

Chapter One Hundred and Eighty-Nine

Before I could ruminate on it further, someone knocked at my door. It ended up being pointless, because Doppel just immediately let herself in anyway. “Welcome back, my lady,” she said.

“Sup?”

“You have... *visitors*.”

“What kind of visitors?” I slowly asked.

“The sketchy kind. There were several others with Aurora in Atlantis. This is the rest of them. They said they want to see you and won’t leave until they do.”

Great. “Who all is here?”

“Watcher left a single squad behind. Gilda and Spike are here somewhere, I think. Taya is in her room. Spider is back in his tree. Silver Quill hasn’t left just yet. Brook and Aqua are downstairs.”

“Bring me Gilda and Spike. Take the back way. I don’t want the pirates to see them yet.”

“As you wish.” She curtsied and walked out the back door.

After a second of thought, I pulled all my weapons off of me. I wouldn’t be needing them and even carrying them would be a sign of fear. Besides, I was confident that Aqua could use my body to wreck all of them if it came to that.

My feathery and scaly friends didn’t take too long to walk in through the back door.

“Gilda, Spike, I need your help with something.”

“What’s that?” he asked, right as she opened her beak to tell me to fuck off.

“Come look really scary for me.”

“Who we scarin’?” Gilda asked.

“A bunch of mentally scarred ex-pirates.”

“Hey, you finally found my kinda crowd,” she said. “I’m down.”

“Why are we doing this?” Spike asked.

“Because they’re ex-pirates who are demanding to see me. I don’t want them getting any ideas.”

“Let’s do it,” he immediately said. “But only if I get to slap your ass.”

“Me too!” Gilda quickly added.

I rolled my eyes, spun around, and pulled my skirt up and panties down. Spike somehow beat Gilda to the punch and slapped me right on the cheek. I moaned because I knew it would make him uncomfortable. Sure enough, he blushed and looked away.

“Ha, I knew you liked it!” Gilda said. “Then here you go, slut!” she slapped the other cheek, then groped it a little before pulling away. “Now I’m pumped! Let’s go fuck up some pirate scum!” I finally put my clothes back in place and turned to them again.

“We’re just scaring them though, right?” Spike asked.

“For now,” I said. “But if they push me, they’re going out the door one way or another.”

“Fair enough. Let’s go.” I nodded and stepped out into the hall. Before I could start walking, Gilda held me back and let Spike go ahead. Then she pushed me forward and followed me out. Spike looked over the balcony and just snorted steam. Gilda jumped through that steam and landed on the floor right in front of the pirate standing in front. He wasn’t expecting that and jumped back. The other pirates started surging forward, right until Spike landed next to her with a heavy crunch. He just crossed his arms and stared at them, his spikey tail wagging behind him.

While they were having a stare down, I began slowly walking down the stairs. I made it obvious that I was in no hurry at all. By the time I finally got to the bottom, the pirates had backed down. When they saw that I had a dragon and griffin working for me, they realized that maybe they couldn’t just push me around.

Once I slowly ground to a stop right in between Spike and Gilda, I quietly said, “And how may I help you gentlemen?”

It took their doggy leader a few seconds to step forward. He eyed Spike for a second before saying, “We have a... *proposition* for ya.”

“Oh? And what might that proposition be?”

“Well, me and the boys were all sailors back in the day. Ya know, *before*...”

“Sailors... or pirates?”

“Well, a pirate’s really just a *kind* of sailor, right?” he asked. Gilda snorted and he rubbed the back of his neck. “It’s been *years* for mosta us, lass. Years for us to grow old, grow out of practice. That livin’s *dangerous*. Besides, mosta us only fell into it ‘cause we was poor!”

“I see. So, *what* exactly is this proposition of yours?”

“Well, the horse princess didn’t do anything with all of us after she brought us here. Made us come all the way to Canterlot to talk, then just kicked us out the front gate with nothin’ but the clothes on our backs. That little sissy griffin told us you helped him out, so we was wonderin’ if you might help us out, too.”

“You don’t say? You see, that griffin friend of yours is earning his keep by working here. Now, how exactly would *you* help me? I’m going somewhere very dangerous soon, and could use all the fighters I can get, but you say you aren’t interested in fighting anymore.”

“Now, we didn’t say *that*,” he replied. “It’s just, we’re out of *practice* and none of us are interested in being pirates anymore. So we was thinkin’ we might be sailors for you.”

“You want to be sailors?” I slowly asked, craning my gaze across the whole crew slowly, looking most of them in their eyes. Finally, I looked back at their leader.

“If you’d have us.”

“The only boats I have are airships. I could use crew for one of them, though.”

“Now you see, we had a thought about that,” he said with a big grin. “Like I said, mosta us are *ex-pirate*. We know all kinds-a pirate strongholds. I guarantee you we’ll blend right in. Once we stake out a good ship, we’ll steal it for you, then sail it however you want us to.”

“Or, instead of doing that, you go to the pirate stronghold and then disappear with whatever gear I outfit you with, along with all the gold I give you,” I said, crossing my arms.

“W-wha... No, that ain’t...” He sighed and drug a paw down his face. “Alright, look, lassie... That was our plan comin’ in. We hatched it on your buggy airship after hearin’ them go on about ya. The moment we got to your house, we was plannin’ on stabbing ya in the back just as soon as we could. But ya weren’t here, so we couldn’t talk to ya. But as we was sittin’ here waiting on ya, that cute little changeling maid of yours came out here to talk to us. The way everyone’s spoke about ya... It ain’t like nothin’ any-a us have ever seen. My momma had a word for people like you. You’re one-a the golden ones, la—er, *miss*. Seein’ you here in front-a us like this, like a dangerous, exotic, scary bitch, just made up my mind.” That kinda felt like an insult for a second before I realized he wasn’t actually calling me a bitch. “We wanna see where you go. Way I figure, we’re all gonna drift back to sailin’ anyway. It’s all we got, after all. We’ve all been with each other for so long that we can work together well. Will you take a chance on a group of old sailors who just wanna do something good in their lives?”

“Pretty good sob story. I rate it... Oh, about an eight or so outta ten.”

“Really brought a tear to my eye,” Spike added. “I’d say nine.”

“Coulda used more orphans,” Gilda said. “Six, but only because he called you a bitch.” Spike snickered.

“Alright, look,” I said, finally dropping my arms. “I’m gonna tell my ship to fly you to whatever friendly port on this continent you want. Once you get off my ship, you will each be given one hundred bits. If you come back to me with a boat, we’ll talk about you sailing for me. You know where I live and I’ll probably be here for a while. If you really want to be useful, put it somewhere in the Atlantic Ocean, not the Pacific. And if you don’t come back, I’m so rich that it literally does not matter. Does that satisfy you?”

“...Aye, little la... Ahem, my *lady*.”

My arms grasped themselves behind my back and I stood at ease. “You sound like you were strangling. Little lassie is fine. I am by no means formal, nor do I expect it from an ex-pirate. I am, as you said, a very untraditional leader. So, bring me a boat if you want to work. This will be your one and only favor. If you don’t want to work with me, take it and go and never contact me again. If you want to earn your keep, come back. I don’t know what Doppel told you, but the last bonus I gave my crew was over four thousand bits. *Each*.” A few of them whistled. “You will be well-compensated if you work with me, but you *will* be working.”

“...I think I can learn to call you my lady without soundin’ strangled,” he slowly said with a grin. That let me see how disgusting his teeth were.

“Please don’t,” I said. “I’m absolutely fine with being called little lassie.”

“I don’t know if I am,” he said. “You may be small, but ain’t nothin’ ‘bout you little, my lady. We gonna call you lady because *we* want to, not because you want us to.”

Spike and Gilda both snickered at me. I slapped Gilda, because it was her turn to get hit for once. That just made Spike laugh even more, until she punched him.

“God dammit. Fuckin’ whatever. Look, here’s what’s gonna happen. I’m gonna send a guard squad with you to Ponyville on the changeling ship. You’re gonna go to a dentist, free of

charge, because Equestria is a communist paradise.” *Minus the horrific mental trauma they’ll have when they’re done.* “When you’re all done, the airship is gonna fly you wherever you want to go. When you get where you’re going, you’ll be given one hundred bits and you’ll be sent on your way.”

“There’s a wee little problem with that, Lady,” the dog said. “A group-a run down, scarred up nobodies appearin’ in any port town with a fortune on us would make the guards look pretty hard at us.”

“Then I suggest you buy new clothes first.”

“Give them a receipt,” Spike said.

“What?” I asked.

“You’re a noble, Nav. Write a receipt for each one of them, then sign it with your seal.”

“I can *do* that?”

“Have you not been doing that?” he asked, dropping his arms in shock. “Nav, that’s bad!”

“Is now really the time for this?” Gilda asked.

“Yes! You have to keep track of your money, Nav!”

“Why? I have so much that I don’t care.”

“*You* don’t, but Celestia probably does. You’re a noble now. You can’t just not pay taxes anymore.”

“...I assumed Silver Quill was keeping track.”

He sighed in disgust and dragged one of his claws down his face. “How is she supposed to keep track if you don’t tell her? Or give her *receipts*?”

“Because she’s the fucking boss,” I said. “Real talk. That chick has all that shit figured out, guaranteed.”

“I’ll be sure to ask,” he sighed, shaking his head in disappointment.

“Anyway, apparently I’ll write you a receipt,” I said. “With that in paw, you should be good to go. I suggest clothes, a good meal, weapons, armor, and then provisions. Or if you want to just go your own ways, I suggest immediately finding a tavern and blowing it on swill. I guarantee you’ll make some good temporary friends that way.”

“Oh, we’ll get everything we need to steal a ship,” he said with a dark grin. “You look after us by sending us to doctors, I promise you, Lady: We gonna getcha the best pirate ship out there!” His unpleasant growl at the end almost made me shiver. Seeing his teeth again didn’t help. “You won’t regret this, Lady.”

I kinda already do, actually. “We shall see. Spike, you mind riding with them to Ponyville to show them where Colgate is? You’re free to come back after that.”

“I don’t mind,” he said. “I’ve been meaning to visit anyway.”

“I’ll ride along,” Gilda said. “I wouldn’t mind seeing Dash again and bragging about fighting through to the bunker. She’s gonna be so jealous!”

“I haven’t seen any of the ship changelings today,” I said. “I assume they just haven’t left their ship for some reason.”

“We’ll find them if not,” Spike said. “After they get their teeth cleaned, they can come back here and collect the money. It’ll take a while to get it all together, after all.”

“With all my vassals gone, yeah,” I said. “How many of you are there?” Counting them really wasn’t worth my time, so I hadn’t bothered.

“Fourteen,” their apparent leader said. “My name is Ollie.”

“And I am Lady Navarone,” I said. “My pet dragon is Spike. His sex toy griffin is Gilda.”

“Better not tell any purifiers,” Ollie said. “They’d rake him over the coals!”

“Their order was eradicated a few months ago,” I said. “Pyrite rules uncontested now.”

“Oooh, maybe that means we can find some hot dragon babes!”

“Have fun with that,” I said. “I’m going to go see what I can do about obtaining that kind of money.” I walked out into the sun room before they could continue being annoying.

Silver Quill was sitting with Brook and Aqua. As soon as I got to her table, she handed me a piece of paper. “This is a check for fourteen hundred bits,” she said. “The bank will give them a receipt. With this kind of money, they could buy three or four ships without having to waste time *stealing* one from *pirates* of all things.”

“That’s actually a really good point.” I grabbed the check and walked back to the main hall, where Gilda was keeping watch over a group of fairly nervous ex-pirates. “Alright, I have a check right here for fourteen hundred bits. I also have two alternate proposals, both of which are considerably less retarded than trying to steal a pirate ship.”

“...We’re listening,” Ollie said.

“Proposal one: Use this money to buy a ship and use the rest of the money to fill it with your first set of goods. That way, you don’t have to risk your lives dealing with some crazy motherfuckers.”

“That... actually is a better idea,” he said.

“Proposal two: Work on one of my airships instead. I just got a third airship that has no intelligent crew yet. It’s in desperate need of experienced crew. It won’t be trading or sailing, but it’ll be doing something extremely important for me and the pay will still be pretty good. Plus, you’ll have free room and board on the ship itself. There will be basically no chance of ever seeing combat and you’ll be a part of one of the largest construction projects in the history of Equestria.”

“...What is this project?” Ollie asked.

“Harvesting resources and using them to craft magical equipment to radically supercharge the Equestrian military. You would be helping keep the ship running day-to-day.”

The guy looked back to his peeps. “So, who wants to try to steal a pirate boat?” Nobody made a move. “Alright... Who wants to buy a boat?” His paw and three others went up. “Come on, really?”

“To be honest, I’m kinda done with the ocean,” one of the few ponies in the crowd said. “We were all lucky to survive when we did. I don’t think anypony has enough luck to survive a

second shipwreck. And even if we do and end up back in Atlantis, is that really a fate that's worth it?"

The only cat in the group nodded. "I was willing to go back to the ocean if it meant staying with the group, but I'd much rather avoid it if the option is there. An airship would be a nice change of pace!"

"So let's make it official," I said. "Who wants to work on an airship?"

The rest of them raised appendages, giving the airship the clear majority. I held the check up to Ollie. "Go to Ponyville and get your teeth fixed. Come back to Canterlot and go to a bank. Split the money up amongst yourselves and get some new clothes, a good meal or two, and whatever else you might want. Don't cause any trouble, don't break any laws. When you're all ready, come back here and you'll be taken to the new airship."

He took it with a bow. "Thank you so much, my lady. We ain't gonna let you down, I swear it!"

"Good."

Since my life is basically a video game, Spike picked the perfect time to walk back in from one of the airship towers. "The changelings are ready."

"You're free to go," I said with a nod. "Have fun with Colgate. She's quite the character."

"That's for sure," Spike muttered.

"Come on, then," Gilda said. "Get a move on!" The pirates started ambling over to the tower. Gilda and Spike waited until they were all in before following.

I guess that's that. Now I have some crew for my biggest airship.

"I'm looking forward to seeing what they say when they see the ship," Aqua said. "And better yet, when they see what else is working on that ship."

They'll live. I walked back into the sun room and over to Silver's table. "So how did the whole Cutie Dream thing go?"

"Well, she apologized for being utterly insane," Silver said. "But then kinda ruined it by asking me out again. Thankfully, she actually took no for an answer this time. She also apologized for selling us a haunted house and was really intrigued when I told her that Zecora was going to expel the spirits."

"What is she going to do now?" I asked.

"Try to win back any clients she lost while she was losing her mind," Aqua said. "I suppose her life will continue as usual."

"Good, so we'll hopefully never have to deal with her again. When are you leaving for your vacation?"

"Tomorrow morning," Silver said. "I needed to finish a few important loose ends and I wanted to spend some time thinking about where to go. I plan to leave right after breakfast."

"Cool beans. I'm heading back upstairs. If any more people come to bother me, let me know."

"As you command, my lovely little lady," Aqua said.

“Brook, would you slap her?”

“Sorry, but I’d rather not,” Brook said.

“Fine. Aqua, slap yourself.” She sighed and slapped herself upside the face. My work there was done, so I walked back upstairs. I didn’t realize it until I got back to my room, but apparently my slave followed me. “Why are you here?” I asked when she closed the door for me.

“To keep you company,” she sweetly said. “And to keep you safe!”

“Whatever.” I walked over to the laptop and popped it open.

“You know, if you let me absorb everything in the laptop, I could project anything on it straight in your mind. I could stream shows or movies directly to your brain!”

“Neat.” Of course, I didn’t trust her with all that information, so it was a moot point. The revelation made her turn dark blue and scuttle out of sight. Unfortunately, out of sight meant behind me. Her tendrils placed themselves on my shoulders. “What are you doing?”

“Rubbing your shoulders. You’re always so tense, my lady!”

“Oh. Just checking.”

She continued. Honestly, it felt pretty nice. “You know, I would be happy to do this however you would like... Or *wherever* you would like...”

“Noted.” *Not that I’d ever be desperate enough.*

“I know exactly what you want and how you want it, my lady. I could play your body like a fiddle, do things to you that you’ve only ever *dreamed* of.”

“Noted.”

Once she was finished with my shoulders, she moved down to my back. “How low would you like me to go, my lady?” she whispered in one of my ears.

“You’ll know when to stop.” *Though it might be a lot sooner than you’d like.*

“You would never need to worry about judgment,” she said. “You would never need to worry about me spilling your secrets. I only want what *you* want, my beautiful lady.”

“Got it.”

When her tendrils got to where they were no longer welcome, they slowly withdrew. “Allow me to keep you warm,” she said, engulfing me and turning pink.

“I felt fine before.” Her body was starting to warm up and it honestly felt pretty nice. “Why are you doing this?”

“Because I want to show my appreciation to the best host ever!”

“Of course. And you’re sure it’s not just to annoy me?”

“I would never dream of it!” she said. She finally engulfed my entire lower body and I felt the heat going to my privates. “Comfy?”

“Yes.” Apparently surrounding me completely wasn’t enough, because she started to sing. Her voice wasn’t as pure as Flo’s, but it wasn’t completely terrible.

After about half an hour, someone knocked on the door again. Once more, it was proven moot by the door opening. Doppel poked her head in. “Twilight is here to see you, my lady.”

“Send her up.”

Twilight's magic surrounded the door and it opened the rest of the way, letting her trot inside. Her hooves faltered a few steps in. "Why is Aqua on you?"

"She's showing her appreciation to the best host ever," I said. "It also came with a massage."

"...Huh." She walked in further so she could kiss me. "It's good to see you again, Navi."

"It's pretty baller to see you, too."

"Would you like anything brought up?" Doppel asked.

"Nah fam, it's cool," I said. She curtsied and pulled the door shut.

"So I spoke to Celestia," Twiggles said. "It was... eerie."

"Tell me about it. Not a mannerism out of place. She reminds me of how she acted when I first met her, back when she was still pretending to be a good person. Honestly, it put me off a little, until I realized she actually wasn't faking it this time."

"If she is, she's doing a much better job," Twilight said. "I tried to trip her up a few times, but no luck. She seems solid. I think this might have been the best choice after all."

"Of course it was," I said. "It's the one *I* picked."

"*Right, of course.* Because you *totally* have a track record for good, healthy choices."

"So, is she willing to continue teaching you?"

"More than willing. She was *insistent*. Apparently the new lesson plan will include true magic, but she's going to ease me into it slowly."

"Awesome. Are you rethinking marrying her?"

"No. She seems quite taken by *you*, though. She asked quite a few questions about my special somehuman."

"She asked me quite a few questions about myself, too. I don't know what she said to Luna, though."

"I'll be spending a lot of time with Celestia while you're in the coma," she said. "I think she'll need a little help adjusting."

"Try to get Luna to spend some time with her, too. You know, if you're willing to spend enough time with Luna to tell her."

"Doppel told me Luna was asking her some very strange questions last night. Questions about... *collars*, for some reason."

"Weird. So how are the books about the trip going?"

"Very well. Princess Gilda was actually reading the first one over for me, but I see that she's not here..."

"I'm pretty sure she went to the bunker. Speaking of, I have some peeps I'll need to have shipped there. If you're around when they get back, would you mind?"

"What kind of peeps?" she asked.

"I hired some crew members for the big airship."

"Oh, good. Celestia also had quite a few questions about the bunker. It was surprising how much she already knew. She was talking like she had been there with us!"

"I think she'll probably want a tour soon. She'll also want to meet Jonathan."

"I can arrange for both of those while you're out," she said with a nod. "Have you decided for sure when you want to do it?"

"Some time after this dayglass empties," I said, pointing at it again. There were probably about two or three hours left. "Hopefully I'll have time to finger one of my paramours before then..."

"I was thinking about that, actually," she said, grinning. "It was so nice of you to be a pony for me during the festival... I think maybe it's time I finger *you* instead!"

"Are you saying...?"

Her horn lit up and she concentrated for a moment. Finally, it lit up much brighter and flashed. Just like that, Twiggles was back to her lovely human form. "I'm saying that it's time to hold hands, my little Navi!"

"...I don't know how, but you made that sound really hot." She carefully walked over to my desk and held out a hand. I grabbed it and let her pull me up. When she had me on my feet, she placed her hands on my face and pulled me in for a kiss. Honestly, it felt a lot better than I thought it would.

"And how was *that*?" she whispered when she pulled back.

"Nice. It was very, *very* nice."

"Then let's see what else feels nice when I touch it!" She grabbed one of my hands and tugged me along to the bed.

As it turns out, a lot of things feel pretty good when you touch them right.

When her experiments were finished, we ended up just cuddling. It felt... right. Something about cuddling with a pony always felt like I was hugging a big dog, even if I knew better. Being able to see and touch a hot chick in my arms was something special.

"What do you think it'll be like?" she softly asked.

"What do I think *what* will be like?"

"The coma. You seem so gung-ho about doing it, but I wonder if you've really considered what might happen..."

"Why would I do that?" I asked. "It would just make me not want to do it."

"Is that so bad, though? If you... *if* you escape... you'll be different, Nav. And we can't know how different you'll be. And..." She sighed and her horn lit up. For some reason, I thought I heard someone squeak. "And I honestly don't know if I'd trust Taya to save you."

"Fuckin' tell me about it. She's a complete... Wait, you are using a magic jamming spell, right?"

"Right."

"Good. She's a complete psycho who still wants into my panties so bad that she almost can't contain it. What Aqua did just kicked it into overdrive. I'm utterly terrified of what might happen if my filly gets access to my brain."

“Well, that isn’t at all what I wanted to hear. How do you plan to tell Taya you want someone else to do it?”

“I was thinking about just asking Athena and Hera to not let her. If I can’t figure my own shit out, maybe I’m better off locked away for good. At least that way, Discord can’t get me.”

“That’s a terrible idea for a lot of reasons. If you don’t tell her, she’ll feel incredibly betrayed. Plus, the world needs you. You can’t just run and hide because you’re afraid of what you might become with outside interference. You knew it was a possibility going in and you thought you could trust Taya, but now that you know you can’t, you need to find someone else who will be able to help.”

“Well, that’s kind of a tall order,” I said. “I need to find somebody who would be willing to enter a coma to save me and who isn’t completely batshit crazy. It also has to be someone who has a decent opinion of me, doesn’t have much going on, and wouldn’t jump at the chance to turn me into their perfect version of me. I don’t really have too many people who work for me that are sane.”

“It doesn’t have to be someone who works for you. You have plenty of friends. And more to the point, it doesn’t necessarily have to be *one* person, either. If Taya had someone else to rein her in, would you trust her?”

“Depends on the person reining her in. There are a lot of things that I don’t want to become.”

“Welllllll... It has to be somepony you trust. Somepony reliable. Somepony that Taya will listen to. Somepony who really knows you and is willing to do whatever it takes to help you.”

“I think I might know just the person,” I said. “Rainbow Dash would love it!”

“I was thinking... I dunno, *closer*. Say, the perfect mare for you...?”

“I don’t know anyone like that,” I said with a shrug. “All I see right now is the perfect human for me.”

That actually gave her goosebumps. “A part of me likes the sound of that,” she said. “Something only *we* share. I don’t see *Fleur* ever becoming human for you...”

“Moonie does, though.”

“Well, I don’t think you’d want Chrysalis deciding who you become.”

“I dunno. I’d probably be a lot more confident.”

“As if you ever lacked confidence for anything.” She stole a kiss and pulled away with a giggle. “Lady Navarone says what she wants to who she wants. Everyone knows it. You’re the most confident person I know.”

“It’s pretty much all a sham designed to hide tons and tons of insecurities,” I said. “I’m constantly a nervous wreck on the inside.”

“Well, I think of anyone here in Equestria, I might well know you the best. Aside from Flo, that is.”

“How can you know me the best?” I asked. “You thought I was confident!”

“Yeah, yeah. I know you well enough to know what you *want* to be. Or at least, I know you well enough to know what you *need* to be.”

“Yeah, that’s the problem. I don’t want to be who I need to be, I want to be something that’ll make me happy.”

“Well, that’s what Taya will be for. I’ll just be there to make sure she doesn’t do anything you’d regret.”

“Hm. I have something of a moral problem I’ve been working over in my head. I feel like I already know the answer, but new opinions are nice. Would it be morally wrong for Aqua to remove Taya’s lust for me?”

“That... is a very interesting question,” she said. “Huh.”

“I thought if Aqua might be able to fix her mind up a little, I could trust her a lot more. Now that Taya is effectively immortal, we’re going to need to do something about her personality.”

“I do agree that her crush is... problematic. I’m just not sure forcefully changing her mind is the right way to fix it. Some of her other behaviors are... erratic, but again, forcing her to change seems like a little much. And if she ever realized you did it, her trust in you would be gone.”

“That’s why Aqua would wait until Taya finishes up her new regeneration seed. If she ever finds out what we did, we can just kill her and start fresh.”

“What?!”

“Kidding. Although...” She slapped me. “Fine! I thought violence was never the answer, Twilight.”

“Then why are you suggesting *murdering your filly*?!”

“Well, if violence works for you, I don’t see why it couldn’t for me.”

For some reason, that made her sniff angrily at me. “I think I should tell Doppel on you. I’m sure she could come up with a suitable punishment!”

“Doppel is cruel and unusual. She would torment me far beyond what I deserve.”

“Good!” She tried to pull away, but I wouldn’t let her. “Although this bed *is* pretty comfy...”

“It’s the bomb diggity,” I whispered as I leaned forward to smooch her. That got her mind off my ultimate backup plan, thankfully.

Right as my hands started reaching somewhere lower, a frantic knocking kinda ruined it. I pulled back in time to see Doppel poking her head in. “My lady, Princess Celestia is here to see you!”

“What the fuck? Like, in person?”

“Yes!”

“Shit. I’ll be down in a few minutes. Tell her I was in the middle of sexing down her student.”

"I'll tell her you were in the middle of something," Doppel said with a nod. She pulled her head back out and closed the door behind her.

"Great," I sighed, my shoulders slumping. "Now I have to deal with *this*."

"I'm surprised she came all this way personally," Twilight said.

"I'm sure she had a reason." I finally started awkwardly scooching off the bed, trying to get to where I left most of my clothes.

Twilight blinked off, then transformed herself back into a horse. Before I could finally stand up, she started floating me the clothes. "The good news is that this will be good for your reputation. Princess Celestia doesn't do many house calls."

"Princess Cuntlestia didn't. Princess Cutelestia might." It didn't take me very long to dress up in the skimpy outfit. Soon enough, all I was missing were my panties, which were still sitting on the floor. "Are you not going to fly those over?"

"No, you don't get to wear them," she replied.

"Oh. Then let's go see what she wants." Her horn lit up and we blinked down to the first floor, right in front of Celestia. I nodded at her. "What up, cuh?"

"Oh, I think I know this one!" She cleared her throat and nodded back. "Ain't much of nothing, fam! How's it hangin' up in this bitch?"

"Alright, I have something else you're never allowed to do again," I said. "It's that."

"You won't stop me from having fun," she replied, attempting to boop me. I slapped her hoof away, which actually stung my hand.

"Nav's just mad that we're starting to understand her slang," Twilight said.

"So why are you here?" I finally asked.

"I'm not allowed to visit a friend?" Celestia asked with a sly smile.

"Obviously you can do just about whatever you want, given that you're the dictator of about a quarter of the globe. Of course, given that you're the dictator of about a quarter of the globe, I certainly assumed you'd have better things to be doing."

"Fine. I was hoping we could talk first, but if you're going to be like that, I can get to the point. I *do* want a tour of the bunker and I *would* like to meet Jonathan."

"Well, the portal is on the second floor," I said. "You're free to head that way. I'm sure Watcher would be happy to assign you a guide."

"I've already picked my guide," she replied. "I want the great conqueror herself to give me the tour."

"Well unfortunately, Luna is currently on personal business. You're welcome to wait for her, but I'm not sure how long it'll take."

"A part of me is surprised it took Princess Cuntlestia so long to lose her patience with you," Celestia said. "You're lucky Princess *Cutelestia* is more forgiving."

"Aqua?"

She instantly appeared at my side. "Yes, my lady?"

"Celestia isn't allowed to magically spy on me anymore. Make sure she remembers that."

“You put my fate in Flo’s tendrils, not Aqua’s,” Celestia said. “What makes you think Flo will let Aqua follow that command?”

“Flo?”

Celestia’s eyes turned blue. “I warned her when she did it that this would be your response. I also warned her that I would not stand in your way. If this is the path you choose, so be it.”

Her eyes went back to their pretty pink. “So much for bluffing. There’s nothing you need to hide from me now, Navi.”

“I’m not interested in Big Sister constantly looking over my shoulder, even if it might be for my own good. I’m especially not interested in anything I say privately being used against me. Twilight, are you coming or staying?”

“I’ll be staying,” she said. “I want to talk to Taya. I also have a few more preparations to make before I’m ready to put you in a coma.”

“In that case, can you get some donuts before you return? Athena and Hera asked for something sweet and I figured that would do it.”

“I can do that,” she said with a nod. “It’ll be nice to show them some pony food.”

“Thanks. Now come on then, Sunbutt,” I said. “Let’s get this over with.”

“You know you enjoy your time with me,” she said as we started walking to the stairs.

“This is the second time I’ve done it. The first time was okay I guess, but I wouldn’t really call it *fun*.”

“Well, you *will* come to enjoy your time with me. You know, as soon as you stop pretending to hate it.”

“I could certainly do with less condescension.”

“And I could do without being called a *dictator*. I am a *princess*, thank you very much!”

You’re very bitchy for someone who’s lucky to even exist.

“That’s another one of those naughty errant thoughts you need negative reinforcement to get rid of,” Aqua said in my head. “Princess Cutelestia is a brand new individual. Give her a chance.”

It didn’t take us long to get to Twilight’s teleportation circle. A bored guard was watching over it. He stiffened to attention when I walked in and his eyes widened when he saw the princess. “Do you need an escort, my lady?” he asked.

“I’m being escorted by Princess Celestia. Any more would be overkill.”

“That’s Princess *Cutelestia* to you,” she said, patting my back with a wing.

“You’re rapidly becoming Princess Annoy-the-shit-out-of-me-lestia. Let’s go.”

“I think Princess Cutelestia sounds better,” the guard said.

“That’s because you’re a pansy pony like her,” I said, booping him on the nose. With that, I stepped into the circle.

“It’s good to know you treat your staff as poorly as you treat me,” she said, also stepping onto the circle.

“She’s too cute to ever stay mad at,” the guy said. “And she makes it really easy to peek up her skirt!”

“And even better, I rarely wear panties,” I said.

“Truly the best lady ever,” the guard said with a smile.

Cutelestia snorted and finally teleported us halfway across the continent. The circle was still on top of the entrance to the fort. There was now a fairly rudimentary staircase carved into the stone, leading down. The airship was currently at the top of the shaft.

“Seeing it all in a memory didn’t quite give me the scale,” Celestia said. “This place is truly massive! And that ship is amazing!”

“I had a plan for it, if you’d like to hear it,” I said. “I’ll probably need your help, too.”

“Of course I’d love to hear it,” she said.

“It’s currently crewed by the race of bugs that Jonathan found. I plan to add on a lot of crafters and machinists. The ship will fly around the continent. The bugs will harvest resources like metals, stone, and wood. The crafters will turn the resources into magical runic armor, weapons, and golems. I plan to retrofit the Equestrian military to the point where we can invade Tartarus in order to pacify all the demons, stop the constant discord, and cleanse the corrupted lake of pure magic.”

“I see. When were you planning on telling me that you were going to use *my* army to start a *war*?”

“Um. Fifteen seconds ago?”

“Right, of course. Do *I* get a say in this plan?”

“Of course. You can stand in my way if you want. But I am going to Tartarus one way or another. I’d feel much more comfortable if it was at the head of a powerful army. I also figured you’d feel more comfortable coming out about not controlling the sun after your army conquers hell in your name.”

“In *my* name?” she asked. “I thought *you* were leading this army.”

“I will be leading *your* army who will be fighting for *you*. None of them would follow me in there without the princess’s permission. I’ve also already gotten pledges of support from Princess Gilda, Shiny and Cadance, and Moonbeam. So, do you plan to stand in my way?”

“When Luna and I spoke, she told me of the summit, of the powers represented there. She also mentioned what you planned to do in regards to governing the world. I would like to meet with all of these leaders myself. I will make my decision about Tartarus after. You will have it by the time you emerge from the coma.”

“Cool. So, you wanna get this tour started?”

“Yes. Let’s start with the ship. I would like to see the queen.”

Before we could start walking that way, a water elemental shot up the stairs and slid over to us. She piledrived me with a hug, knocking me off my feet and sliding me across the stone. Her body kept me safe from harm, thankfully. When we stopped sliding, Flo’s body finally formed and she kissed me on the nose. “Hello, Navi,” she sweetly said in my head.

“Hi. Do you wanna convince Celestia that you’re a much better tour guide than I could ever be so she’ll let me go back home?”

“No, of course not,” she said. “Then I wouldn’t get to spend any time with you!”

Gosh darnit. “Then help me up.” She set me back up on my feet, though she didn’t pull away from me. “So, shall we?”

Flo started ferrying me along. Celestia walked next to us. “So is there a piece of Jonathan we could speak to aboard?” she asked.

“There is,” Flo said.

“What about Zecora?” I asked.

“She’s recuperating on the *Second Chance*,” Flo said. “It’s flying around the crater with another copy of Jonathan. He’s showing us how to operate all the nanites he created for weather and crop control.”

“I would also like to see a demonstration of that,” Celestia said.

“Of course, it’s not like I had any plans today or anything,” I sarcastically replied.

“I actually had a question about those plans,” Flo said. “Luna told Celestia last night that you decided to enter the coma in Athena’s book. I assumed either I misheard her or she was misinformed, though, because I know you have more than two brain cells.”

“You’ve been in my brain long enough to catch up,” I said. “I can absolutely see Discord trying to pull some shit while I’m out. I feel like the chances of him succeeding are a lot lower if I’m in Athena’s book. I sense no malice from either of them. Hera’s psychotically insane, but she seems relatively harmless as long as you don’t provoke her. Athena’s just a lonely old woman. Neither are going to try anything.”

“All the same, I would feel more comfortable with you under *my* care,” Celestia said. “Aqua could surround your body to ensure you heal properly and are protected.”

“They’re already making preparations. It would be rude to back out now.” We got to a new staircase in the center of the deck and started heading down. “Where did these staircases come from?”

“Jonathan decided it would be easier for us to navigate if we had direct access to areas of importance,” Flo said. “So he showed us another one of his skills, which is the ability to mold a structure into a new shape. This allowed him to essentially carve stairs into the wood and stone. He offered to make us a staircase that spiraled around the entire hole, leading all the way to the bottom. We declined.”

“I can see why,” Celestia said. “It’s quite a drop. So the race that first found this place just dug straight down?”

“That’s what he told us,” I said. “Apparently the crater was already here, though.”

“And the being you found in that runic room under the mountain was one of them?”

“She was,” I said. “The elementals have all of her memories.”

“They’re quite fascinating,” Flo said. “It’s astounding how similar they were to humans and ponies. There is even some evidence that they knew of elementals, though I don’t think they found any.”

“They were super hard for human tech,” I said. “I hope we can replicate their power device. That would be a pretty huge boon. If we can create a magical shield over all the cities in Tartarus, the innocent civilians can finally rest easy.”

“Flo, do you think Watcher could use extra ponypower?” Celestia asked. “I would be happy to send some guards in to help hurry things along.”

“The current bottleneck is the amount of spirits below,” Flo said. “We are trying to neutralize them peacefully and allow them to return to the afterlife. Zecora is confident it’s better than trying to eradicate them.”

“I’m inclined to agree,” I said. “We’re not in a hurry.”

“All the same, with the shield down, you are open to interlopers. I would feel more comfortable with more troops on standby. Watcher will, of course, remain in command.”

“Do I have a say in this?” I asked.

“Of course. You can stand in my way if you want. I believe it should be left up to Watcher, though.”

“Flo, ask him if he wants any oversight.”

“He said additional hooves would be appreciated,” Flo replied.

“Well, there you go. You can send some peeps here I guess. I’d prefer them not having to use my house to do it, though.”

“Twilight drew one set of circles. She can draw another.”

With the staircase, it took us no time at all to get to the heart of the big-ass ship. Char was talking to the iteration of Jonathan. A bored guard squad was playing spin the bottle. The queen was chilling with two of the huge melee bugs.

“That silver blob next to Char is Jonathan,” I said. “And that ugly lump of fuck over there is the queen.”

“That is no way to speak about royalty, Nav,” Flo said.

“I don’t see a crown on her head,” I said. “She’s just the queen bug. It doesn’t even count, since she’s totally controlled by Jonny.”

“Then do *I* count as royalty?” Celestia asked.

“Well, let’s see. You have a crown on your head *and* you aren’t being totally controlled by somebody else, so I would say yes. Now, do you want to meet Jon?”

“Yes.” She started trotting over to introduce herself. I wanted to stay behind, but Flo didn’t let me. Celestia’s enormous size meant she made a lot of noise, so Char and Jonny quickly noticed us. Jon stared straight at Celestia as we approached. “Greetings, Jonathan,” Celestia said. “My name is Princess Celestia.”

“I have many memories of you,” he said. “You’ve ordered more than one expedition here.”

“I have,” she said. “And all of them failed. Navarone has once more succeeded where I could not.”

“My stock of ponies is mostly depleted, but I am working on rectifying that,” he said. “When I have enough, I will release them to you to recuperate your losses. I can return the minds of those who became my puppets, as well. They might be disoriented in their new bodies, but they will grow into them in time.”

“You actually store their minds?” I asked.

“I keep the minds of the races that are still alive. The extinct races get overwritten. That way, I would be prepared to give the chosen one the minds of any I took from her.”

“You are a machine,” Celestia said. “As I understand it, all machines that humans built had a purpose. Your purpose was to wait for the chosen one?”

“Yes.”

“So what will you do now?” she asked.

“My next order is to obey Navarone as she progresses. I fully intend to do so.”

“You said you kept the minds of races until they went extinct,” I said. “Do you have any human minds?”

“I am not at liberty to say.”

“Wait, what?” I said.

“That’s... suspicious,” Flo slowly said.

“It’s definitely cause for concern,” Char said. “Why aren’t you at liberty to say?”

“It goes counter to some of the other orders I was given.”

“What other orders were you given?” I asked.

“My orders are to tell you only what my current main directive is. That current main directive is to support you however you need.”

“Well, I’d like you to support me by telling me your orders.”

“Doctor Anonymous warned me that you would try this,” he said. “And advised that I slap you in the face if you do not stop. Will I be required to slap you in the face?”

“No. Any more questions, Celestia?”

“I’ve been told you have technology that controls crops and the weather.”

“You have been told correctly,” he replied.

“Would you be willing to share this technology with the ponies?”

“No.”

“What if Navarone requested it?”

“If Navarone requested it, I would.”

“How difficult would it be to make more of these machines?” I asked. “Enough to feed, say, a city.”

“Extremely easy,” Jonathan said. “The limiting factor is time and materials. I need titanium, aluminum, and gold. If this ship does end up traveling around for materials, I will be

able to obtain what I need. It will take me one week to produce enough machines to feed ten thousand ponies.”

“How much land will you require?” Celestia asked. “I imagine you would need to rotate crops constantly to keep enough nutrients in the soil.”

“That is unnecessary,” he said. “The nanites in the soil seek out bugs of all kinds to work the soil, keeping it full of nutrients. If you’d like to do this long-term, the ideal farm would be about one hundred acres. Each plot would take about a week to grow the crops, and then be idle for a week. You could consistently grow crops for about six months before the land will need three months to recuperate.”

“Astounding,” Celestia said, a huge grin coming to her face. “And what of *these* bugs?” she asked, looking over to the queen. “Nav seems to believe they can harvest resources. Can you think of other uses they might have?”

“They can build,” he said. “I used them to build this fortress. I’m sure they’d have plenty of other uses, if you put it to thought. I have little thought for how to use biological life. It is not my purpose.”

“I think the more important question is, can you breed more queens to control more colonies?” I asked. “Because one colony working out of this ship would be great, but more would be better.”

“That is doable,” he said. “There is actually an ant queen in the dirt. It is possible we could put her to use as well.”

“I’m sure we can find a use for a bunch of giant ants,” I said. “Load her up on the ship.”

“Ants make great cannon fodder,” Celestia said. “Luna has used them as mercenaries in the past. Most queens care little if a few dozen soldiers get killed, but they can make a huge difference in a battle.”

“Perfect for a war on Tartarus,” I said. “So we’ll have giant ants, giant other bugs, runic golems, and soldiers in magic armor.”

“Hm. This war of yours is beginning to sound more and more interesting. I would like to see the golem before we leave.”

“It’s on the other ship,” Flo said. “You can see it when you go for the demonstration.”

“Do you have any other cards hidden up your sleeve?” Celestia asked the guy.

“Yes. I have several mostly extinct species here. Most won’t be useful. I also have a variety of historical knowledge that I would like to begin transcribing now that I have peaceful contact with the world.”

“Have you ever heard of somebody named Athena?” I asked.

“Yes. She is the Greek goddess of knowledge. There is also a magical entity that goes by the same name locked in a pocket dimension. I captured two of her agents long ago.”

“What about Zeus?”

“Yes. He is the king of the Greek gods. There is another magical entity that goes by his name in another pocket dimension. I captured one of his agents about eighty years ago.”

“What can you tell me about his book?”

“He shared it with another by the name of Hephaestus. The book was owned by a guild of adventurers in China. I don’t know if it’s still there.”

“Hm. Someone in China put a bounty on me. I wonder if it’s that guild of adventurers, because I found another two books.”

“Sounds like a mystery!” Celestia said. “I’ll send out a few tendrils. My spies in China will see if they can find who wants your head.”

“For once, Aqua can be useful. She mindjacked two of the bounty hunters.”

“I’ll get the information from her later,” Celestia said with a nod. Unfortunately, she ruined it by wrapping a wing around me and pulling me close. “See there, Navi? Isn’t working together *great*?”

“Sure is,” I said, rolling my eyes.

“I believe I have no more questions for this Jonathan,” Celestia said, still cuddling me. “I think I’d like to head to the other ship.”

“It’s not far,” Flo said. “I can assist your teleport. One moment.”

Celestia’s horn lit up and both of us flashed off. Given that Flo had been all that was holding me up, I would have fallen right on my ass if Celestia hadn’t been propping me up. She finally released me when I was steady.

“Greetings,” Celestia said to the deck full of water elementals and a single Jonathan. “Some of you may not have met me. My name is Princess Celestia.”

“It’s so comforting to see her tamed,” Kat said, attaching herself to one of my arms. “I’m glad you missed me so much that you had to come see me, my lady...”

“Princess Cutelestia wanted a tour,” I said. “While I’m here, I need to get something from my room. Can you handle this one on your own?”

“I believe I can make it,” Celestia said, walking over to the new Jonny. “Take your pet cat with you.”

Kat giggled and started rubbing her head on me. That was weird, so I began walking to the staircase. She stayed latched on and began purring. “You’re feeling very cuddly today,” I said.

“I just love being reminded how my lady is the best there ever was.”

“I try to be a good example for you miscreants. It doesn’t usually work.”

As soon as we got down the stairs, one of her paws found its way right up my skirt. It was kinda difficult to walk with her doing things to me, so I pulled the paw away. She pouted at me for it, but I honestly didn’t care.

Someone had been behind me to tidy up the room, but I found the mirror right where it belonged. As soon as I picked it up, Moonie’s face appeared. For some reason, she looked upset. “It was quite rude of you to leave like that, Navarone. I wanted some time to talk to you more face to face. Let me know where you are when you get this and I will meet you.”

I wanted to speak to her right then, but I didn't really foresee her wanting to come out to the bunker. With that in mind, I started wrapping the mirror in a towel.

"Are you not going to contact her?" Kat asked.

"I'll wait until I'm back at home."

"Why? If you do it now, you can show off your princess and your new conquest."

"That's unnecessary, but a good point." I unwrapped the mirror and said, "Moonbeam."

Her ceiling appeared. A moment later, someone groaned. The mirror lit up green and floated across the room, where Moonie was lying on her bed looking miserable. "Hello, Nav," she said when she finally saw me.

"Are you alright?" I asked.

"Yes. I'm just pregnant again and it's affecting me a little more than usual."

"Oh." For some reason, I found that really surprising. "Well, I'm at the bunker again with the new Princess Celestia. She wanted to inspect it."

"How well is she faring?"

"Eerily well. Flo did a good job. I sense no hostility in Celestia and she seems to be growing quickly to fill Exlestia's oversized shoes."

"Good. I wanted to speak to you in person, but I'm not feeling up to a trip. I told you I wanted to speak with you before you left, Nav. Why did you allow the behavior of rude children to force you away?"

"Nobody was speaking up to defend me, so I felt unwanted. I'm sorry if you feel slighted. You can punish them all for it later."

"I can and will. You mentioned wanting to build connected royal academies. I would be delighted to assist, but we will need to discuss the specifics of what will be taught."

"We'll get together with the griffins and the headmaster of the college I'll be founding here and talk about everything then. One thing I'd definitely like to teach is monster hunting. Once we have a few classes out and about, I want to create monster hunting guilds so we can start wiping these menaces out."

"A wise idea, but I don't imagine many would volunteer to hunt *monsters*."

"You might be surprised. Another thing I wanted to discuss involves the gem mine near Ponyville."

"What of it?" she asked.

"Well, I'm planning on forming the college right next to the Everfree. I want to use the monster hunters to capture living monsters, have them shipped to the changeling mines, and then slaughtered over the gems to create blood gems. I'll use those to help fuel the Tartarus war."

"You have my permission, but I will be keeping a percentage."

"That's fair. We can negotiate how much when we actually get it going. There's another thing I wanted to ask. Now that I have a house in Canterlot and now that I have Celestia under my control, I think it's better that I stay there. I was planning on expanding the house your

changelings built for me into the university. I was wondering if they might be up for another building project.”

“We are,” she said. “It will take us longer to build, though. We’ve made a few improvements to our generators that’ll help.”

“Magitech will definitely be on the curriculum. Twilight Sparkle was hoping to help direct the building efforts.”

“Why must you insist upon allowing her to ruin your greatness?” she sighed.

“Twilight chose to support *me* over Celestia,” I said. “That takes conviction, honor, and loyalty to *me*. She is a very valuable asset, even if her social skills occasionally leave something to be desired. Twilight is best when you point her at a goal, tell her why the goal is important, and give her guidelines for how to achieve the goal. That’s what I did with the academy. She knows what I’m trying to accomplish and I trust her to build an academy worth attending.”

“You’re always so quick to defend your toys,” Moonie said. “I somewhat wonder how quick you are to defend *me*.”

“Extremely,” Kat said. I turned the mirror to face her. “Everyone is always shocked and surprised, but every time anyone says anything negative about you, Nav immediately jumps in to say how quickly you’re changing and how good you’re becoming. She also usually calls you either a cutie pie or a super sweetie.”

When I spun the mirror back, I saw that my pretty little queen was actually blushing. “That answer your question?” I asked.

“Sufficiently so. It’s comforting to know your loyalty extends beyond just my presence.”

“I do my best to wear just one face,” I said. “It makes deciding which to pick for the day so much easier.”

“Those like you are a commodity, Nav,” Moonie replied. “You can certainly do better than a princess’s student, number one or not.”

“How upset would you be if I told you that the griffin princess might kinda sorta have a thing for me?”

“Not at all, given that I am already aware. Her lust was obvious and deep enough that I’m sure you’ve been to her chambers more than once.”

“Any love mixed in all that lust?” I asked.

“She’s a young female griffin,” Kat said. “They’re basically one and the same.”

“Very much so,” Moonie said. “If you want her attentions to falter, put a better candidate before her and she would likely switch her tune in a heartbeat.”

“That might not be a bad thing. I have serious doubts about her ability to be discreet.”

“We could make her disappear,” Kat helpfully suggested.

“We’re not making a princess disappear,” I said. “Anyway, we got way off topic and I don’t want to take up too much of your time.”

“Right now, I’m spending most of my time being miserable,” Moonie sighed. “I’m sure having you here with me would put a smile right back on my face, though...”

“I have appropriated Nav’s services for the moment,” Celestia said, poking her head in the door. “And I believe she has plans immediately after.”

“As tempting of an offer as it is, I’m afraid my liege lady summoned me first.”

“Queens outrank princesses,” my queen said.

“*You* might be pregnant, but *I* am less than two days old,” Celestia said. “I require Nav’s services considerably more, believe me.”

“That... is fair,” Moonbeam said. “How do you feel?”

“I feel... right. When I first... awoke, everything felt so hollow. Now that I’ve had time to begin processing and now that Flo is finishing up with my memories, I’m starting to feel complete. I’m happy to be given this chance. I understand that trust will take time, but I fully intend to earn it.”

“An interesting take on what Celestia *should* have been,” Moonie said. “Your elementals are impressive, Navarone. The ones who aren’t traitors, that is.”

“Yes, the ones who aren’t traitors are definitely impressive,” I said. Aqua sighed in my head. “Wait until you see a fire elemental fight.”

“I hope it never comes to that. Since your princess is demanding your attention, I will allow you to return to her. However, I may have to consider adding some tallies to your punishment.”

“Why is a foreign queen punishing one of my nobles?” Celestia asked.

“Because I’ve been a naughty girl,” I said. “And Moonie is gonna teach me a lesson.”

“Ah. I withdraw my question. I *would* like to schedule a meeting later, though. Will you be available for a talk tonight?”

“I will. I’ll keep the mirror near.”

“I’ll see you later, Moonie,” I said.

“I’m already looking forward to it.” I suddenly saw my own face again. Kat took the mirror and started wrapping it up.

“I had a feeling meeting her would be interesting,” Celestia said. “I was hoping I had more time to prepare, but sometimes surprises are good.”

“Rarely. So, what’s next?”

“The golem,” she said with a nod. “I’d like to see it in action, but I understand that’s not an option.”

“It’s in the workshop,” Kat said. “Last I saw, Jak was also in there working on a new project.”

“Then we’re going to poke our heads in,” I said.

“I’ll pack up everything else for you,” Kat said.

“It’s good to see your servants know how to be useful,” Celestia said, pulling her head back out. “Shall we, Navi?”

“Sure.” Normally I would defend my vassals, but if Kat wanted to pick a fight, that was entirely on her. She didn’t say a word as I left, but her tail was swinging. When we were a few

steps down the hall, I said, “I really hope punching down won’t become a common thing for you.”

“I’m Princess Celestia,” she said. “The only way I have to kick *is* down.”

“Tell that to Pyrite.”

“I would, if kicking up at him wouldn’t potentially cause a war. I say the reason I can only kick down is because kicking up to any of those who are more powerful than I would be a very poor life decision. I do not intend to snap back at just any snippy remarks, but I won’t be talked down to by a rapist.”

“That’s fair. Just remember that this particular rapist is psychopathic, brainwashed by Flo without permission to be loyal, and also happens to be a trained assassin. We try not to provoke her.”

“I’ve dealt with assassins before.”

“At two days old? I’m impressed.”

That made her snort. “If *you* can kill two assassins in the body of a baby, I doubt I would have much issue.”

Ouch. I kinda wanted to reply, but we got to the workshop and I wanted to go home even more. So I opened the door and let myself in. Jak was using Blaze to heat metal for him. The golem was chilling next to one of the walls.

“So I take it you were successful,” Blaze said.

“I was,” I said. “Meet Princess Celestia 2.0, now with less tyranny and more cuddles.”

“Good riddance,” he said. “I can already tell you’re different just from the look on your face.”

“That’s good to know,” Celestia said. “I’m sure the way she used to look at you made you feel all icy.”

“No. I could tell as soon as I saw her exactly what she thought of me and the other elementals. As soon as she got what she wanted from Nav, we were going to become public enemy number one.”

“Well, for what it’s worth, *you* struck first, not I.”

“Seems to be a good thing to me,” Jak said. “Sounds like we avoided one hell of a bloodbath.”

“Hunting Celestia would have been a thing of legends,” Blaze said. “It’s a shame we won’t get the honor. But taming Celestia is a much wiser approach.”

“And now that she is tamed, we need to get her up to speed,” I said. “Show her the golem.”

Jak picked up a wrench and threw it at the golem. It caught the wrench out of the air without even turning. “It’s eerie. One or two of those runes gave it some kind of intelligence. It’s extremely basic, but the auto-repairing thing got me thinking. What else might this thing do without me even knowing?”

“That would be a question for Athena,” I said. “Her book is in Canterlot.”

“It performs well in combat,” Blaze said. “I watched it during the fight for the deck of that ship. It fights with purpose.”

“Athena usually deploys hit squads of her golems,” I said. “I imagine there is some way to get them to all work together.”

“It’s astounding to see such a thing,” Celestia said, looking the golem up and down. “This was never a weapon my sister or I truly foresaw.”

“Human ingenuity is a hell of a thing,” I said. “Athena may be nuts, but she’s smart.”

“Jak, how do you feel about the thought of a workshop in the palace?”

“I’m plenty happy where I am,” he said. “Nav has given me purpose. Now that I have the memories of one of the race who did so much to guide my own, I will be able to create *wonders*. She is going to convert the big ship she captured into a mobile research and crafting platform. I am going to take the army of craftsponies she hires for me and use them to craft wonderful toys of *war*.”

“Yes, she finally decided to inform me that she would be leading my country into war,” Celestia said. “Apparently I’m the last to know.”

“It won’t be a war,” Blaze said. “It will be a slaughter. We will form a lake of blood in Tartarus with your name on our lips, princess. What better way for Nav to showcase to the world that she’s the new big power on the block? With Tartarus under her belt, she’ll have direct access to all three portals leading out. The ability to put an entire army on another continent in less than a day will be game-changing.”

“Oh, I’ve always been able to do that,” Celestia said. “Trust me, there’s nothing quite like teleporting a vanguard of elite naga directly into a fort. They get to skip all the defenses and get straight to the fun. I’d quite like to see what you could do with a squad of golems.”

“I plan to find out,” Jak said.

“I have a suggestion for the next golem,” I said. “Turn one of his hands into a sword or mace.”

“That is a wise suggestion. There’s nothing stopping me from making their bodies however I want, is there?”

“Give them four arms,” I said. “One in the chest and one in the back. They can outstretch their hands and spin, slapping the fuck out of everything.”

“An interesting idea. I will think on what other forms might be useful. How long do you think it’ll be before we can get the ship moving?”

“It’ll be a bit,” I said. “I’m still not quite sure how moving it is going to go. It’s too large to dock at most cities.”

“I will have a port constructed for it in Canterlot,” Celestia said. “On the side of the mountain. I’ll send a crew to take measurements and build you a full dock for it.”

“That’s very generous of you,” I said.

“This is a ship that you are going to use to fuel a war,” she said. “It’s an investment. So is the ship itself. I would be happy to crew it for you.”

“That won’t be necessary,” I immediately said.

“I have hundreds of ponies on file for this sort of thing, Nav,” she said. “What’s your hiring pool looking like? Because I could have that ship fully crewed tomorrow, including whatever craftsponies you’d like. Experienced ponies, of course.”

“If you want my ship, you’re going to have to pry it from my cold, dead hands. But don’t get comfortable, because I’ll be coming back for it as soon as I wake up and get my bearings.”

“I have no intention of taking your ship. I just want to crew it to get it to work sooner rather than later. Besides, why would it matter if I did take it? You’re putting it to use for the state anyway.”

“Because you didn’t earn it. Your expeditions here failed. Mine succeeded.”

“I see now that I should have made it a point to come here myself. I sent Luna, but she gave up before she got far enough.”

“She didn’t give up, she withdrew after losing half of her party. We took no losses at all.”

“Nav’s team is impressive,” Blaze said. “She has built herself a wide variety of deadly skills. They all put them to use so passionately. I think I enjoy watching Kat work the most. It’s a rare thing to find someone who takes pleasure in the kill. I think to her, it’s like ambrosia.”

“She gives me the shivers,” Jak said.

“She gives everyone the shivers,” I said. “So, have you inspected the golem?”

“I have,” Celestia said. “You are a wonderful tour guide, Nav.”

“Hurrray. What’s next?”

“Home,” she said. “I’d love to stay for longer, but time is always short for a princess, I have found.”

Finally. “I think Kat was packing a bag for me.” As soon as I said her name, she walked in with said bag. “And there she is.”

“I didn’t want to give anyone the shivers,” she quietly said, handing me the bag.

“A good first step is not listening at the door,” Celestia said. “Are you ready, Nav?”

I pulled my kitty in for a short snuggle before nodding. “Ready.” Celestia’s horn lit up and we both appeared back at the fort, on the circle. Her horn lit up brighter and we reappeared in my house. “I guess that’s that.”

“It is,” she said. “I will be making a few more visits to the bunker. And again, I would be happy to crew the ship for you. I’m sure finding your own crew that is okay with working with giant bugs might be difficult.”

“Nobody seems to mind Doppel. In fact, I’d say a pretty sizeable chunk of peeps would tell you she’s a delight to be around.”

“*Doppel* is intelligent, cute, and puts out on a dime. These bugs are dumb, ugly, and probably incapable of sex.”

“Fine. Hire a crew for it. But it flies my flags.”

“Your flags are Equestrian, so that still counts for me. We are on the same side now, Nav. The only reason to dance about on issues of ownership is pettiness. At this point, your goals are

Equestria's goals. It's obvious to me now that any resources given to you will be going to a very good cause. Getting that ship operational as quickly as possible is imperative."

"Then do it. Jak knows what to do with it when it's ready."

"I want it to come to Canterlot first," she said. "It will get mouths wagging. When you get out of the coma and get your head on straight, come talk to me. We'll discuss what steps will come next. In the meantime, I will meet with the other heads of state and get a feel for things. With enough support, I feel that Tartarus may be doable."

"And once we have it, we pretty much get the keys to the kingdom. I feel fairly confident that if push came to shove, we could steamroll the dogs."

"Luna and I considered it, but that would be kicking a hornet's nest. Their country is rife with political infighting. It's a purpose-built system designed to keep the most cunning and powerful on top. The only thing that makes them unite is external pressure."

"Then it sounds like we're going to need ourselves a coup," I said. "I'm sure we can find a pro-Equestrian leader to prop up, someone who's capable of seeing the bigger picture. With enough support, our candidate could take power."

"That is something Luna would come up with."

"Well, apparently it's also something I would come up with. What did you make of your sister?"

"She is sister no longer, as she was quick to point out to me. The old Celestia was her sister. It will take time to build something there. I'm not sure she will even be interested, but I hope she will. The old Celestia cared very deeply for Luna."

Coulda fooled me. "She's wary and in a lot of pain. I could use your help alleviating that pain."

"I will be happy to give it. Why did you make her a vassal?"

"I didn't. Aqua did. She wanted you both under her control and making Luna a vassal would accomplish that."

"And yet you haven't relinquished her oath."

"Why would I do that? She's proven herself loyal and useful."

"I would much prefer her company in the palace."

"Well, you can take that up with her."

"I did. She told me that she was happy here."

"Then there's your answer," I replied with a shrug.

"Hm. Enjoy the coming newspapers, Nav," she said. "The fact that Luna is back in Canterlot has already spread far and wide. The fact that she's staying *here* will probably spread quickly, too."

"Fleur will handle it. Having a propagandist is great."

"Indeed. Farewell for now, Nav," she said. "I will see you on the other side."

"Hopefully a better version of me. But if everybody hates her, just kill her and start fresh from this seed. Tell me that she was a cunt and I'll figure something else out."

“Ever the pragmatist,” she said.

“I certainly try. See you, Sunbutt.”

“See you, Navi.” Her horn lit up and she vanished.

The instant she vanished, Aqua slid in and hugged me. “Welcome back, Navi!”

“Hi. Who all is here?”

“A skeleton crew. Mostly the same people as before, minus Twilight. She’ll be heading back shortly.”

“Cool.” She started ferrying me up to my room. Shit was pretty swanky.

When we got there, Taya was balled up in my bed. Her little butterfly wings started fluttering when she saw me. “Welcome back, mommy!”

“Howdy.” The dayglass was empty, so I finally pulled the seed out. “I wasn’t *planning* on leaving the house today, but I didn’t get a choice. You want to help me plant this out back before Twilight returns?”

“Why do you need my help?”

“Because it’s cold as shit and you can keep me warm without being as annoying as Aqua.”

“...*As annoying?*” my filly slowly said.

“So, you want to help?”

“Maybe after you explain how I won’t be *as annoying!*”

“Oh well. Aqua, shall we?”

“Wait, what?” my filly asked as I started surging over to the door.

“See you in a sec,” I said as Aqua carried me out. When the door was closed, I sighed.

“So, Flo, would you mind doing something morally questionable for me?”

“I’m not brainwashing your daughter.”

Let me finish. If Taya does end up entering the coma to come after me, I want you to stop her from letting her crush change me. You don’t have to remove it, you just can’t let her make a bad decision at a critical time.

“And how exactly would you convince her to become a host?”

It’s Taya. I can manipulate her with no problem at all.

“None at all?” Aqua asked. “No moral qualms or anything?”

I’m her mother. Manipulating her is my job. It’s called parenting.

When we got to the grove, Aqua cleared out a spot of snow for me and dug a small hole. I dropped the seed in and she covered it up. With our task complete, she began carrying me back.

“Parents do not manipulate their children,” Flo said. “Or at least, they aren’t supposed to.”

So what do you call teaching them right and wrong? You’re manipulating someone with no moral compass into following your own. Raising your child properly involves manipulating them from the start into being a good, successful person.

They both just said, “Wow.”

Yeah. I'm sorry to burst your bubble, but that's just the way it is. I'm sure you'd understand, if you could ever have kids of your own.

For some reason, they didn't have a reply for that.

When we got back into my room, I discovered that my filly was pouting. That simply wouldn't do, so I had Aqua ferry me into the bed and slide me on over. "I think a belly rub will turn that frown into something that isn't a frown," I said.

She didn't reply, so I took it as consent. Her silence continued as I started touching my little filly in all the right ways.

"I've been thinking," I said. "Now that the elementals are effectively cleansed and now that you're immortal anyway, there's nothing stopping you from being a host. I can understand not wanting Aqua as your elemental, but I currently have Flo in my head. She could use that to make you a host. That would let us instantly communicate from anywhere on the planet."

"I dunno if I want *Flo* in me. She kept being mean to me!"

"She wasn't being mean, she was just informing you of how you were acting. Having an elemental in you to help police your actions before you do them might not be a bad idea. It would make fewer people think you're creepy, for example."

"Who thinks I'm creepy?! I'm your adorable daughter-pet!"

"Pretty much everyone who's ever heard the phrase daughter-pet thinks you're creepy. I'm sure there are plenty more besides that. You spooked the heck out of the guards at the bunker, for example."

"...Am I creepier than Kat?"

"God no. I think Kat is creepy. I think *you* are adorable." *You know, when you aren't being creepy.* "Not everybody agrees."

"But you *do* think I'm annoying..."

"Sometimes." That made her ears slump. "When you do stuff like teleporting into my bath after spying on me doing lewd things with Doppel."

"I waited until you were finished!"

"Flo, would you like to explain?"

She took over my face and said, "Watching your mother doing anything lewd is inappropriate. In fact, spying on her at all is rude. Teleporting into a bath when she's spending time with a lover is certainly not filly-like behavior. You did it solely to steal all of mommy's attention for yourself. Nav and Doppel both saw right through it. These are all obviously things about which an elemental could have warned you."

"She's being mean to me again, mommy!"

"Constructive criticism isn't mean," Flo continued. "Now you're just copying Nav. I would not mind being your elemental. That way, you would have some company while your mother is away."

"Hm. Can I have both you *and* Aqua?"

“I don’t want Aqua in you,” I said. “She’s insidious and would do her best to sabotage you.”

“I resent that,” my pet elemental said.

“You’ll live. So, would you like Flo inside of you?”

“I guess that would be okay.” Something immediately slid between the two of us as Flo filled my daughter in a way no other could.

See there? I’m the best mommy ever. “So how’s that pout lookin’?” I asked.

“You were right, a belly rub fixed it!” She rolled over and hugged me. “Best mommy ever!”

“Yeah, I’m the greatest,” I said, pulling my little pet filly close.

A knock on the door interrupted our snuggles. It opened and Doppel poked her head in. “Twilight is back, my lady.”

“Send her in.” Twilight pushed the door open further and let herself in. She was carrying a large box of donuts, thankfully. “My body is ready.”

“Good to know. This is your last chance to back out, Nav.”

“I ain’t bitch-made.” I released my filly and let Aqua slide me right back out of bed and place me on my feet. “Let’s do this.”

“Would you like lunch after you finish whatever you’re up to?” Doppel asked.

“I probably will want food, but I have no idea how long it’ll take.”

“Well, let me know as soon as you’re done and we’ll get something going!” She pulled her head back out the door and fucked right off.

“So did you make up your mind about who will go in after you?” Twilight asked.

“I thought I was doing it,” Taya said.

“You are,” I replied. “I think she’ll be fine.”

“...If you’re sure,” Twilight said. “Then shall we head into the book?”

“Hells to the yizzah, fam.”

“That means... yes, right?”

“It does.” I started walking over to the desk. The two of them joined me. When we were all standing in front of it, I took a deep breath and opened the book.

As soon as we were dumped inside, Hera appeared to hug my filly. “You finally brought my pet!”

“I don’t mind the belly rubs, but I don’t really want to be your pet,” Taya said.

“That’s okay. You’ll learn to accept it in time.”

“She’s not here to be your pet,” I said. “She’s here to say goodbye before I enter the coma.”

Athena appeared behind Hera with an actual squirt bottle and sprayed her roommate with it. Hera squeaked and spun around, glaring at Athena. “How many times do I have to tell you that you can’t have a pet?” Athena asked.

“Obviously a lot more! And if you even think about squirting me ag—”

Athena squirted Hera again. Before things could get ugly, I swooped in and hugged them both. “Thank you for letting me do this here,” I said. “I’m glad to know you’ll work together to help me regrow.”

“I’ll put that spray bottle to a better use,” Hera said. “I can use it to water our new houseplant!”

“You smell very nice,” Athena said.

“Thanks.” I finally released them. Hera’s dress was dry again, so hopefully she wouldn’t flip shit. “So where did you draw up all the runes?”

We teleported down to the lower level. A bed was waiting for me. It was surrounded by several glowing runes. “You may begin as soon as you are ready,” Athena said.

“Well, are you ready?” Twilight asked.

“Fuck it,” I said. “Let’s do this.”

Taya jumped up to hug me. Twilight joined her a moment later. I hugged them both back, though I used the hand around Twilight to grope her a little.

When everyone was done leeching my warmth, they both pulled back. “So what exactly is going to happen?” I asked.

“I dunno,” Twilight said with a shrug. “It’s different for every person. For all we know, it could be a nightmarish prison from which you can never escape.”

“She adds color to the room,” Hera said. “So I can deal with that.”

“If that happens, just kill me,” I said. “I’ll come back only missing a few minutes.”

“I would like to keep the body,” Athena said. “I want to see what you look like on the inside.”

“...Okay. So, Twilight, comatize me!”

“Well... here goes, I guess.” Her horn lit up. I felt myself falling before completely blacking out.