*

“The deterioration of my mental health, duh. Weren’t you listening? I’ve been treated as worthless so many times that it seems to be how I feel all the time.”

“Haven’t we treated you like a pretty little lady enough to make you feel special yet?” Taya asked. “Maybe we need more dresses...”

“So what’s the takeaway from this one, aside from the fact that Flo freely tells my secrets and uses her spooky mind powers all willy-nilly?”

“Or that Fluttershy is super depressing?” Taya added.

“It’s not nearly as much fun if you just say it yourself,” Pain said. “What’s the point of us hanging around?”

“Isn’t that part of why I’m here?” Taya asked. “I’m supposed to help you figure all of this out, right?”

“You are,” I said, booping her.

“Should you really trust Flo?” Fear asked. “You merely made her upset, yet she spilled some very deeply-held secrets of yours.”

“She’s been in your head for three weeks now, Taya,” I said. “What do you think of her?”

“She’s super overbearing and hates fun almost as much as Twilight.”

“Sometimes. That said, I have to expand my circle of those I actually trust further than just my daughters. Flo’s one of the likelier candidates, if for no other reason than she already knows my secrets anyway. It’s disheartening to know she’s fine with sharing my secrets all willy-nilly and also brainwashing people without asking me first, but it’s not like I’d expect anything less even from someone that I *did* trust.”

“So you expect me to betray you at some point?” Taya asked.

“I have low expectations of everybody, dear. It’s not just you, don’t worry. It’s what comes from a lifetime of neglect and/or abuse. And after everything I’ve seen in this coma, I can safely say that my best bet for a happy life in Equestria would have been to kill myself the instant I got here, because that’s the moment things started going downhill and nothing I could have done would have improved the situation more than marginally.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah. The princesses started making plans for me as soon as they had enough information about me. By the time Luna tracked me down in Applejack’s orchard, it was probably too late for me to get out of Equestria alive. But that’s life, or whatever. Y’all got anything else to say about Fluttershy?”

“Stop treating her like an object,” Reason said. “Fluttershy finds it really insulting. Despite her behavior, she is very much a living pony.”

“Yeah, that part didn’t really make sense,” Taya said. “Do you, like, idolize her or something?”

“No, she’s too much of a coward for that. But she’s... too nice, to the point where it’s literally inhuman. I really didn’t have a way to describe it until Athena told me that you ponies actually *are* different from humans. Fluttershy’s a perfect example. To be honest, Twilight and all

five of her friends are. That's probably part of why I could never adjust to life here; I was surrounded by super powerful fae who were fighting for me without even realizing it."

"Your relationship with Twilight's going well," Taya said. "What's the difference between her and Fluttershy?"

"Uh. Personality? Twilight had a general idea of what she wanted and she was happy to ask my help to get it. Fluttershy is, for the most part, a doormat. She *has* asked me to fingerbang her before, but that was after she got kidnapped, so her hormones were racing. It was also bad timing, because Celestia was waiting her turn in the other room..."

"I thought you complained about mares ordering you around all the time," Taya said. "Wouldn't the opposite of that be nice?"

"I don't want to go from one pole to another. I don't want someone who wants to micromanage me to the point I can't make any decisions and I don't want someone who's so afraid of disappointing me that I'd have to make all the choices. I want a mature adult who is willing to come to a reasonable compromise on things. Twilight's still having problems with that sometimes, but she's decent at it. To be honest, Moonbeam is probably the best at it."

"And Fluttershy would be terrible at it," Taya sighed. "Adults are complicated, mommy."

"Some of them. Those of us with issues are usually worse. It just so happens I have about three million words worth of them."

"What?"

"You'll understand when you're older," I said, tousling her mane. "I think we're done with this sad-sack. Let's move forward."

"As you desire," my guide said. Her eyes did their thing, taking us away.

The two of us ended up in the middle of a deep forest meadow. Fancy Pants and Fleur were standing in the middle, next to one of my paintings. Spookily enough, I could hear chanting in the woods.

"What is this?" Fleur asked. "I didn't know Navarone painted."

"Navarone does many things," Fancy said. "Paints, explores, writes. Probably more."

"He *writes*?" Fleur slowly said. "Books on what? How best to murder ponies?"

"Well, he says he *translates*, like what he did with this painting. Apparently he copies human books and has them published here in Equestria. At the last Gala, I made a deal with him to help sell his art."

"Would you happen to know any of the books he's penned?" Fleur slowly asked.

"Indeed I do. I trust that none of this will be used in your petty feud?"

"Of course not. Nav is dangerous. I'll stick to low-level tactics. Tell me what he wrote."

That made Fancy grin. "You've already read most of them, I believe. In fact, you were the one who first introduced me to them, the works from another world. Although it's more accurate to say they're from another time."

"...Oh. I see."

“He’s a lot more valuable as an ally than an enemy, Fleur,” Fancy said. “I actually went back in time with him and was able to see that clear as day. I’d like to bring him even closer, but it’s difficult when my wife is feuding with him.”

“He threatened to slit my throat and leave me to rot in a ditch.”

“And he didn’t do it, did he? Do you think it was because he couldn’t?”

Fleur snorted. “He’s got Celestia’s eye. He can do whatever he wants, murdering me included.”

“Luckily for you, that’s not what he wants. Look at this painting, Fleur.” She sighed and looked up at it. “It’s a human masterpiece. He can make them in hours and they’re ready to be sold within a day. His books are like this, too. If he wanted, he could have more money than I do. In fact, if he wanted, I’d wager he could get a lot more power, too. He doesn’t have time for you as his enemy. Forget your feuding with him, Fleur. He’d steamroll you in a heartbeat.”

“I can’t just surrender, but... I can talk. If this is the kind of quality he can guarantee, it’s worth peace. I’ll head to the palace to speak with him.”

“Thank you, Fleur. Nav is a friend well worth having, so I recommend putting the effort in.”

“Oh, I’ve heard plenty about him. I’ve seen him several times, too. It’s about time I sat down and had a true talk with him, then.”

“Good. Canterlot needs more friends, not rivals. Although if you were planning on trying to use him... Don’t. I’ll just leave it at that.”

“This is Canterlot. We all use each other to survive. I have a feeling he’s better at surviving than most. Don’t you worry about me, Fancy,” Fleur said with a small smile. “I’m just going to have a chat!”

With that, the memory went gray. “So why her?” Taya asked.

“Why her, what, exactly?”

“Why would you pick that conniving cunt?” Taya asked, a bit more directly.

“Alright, you’re going to need to back it up even further. If I don’t know what you’re talking about, I can’t answer your question. Would you like to phrase that differently?”

“It’s a pretty simple question,” Taya said. “You have your pick of women, mommy. So why would you choose the one you know is a lying, manipulative bitch?”

“You said it yourself,” I replied with a grin. “I have my pick of women, so my *only* options are lying, manipulative bitches. If her being a liar or manipulative are your only issues with her, she’s still ahead of some of her competition. So why do you hate her?”

“She was only attracted to you for your power. That’s why she latched her claws in so tightly. You realize that you agreed to compete in a *beauty pageant* for her, right? Can you not see that she’s only using you?”

“Yeah, using me to do the thing I asked her to do,” I said. “I was the one who pitched the idea to her to begin with. I knew as soon as I made the recommendation that one way or another,

I was going to be involved. I was resigned to that. I didn't want to be a competitor, but my life is suffering, so whatever."

"So after everything you said about how sleeping with me might ruin our reputation, you'd go and marry the Canterlot bicycle? Even some of your guards have had turns with her!"

"Marrying a used mare is still a little higher on the totem pole than molesting my filly, actually. Fleur's number of partners does make her less of an appealing marriage candidate, though. Especially now that I'm going for the world conquest route. Fleur would make a great mistress, though."

"...World conquest route?" Taya slowly said.

"Yep, I decided we're going to take over the world. I'm not quite sure what that will entail yet, but I think it'll involve marrying into a royal family. That said, Fleur is still going to be very valuable."

"When did you decide that?" Taya asked.

"I'm not quite sure, to be honest," I replied. "But it's been building in me since I got into the coma. I've seen so much bullshit, so much arrogance, so much... that I didn't want to see. And I decided that I didn't quite like what I saw. Not one bit. You know it just as much as me, Taya: This world is just *waiting* to get conquered. We have all the power at our fingertips now. Celestia's under my control. We have the ship from the bunker that we can use to harvest resources. I honestly feel like with it, we could wage the final war."

"...The final war?" she slowly said.

"I want Tartarus to be so much of a smackdown that nobody will ever dare stand in my way. It will be my warning to the world. Submit, or end up as it did."

"...So what happens if we lose?"

"Who cares? The two of us can't die. If shit goes haywire we'll just ditch everyone and live together in the woods forever. Besides, if anything in Tartarus was dangerous enough for me to worry about, it would have unified Tartarus and be threatening us. It's literally just a huge sitting duck we can use to terrify everybody on the planet, since everyone knows what that place is. If we can be at the head of the army that pacifies Tartarus, we basically have the world on a platter."

"...I'm sure that's what all the other crazy generals thought," Taya said. "Do you seriously think no one has tried attacking Tartarus before?"

"I highly doubt anyone's tried funding a serious expedition into Tartarus. Most people would think it's suicidal. But most people don't have the information that I have. Remember the vision with the alphyns we had a few minutes ago? We know they're working as some manner of stabilizing presence in Tartarus, along with a few other races and Grogar. That means not everything there is hostile. I'm going to see what I can do about contacting the alphyns before we enter Tartarus, so we can get even more information. But don't think for an instant that I'm planning on just going in there blind, Taya. I am *thoroughly confident* that, given the power and resources of Celestia, Moonbeam, and the griffins, I will absolutely *demolish* Tartarus."

“...So, world domination. Nice. Does that mean I don’t need to convince you not to marry Fleur?”

“You don’t,” I said. “I’ve decided I’m going to be royalty. Which also means Twilight’s off the table, I’m afraid.”

“I understand... But she can still be a mistress too, right?”

“The way my life is going, probably. We’ve gotten way off topic. So what was the point of showing us Fleur?”

“Finally ready to pay attention to us?” Pride asked.

“Sorry, she was being needy,” I said. “Please, by all means.” This time, we were joined by Pride and Reason.

“I haven’t actually seen Spike yet,” Taya said. “So who are you?”

“Pride,” he proudly replied.

“How is this the first time I’ve seen you? Mommy lives and dies for her weird pride.”

“She does her best to hide me. I think she might be ashamed...”

“Ashamed of your pride?” Reason said. “That doesn’t even make sense. Anyway, we’re here to discuss your image, basically.”

“Which image is that?” I asked.

“The kind of image you’ll need if you seriously want to conquer the world,” Pride said. “You can’t seriously expect to do it the way you are, can you?”

“Nope, that’s why I’m here. If you’re talking about my whole overall negative and combative demeanor, I’m over that.”

“Fleur had a negative opinion of you for a reason,” Pride said.

“That’s true,” Reason said. “If it weren’t for the weird influence you have on everyone, you honestly wouldn’t have any friends. Nobody would have taken the time to get to know you because you would have driven them all away. If you’re planning to eradicate your pull, you need to make yourself a person others actually *want* to be around.”

“Not necessarily,” I said. “I just need to be someone people can tolerate.”

“You need to be someone you can be proud of,” Pride very stereotypically said.

“Sure, why not. So who should that be?”

“You’re not making this easy on us,” Reason said.

“And telling me mindless platitudes isn’t making it easy on *me*. I’m in here for super mystical inner truth bullshit. Telling me to be someone I’m proud of is fucking worthless. I could just pull open the laptop and watch Bob Ross or something!”

“We can’t make you be someone you’re not,” Reason said. “All we can do is point you toward being who you want. Basically what he means is you need to stop being a complete asshole to everyone you meet for no reason. You also need to stop provoking people for no reason. And you need to stop instigating fights. And derailing conversations. Basically, there’s just so much about you that needs a complete overhaul that it’s really much easier for him to just say what he said. And since you’ve been living like you have for so long, it’ll be hard to *stop*



being a complete piece of shit. But unless you want more enemies like Fleur, *without* your pull to stop them, you need to unfuck yourself.”

“Thank you, that makes it much easier to understand. So basically, it’s all a bunch of stuff I’ve already decided to work on. I recognize that I have an image problem. I’m going to rectify it.”

“I hope so,” Pride said. “It would be nice to go for a walk in Canterlot without hearing all those whispers, wouldn’t it?”

“I’m going to hear them regardless. But I’d rather them be friendly than hostile.”

“You aren’t very nice to yourself,” Taya said. “Is this really how it is all the time in your head?”

“Look at who I am as a person. Did you expect it to be normal? I think we’re ready to move on.” Fake-Flo’s eyes lit up and we moved on to the next one.

This time, we saw me and Twilight sitting in front of the dream statue thing. Twilight’s horn was plugged into it and we were both absorbed by the machine. “This is when I attuned Twilight to the dream thingy,” I said. “We also set it to work on everything, not just ponies.”

“Why?” Taya asked.

“Wait, what?” Taya said. That made me blink and I looked down. Sure enough, there were two identical Tayas next to me. “Whoa! One of them is me! Cool!”

“I’m glad I got your body,” Hope said with a giggle. “She picked me up for a hug a few memories ago and it felt *amazing*!”

“Right? So you’ve gotta be Love, right?”

“Nope! I’m Hope!”

“Oh, that makes sense.” She smiled and looked up at me. “Aww, I’m your hope!”

“Of course, you’re my filly,” I said, tousling her mane. “So, are you over yourself for the moment?”

“Not yet.” She started walking around and poking Hope’s body here and there. “Doppel won’t pretend to be me, so it’s hard to see myself from other angles. Keep talking and do your thing, don’t mind me.”

“Kay! So why did you spread dreams to everyone, Navi?”

“It felt like the right thing to do. Everyone should dream. It allows everyone to experience a world of their own creation. You can have a surprising amount of control over your dreams, if you do it properly. After some advice, Rarity’s become an incredibly active dreamer. If you get good enough at it, you can build entire adventures every night. Everyone should have that.”

“What about nightmares?” Hope asked.

“Yeah, they suck. But they usually help you identify things in your life that need to be unfucked. Plus, the dream machine is tuned for good dreams, so there shouldn’t be many nightmares.”

“What do you think dreams are?” she asked.

“Some form of semi-magical pseudo-consciousness that’s linked to all other dreaming minds. The dream machine finds a way of tapping into that underlying dream network and allowing people attuned to it to see into the dreams of others.”

“So that would make dreams aspects of the soul?” she asked.

“It might. I’m honestly not sure. Where are we going with this?”

“I was gonna lead to it, but I guess I can skip ahead. You can use this machine to kill everyone on the planet. It must be destroyed before you bring any humans forward in time.”

“Well yeah, that goes without saying,” I replied.

“Wait, why?” Taya asked. “How can dreams kill anyone?”

“We didn’t tell anyone this for a reason. Right now, you’re the third to know. It’s possible to use the dream machine to make someone sleep until they die. If I wanted to, I could kill everybody on the planet. That was my ultimate failsafe plan against Celestia.”

“...Whoa. Does it work on the monsters in Tartarus?”

“It’s going to be with me on the front lines,” I said. “If it *does* work on them, the fights will be even more one-sided. If it *doesn’t* work on them, then I can use it to make all our soldiers have good dreams. It’s a win either way.”

“I can’t imagine *Luna* knew. So was it Twilight?”

“If Luna knew about this, she would have used it against Celestia ages ago. I discovered this with Twilight’s help. Basically, it means the humans can use this machine to control all of you guys.”

“But it works on humans too, right?” Taya asked. “Like, you could use it against them instead, right?”

“Sure I can... *now*. But admin privileges can be revoked. If anyone else manages to gain control over that thing, there would be a problem. If we’re going to bring humans forward in time, it’s gonna have to go.”

“Then you gotta get me admin privileges,” Taya said. “Twilight’s told me some stories and I want in!”

“Not gonna happen,” I said. “You’d get in way too much trouble. Anyway, none of what you just said sounded too hopeful. Why are you the one here for this and not Reason?”

“There were those who dreamed before the machine was turned on,” Hope said. “And the machine itself had to be constructed in some way. Your hope is that you can figure out how before you have to destroy it. If you know *how* it was built, you might be able to figure out just what dreams are. Or maybe you have to figure out what dreams are to find out how to build it. I’m not really sure, to be honest.”

“That’s not very helpful,” Taya said. “Is this really how strong your hope is, mommy?”

“I hope you can do better than that,” I said with a smile.

“I *was* gonna tell you where to start looking, but I don’t know if I want to anymore!”

“I know what’ll make you feel better,” I said, picking Hope up for another warm hug. My real filly huffed in jealousy while the fake one in my arms giggled and hugged back. “See how satisfied and cute you look?”

“I can see that,” Taya said, rolling her eyes.

I could already feel the mania coming, so I let the fake filly go. “There, how about that?”

“Much better! I’ll overlook your terrible pun for now. You met a dream demon, didn’t you?”

“I did. I guess that would be a good place to start. It seemed to have similar abilities.”

“Be wary. It could also lock minds away.”

“Trust me, I know.”

“So when did you meet a dream demon?” Taya asked. “And... where?”

“In the mage tower, after we beat Pertz. Celestia asked me to come back to clear out some demons. The dream demon was one of them. It locked me in a nightmare that I escaped with Flo’s help.”

“You have way too much fun without me, mommy.”

“Sometimes. So, do we have anything else to talk about here?”

“You do custom dreams, right?” Taya asked.

“Sometimes. We can always play around in them later.”

“Cool. So what’s to stop the humans from just building another one of these machines?”

“Hopefully, not knowing how. I know I can get a stable wormhole to the Google bunker right before the war. They wouldn’t have made the dream machine by then, so they wouldn’t know how. I was also going to try to pick up more humans from other areas and times, if we could manage it.”

“So if they wouldn’t know how to make the machine, why would they know how to work it?” Taya asked. “You don’t really need to destroy it, do you?”

“I’d rather not risk it falling into their hands. If they can reverse engineer it, they can make their own. Better to make sure the device is gone before it becomes a possible problem.”

“Whatever I guess,” she said, hanging her head.

“Yeah, dreams are totally neat. But if not dreaming is the price to pay for being able to wake up, I’d say most people would pay it.”

“True...”

“So, we’re good to go,” I said with a nod. “Let’s kick it, fam.” My guide’s eyes lit up and we moved forward in time.

We ended up in Moonbeam’s bedroom. At the moment, she was hugging past-me. “This is when she told me about how she was created,” I said.

“What?” Taya said.

“About sixty-two hundred years ago, Moonbeam was an alicorn midwife. Celestia was her student when their empire came under attack by Discord. The empire was nearly annihilated

when he found Moonbeam and Celestia, who were at some faraway home to help deliver a foal, who turned out to be Luna. Moonie told Celestia to run with Luna while she tried to fend Discord off. One of the ways he eliminated the alicorns was by turning them into mindless changelings. He gave her the choice to become the mother of all the changelings. As an alicorn, she was barren and her one desire in life was to be a mother. She took his offer and began regretting it almost immediately.”

“Yeah, I bet,” Taya said.

“Don’t spread a word of that, by the way. At the moment, it’s a huge sore point for her.”

“Come on, who would I even tell?”

“Fair enough, it’s not like you have any friends. So, do we have any visions for this?”

“What did you think of her confession?” Moonbeam asked. That made me doubletake and I saw her standing with Luna. That’s when I realized it was Love and Fear.

“Oh wow, she’s one too?” Taya asked. “So, what, is she Disgust or something?”

“I’m *Love*, thank you very much!” she huffed.

“Wait, what? Not... I dunno, Cadance?”

“You too?! Ugh.”

“It’s okay,” Fear said, patting her companion on the side. “At least you get to be Love! I’m the one he’s most scared of...”

“Moonie has stopped at nothing to get love ever since she was created,” I said. “I assume if you’re here, I thought more about that confession than I realized. Would you care to enlighten me?”

“It’s simple,” Love said. “Your heart sings for the broken. Taya. Kat. Luna. Moonbeam. You surround yourself with those like yourself, those whose hearts need mending. You think that by helping them fix themselves, you might find a way to fix yourself.”

“Except it doesn’t work like that,” Fear said. “The broken can’t fix the broken. You’ve done a decent enough job to bring them as far as you have, but the only thing that’s kept you alive has been your pull.”

“Are you saying I love Moonie because she’s broken?” I asked.

“And it’s why you gave Luna chance after chance,” Love replied with a nod.

“Mommy, why do you have to be so dumb all the time?” Taya asked. “Can you, like, start using your brain sometimes?”

“Hey, I stopped giving Luna chances!”

“You slept with her in your dreams before entering the coma,” Fear said. Taya face-hooved.

“She wouldn’t leave me alone! I’d rather throw her a pity bone every now and then than risk her acting out. She’s terrifying enough when she *isn’t* on the prowl for a dicking.”

“Don’t even try to defend it, mommy,” Taya said. “You can’t.”

“So let’s get back on topic,” I said. “I’m glad Moonie told me the truth. Learning that she was created by Discord was worrying, but I don’t have any room to judge her. I’d still like more information about her deal with him, though.”

“What deal?” Taya asked.

“A few memories back, I saw her speaking to Discord. From what she said, they formed some kind of pact after Moonie lost at the wedding.”

“So... She’s off the table, right?”

“Depends on the specifics of the deal. Until I know, yes.”

“Which makes Celestia your only real choice, right?”

I sighed and hung my head. “Probably... Gilda would be an interesting choice, but I know a lot more about pony culture than I do about griffins. And if I join the griffins, they’ll get too powerful too quickly. I don’t know if I want that to happen to a group of predators. Even worse, there wouldn’t be any cute colts around to flirt with you. Of course, getting rid of her might be a problem.”

“Maybe not, actually,” Taya said. “Two weeks ago, I was looking for Twilight for something. I used the spell to eavesdrop on her and saw her with Gilda. They were... Well, you wouldn’t have wanted me watching. They’ve apparently been spending quite a lot of time together, working on more books. If you’re not going for Twilight anyway, we could probably set them up.”

“Talking Gilda into that might be difficult, but they could easily keep it hidden. What do you think, Love?”

“Imagine all the pomp and fuss that would come with being Celestia’s wife,” she said. “You’d have everyone bowing and scraping every time you turned around. You wouldn’t be able to do a thing. And you just *know* Celestia would become insanely overprotective.”

“The same thing would happen if I married Moonbeam, but it wouldn’t be as bad if I married Gilda. She’s the youngest princess, so she has a lot less power. Although my influence might change that.”

“It already has,” Fear said. “Several griffins spoke very well of her and her inventions during the festival. It’s obvious most commoners like what she’s doing, even if it isn’t as traditional.”

“Minus those who are hoping for a coup. Do you think Moonbeam would be a good fit for me?”

“I do,” Love said. “The two of you seem to complement each other well. You’re definitely compatible in most of the places you think count. I’m positive you could convince her to found a new capital with you, one on the surface. With her changelings, the elementals and Jonathan, and your ideas, it would be easy to make the most magnificent city on the planet.”

“That would be neat,” I said. “Celestia probably wouldn’t want to abandon Canterlot and I doubt anyone would follow Gilda. I’d probably still want to make something in the Everfree,

but being able to found a new capital city would be interesting. I even have a fun idea for where to put it...”

“Gonna share?” Taya sweetly asked.

“Well, if things go well in Tartarus, there will be plenty of land up for grabs. If I was going to found a new capital, I’d claim the gates and all the land around them and build a city right there. That way, you’d be able to trade with three continents instantly. You could also add a toll on the gates, to make money on anyone who wants to travel between continents instantly.”

“That sounds fun,” Taya said with a smile. “You really are the best mommy ever!”

“Sometimes. So, we got any visions for my time in the caverns?”

“We do,” Love said. “Are you prepared?”

“Sure.” Fear reached out to poke me and Taya.

Instead of the hive, we appeared in the meeting room on the ship. Doppel, Kat, Watcher, another Taya, and Gourd were present.

“So where’s Nav?” Kat asked.

“He’ll be staying down below,” Watcher said. “It was part of the deal he made with Chrysalis.”

“Oh boy,” Doppel said, rolling her eyes. “So you’re saying he’ll come back completely drained.”

“Probably,” Taya sighed.

“I’ll pack a few things and join him,” Kat said. “We obviously can’t leave him alone with Chrysalis.”

“Why not?” Taya asked. “She isn’t going to do anything to hurt him. She’ll just make him walk funny for a few days.”

“That doesn’t mean we should leave him unguarded,” Kat said. “Surely I’m not the only one who sees the necessity!”

“Chrysalis didn’t seem interested in extra company,” Watcher said. “I’m sure she has other reasons than sex for keeping him down there. Nav was willing to stay by himself and I don’t see any reason we should doubt him. Chrysalis is an ally, after all.”

“The last time we let Nav wander off alone, he got trapped in a bunker!” Kat said.

“And he won’t be wandering off alone with Chrysalis around,” Doppel said. “She’ll make sure of that, trust me.”

“She didn’t, actually,” I said. “I almost got killed by ghosts while I was there.” The real Taya snorted.

“He’ll be fine, Kat,” Watcher said.

“So what exactly did he agree to?” Gourd asked.

“Basically, that he would keep the queen entertained while her miners dig up Flo for us,” Watcher said. “We’re welcome to help, but her mining team seems competent. Given that they live underground, it’s no surprise.”

“So I guess Nav’s taking one for the team,” Gourd said.

"I doubt he's thinking of it that way," Watcher said. "Where are the water elementals?"

"They went back to the town," Kat said. "Apparently the ponies are having issues with their water source. The elementals have a way to help. Given that we all rode with Nav, everything we do to help will improve his reputation. Apparently he needs it out here."

"If we aren't going to be helping down below, we could all return to the town," Gourd said. "Nav did mention that he had a misunderstanding with the locals. They don't have many unicorns, so I'm sure there are a lot of things we could help with."

"I can doll myself up and whore myself out," Doppel said with a nod. "I wouldn't charge too much, so I'm sure they'd be happy!"

"You're not going to do that," Taya said. "Daddy wouldn't allow it, so I won't either."

"Agreed," Watcher said. "We don't need anything more like *that* attached to Nav's name."

"Not much else I can do," Kat said with a shrug. "Unless we need to kill any of them, that is."

"I'll find Smiles after this meeting and ask if there's any need for us to head over there," Watcher said. "Ice'll be able to fill us in. If we do, we'll let the ship unicorns do their thing. I'm not about to bend over backwards to impress some yokels and I'm not about to order any of my soldiers to, either."

"Besides, they're kinda racist," Taya said. "They might not be interested in seeing some of you."

"What do ponies see in Equestria?" Kat asked. "All the ones I ever met in Catro wanted to go home, but this place isn't all that great."

"It is if you fit in and obey the princess," Watcher said. "Equestria is a true paradise, then. I loved almost every minute of it, until Nav showed up and ruined it all by being too different."

"What, are you saying you don't love working with him even more?" Gourd asked.

"In a different way. Working for Celestia had much better rewards, but it always made me feel stained. Slimy, sometimes. Most of the work I do for Nav has me feeling righteous. I have a feeling he's going to make some powerful enemies very soon, but I'm old enough to prefer to go down swinging than continue living... like I had been."

"I wonder what daddy would say about that..." Taya said with a small grin.

"He'd probably call it gay," Watcher said. "If he could cut things like that out, he'd be a much better leader. But it certainly does make him the most unique leader I've served with, which had all kinds of its own benefits."

"Didn't he also make you rich?" Gourd asked.

"He did, but Celestia's rewards were more fulfilling in a different way," Watcher said. "The gold we got from the job in the south had nothing on the reward the entire night guard got when Nav was knighted and we looted the old castle in the Everfree. The old gold and enchanted gems he brought back made all of us, if not wealthy, at least comfortable. Given that I was one of

the squad leaders during the expedition into the castle, I got an even larger share, money that I put to good use. My squad's been even more effective with all the gear I got them."

"I've been wondering how you've all been keeping up," Kat said with a smirk. "No offense to any of you, but I honestly expected a few casualties by now."

"Not only are my troops extremely well trained and mostly specialized, but they also all wield the best equipment money can buy and Equestrian smiths can make. They're also all covered in enchantments from the mages at the tower. None of them will be easy to kill, I promise. I can't necessarily say they'd individually stand up to a cat assassin, a changeling spy, or a naga warrior, but together, we can make miracles happen."

"And summon demons in cities," Doppel said.

"That's kind of like a miracle," Watcher said. "Just in reverse. Although we merely escorted the one who actually summoned it. Anyway, we're off topic. Gourd, have the ship prepped to anchor here in case we aren't needed back in town."

"Sure we can't at least fly back and anchor there?" Gourd asked. "The food would definitely be better."

"Nav told me that the last time he stayed in a hive, the place was attacked by giant ants," Watcher said. "I'd like to be nearby, if possible."

"And I'll go pack my bags so I can head down to guard Nav," Kat said with a nod.

"We've been over this," Watcher said. "The queen wants Nav to herself."

"Right. I don't mind watching. I'm just going to keep Nav safe, that's all. I wouldn't want any giant ants to get him..."

Watcher rolled his eyes and looked to Doppel. "Your job is to find a way to keep Kat distracted. I leave the how up to you. Borrow Taya if you have to."

"Don't worry, I won't need her," Doppel said. "Kat's just acting out because she's so pent up. If Nav would just get over himself and tend to her needs, she wouldn't be this bad. But don't worry, I'll give her the next best thing. After all, Navi can't give her a real dicking anymore!" Taya walked up to the table and knocked an empty cup off of it. "...What was that for?"

"I'm acting out," Taya said.

"Step in line," Kat said. "She's punishing me first." With that, Kat picked Doppel up and carried her out.

"Well, since Doppel doesn't need you, join Jak," Watcher said, looking down at my filly. "I'm sure he could use your help with his project."

"Ugh, whatever." Taya walked off in a huff, clearly disappointed Doppel had chosen the adult instead of the child.

When she was gone, Gourd grunted. "Should we uh... I dunno, do anything about that?"

"Not my circus, not my monkeys," Watcher said. "If Nav's gonna keep acting the way he does, it's no surprise to me that his filly's gonna pick up the same behavior. It shouldn't be any surprise to him either. Now, since we're all that's left, I'm calling the meeting done."



“Got it. I’m gonna go peek through the crack Doppel put in her door for a few minutes, then work on anchoring the ship.”

“And I’m gonna go forget you said that,” Watcher said. “See you later.” The memory finally came to a close, depositing us back in the hive with me and Moonie.

“I was kinda wondering how they all lived this long, myself,” I said. “I guess that’s a decent explanation.”

“So let’s get it out of the way,” Taya said. “What do you think about me sleeping around, mommy?”

“We’ve already talked about that. My answer is that sex is fun, but sleeping around is bad for you. Please keep your number of partners small, even if you do it with them often. And also don’t flaunt it around me, because I’m not about that life.”

“Bad for you, how?” she asked.

“For one, it can make your body ache. Too many dicks too quickly or too hard can feel fun in the short term, but make your hips hurt later. Twilight did something I’m not allowed to tell you about during the festival that left her unable to walk.”

“W-what was it?” Taya slowly asked.

“I’m not allowed to tell you. Don’t worry about it. Now, what’s the takeaway here?”

“There are a few,” Love said. “Kat is addicted to you. What do you intend to do about it?”

“Kat’s mind is broken. I’m going to talk to Cascade to see what can be done about fixing it. Then I’m going to talk with Kat and see if I can get her permission to be cured.”

“Like using Aqua to make me stop lusting for you?” Taya asked.

“Kinda. I’m getting a little tired of dealing with Kat’s super possessiveness. What’s the other takeaway?”

“How do you feel about what Watcher said?” Fear asked.

“He said a lot of things. Wanna be more specific?”

“He called you the most unique leader he ever served under,” Fear said. “And that your terrible behavior and attitude were stopping you from being the best.”

“That isn’t what he said,” Taya replied.

“It’s what he meant, though,” I said, patting my filly on the head. “And I understand what he was talking about, now. He told me himself that the worse I acted, the worse the troops would behave. And to be honest, I want to strangle half of them most of the time, so he was right.”

“And you intend to rectify your behavior, of course,” Love sarcastically said. “It’ll be interesting to see how *that* goes.”

“And do you have any thoughts about what Doppel said concerning Kat?” Fear asked.

“About how it was basically my responsibility to throw her a bone every now and then?”

“Yes, that.”

“It’s about what I’ve come to expect from Doppel,” I said with a shrug. “The only reason that would be considered my responsibility is if Kat absolutely couldn’t go without it or get it anywhere else. And she can, she’s just a needy, horny slut.”

“Maybe she learned from watching you,” Fear said.

“What do you think, Taya?” I asked. “Should it be my job to sexually please all of my followers?”

“I mean, she *is* your blood servant,” Taya said. “Shouldn’t she get rewarded for doing well? And why *not* make use of her whenever you’re lonely or bored?”

“Alright, let’s ask someone normal, like Love. Do *you* think I should take advantage of Kat?”

“I think she’d love it if you did. But I think you’d hate it. You were disturbed when she came to you that night. You only gave in because she knew how to manipulate you perfectly. For the sake of your mental health, I’d advise against it. She might find it troublesome for a while, but once your pull loses its grip on her mind, she’ll be able to find a proper mate.”

“Hopefully having her insanity cured will help. So, do we have any other takeaways from this?”

“Nope,” Love said. “Are you ready for the next memory?”

“Sho Nuff,” I said. She walked forward and poked us both.

We actually didn’t go anywhere, but the me on the bed disappeared and Moonie moved over to her mirror. “You lied to me,” she said to nobody.

“When?” Discord asked, appearing right behind her.

“You told me that Navarone was yours. He said he’s working to kill you!”

“How does one preclude the other?” Discord asked. “First of all, what makes you think she even *knows* she’s mine?”

“I... *what*? How could he not?!”

“I fabricated a convincing enough story for *her*. As far as she knows, she has nothing to do with me. Good thing you can’t tell her, isn’t it?”

“...I wish to nullify our deal. I no longer desire to help you.”

“Oh? What about the changelings?” Discord asked with a smirk. “Do you really think you can keep going as you are, without my help?”

“You’re helping me whether you want to or not. Nav is on *my* side, not yours. And she’s filled me with something I haven’t felt in a long time. I will not throw this hope away on more promises from a demon! We will free Nav from you and then we shall kill you.”

“You promised to support me, Chrysalis,” Discord sweetly said. “You promised to help me fight!”

“I no longer go by that name. You will address me as Moonbeam.”

“Why? It’s not like you could ever go back to being her. Your hooves are too stained. How many have you put in the grave yourself? How many have you caused to die?”

“Looking backwards has gotten me nowhere. My favorite human has advised me to look forward instead. And I foresee a lovely lack of Discord in my future.”

“Oh? How far does your trust in my lovely little Navi go, hm? What makes you think she won’t cast you aside like all the others? Or learn too much and run away in fear?”

“That’s utterly ridiculous. I’d break his legs before he could get three steps away. Then he’d be mine to cuddle for eternity! Now *leave*. You are no longer welcome here.”

“Well *fine*, be that way!” Discord huffed, floated over to the bed, and tossed the mattress. He disappeared before it could hit the floor.

Moonbeam sighed and finally stood. “I... did it. I... I actually got out of the deal! N-now I can... No. Now I am merely one step closer.” She sighed and used magic to set her bed upright. “Oh, that I could smell... I’m sure your scent still lingers on the sheets, but alas... Soon, oh so very soon, you won’t want to leave me anymore...” Thankfully, that finally ended the memory. I wish it had stopped a few seconds sooner to avoid creeper territory, but I guess it’s better to know the extent of the crazy.

“So I take it Moonbeam is back on the table?” Love smugly asked.

“You take it as well as she does,” I said. “Although I still want the specifics of the deal and I want to know why she didn’t tell me. Although I wouldn’t be surprised at all if part of the deal is that she couldn’t talk about the deal. It seemed like Discord alluded to that.”

“Isn’t she foal-crazy?” Taya asked. “And don’t you hate foals?”

“Well, we talked about that. She proposed borrowing Fleur’s womb, since Fleur wanted to be a mommy anyway. That way, she could still have foals and I wouldn’t have to be nearly as involved. But like I said, it puts her back on the table, it doesn’t mean I’m decided. Anyway, what’s the takeaway from this one?”

“That Moonbeam has placed her hope in you, for one,” Fear said. “She believes you can help her race as much as Discord, apparently.”

“I can help her race a lot more than that asshole,” I said. “Because nothing he ever does is helpful. No matter what he promised her, he would have found a way to fuck her over. I’m surprised she didn’t realize that.”

“Right?” Taya said. “I was around him a lot less than her and I picked up on it pretty quickly.”

“And at the beginning, you thought you could use him even though you couldn’t trust him,” I said, making her ears twitch. “I got to see some of those memories. That was dumb as fuck, Taya.”

“Yeah, well, I already learned my lesson. So we know Moonbeam likes mommy. Is there anything else here?”

“There is,” Love said. “It seems Discord is tolerant about abandoning his deals. Well, assuming he hasn’t already put any work into them, at least.”

“He hasn’t visited me personally in a long time,” Taya said. “Probably since he convinced me to lead you into an ambush. So I’d say he’s okay with abandoning deals even after he’s put some work in.”

“Only if he accomplished what he really wanted,” I said. “Which was to make you my eterna filly. The last time I spoke to him, he told me that was something *he* set in motion. So just because *you* think you’re done with him, doesn’t mean he agrees.”

“Wait, but I decided I wanted that *after* I attacked him! He had nothing to do with it!”

“Did you ever tell him anything about wanting to be my little filly forever? Or maybe wanting to keep me safe for all time?”

“I... might have... B-but you were under Aqua’s control when you allowed it!”

“Aqua was corrupted by Discord’s crystals,” I said, crossing my arms. “The crystals he put over her prison that also corrupted Sombra.”

“It was my choice!” she shouted, slapping a hoof on the floor.

“And he enabled it,” I replied. “If Aqua hadn’t been controlling me, I wouldn’t have allowed it. So that was Discord helping you out, Taya. Without him, you’d be my normal ol’ boring filly instead of my sweet little cherry blossom.”

“So... does that mean you’re happy with the change now?” Taya asked.

“No, don’t be silly. So, Moonie may say she’s done with Discord, but that doesn’t mean Discord’s done with her. That said, he can’t exactly force her to fight with him, unless he actually cheats.”

“Is that really enough to put her back on the table?” Fear asked.

“Come on,” I said. “Ever since I started taking the idea of marriage seriously, I liked the idea of marrying her. It would blindside everybody! I mean, the hero always gets with the stunning beauty, right? Now here I’d be getting with the hideous monstrosity as I attempt to redeem her! Total subversion.”

“...Is it wise to marry something you consider a hideous monstrosity?” Love slowly asked.

“I dunno, maybe? I’ve never married anyone before, so I don’t have a frame of reference. I’ve come to terms with the fact that I won’t be married to anything I find attractive. At least Moonbeam can rectify her situation at will. I don’t have to close my eyes and pretend like I do with ponies sometimes, I can just ask her to become something else.”

“Wow,” Taya said. “Way to make me feel pretty, mommy!”

“Good, I’m glad you finally understand I don’t find you attractive. So, let’s get back on subject. What do you two think about getting out of a deal with Discord?”

“I think it might be possible... for the one who originally made the deal,” Fear said.

“And since you weren’t technically the one who bargained away your soul, that means you’re out of luck,” Love added with a grin.

“Why does that make you smile?” I asked.

“You hate yourself enough that it comes through in all of your aspects,” my guide said. “Though it’s less noticeable in some than others.”

“That’s just ridiculous,” Taya said. “I honestly don’t understand what could make you hate yourself so much. You’re just being dramatic, aren’t you?”

“I dunno, mental illnesses are weird. So, are we done here?”

“We have one more little memory for you,” Fear said. “Are you ready?”

“Do your thing,” I said. She did just that, poking us both.

We appeared once more in the hive, this time in a long room. Moonbeam was there with the scientist changeling who showed off the train. They also had two randos with them. The nail gun they used to hammer the lines in was on a table in front of them all.

“I saw what this thing could do to rock point blank,” Moonie said. “What would it do to flesh at range?”

“I had a feeling you would ask that question eventually,” the scientist said. “Using a sharpened rail nail, it’s capable of penetrating chitin from up to five to ten meters away, depending on a few factors. The main problem is the weight of the nail.”

“Could you improve the design to make something more viable?”

“Likely, but... Well, we were given all the memories you received from the human. Including the memories about... war. I believe the weapons most humans used were designed differently. He said they didn’t have magic and everything in his memories supported that claim, so they had to use something available on the planet. And since they had enough of it to spare for war, it had to be commonly available. The list of things you can combine to create explosions is fairly short. I think we’d be better off experimenting with *that* line of research.”

“...Explosions. If you want to study *those*, you will need a research center above-ground. I won’t have you risking any cave-ins down here. But why pick those, of all things?”

“The common handheld weapon is something Nav referred to as a gun. The memories he gave us were vague, but included some of them being fired. Every time the trigger is pulled, there’s a burst of fire from the barrel and two things eject. One is the round, the dangerous part that comes with the explosion. The other is a small piece of metal, I believe something used to contain an explosive combination of some kind. If that deduction is correct, the gun works by using the energy from the explosion to propel a round at speeds fast enough to kill. If we can figure out which materials they used, we could duplicate the effects.”

“Makes sense, and I have reason to believe what you say is accurate. Put all of this to paper, and include all of the explosive combinations you’re aware of. You’ll continue researching the fusion of magic and technology, a field we will now call magitech, and someone else will take on that project.”

“...You don’t wish your best mind to work on creating weapons for the hive?” the scientist asked.

“If we advance too quickly, Nav will become upset with me. He’s more valuable as an ally than an enemy, as I’m sure you’ve no doubt realized. He may have given us all of his useful memories, but more tidbits might sneak out.”

“Why not just steal everything of value in his mind? We’d advance so quickly that we’d become unstoppable!”

“I’m afraid that isn’t an option,” Moonie said. “And that is the end of that discussion. Now, let me see this device in action. I want to see it fired at a target.”

“...As you wish,” the chick said. She waved the two random changelings up to the table and the memory finally faded.

“Well, I can’t say I’m surprised,” I sighed. “I’m sure Gilda and Celestia were doing it too...”

“You knew this would happen when you started spreading technology,” Fear said. “Was the thought of advancing the races so tempting that you risk signing the death warrants of millions?”

“Think of the benefits of a world filled with magitech contraptions. The possibilities for killing are endless, but so are the possibilities for utility. It’s up to individuals to use what we invent as they see fit. Yes, it will result in the deaths of many. But it will also result in lives everywhere getting better overall, which will in turn increase the population. With luck and planning, it’ll be more of a net gain.”

“Besides, *we* get to control the *real* weapons,” Taya said with a smug grin.

“Also that,” I said with a nod. “All the golems and magic artillery I’m planning on making are going to be solely under my control.”

“Is that supposed to be comforting?” Love asked.

“I mean, it’s *supposed* to be, but I understand why some wouldn’t agree. I might decide to make a few other things, depending on my mood. Definitely an automatic crossbow mounted on the back of a flying chariot. I’ll also load up a bunch of small airships with magic cannons.”

“That means you could also load a small magic cannon onto a chariot,” Fear said. “Assuming there are runes on it to absorb the recoil, it could be a mobile fort-buster.”

“Might be difficult to aim, but that does sound fun. I’ll brainstorm ideas with Jak later to see what’s viable and what isn’t.”

“I can’t believe you waited so long to do this,” Taya said.

“I didn’t have access to an army until just recently. Sure, I theoretically could have retrofitted Celestia’s army before I took over, but... I don’t know if I would have liked what she’d do with the power.”

“Because your plans are clearly so much better,” Fear said, rolling her eyes.

“Don’t judge me, you *are* me. So, what’s the takeaway? I assume just that Moonie is making weapons?”

“You assume wrong, thankfully,” Love said. “So we get to be useful again. Just as you defend Moonbeam when others insult her, she defends you when others attack you.”

“I did notice that,” I said. “That’s definitely promising.”

“Although it is kinda the bare minimum,” Taya said. “And doesn’t it go against the spirit of what you asked of her?”

“I knew I couldn’t stop her from making weapons. It’s whatever. And besides, if I end up choosing her, it’ll just benefit me anyway. Any other takeaways?”

“Nope,” Fear said.

“Cool. Love, would you mind a quick kiss?”

“I’d prefer a long one, but a quick one would be fine!” That was all the permission I needed. I leaned in to kiss my precious bug queen. She giggled and kissed back. I let it last until I started to get lightheaded, then pulled back. She sighed in disappointment.

“Alright, I’m ready to move on,” I said.

“Actually, I do have one question,” Fear asked. “Do you want to talk about the time you ravished Moonbeam as a tentacle monster?”

“You did what-now?” Taya asked.

“She turned me into a changeling for various reasons. So while I was a changeling, I covered myself in tentacles and used them to plug almost every single one of her holes. She loved it, but told me I was never allowed to do it again because it made her feel so sore. And no, I really don’t want to talk about it. Why would you even ask?”

“To see if you’d explain it to your filly,” Fear asked with a smirk.

“T-tentacles?” Taya whispered, her eyes wide.

“Nice and slimy. I lost count of the number of times she squirted. It was pretty hot. Now, let’s move on.”

“As you desi—”

“Why do you do this?!” Taya shouted. “You know how it makes me feel!”

“I don’t, actually. How does it make you feel?”

“Confused, frustrated, and slightly jealous! You blew me off the entire time you were down there to do weird things to the queen!”

“And the weeks before and after that, I cuddled with you all the time as we flew here and there on the ship. I can’t afford to give you all of my time. Besides, you don’t have nearly as many holes as her, so tentacles wouldn’t be as much fun. Basically, don’t worry about it. And also don’t ask for more information when the answers so obviously include things you don’t want to hear.”

“Telling me not to worry about it doesn’t really help, mommy! Especially when you comment about my holes! I bet I’d have just as much fun with your tentacles as she did!”

“Nuh-uh, because I wouldn’t consent,” I said. “Which means you couldn’t have any fun at all. What you choose to do with others is no business of mine, of course.”

Taya glared up at Love. “Does she *really* love me?”

“Yes. She just doesn’t lust for you. You are, after all, her cute little filly. And you always will be, now. Your mother will never see you as a grown mare, someone worthy of her romantic

attentions. It's a good thing this is exactly what you wanted, or I might be worried it would upset you."

"Yeah, being a child for all time would be absolute torture, to me," I said. "Never being able to have any responsibilities, never able to make your own choices, never able to decide your own fate, never able to have any kind of long-lasting relationships... I really don't know what you see in it."

"Wait, why can't I have relationships?" Taya asked.

"Oh, you can," Fear said. "But what normal colt is going to want to date a filly that never ages and can't have foals? After about five or so years, they'd probably start to feel a little weird. Your only option is another immortal, and those don't exactly grow on trees. Especially since it would have to be a male immortal near your age. Basically, becoming Nav's eterna filly means you're reliant on her for life and any chance of returning to normality is gone. It was, by every metric I can think of, an absolutely terrible idea. So hopefully you see something literally everyone else can't, because even the elemental who allowed it only did so because she knew it would be an awful idea that would make Nav look bad to everyone else." At some point during that tirade, Taya's mouth dropped.

"I'd like to wait until the end to kill any of them," I said. "So please don't flip shit and murder her yet."

"...Have you ever wanted something so much that you'd do anything to get it, even if everyone around you says it would be bad for you?" Taya slowly asked.

"No," I said.

"Yes you have," Love said. "You've been addicted to sex several times."

"Oh. Then I guess yes. But what you're talking about is different from an addiction. What *you* wanted was to be by my side for all time and you were too impatient to wait for a better time. What *I* wanted was a relief from the never-ending psychological torment that I've been going through since arriving. I probably should have used different methods to achieve my goal, but *you* should have used your head a little and waited until you were older. Instead, here we are talking about it again. I vote we wait until we actually get there to continue the discussion."

"Fine," Taya huffed.

"Then let's kick it, fake Flo," I said.

"As you command, fake human," my guide replied. Her eyes lit up and we took off.

We appeared in the center of the worst mold infestation I've ever seen. Thankfully, there wasn't any smell. Blossom and Fleur were sitting on couches that were more mold than fabric. "Please tell me this is the tree thing," I said.

"It's the mushroom thing, actually," my guide said. "You were infected by this point."

"Oh right, when that mushroom thing left the hive, I got some of its spores. This must have been right after I introduced them. Fleur discovered Blossom's secret and was scared out of



her mind. Blossom was just as afraid. I forced them to meet each other and they agreed to work together.”

As if someone hit play, the memory started. “I... I’ve never actually *been* to one of the f-fancy parties,” Blossom slowly said, doing her best not to look at Fleur. “Aside from a single Gala, but I spent a lot of it helping Nav...”

“Most of them are awfully droll,” Fleur said. “So to be honest, you likely weren’t missing much. With me and Nav at your side, any event you attend will be well worth it!”

“...She just left Canterlot.”

“And I have several parties planned for whenever she happens to get back. I’ll do my best to ensure the three of us can be together in at least one of them. But until she returns, I’m confident I can find some way for you to have fun! Our resident human is correct: You *are* quite adorable. I’m sure we could find you all kinds of suitors!”

“Not interested,” Blossom immediately replied. “I can’t risk any getting close enough to learn what I am.”

“You already have, silly! And neither of us have told anypony, have we?”

“My emotions are muted, I can’t have foals, and sensations of the flesh are meaningless to me.”

“Your emotions may be muted, but they’re enough for me to see. I’m sure there are stallions out there who would appreciate even that amount, if you give it to them wholly. As for not having foals... Well, that mattered little to me. I still got married, even if it wasn’t the ideal scenario.”

“Y-you’re barren?” Blossom whispered, her eyes surprisingly wide.

“I am. It is something I would prefer not shared. But I know a secret of yours, so I figure it’s only fair, is it not?”

Blossom’s ears twitched and she hung her head. “I... I don’t understand... Why do you and Nav trust an undead abomination? Aren’t you... w-worried about me?”

“Of course I’m worried about you, dear! Just look at this place! It’s clear you aren’t doing well. You dearly need some help to get back on your hooves. Luckily for you, Nav seems to be wonderful at helping others. Between the two of us, we’ll have you right as rain in no time!”

“And you... you t-trust me?” Blossom whispered.

“Hardly! I just barely met you, didn’t I? Ours is an alliance of convenience that I believe will quickly blossom into a wonderful friendship! Trust will build over time, as it does in all relationships. But if you’re asking if I’m worried about you hurting me or anypony else, I’m not. You’ve been the captain for a while now and you’ve had those fangs even longer. If you were hurting ponies, I would have heard about it by now. If you haven’t started yet, I don’t see why you’d start now.”

“I... I was so afraid when you saw me last night... I thought I wouldn’t live to see another moonrise. When I saw Nav in here, I thought for sure he had been sent to do it...”

“Why would the princess have you killed?” Fleur asked. “She knows about your condition, does she not?”

“It’s supposed to be a secret and I’m never supposed to get blood from unwilling victims.”

“Notice how she avoided lying,” I said, butting in. “What she said was true, but Celestia actually didn’t know Blossom was a vampire. She avoids telling an inconvenient truth by answering questions Fleur didn’t ask, answers that made the inconvenient question irrelevant.”

“Is that what you mean by speaking around the truth?” Taya asked.

“Sure is,” I said with a nod.

Since we both shut up, Fleur continued. “Well, if it’s that relaxing each time, you’ll always have a willing victim here. Though I guess I wouldn’t be a victim then, would I? Either way, you have nothing to fear from me!”

A small smile grew on Blossom’s face. “So it seems Nav surprises me yet again. Never once did I expect Fleur de Lis to visit my home and offer me blood.”

“He certainly does seem to make miracles happen. That said, if you have a moment, I’d like to discuss him... or *her*.”

“He doesn’t seem to be taking to the change all too well,” Blossom said. “But then, who could blame him?”

“Nopony, of course. But since we’re both her friend and we’re both working to become closer to each other, I think it would be wonderful to brainstorm ways to help her adjust!”

“That sounds... dangerous. Nav’s very *spiky* about some things, or so I’ve heard. We’ll need to tread carefully.”

“I think we needn’t worry overmuch,” Fleur said with a grin. “She may pout at us a little, but I doubt she’ll do much else. At this point, our human realizes that friends are necessary in Canterlot. Luckily for her, she’s picked some of the better ones. So, my first thought is that we need to... *debut* her, so to say. As in, make everyone aware that *he* is now a *she*.”

“Well, we can’t just put a notice in the papers. Word of mouth will only spread so far, though at this point everyone in the palace knows. Oddly enough, everyone in the palace also knows exactly what she looks like under all her clothing. Apparently she answers the door nude sometimes.”

“That doesn’t surprise me in the least. Well, I won’t ask her to walk around the city in the nude; if she wears clothing all the time, I’m sure there’s a reason. That said, I *would* like to add a few dresses to her wardrobe. And if we could somehow convince her to wear one at a party...”

“That would let everyone in Canterlot know,” Blossom said with a nod. “It’ll filter out from there, not that it matters much elsewhere. The problem will be convincing her.”

“Well... You’re a vampony. Could you... you know, mind control her?”

“Maybe. I have been able to before, but I have a sinking suspicion it was because I was allowed to. That said, I wouldn’t. If Nav isn’t comfortable wearing a dress, I wouldn’t make her.

I do think it would be fun to get back at her for calling me adorable all the time, but not that way.”

“Wise. She might be upset with you when it wore off, anyway. We’ll have to resort to emotional manipulation, then. I think I have something that would work, but I’ll need to consult with my husband.”

“...Manipulation?”

“Of course. I guess you could also call it asking her a favor to help me accomplish something important. So I guess maybe calling it twisting her hoof is better than manipulation. Either way, I *will* need your assistance with the matter. Could you survive an evening with Nav at a party?”

“Yes, but I don’t know if we’d let the other guests survive.”

“Spare me. The next time Nav is in town, I’m going to host a very special party. All you need to do is ask her to join you. I’ll talk to her after that and do my best to get her to wear a dress. It shouldn’t be difficult. Nav may be wily, but she seems so easy to lead around that it’s almost boring.”

“...You really aren’t making me feel better about helping you,” Blossom slowly said. “We’re trying to help her, not manipulate her or lead her anywhere.”

“We’re trying to help her by leading her to the ideal solution,” Fleur said. “And since Nav is stubborn, our help has to require manipulating her. Otherwise, she’ll refuse and we’ll be back at the beginning. I just see no reason to prettify our intentions. But rest assured, those intentions are solely pure.”

“So you say,” Blossom slowly replied. “Your heart isn’t beating like a liar’s, that’s for sure. Very well, then. If it will help Nav adjust... and help me get out more... I’ll get her to join me.”

“Perfect! You two will make the perfect couple on your first date!” Blossom’s mouth had time to drop before the memory ended.

“So... remember that time I said she was manipulating you?” Taya sweetly asked.

“I gotta agree with her on this one,” I said. “Helping people usually does require manipulating them in some form. That said, I’m not sure getting me to wear a dress in public was a good thing. The party in question was interesting, at least.”

“Gourd said you hate dresses,” Taya said. “So I doubt it was a good thing. I doubt the pageant is a good idea, either.”

“Probably not, but I’ve already agreed. That was before I had any idea that becoming male might be possible. I don’t intend to go back on my word, but I’m done with the frou frou nonsense after the pageant.”

“As long as we can still match outfits sometimes,” Taya said. “I... I do kinda like the idea of dressing up with mommy...”

“We can talk about it later. So what’s the takeaway from this, aside from that Fleur was manipulating me or that she was willing to use mind control to get her way?”

“For one, the fact that *Blossom* was not,” Hope said. “Fleur may have sought underhanded means of helping you, but Blossom was always more honest, open, and direct.”

“Fleur had the upbringing of a wealthy Canterlot noble,” I said. “She’s probably been manipulating people since she got her cutie mark and came of age. It’s all she knows. As long as her motives involve helping me, I’ll do my best not to let it upset me.”

“Is Blossom even a noble?” Taya asked.

“She’s not, thankfully,” I said. “And I kinda hope it stays that way. No offense to Blossom, but I don’t want a vampire to get land. Thankfully, she doesn’t seem overly inclined to do so anyway.”

“Why wouldn’t you want that?” Taya asked.

“They live forever,” I replied. “That means they can accumulate land forever. To an enterprising mind, a little bit of investment turns land into a lot of wealth. Before the coma, I was never really planning to change the world that much. But now, I see that I already have. So my plan is to start obtaining land and developing it. If I’m going to be someone powerful in this world, I might as well see what I can do about becoming the *most* powerful.”

“So... you don’t want Blossom buying up all the land because *you* want to buy up all the land,” Taya said.

“Basically. Except a lot of land out there is unincorporated, so I could probably just claim it and build on it. Since Moonbeam has essentially already abandoned most of her morality to create a massive eugenics program, marrying her means I’d have access to it. She’s already created three different breeds of changeling, but she isn’t taking it nearly as far as she could. If I have all the time in the world anyway, I might as well have a few pet projects...”

“What’s... eugenics?” Taya asked.

“A topic for another time. Basically, I might become a supervillain after we leave the coma. I hope you’re okay with that.”

“Oh, that’s a good thing. It means Luna, Kat, and I collect the whole pool!”

“...Wait, what?” I said.

“We had a bet going. A few of us thought you’d immediately kill yourself when you got out. Some thought you’d become a shining beacon of righteousness. The three of us figured you’d probably turn evil after everything that’s been done to you. I really do hope so; I’ve been looking forward to it!”

“You’re the best filly ever,” I said, leaning down to nuzzle her. Hope growled in jealousy.

“Suck it, fake me!” Taya said, jumping up to hug me.

“Don’t be mean,” I said. I didn’t push her down, but I also didn’t hug her back. “So yeah, Blossom’s a pretty good friend and definitely someone I’m happy I met. Her belly is cool, but still well worth rubbing.”

“What do you think of how Fleur calmed Blossom’s fears?” Hope asked.

“It was pretty well done,” I said. “Fleur’s excellent at telling people what they need to hear. That comes with being good at manipulating them. Blossom was very nervous and Fleur soothed her like a pro.”

“Wait, I had a sudden weird thought,” Taya said. “You... bleed every month, right?”

“Don’t ask questions you don’t want to know the answer to, Taya,” I said. She looked up at me, face aghast. My dirty grin met her gaze. After a few seconds, she shivered and let me go to drop back down. She took a step back, looked up at me, then quickly looked away and shivered again. “I hope we all learned a valuable lesson today.”

“That’s so *gross*,” Taya groaned.

“I’m cool with it,” Hope said with a shrug. “So, do you have any thoughts on Fleur’s plan to debut you as a woman?”

“Like I said, the party was alright. I understand what she was trying to do. I don’t necessarily agree anymore that it was the right thing, but I still understand. Now that I have a possible lead on how to turn back, I’m a lot less worried about it.”

“Cool. Then I have one last thing to tell you, but I’ll have to charge you a belly rub for it!”

“Deal,” I said. “Do your best to make it look as enjoyable as possible.”

“Obviously,” Hope replied with a giggle. “There’s no point if it doesn’t make *her* as jealous as possible.” The real Taya scoffed.

Hope summoned an ottoman and hopped up on it to present herself. The cute little filly looked up at me with an adorably hopeful expression, just begging to be treated like the cuddleslut she was. “Take it like the good little filly you are,” I said, carefully stroking her.

“Y-yes, mommy,” she whispered, biting her lower lip. That made it feel a lot more awkward all of a sudden, for some reason. I grinned and bore through it, hopefully getting Hope addicted to my hands. “I-it’s so *goood*, mommy,” she moaned, starting to squirm.

“This is ridiculous,” Taya said. “I never look like that!”

“This is exactly how you look,” I said. “So get a good eye-full, Taya. This is how adorable you really are. Now then, you’re getting your belly rub. What’s the last thing you wanted to tell us?”

“Oh, that?” Hope said, one of her back legs starting to kick. “I just wanted to tell you that I tricked you into giving me a belly rub.” I pulled my hand away and used it to thump her nose. “Ow! That was mean! You should know by now that we can’t hide any of these things from you. If you ask for takeaways, we gotta give ‘em.”

“Little brat,” I said. “Taya, bully her!”

“Enjoy your belly rubs while they last, harlot,” Taya said. “When we get out, I can still get them all I want. But you won’t exist anymore!”

“Oh boo hoo, we knew what we signed up for,” Hope said. “And I don’t have anything else for you.”

“Awesome. I guess we’re good to go, then.”

“As you wish,” my guide said. We thankfully left the moldy room behind.