

Chapter Forty-Six—Gryphus

I love the beginning of fall in Equestria. Ponyville is around the area of north Virginia, pretty close to DC. It gets cold early on and the leaves drop quickly. Faster, when the Running of the Leaves happens. October was always my favorite month back home, and here it is just compounded.

Which is why I was not happy I was leaving Equestria that month. I had already packed everything I needed, all the clothes and my armor and my weapons. “Do you have to go?” Taya asked for the umpteenth time, lying on my bed.

“Yes. I asked Celestia if you could go, and she said no. Didn’t say why.” Actually, she did say why: Apparently the king of griffinland is fucked in the head and likes fillies a lot more than he should. Not just fillies, but kids of all kinds. Innocence, I guess. I snorted when Celestia mentioned that. ‘Innocent’ isn’t something I would use to describe Taya. She would tear that king to pieces. Of course, she would be tearing his dead body to pieces, because if he laid a talon on her, I would rip his dick off and beat him to death with it.

But I wasn’t going to expose her to him if I had the choice. I did raise the point to Celestia that we shouldn’t even deal with a fucking pedophile. She had the relatively decent rebuttal that politics and keeping the peace are a lot more important than morals.

Didn’t mean I had to like it. Pedophiles will get their special place in hell. And if I find any children he’s keeping for his fun, I was going to bust them out. Celestia agreed with me on that, as long as I could do it quietly. I figured it wouldn’t be that hard to get Cadance and Shining Armor to help me on that issue.

I was planning on taking all of the magic things I got from the forest, my axe, the knives, clothes, the crossbow, plenty of bolts, my armor, and plenty of paper. Guard duty is boring as hell, so I was expecting—or at least hoping—I would be able to write during it. God only knows I didn’t want to have to listen to Cadance.

Thankfully, Celestia said that none of the others knew the king was a pedophile. Most ponies would refuse to deal with him if they knew. Cadance, especially, wouldn’t. They would find out right quick if I had to bust any kids out.

That should have been my first hint that she was probably lying, though.

I sighed as I looked over the few bags I was taking. “I really don’t want to do this, Taya.”

“I know. I don’t want you to either.”

“Well, it’s good to know the feeling is mutual. Not like it does us any good. At least I won’t be up all night anymore.” That wasn’t really a blessing, though. Unless I get frequent sunlight, my body starts getting sluggish and will eventually just shut down to sleep a while to recuperate the energy. I suspected that if I started eating more, I could use that energy stored to keep me awake all fall and winter as well, but I hadn’t tested it yet.

Probably wasn’t going to get to any time soon, either. I stooped down to throw the axe over my back. I buckled it on and grabbed my crossbow. I continued with the rest of my

weapons. “Fucking cognitive dissonance,” I muttered as I felt their weights settle on me.

Taya looked at me, confused.

“It’s a phrase from my world. It’s when you have two conflicting ideas in your mind at once. I hate the idea of carrying weapons. I hate it so much... All the pain and death I’ve caused. But at the same time, I don’t feel comfortable unless I have cold steel on me, ready to be used in my defense.”

I eschewed a cloak this time. I was over that phase of trying to look cool. Fuck ‘em all; I already knew I wouldn’t blend in here, no matter what I wore. I did have several warmer things packed, though; we were going into fucking Canada, after all.

I looked down at all the bags on the floor. There were only three, but two were bulging, full of clothes and armor. “It’s a good thing they’re coming here,” I said. “I wouldn’t want to have to carry these far.”

“It would be a lot easier if you were wearing your armor,” Twilight said as she walked in. “I’ve gone over the checklist three times, and I believe you have everything you need to impress the king!”

Twilight had a thing for checklists. It used to be a whole lot worse, and I heard horror stories from Spike. Between me and Spike, we got her over a bit of it, but she was still really into them.

“I’m not there to impress the king.” Not officially, anyway. “I’m there to guard Cadance. I don’t know why Celestia’s insisting on sending a pregnant woman as an ambassador, but whatever.” Cadance and Shining Armor didn’t waste much time, that’s for sure. At least she wasn’t very far along; we wouldn’t have to worry about a baby coming. But we would have to worry about Shining Armor being overly protective of her, and we would have to worry about a hormonal chick.

“Well, she can’t exactly send Luna,” Twilight answered. “And ever since Blueblood disappeared...” She shrugged. “Cadance has been doing most of the ambassador missions. She’s been getting run ragged, I hear.”

“Celestia sent two ambassadors—non-royals—to Egypt. Why is this any different?”

“Because the cats are unimportant. No pony cares what they think. We didn’t even know they existed until they started causing problems! Everypony knows about griffins, and griffins have been our neighbors for hundreds of years. They have to be given the best.” She muttered something I didn’t hear. “Now let’s get all this downstairs. Don’t want to keep them waiting when they get here!”

“Twilight, this’ll be the first time in a while since you saw your brother. It wouldn’t kill them to stay and talk for a bit.” She grabbed my bags with a purple aura and they started following her down the stairs. She didn’t answer me.

Taya and I followed her down. I bumped into Spike on the way there. “When I get back, we’re going hunting,” I told him. “So be ready.”

He smiled. “About time! I don’t know why you wanted to wait until it got cold...”

“Tradition. Fall and winter were the hunting seasons back where I come from. I may not be there anymore, but I might as well keep some things from that time.” *Man, it’s hard to think there will be a time where I’ve been in Equestria longer than Earth.*

I made it to the main room of the library, where all of my bags were sitting, ready to be packed onto whatever ride we were getting. I assumed we were going by pegasus chariot. Anything else would probably take a while.

So color me surprised when a ladder plopped down outside of the library and Shining Armor climbed down it like that was somehow logical. He entered the library with a smile. His smile dropped when he saw me. “Put your armor on, Nav. You’re there to impress the king, after all.” Twilight smirked at me.

When she got done smirking at me, she rushed forward to hug her brother. I was dumping my bag at the time, so I had a hard time hearing them. I heard airship and stopped. “We’re going in one of those things?” I asked.

I had seen airships here in the past. They’re basically small blimps, Hindenburgs or something. I was honestly surprised they weren’t used more often, but I also didn’t care.

Shining Armor nodded. “Yep. The princess gave us one since our entourage is so large. It would take too many chariots to get everything there, and it would take too long to go by foot. We never built train tracks over the mountains toward the griffin territory, so she decided an airship would be fine.”

I started dropping weapons and putting armor on. I didn’t really like feeling enclosed in that stuff, but I’ve been through worse.

Shining looked at the bags on the floor. “Is this really all you’re bringing?”

“I travel light. I assume the griffins take bits? Or do I need to carry some gems?”

He blinked. “How do you have gems?”

“I own a gem mine now, apparently.” I shrugged.

“Bits are fine.” I finished putting my armor on. “Are you ready?”

“You just got here and now you want to leave? Don’t you want to talk to your sister?”

“We do need to get there, Nav...”

“Shiny, I’ve been away from my sister for years now. You really shouldn’t take her for granted.” I grabbed the two bags and started hauling them out. Taya followed me out. I thought about it for a few seconds and then tied the bags to the end of the rope. I bent down and grabbed Taya. “I’ll see you when I get back.”

“I know.” She sighed. “Just... come back.”

I let her go. “I fully plan on it.” I looked up at the airship and gave a light whistle. “Good God.” It was larger than most of the others I had seen. A large purple balloon sat on top of it, and propellers sat on the back. It really looked like a boat with a balloon on top. In fact... it looked familiar. *That’s the pirate ship! What the hell?*

Wait, more importantly, why the hell does that ship have propellers, but they can’t put propellers on the ships in the water? *I swear, these ponies are fucktarded sometimes.*

I grabbed the ladder and began to climb. I was halfway up to the ship before I remembered that I had wings. I kept climbing, because it had been a long time since I got to use a ladder.

When I pulled myself over the railing, I saw Rainbow Dash talking to a familiar unicorn. It was that bitch that threw me around with magic back on the ship. *This is going to be a long trip.* I pulled the ring out of the pouch around my neck and slipped it on. They noticed me when I was putting my gauntlet back on.

And as soon as they noticed me, I had Rainbow Dash in my face. “This thing is so awesome! I can’t believe you get to ride on this thing all the way up to Gryphus!” For anyone not familiar, that’s the griffin—or griffon or gryphon—capital.

“I’ve been on this ship before,” I said. “But it was in water at the time. I bet the blood stains have been cleaned out as well.” She paled a bit at that. “You didn’t know? This used to be a pirate ship. Quite a few of them called this place home.” I grinned. “I evicted them. Your friend over there helped,” with a nod to the murderous unicorn that was glaring at me.

In a quiet voice, Rainbow just said “Oh.” She gulped. “I’ll uh... I’ll see you when you get back, Nav.” She jumped over the edge.

I took one look at the unicorn and walked over to the entrance of the under deck. I opened it and went down. The entire place had changed. Where before it smelled of death and fear, now it seemed to smell of flowers and ponies. I found Cadance in a room, writing something down.

“Where’s my room?” I asked, standing at the door.

She looked up at me and smiled. “Hello, Nav. You know, I’ve heard some interesting news from Luna...” Her smile grew wider.

“Where’s my room?”

“She said you finally agreed to date her. I’m so happy for you both!”

“I bet she didn’t mention that her sister is considering taking me as a consort.” Her mouth dropped. “So where’s my room?”

“W-w-what?”

“It’s not a hard question. Where is. My room. You know, where I’m going to be sleeping and staying? The place I’m going to hide from that bitchy unicorn that wants to kill me? You must be working too hard if you can’t figure this one out.”

Her horn lit up. Nothing happened. I crossed my arms over my chest, looking at her. Now she was gaping again.

“Oh, Celestia didn’t tell you? I found a ring that gives me immunity to magic. You’ll have to stab me if you want to stop me, now. Funny thing: I found a key that opens any lock, too.” I pulled it out. “Including minds.” I concentrated. “Where’s my room?”

Her eyes went blank. “You don’t have one. It shouldn’t take us a day to get there, and we’re all staying in the embassy.” She blinked, shaking her head. “What did you do to me?”

“Oh, you know.” I waved a hand while putting the key away. “I’ll see you later, I

suppose.” I walked back up to the deck before she could say anything.

I didn’t see Crazy Bitch McFucklips on the deck, but given that there was one entrance below decks, I was assuming she was just standing somewhere I couldn’t see her. I approached the front of the ship and leaned against the rail, looking down. *Hope I don’t fall with this ring on.*

It wasn’t long before I heard the clopping of hooves approach me. I didn’t turn. “I don’t want hard feelings on my boat, Nav,” I heard a familiar voice say. It sounded like that fellow that was the de facto leader of the pirate slaves. Didn’t remember his name. Didn’t really care, either.

“You don’t have any from me,” I answered, still not turning. “You should be talking to Crazy Bitch McFucklips. I’m immune to magic and poison now, so the only way she’ll kill me is by stabbing me with that horn. And while I’m wearing this armor, she won’t be able to do even that.”

He started giggling when I said her name, or at least what I was calling her. He clammed up when I mentioned my new talents. “Immune to magic, eh?” He shut up for a second. After a moment, he grunted. “Well I’ll be. How’d you pull that off?”

“Enchanted ring. I leave her alone, she leaves me alone. End of story. In fact, I’d rather just be left alone by everyone. I’m a knight now, so if she lays a hoof on me, I’ll have her in irons. We have an understanding?”

“Seems fair to me. But wouldn’t you rather make peace?”

“No. I’ve done nothing to her, other than save her from a life of slavery. If this is how she chooses to repay me, I might as well do her the favor of staying out of her business.”

“I see. Would you be willing to talk to a few of the others, at least? Some... haven’t been doing as well as others. We’re all in this business together; it doesn’t take much to keep this scow operational. No pony wanted to buy a ship with such a dark history, but Princess Celestia took pity on us and gave us a neat little solution. We all said we were done with the sea, but... Well, we’re not on the sea!”

“Yeah, and what happens when you fall off?”

“Those of us without wings stay away from the edge,” I heard Shining Armor say as he walked up. I didn’t hear him heave himself over the top, but then, I was a bit distracted.

“You get used to heights,” I answered. “When are we casting off?”

“As soon as the captain returns to his post,” he answered.

“Aye aye, sir,” the captain said, presumably saluting. I heard him walk off. Shining Armor stayed.

“Shiny, I might have a bit of a problem with one of the mares here.”

“Don’t call me that. What kind of problem?”

“I saved her from slavery and she tried to kill me twice until I threatened to cut off her horn and shove it up her ass.” Actually, I don’t remember what I threatened to do with it, but I know I was going to cut it off.

“I see. Well, as long as she leaves you alone now, there won’t be a problem.” I felt a judder as the ship kicked into gear and began to move. “Your bags are stowed below with the

others. Has Celestia already briefed you?"

"Yeah. Show up, look good, be impressive, guard Cadance. If the king gets uppity, slap his shit."

"The first four are good. Don't lay a hoof—or hand—on the king. I'd prefer you not talking to him at all, but if he asks you a question, you need to answer it. He's not at all like the princesses."

"I've met a king and a queen before. I'll be fine."

"You've met a king of a backwater and a queen that was basically a vassal. This is different, Nav."

"Buck up, prince. I'll be fine."

"P-p-prince!?"

"Yeah. You married a princess. The fuck you think that makes you?" That's one reason I sure wasn't in any hurry to get married to Luna. Not a fan of marriage and I sure don't want to be a prince.

"I... I never thought of that before. I'm... I'm a prince!" He started giggling. "I wonder what kind of authority I have now... I bet Cadance knows!" It sounded like he took a step back, but he stopped. "Nav, why are you looking out there, anyway?"

"See that mare glaring at me next to the captain?"

"Uh... no?"

"Well, I'm sure she's somewhere. I don't want to see her. Besides, I like watching the plebeians run about their day like little insects."

"That's... kinda messed up."

"Yeah. I just said that to see what kind of reaction I'd get. You'll do fine as a prince. I shouldn't have to do to you what I did to Blueblood."

"What... what did you do to Blueblood?"

"Well, when was the last time you saw him?"

"Um... You didn't... you couldn't... Did you?"

"No. I just wanted to see your reaction again."

"You're terrible, Nav. I'm going to see my wife, unless you need anything."

"You still want to talk about my time back home? I'm sure we have some time, if you do."

"I have some things to get squared away. We'll have time during the week."

"See you whenever, then. Don't make her moan too loud, now."

He beat a hasty retreat at that. I knew he didn't like being teased, which is of course why I did it. Sure, he could make my life hell if he wanted to, but I could make his worse—and shorter. Being a knight apparently has some interesting perks that I never planned on taking advantage of if I could help it.

I was alone there for nearly an hour, watching the countryside pass by. Good things never last, I've found. I heard a pony clop up to me. "Sir," a male voice said, "do you have any

orders?”

What the fuck? I turned around and saw a bat-winged night guard standing there. “What the fuck?”

He looked at me, confused, and said, “Princess Luna placed me under your command for this mission, sir.”

“Then Princess Luna is smoking crack. Did she give you anything to give me?”

I saw a light click on in his head. He patted all over before pulling a letter out from under his armor and handing it to me.

“This better not be sweaty,” I said as I grabbed it. He smiled sheepishly as I opened it. “Blah blah, Sunshine Smiles asked to guard you, blah blah don’t get hurt, blah.” I looked up. “What the fuck, dude?”

“Well... After what you did for us, the night guards want to make sure nothing bad happens to you. Princess Luna was all too happy to allow one of us to accompany you to the griffin capital. We all wanted to send more, but it would be suspicious enough sending one along with you.”

“I don’t see why, honestly. Both to sending any and as to why one would be suspicious. When have I—Never mind.” I looked back to see how far away we were. “Too damn far to send you back.” I turned back to him and crossed my arms, leaning against the rails. “So. Does Shining Armor know about you?”

“Yes sir. I reported to him first.”

“Cut the sir crap, unless you absolutely feel the need to annoy me. Shit, I bet you’re supposed to be sleeping right now, aren’t you?”

“Well... I usually am asleep right now, yes.”

“You ain’t much use to me dead tired, Smiles. Though to be fair, I honestly don’t know what use you’ll be to me at all. With the onset of fall, I start sleeping again. And it has to be at night, or my body will start to shut down. Resetting a sleep schedule is hell on the body and on the mind, as I’m sure you know. All of my activities will be during the day, when you are asleep. You’d probably be better off joining the small night guard contingent Cadance has guarding her. I won’t tell Luna if you don’t.”

“You can’t get rid of me that easily, sir. She told me personally to make sure nothing happened to her soon-to-be special somepony. Or... somehuman, I suppose.” I wish there was a way I could make myself look more threatening. Orange hair just doesn’t do enough.

“And this letter says you have to follow my orders.”

“But the princess told me to guard *you*. From what she told me, making sure you get home safe is more important to me than making sure Princess Cadance gets home safe.”

“Well, my life is forfeit if Cadance doesn’t make it back. Celestia would have my head mounted above her throne if anything happens to Cadance. And given that there will be no threats to my person, I believe that making sure Cadance returns safely will give me the highest chance of keeping my head.”

“I’m sorry, but I’m not having this debate with you, sir. I’m going to guard you if I have to sneak around to do it.”

“For fuck’s sake... Fine. Good luck staying awake, Smiles.” I saw him living up to his namesake before I turned back around and began watching the passing scenery again.

Silence reigned for a good little while. I saw the scenery slowly change from coniferous forests to evergreen forests. We passed a few small settlements, each full of ponies. I saw more and more different races the further north we went. The most common were still ponies, but griffins and a few dogs began to show up. Of course, it was hard to tell as high up as we were, but we also ran into plenty of fliers.

It was a nice day out wherever we went, apparently. I later learned that Celestia had this path opened up for us all the way there so that our airship didn’t run into any bad weather. Rather nice of her.

Silence never lasts. It’s a shame. I heard the guard come to attention and then a gentle clopping of hooves come up to me. “Would you mind leaving us, guard?” Cadance asked.

“Don’t move, Smiles,” I said, turning. “He’s my assurance, Cadance. You throw me over the side, I have a witness.”

She rolled her eyes. “I don’t want to *hurt* you, Nav. I just want to talk.” She cast a sidelong glance to the guard. “About private things. Besides, you have wings.”

“We have nothing private between us, Cadance. Nor is there anything I wish to make private or discuss that might be private. *I* solve my problems, no one else.”

“Don’t make me order you to talk about this, Nav.”

“You can’t order me to do shit.”

“Your oaths would require you obey me!”

“My oaths were revoked by Luna herself. I’m a knight in name, not in oath.”

Her eyes widened. “How did... Why would she do that?”

I smiled. “I gave her an offer. Nav, or Sir Navarone.”

She looked disgusted. “How *dare* you hold love ransom?! You monster!” Her horn lit up but nothing happened. She grit her teeth.

“I honestly don’t consider that holding love ransom. If you were forced to follow every command Shining Armor gave you, could you love him? Could you happily have a relationship with someone that has complete control over you?”

“Somepony that loved me would never order me to do something that I didn’t want to!”

“I’m so very happy for you. I don’t have the same luck, since I’m not a princess that lives in happy fairy tale world. I live in a place called reality. Maybe you’ve heard of it. Here’s a bit of an introduction: It fucking sucks. What did you want to talk about?”

“Why do you hate me, Nav?”

I blinked. I opened my mouth to respond, but I had to close it. *Why am I so mean to her?* “That’s a good question. I could give a few reasons, but some are blunt and painful. Do you really want to hear them?” She gave a stiff nod. “I don’t really like the color pink. Your voice is

somewhat annoying. Ever since you've met me, you've been trying to get me to talk about something that is in no way your business and I've told you repeatedly that I do not want to talk about it and yet you persist in annoying me anyway. I'm sick and tired of fucking ponies that refuse to leave me alone. You are a princess and yet you have no idea what it takes to take and hold a throne. You were born into the role—or were perhaps adopted as Blueblood was, I don't know—and thus have no experience living on a day to day basis, trying to make sure you stay alive. You don't know what it takes to do my job and automatically assume I have it easy and can spend all day talking to you about something you have no business discussing. While that is currently true, I've pulled jobs in the past where I would have been killed for daring to open my mouth out of place. The first time we met, you assumed you knew me based on what you had heard around the palace and from what Celestia and perhaps Luna had told you, and when you realized I didn't live up to what you were told, you seemed personally offended or very scared, one of the two." Though that was fair enough, given that I was threatening to torture anyone that attacked her. "Now, a question of my own: Why don't you hate me?"

She looked like she was about to cry. The night guard looked like his eyes were going to bulge out of his head. She finally managed to answer, "Because you're broken. You don't mean to hurt me, you just do it because you can't stand to let anypony close to you."

"If thinking that makes you feel better. Now, what did you want to talk about?"

"...It can wait, I think. I will... see you later, Navarone." She walked away, head hung low.

When she was out of earshot, Sunshine said, "It isn't my business, but that was really mean."

I didn't say anything, just turned around and watched the scenery change some more. What was there to say? He was right. It really was mean. And he was also right when he said it wasn't his business. *God I wish I had some alcohol... Vinyl needs to get off her ass and start making some.*

Is it bad, that I felt a strong urge to jump off the side of the airship? To tell Sunshine Smiles to go get me something from below decks and just fall, letting my body painlessly hit the ground? To finally find peace among the ponies...

I almost did it, when I heard more clopping behind me. "What is your business?" the guard demanded.

"I want to talk to the human," a female voice said.

"Sir?"

I turned to look. Just one of the random ex-slaves. "What do you want?" I asked her.

"I wanted to thank you again. For saving us, and for helping us after. I know you didn't want to talk to us, but everything you told us helped us get better. But... not all of us are doing so well."

"Your captain mentioned that. I told you it would be hard. I'm having problems of my own."

“Just as you said you would?” I nodded. “You know you can talk to any of us. And you know we are always willing to talk to you. Except for Sunny, who still hates you even though she’s the one that took your advice most to heart.”

“Just because I can doesn’t mean I should. I’ve picked up problems since we last spoke. Dark problems. I’ll not burden any of your minds with them, but if you’ll all do me a favor, I will listen to those that need more help.”

“Anything, Nav. Ask and we’ll do it.”

“Keep a very, very watchful eye on your children—your foals—in Gryphus. I’ve heard bad rumors, and I wouldn’t want any of them hurt.”

She nodded. “Princess Celestia has heard the same rumors. She allowed us to keep our foals in Canterlot for the duration of this mission.”

“Yeah, she’s a pretty nice lady. I guess I don’t need a favor anymore. Tough luck, I suppose.”

She grinned. “You wouldn’t turn any of us away if we really needed help. You’re too nice.”

“That’s an opinion. I just sent that pretty princess away in tears.”

“She didn’t need help though, did she?”

“I don’t know. She didn’t get to what she wanted to talk about. I doubt it, though; she’s been bugging me for a while.”

“I’ll send some of them on over, then.”

“One at a time. You know the drill.”

She nodded. “Of course. I don’t know why you insisted upon that, though.” The real reason was that I figured I could handle at most one unicorn at a time back when I wasn’t immune to magic. I kept my crossbow loaded every time one of them came by, so I could easily kill them before they could react. The reason I told them is that they could talk more freely without anyone there to judge them or to make them shy about their problems. The fake reason is pretty good, if I do say so myself.

She left. The guard gave me a bit of a confused look. “Don’t worry about it,” I told him. He shrugged.

I spent the rest of the ride talking to depressed unicorns. It made me feel better about myself, but that isn’t saying much.

I noticed that as we got further north, the fewer houses I began to see. Instead, I saw large trees that looked relatively hollowed out. In a lull between slaves, I asked the guard, “Do griffins live in trees or something?”

“Those that aren’t in the capital do usually live in trees, yes. The capital is styled after more modern architecture. It is a city closer to Canterlot than to other griffin towns, but it does have a few trees.”

“Hope they never have a dragon problem... We getting grub on this barge, or are they going to feed us when we arrive?”

“I don’t know, sir.” *I guess he wants to annoy me. I hate titles.*

The griffin capital looked dull—and I mean that in two ways. It looked dark, bereft of brightness. And it looked boring, lacking much to do. As soon as we got within sight of the city, we picked up a griffin escort that lazily followed us as we entered the city proper.

Smiles was right: the city appeared styled after a Canterlot that was on a plain, rather than built onto the side of a mountain. Missing were all the bright and cheerful colors, replaced by a sad and somber grey and black. Rather than the tile roofs that grace the many buildings of Canterlot, most of the roofs here were thatched, presumably to help keep in warmth; without magic, they had to make do. From my time in Africa, I knew how much that sucked.

Hopefully we would have magic rooms and stuff since we were going to be in an embassy. Surely there would be a few unicorns that could regulate the temperature. I could feel a nip in the air already, and it didn’t help that we were high up. I envied the griffins their feathery coverings, and wrapped my body as well as I could in my wings. *Armor is not made for cold weather.*

Shining Armor, Cadance, and the rest of the guards came out on deck ten minutes before we got off. “Everypony get ready to disembark,” Shiny called. “This ship isn’t coming back for three weeks. You leave something on board, it *stays* on board.”

I turned to my guard. “Smiles, is all your gear ready to go?”

“Not yet, sir.”

“Then let’s go get our stuff.” I led the way to the storage area. The ship had very few passengers, and most of them were above and waiting to get off. We had no trouble finding our bags.

Thankfully, neither of us had much of anything. “Need help with that, sir?” he asked, watching me heft a bag over my shoulder.

“No. I dearly hope you have everything, because if you have to stay in that armor until we’re done here, you are going to freeze your ass off.”

“I have everything.” We went back up topside to find that we were getting awfully close to the castle. It was a large, ugly thing. Nothing at all like the castle at Canterlot. First glances from far away gave this thing a lot more credit than it was due. This castle just looked cold: Dark, empty, unpleasant... I don’t know how else to describe it, honestly.

We were getting a little *too* close to the tower. Like, way too close. The guards and I both were starting to get uncomfortable, and we were looking around anxiously. The griffin escort we had picked up had apparently been trying to get us to stop or something, but had given up and were high-tailing it away from whatever they expected to happen.

I calmly pulled my gauntlet off and removed my ring, sliding it into the pouch around my neck. “If we hit that castle, drop your shit and fucking bail,” I warned my guard. “We can buy more of whatever you had. We can’t buy more you.”

He gulped. “You got it, sir.”

Shining Armor and Cadance were looking confident, though. I assumed there was a plan that we weren't told about. Well, Cadance was looking more confident than Shiny, but then she also had wings. All of the unicorns I could see that manned the ship were doing fine, though.

We didn't hit the castle, of course. Though I have to admit, it would have been awesome if we had—until the griffins interpreted it as an act of war, at least. We jerked upwards at the last moment and stopped right next to a spire, a quick step away. There was a griffin there waiting for us.

"Princess Cadance?" the fellow said, looking at the pink alicorn. She nodded. "Come this way. You will be shown to your quarters, and then you will be brought before the king."

"Lead the way, please." He did. We all followed him. Cadance was at his side, talking to him about what to expect. Shiny was watching over the guards, giving small orders every now and then to make sure they were tip-top. We had six regular day guards, four night guards, me, Shining Armor, Sunshine Smiles, and Cadance.

Whereas the halls of Canterlot Castle had rich carpets and colorful tapestries, this place had stone floors and mostly bare walls. There were almost no decorations at all. The few tapestries we passed were darker and depicted much more gory scenes. Cadance grimaced at a few of them, but didn't say anything.

It didn't take us long to get to where we were being led: A small wing of the castle. I didn't comment on that in front of the griffin, but when we all set our stuff down in our rooms—and I was given a room to myself, thank God—I found Shining Armor. "This is not an embassy," I told him.

"It is, in a way. Since the griffins and ponies are neighbors, we keep each other's ambassadors more comfortable. Whenever ambassador parties come from here, we put them up in the palace. Whenever our ambassadors come here, they stay in these rooms."

That isn't at all like my world, then. There, our ambassadors have their own buildings and are almost always staffed. Or at least, I think that's how it works; I wasn't exactly given an education in world politics.

I just shook my head and went back to my relatively nice room. Stowing away my gear was easy: Throw the bag of clothes in a corner to be ransacked as needed.

Look, I'm a bachelor. I can do this shit.

Sunshine Smiles felt the need to rain on my parade, though. "Sir, why are your clothes in the corner? That's highly unprofessional."

"Dude, when have I ever given you a vibe that indicates I know what the fuck I'm doing? I just listen to my instincts; my mind is along for the ride."

"I don't believe that for a minute... sir."

"You're doing that on purpose." He played innocent. "Whatever. When are we leaving?"

"Three minutes. Two, now. I hope you're ready."

"I am. You need to stay here; my job is to impress the king by being a kickass mofo. If I show up with a guard, that is going to seriously crimp my style. That ain't up for debate, either,

you hear me?”

“I know. Princess Luna said you would insist on that. Since it fits with the main mission imperative and since you’ll be surrounded by our guards anyway there shouldn’t be an issue.”

“Whatever. Feel free to do whatever floats your boat as long as it doesn’t involve rooting around in my stuff.”

“Yes sir.”

“And knock that shit off. Seriously, you’re probably older than I am.”

“Well, how old are you?”

“...Twenty something. I don’t remember anymore.”

“I see... sir.” He was smirking as he said it.

“Fuck you, Smiles.” I left the room at that. I loaded my crossbow as I walked to the small group of ponies that looked like they were getting ready to meet a king.

Cadance was at their head. It was just one guard, Shining Armor, her, and then me. I holstered my crossbow as I joined them. “You won’t need that, Nav,” Shiny told me.

“Okay,” is all I said. I didn’t make any move to unload it. I remember what happened the last time I got back from a meeting with a king when I wasn’t armed. Assassins could kill Cadance all they wanted, but they weren’t going to catch me unawares.

“Navarone, please...” Cadance said.

I looked at her. “Do you know what happened the last time I was in an embassy?” She shook her head. “Assassins. Assassins everywhere.” Actually, there were only two of them. Well, unless you count Kat. “You can laze about if you want. Me, I’m not getting caught with my pants down. If those fuckers want *my* blood, they’re going to have to work for it.”

“You’re here to guard Cadance, Nav, not yourself,” Shiny told me, a bit of sharpness to his voice.

“My safety comes first, to me. I’m not patriotic. I’m not loyal. I’m not self-sacrificing. I’m here because I have to be. Don’t forget that.”

“I won’t,” he forced through gritted teeth.

Cadance, however, rolled her eyes. “Don’t pay him any mind, Shiny. He’s just lying to make himself look tough. He might not like me, but he’ll do his job.”

The unimportant redshirt hissed, nodding down the hall. We all saw a griffin approaching. I popped my neck as it approached. “This is the group that will see the king?” he asked when he was close enough. Cadance nodded. “Come with me, then.” Off we went, down more drafty halls.

We were walking for a few minutes when I said, “So uh... What’s the king’s name, anyway?”

“Bloodbeak,” the griffin answered, not turning.

Well that’s a bit ominous. “Is his beak bloody, or did his parents just like odd names?”

“His parents just liked odd names,” the griffin answered. I think he was grinning, but it was hard to tell from this angle. It was also hard to tell because he had a fucking beak instead of

a mouth.

The throne room didn't have doors. We were led straight in and I got my first look at the king.

He was boring looking, just like his castle. Old and grey, the only sparks of life on him were his eyes, which watched us—no, they just watched *me*—approach. He stood when we were halfway to him. “Why do you bring a heavily armed freak to me, Cadance?”

“I may be a freak, but at least I ain't a peckerface.”

...

Oh shit.

One hand shot to my knife before I realized the king was laughing. Shining Armor was glaring at me. Cadance was giving me a pained look. The guard had his eyes squeezed shut, thinking he was about to die. The king's guards were watching impassively. And the king was still giggling slightly. I slowly eased my hand off the dagger.

“So they were right!” he finally boomed. “The ponies finally sent me a warrior! Something with fire in his blood! I don't know what a pecker is, but from your reaction, I'm guessing it was a grand insult. I heard the reports of how you won the tournament in Prance, so I shan't bother you for details of your ‘battles.’ I'm sure your parts in them were things none would care to hear. Now come, all of you. Let us feast.”

With that, he descended from his small dais and walked toward our group. Shock and surprise replaced horror on the faces of Shiny and Cadance. And probably my own, honestly. I did my best to look nonchalant, but it didn't seem to be working. The king walked through our group. Cadance stepped aside to let him pass by her. Thankfully, he didn't get near me.

But... “Walk with me, Navarone,” he said as he passed.

I stepped to his side, walking next to him. I heard Shiny whisper, “What just happened?” No one answered him. I wish I knew what just happened as well.

“You know, you're the first royal I've met that was cool with an insult being the first thing out of my mouth,” I commented as we walked.

“I know about you, Navarone. Irreverent. Rude. Crude. Blunt. Loyal and self-sacrificing.” Shiny snorted at that. “Kind to anything not an enemy—and kind to them as long as they are kind in turn. Once you defeat them, of course. And from the things I've heard, you *will* defeat them, even if you have to resort to less than pleasant tactics to do so. Tell me, have you ever had an honorable fight?”

“Yes. Well, sort of. I ran into an assassin once that I had to fight face to face. I tackled him, using my superior strength to ruin his day. We both had daggers, but I knew if I had to fight with that, I would end up dead.”

“You are one I would never hope to fight, Navarone. Not in a war and not in a duel—and I've heard you were involved in one of those as well. Though I heard you didn't fight fair.”

“You are correct, I didn't. Why would I?”

“Because fighting fair and honorably allows those around you to know that the winner

won from a superior fighting ability.”

“It doesn’t matter who’s a better fighter. At the end of the day, all that matters is who walks away and who doesn’t. If I can win a fight with my brain rather than my skills as a fighter, I can go home to my daughter a happy man—because it means I didn’t risk her father’s life doing something as stupid as fighting.”

“If you think that, why would you not learn to be the best fighter you can be so you take fewer risks?”

“Because warriors are a dime-a-dozen. Anyone can swing a blade or bash a skull in. Thinkers... No, *generals* are irreplaceable. If I can prove my worth by leading men and outsmarting the enemy, I’ll never find myself in the path of a sword again, until I find myself facing someone smarter than I am and I lose it all. I’d rather not be forced to fight at all, but if I had to, I would choose to lead from the back rather than fight at the front.”

“All the hatchlings grow up dreaming to become a soldier to fight. So very few grow up dreaming to cower behind them.”

“Any leader that fights with his men is an idiot. They need to be at the back, coordinating the assault using messengers and signals. If the enemy changes tactics, the commander must order his troops to respond immediately. They can’t tell what the enemy army is doing if they are in the thick of battle. At the back, they can use fliers to keep up with the flow of the battle and use those same fliers to send messages to the commanders of the individual parts of the army to correspond immediately to whatever the enemy attempts. And if, at the end of the day, your army is routed... Which would you rather make it back home? A bedraggled infantryman, or the commander leading the force?”

“The infantry can fight another day. A commander that failed me so would be put to death.”

“More fool you. No one can win every battle. Some are impossible. Sometimes you fight for a reason other than winning. If you kill every commander that loses, you will soon find yourself lacking people smart enough to lead, meaning you’ll lose more and more battles. There are indicators that your commander is an idiot and you need to look out for them, but if you put someone to death for a single loss? You’re going to lose the war and I’m afraid to say that you’ll deserve it.”

“Navarone!” Cadance hissed. I looked back at her to see her glaring at me. She flicked her eyes at the king, who I saw was looking at me with confusion.

He slowly said, “You are the only one I have ever had *dare* tell me I was a fool. And I have said many foolish things in my long life.”

“Well, I’ve punched a queen in the face before, so don’t think I haven’t done worse. You said it yourself, though: I am blunt and I am irreverent. We don’t have kings where I come from because we killed them.” Only partly true. “They started pushing their people too hard, so the people revolted. Royal blood sheds just as easily as peasant blood, if you can get to it.”

“So your people live in anarchy?”

“No. We elect our leaders. Everyone that is above a certain age is allowed to cast a vote for a candidate that is running for the position of president. The president stays in power for a short time and is then put up for reelection. In my country, they can be elected twice before having to stand down and pass the flag. Just about anyone can run for president, but convincing the people that you deserve to win is the hard part. You have to travel extensively to get your name in the minds of the people. You have to give speeches and make promises that you need to fulfill upon being elected.”

“And your president then becomes the king?”

“No. Not a king as you know it. We have three branches: Executive, legislative, and judicial.” I briefly explained how they worked.

“I see. You mentioned a Constitution. What is that?” I told him. “Why would you need to protect rights that are inalienable... universal?”

“Because there are good people in my world and there are bad people in my world. The good want to stay free and the bad want to take power and do as they wish. The Constitution ensures that the people that are neither good nor bad will know when the bad people are trying to take power. If any of the rights guaranteed in the Constitution start disappearing... It’s time to break out the guns and have another Revolution.”

He nodded slowly. “We have had... our own problems with that. We shall discuss this more later.” He stopped at a door that a servant opened for him. “Let us eat.” He led the way inside. A large table was within, and he promptly took his place at the head. He beckoned me to his right-hand side. I joined him with a shrug. Cadance was positioned at his left, with Shiny next to her. The redshirt started to stand behind her but I pointed him next to me. He ignored me.

“The best measure of a leader, I have found, is how they treat those under them,” the king commented as he saw the exchange. “The ambassador is safe here, soldier. You may join us.”

Shining Armor glared at me as the soldier stiffly moved to sit next to me. I shrugged. *I am going to be in soooo much trouble when we get back to the embassy.* The king noticed that too, but didn’t say anything. As soon as the redshirt sat down, the table began to fill up with more griffins. Various nobles and dignitaries, I suppose; none were introduced to me. I slid my gauntlets off as servants began to bring out food.

I grinned massively as they dropped a smoked boar in front of me and the king. Oh, and Cadance, who was looking at it in mute horror. Shiny and the guard had similar reactions. There was no silverware or anything like that for me, so I wondered a moment how I was supposed to eat this thing or carve anything off.

The king answered that for me by gripping one of the legs and *tearing it off.*

Right in front of Cadance. I think some grease landed in her hair.

I wish I had a camera. Oh my God, I wish I had a camera.

As soon as the king took a large bite from what he had ripped off, the other griffins began eating. The servants had dropped vegetarian fare off for the ponies, and there was plenty of bread and whatnot for them besides. They also gave me a salad that I promptly pushed to the guard

next to me. I jerked my knife out and carved into the pig.

Shiny jumped back. "You eat meat?!"

I pulled the hunk of boar to my plate. "Uh, yeah? Didn't you notice my teeth?"

"And Celestia let you live with Twiley?" His tone was starting to sound dangerous.

"Yeah. Twilight has known since she met me. Cadance knew, too." I took a bite of the boar. It was like an angel came in my mouth. I let out a sigh and said to the king, "I don't eat meat nearly enough anymore." *Less time to hunt, with Taya.* "I don't suppose I could get some kind of jerky or something before I leave to take back with me?"

"That can be arranged," he said in an approving tone. He winked at me.

Cadance pushed her plate away, having eaten almost nothing. "Please don't encourage him, your majesty. I know that he *can* eat meat, but he doesn't have to."

"Yeah, and you *can* eat cupcakes," he replied. "But wouldn't you prefer a life with them? Such is meat to a meat eater. We can live without it, but why? Surely Celestia wouldn't send a pony with such sensibilities to be an ambassador to the griffins!"

"I was her only choice. Blueblood disappeared, Luna is unable to leave Canterlot for some time, and Celestia herself has to deal with something very important." I wonder what that would be. "Our closest allies require royalty, so royalty was sent."

"I see. And yet we offend you. How do you expect to make any manner of deal like this?"

"I would prefer to not speak business over dinner," she calmly replied.

"A wise mare," the king said. "So be it. Eat, or don't. Business for us begins tomorrow. Bring out the mead!" he commanded.

I dropped the hunk of boar I was working on. "Did you say... mead? As in honey alcohol?"

"There is honey involved, yes," the king said as servants began to pour golden liquid into mugs at our sides. "I don't know the rest of the making of it."

I grabbed the mug with a shaking hand and sipped at it. *Oh sweet Jesus.* "I was summoned to the wrong place in this world," I said. I tilted the mug back and drained the booze. I set the cup back down and looked over the pig at Cadance. "Is it too late to tender my resignation as a knight to move up to the griffin lands?"

The king boomed out a laugh. "You are welcome up here, Navarone!"

Cadance, however, was not amused. "Yes, it *is* too late. I believe you know why."

"Geez, you just don't know how to take a joke. Also uh... You probably shouldn't drink any of that mead. Unicorns don't mix with alcohol, and I know one of you has had bad experiences with it."

Shiny and Cadance shared a glance. Both of their horns lit up, the mugs floated over to them, and they drained them.

Shining Armor raised his eyebrows. "This is better than the stuff you gave us, Nav!"

"This was made better, that's why," I replied. "And mead is just awesome. I'll have to get

the recipe before we leave.”

Cadance shook her head. “Princess Celestia banned the import of this, Nav,” she said. “I don’t think she’ll be pleased to find you making it.”

“I see.” I was totally going to do it anyway. Celestia has been reading my journals, so I know she knows I’ve been making booze. If she hasn’t stopped me yet, she probably wasn’t going to. I continued eating.

I noticed that the guard next to me was chatting up the chick next to him. They were talking about battles they have both been in or something. Apparently this guard was a veteran of many Everfree monster fights. Since no one else around me was talking, I started listening in.

And from the sounds of it, somepony was getting laid tonight. I’ve fucked a griffin before and I have to say that I felt sorry for him. But I wasn’t about to ruin it for him, so I kept my mouth shut.

When the king finished eating—and he ate over half that boar by himself—he said, “So Navarone, why were you sent with the ponies?”

Cadance said, “As a gua—”

“To impress you,” I said, cutting her off. “They figured a warlike creature would be better suited to impress the king of a warlike people than a pony, even one decked out in armor.”

Cadance and Shiny both glared at me.

“It worked,” he replied with a smile. “Tell me, how old are you?”

“Twenty-three.” I wasn’t certain about that, actually. I remember turning twenty-one, but I don’t remember when. Age seems to get confused in this place, at least for me.

“So young...” I felt my hands clenching at that. It was easy to forget this guy fucks children. “You are far from innocent, though. Such is the life of those that live lives such as yours. A shame, truly.”

“Hardly. Innocence is a shield, a pair of blinders worn by children and those that don’t know hardship. It is nice while you have it, but when you finally lose it, you look back and see what you missed just because you never thought about something. You can’t take action as an innocent. You can’t change anything. You’re stuck in a small world with a narrow view, following a path set in front of you by those that long ago lost their innocence.” *Maybe that’s cynicism talking.* “There’s a reason Celestia rules the ponies. She is jaded and cynical while at the same time wise and loving. She leads an innocent people using the kind of wisdom it takes thousands of years to accumulate. If all of her people were forced to open their eyes, the poor mare could finally get some rest and retire in peace.”

Shiny and Cadance were quite surprised at that. I think the king was as well. At least I knew the king wouldn’t want to have his way with me.

“So young, and you have a daughter?” he said when he rallied.

“Yeah. It’s a shame I had to leave her, but when duty calls, I have to answer. She’s not mine by blood, though. I found her in a land across the sea and brought her here. I was going to leave her in an orphanage, but Celestia’s a bitch and made me keep her.” I shrugged. “She grew

on me.”

“It’s good to know you treat all royalty like me,” the king said. “You mentioned you punched a queen in the face. What happened?” I told him the tale. “We have had problems with changelings in the past. Our allies and friends the dogs have as well. I believe a large mining colony was recently wiped out by the changelings. There have been raids going back and forth between the two for a while, but never anything on that scale... Filthy monsters.” He shook his head. “If the changelings weren’t largely based under Equestria, we would have wiped them out long ago.”

I think it would have been a bad idea to mention my part in that affair. Thankfully, Shiny and Cadance were smart enough to not mention the treaty between the changelings and Equestria. Fucking politics, man. How does it work?

“Your silence betrays you, Navarone. Do you disagree?” he asked.

Fuck me. “I think I would rather have an army of shape shifters on my side rather than as enemies. We found out how much damage a single changeling can do at their wedding,” I said with a wave to Cadance and Shining Armor. “There was a very real danger of her overpowering Celestia and taking over Equestria all by herself. Imagine having a changeling as an ally that could do that to your enemies. Imagine an entire army that could do something like that. Yes, you could track them down and eliminate them. But why, when friendship is so much more useful?”

“They are parasites. They survive off emotion and other resources and give little in return. We could use their ‘talents,’ but why, when we could so very easily win an upfront and fair fight?”

“At what cost? I could think of several ways to use changelings in an upfront fight against an enemy that fights as griffins do. Each would give me a significant advantage. Probably enough of an advantage to win.”

“Your mind works in devious ways. Ours do not. We might discuss this more at a later time. If you have no questions, ambassador, I can have a servant show you back to your quarters.”

“That would be fine, your highness.”

He snapped and a servant appeared. The king pointed to Cadance and jerked his thumb backwards. The servant nodded. “Follow me, please,” she said. We did. She led us right back to the embassy. I slipped my ring on while we walked.

I very quietly—as quietly as I could in a suit of plate armor—tried to return to my room. I got to the door to find that it was glowing a light blue, the tell-tale sign of a unicorn’s magic. I casually opened it with the hand that had the ring and stepped inside, locking it behind me with my magic key. I giggled as I heard a muffled curse.

Sunshine Smiles was passed out on my bed. I slipped my boots off and padded my way to him. I leaned in real close. “BOO!”

He shot up out of bed. “I wasn’t sleeping!”

“Dude, yes you were. Don’t even try.”

“...Yes I was. I’m sorry, sir.”

“You have your own fucking room. Why are you sleeping in here?”

“I... don’t have my own room, actually. There was no room in the small barracks for me. Captain Armor and Princess Cadance have the other room.” He attempted to give me puppy-dog eyes.

“I hope you don’t mind sleeping in the hall, then.” His puppy-dog eyes intensified. I sighed. “Two rules: This is my bed. If I catch you sleeping next to me, I’m castrating you. And when I go to sleep, you can shut the fuck up. You can accomplish that by being somewhere else or by sleeping yourself. Oh, and another rule: If you find a chick you want to fuck, feel free to bring her here and use the bed as long as you warn me and change the sheets.”

“I prefer stallions. But yes sir.”

“Then if you fuck in my bed, you definitely better change the damn sheets. Just leave a sock on the door knob or something if you have a guy in here.”

“What’s a sock?”

I pulled one of mine off. “This. Just grab one from my bag or something.” I began taking my armor off. “As far as I know, we’re done with the king for the night. Feel free to go find food or whatever.”

“We were all given food. The servants came by and gave us stuff.”

“Then find something to amuse yourself with. Make a bed or something on the floor. I have things to write.”

I opened my smaller bag and set up shop at the desk. I was about to start writing when he said, “Where can I get some blankets?”

Without turning I said, “Fuck if I know. Good luck with that.”

“You know, if I get cold, I might just have to cuddle up with you. Those wings sure do look warm...”

“That would be breaking rule one and would end with you castrated. In case you don’t know what that means, I would cut your testicles off.”

That shut him right up. For all of five minutes, at least. “What if I said please?”

“Then I would say no. Don’t you have anything better to do than bother me?”

“Such as?”

“Playing cards with the other guards. Reading. Guarding. Lighting babies on fire. I’m sure you can think of something.”

He was about to answer when we heard a sound of someone tinkering with the door lock. I reached across to my crossbow and loaded it, standing up and facing the door. I pulled my axe from where I had it rested and leaned it against the desk, ready to be pulled up after I shot the bolt. I pointed Smiles to stand next to the door, ready to attack anyone that managed to get past my bolt.

We stood like that for a minute before we heard an exasperated noise, followed by a loud

slam against the door. “That sounded like hooves,” my guard said.

“It was hooves,” I confirmed. “I pissed Shiny and Cadance off something fierce. But I have a key that can lock a door closed until the original key or my key is used on it. That door is staying shut unless they track down the key master or I decide to open it. Honestly, I’m surprised they waited this long.”

There was a gentle knock on the door. I thought for a moment. *I can’t keep this up forever.* I tossed Smiles my key. “Open it.” I had my ring on and my crossbow primed, so I was safe anyway. Him? Not so much.

He complied, pulling the door open. “What is your business?” he asked.

“Move aside, guard,” I heard Shining Armor command. “We’re here for Navarone.”

“Let them in, Smiles,” I said. “No reason to keep my guests in the hall.”

He stood aside, allowing entrance for Shiny, three guards, and Cadance.

“Guards? If I didn’t know any better, I would think you were here to arrest me.”

“You have proven yourself unreliable, Navarone. I can’t arrest you—nor do you deserve it—but I am not certain it would be smart to leave you alone with my wife.”

“Yes, mares seem to quite enjoy me. I understand your fears, but you needn’t worry; I don’t chase taken women.”

“How does Princess Celestia stand you?” he groaned.

“Because I’m quite nice to those that don’t annoy me. Or maybe I’m just an acquired taste, in a way. I’ve asked myself the same thing, honestly. If we weren’t friends, I think there’s a good chance I would have ended up jailed. Now, what did you want?”

“If you put your weapons away, we can send the guards away and get to the crux.”

I set my crossbow on my desk and sat. “By all means, send your men away. I have no desire to hurt anyone that doesn’t deserve it. At least, not physically. You really should listen to your wife more.” Cadance smiled a bit at that.

Shining Armor nodded to his guards. They left the room. “You too, night guard,” he said when he noticed my guard stayed.

“Don’t move, Smiles. He’s mine, not yours, and he stays.”

“You don’t trust us?” Cadance asked.

“No farther than I can throw you, and I can’t pick an adult pony up. I’d prefer an assurance, and he was ordered by Luna to guard me.”

“Fine,” Shiny said. “He can stay. It isn’t worth debating. Did you know the king was going to react like that?”

“In hindsight, I can say that I suspected he would. The griffins have always been more down-to-earth. Beforehand, though? I thought I was about to get murdered. That was a complete cluster fuck on my part that only got resolved positively through sheer luck. But then, that’s pretty much how all of my everything gets resolved, so no complaints.”

“All of your... everything?”

“Yes, that’s what I said. Is that all you wanted?”

It wasn't, of course. "So you're saying you insulted the *king* offhand, with no regard to the consequences?"

"Yes, that is exactly what I said." Cadance, Shining Armor, and even Sunshine Smiles face-hoofed at that. "At least I didn't punch him in the face! Just be thankful he didn't ask what a pecker was..."

"And what, Navarone, is a pecker?" Cadance wearily asked.

"It's another word for penis." Shining Armor and Cadance both blushed. Smiles looked slightly interested. "It's also a euphemism for beak. So pecker face would have a dual meaning, in that he has a beak on his face and that he has a penis on his face. Like I said, it's a good thing he didn't ask."

"Are all human insults this... colorful?" Shiny asked.

"No. We have a few imaginative ones. And making your own isn't that hard. Like... Thundercunt McAssFace." The guard choked, laughing so hard.

"I don't know what some of those words mean," Cadance slowly said. "And I don't want to. We're getting off track, Shiny..."

"Yes, we are. What you did today was highly irresponsible, Navarone. Disregarding the fact that it worked better than anything we had planned, it is still inexcusable. What do you have to say for yourself?"

"Nothing. You're right. I screwed the pooch on this one." I shrugged. "I already knew that. I won't say that it won't happen again, because I know me. There's a very real chance it will happen again."

"You just don't learn from your mistakes, do you?"

"Oh, I do. I just don't learn the correct lessons. You see, my 'mistake' here built an instant rapport with the king. I impressed him more with a single statement than I would have my entire time if I hadn't said it. The lesson I come up with is that trusting my instincts is usually a good idea, even if they seem fucktarded at the time."

"That's going to get you killed one day, Nav," Shiny said.

I shrugged. "I'm not going to live forever anyway."

"It'll break Luna's heart," Cadance said.

"...Yeah. It would, wouldn't it?" I sighed. "I was avoiding it for so long... It's a lot easier to do stupid things when you're the only one that has to suffer. But with Taya and Luna... It's a shame I can't change. C'est la vie." I grinned at their expressions. "I had you two going, didn't I? Hah! Yeah, I know it'll fuck them both up if I die, but they'd get over it. You can call me selfish and it wouldn't be a lie. You can call it senseless, but then, what fun is there in making sense? What you—and everyone else—seem to forget is that I'm not a pony. I'm not the same as you. Similar, yes. But never the same. You guys need anything else?" I'm such a dick. And what Cadance said was right. I really didn't want to hurt either Luna or Taya. I never wanted to at all. I would probably work on being more cautious, but I wasn't about to tell them that.

They shared a pained glance. "Just one more thing, since you're going to be like this,"

Shiny said. "Be careful with the king, Navarone. I know he is allowing you—for some reason—to speak freely, but know that some things don't need to be discussed. And besides, I've heard some dark rumors..."

"I'm not an idiot," I answered. "I may be a lot of things, but that's not one of them."

"I hope not. Good night." With that, they both left. Smiles closed the door behind them.

I sat, unloading and decocking my crossbow. I set it against my desk as I began to write. "Uh, sir?"

"Stop calling me sir. And yes?"

"Did you mean all that?"

"Yes."

"That's cold... sir."

"You are sleeping in my room on sufferance. Don't make me kick your ass to the hall." He sighed. "Now go find some more blankets or something. From the feel of things, there is no central heating in this building. You are going to get cold tonight, with that meager pallet."

He exited the room. I went back to writing. Not five minutes later, he came back empty-hooved. "We aren't allowed to leave the embassy wing tonight, for some reason," he told me. "I was told to return to my room by one of the guards. No pony else had any blankets to spare."

"Well, have fun with that." I didn't look up. I knew what he was going to say next.

"Just for tonight? Please?"

"If you stop calling me sir, fine. But if I catch you calling me that again after tonight, I'm going to come up with a really embarrassing pet name for you and I'll make sure it gets put on the official roster back home."

"That's cruel and unusual!"

"I'm a cruel and unusual person. Do we have a deal?"

He sighed again. "Fine."

"That also goes for calling me anything other than Navarone or Nav." He grumbled at that, but I wasn't listening. I was trying to remember how a certain chapter went and it was giving me all manner of trouble. After way too long of staring at it, I looked up. "So what do guards think about when they're just standing there, guarding something?"

"The same things you think about when you zone out."

"I doubt it. When I zone out, my mind is gone. I stop thinking entirely and turn to my senses."

"Oh. Then we think about our life. What we'll do when we get off duty. What we'll do when we retire. What we've done in the past." He shrugged. "We just think."

"That sucks. I'm glad I'm not a guard. So how did you get signed on with Luna?"

"Celestia offered some of her guards a choice. We could swap our colors or we could stay under her fold. She had profiles on all of those she asked, knowing beforehoof that we would all say yes. We all did it for a number of reasons. Some didn't like the day hours. Some were

already working night hours anyway and decided not to change. Some liked the idea of a small pay increase. Some wanted to do it for the looks. Some wanted to meet the night princess, to see what kind of pony Celestia would willingly forgive for doing such a heinous act. Some just wanted a change in their life. Me? I just loved the irony.”

“Her profiles must be rather in depth if she knew you would agree to it because of irony.”

“She knows almost everything about everypony under her command. I wager she knows quite a bit more about you than she lets on, too.”

“Oh I’m sure she does. But I know she doesn’t know everything.”

He gave me an unsettling smile. “You’d be surprised.”

“No, I wouldn’t. If she knew everything, I would be in prison—if I was lucky. It’s more likely that she would kill me.” I tell her a lot, I’ll admit. But she doesn’t know everything.

“If you say so. When do you usually go to bed? I’m really tired.”

“Is it even dark out?” He shrugged. “I hate not having windows. But I suppose it’s a good thing, here. I’m stuck on this chapter anyway.” I stood, popping my back; being forced to lean over because of my wings is a pain. I grabbed my toothbrush and went to the bathroom. *At least they have running water. Somehow.*

I finished up and went back into the room to find Smiles reading my notes. There was nothing sensitive there, so I didn’t really care. He looked up as I sat on the bed. “You’re the writer of the books from another world?” *I bet you can count on one hoof the number of people here from another world, dumbass.*

“So that’s what they’re calling them now? Yeah, that’s me. Well, not the writer, just the translator. That’s how I’ve pushed so many out so quickly. It’s a shame I don’t have the originals; I have to make do with what I can remember, and that isn’t always everything. Still, it’s better than the crap books you had before I got here.”

“I went with Princess Luna to a showing of *Hamlet*. She cried her eyes out at the end. A lot of ponies did.”

“That’s the point. We got so inured to such tragedies in our daily life that we have to make such things theatrical to drive the pain home. It’s a shame Celestia forbade me from bringing more tragedies over, but I think the few I brought were more than enough to encourage other play-writes to bring some up.”

“Why not write happy stories, to help you forget?”

“Because life isn’t always happy. The book you’re poking through right now is called *Braveheart*. If his wife hadn’t died, the man would have no reason to do what he did. Sure, the English were unjust, but it wasn’t personal until then. In the end, the man dies. He dies horribly, having failed. The only victory he has is that he gets the queen of England pregnant. But that book will probably never get printed, because Celestia will want to read through it first.”

He looked down at the notes before shuffling them together. “I guess I have no reason to read it, now.”

“It isn’t about the end, Smiles, nor is it about the beginning. The only thing that matters is

how you get there.”

“If you say so. Are you ready for bed?”

I looked over at the door. “Did you lock that?” He nodded. “Then yes.”

“I uh... I have two things to say first, though. I’m a pretty deep sleeper. And uh... I’m kinda hoovesy.”

“That’s a bad combination. You stay on your side of the bed and I stay on mine.”

“Um. Have you... have you *looked* at the bed?”

I looked at the bed. “Son of a bitch.” It was a double. I sighed. “It’s just one night.”

At least I’m wearing clothes. I lied down as far to one side as I could without being in danger of falling off and pulled the blanket over me. Smiles wasted no time getting in either.

“Um.”

“I can’t control them, Smiles. They don’t tuck in well against my body. Just ignore them.” *Fucking wings.* “Besides, I thought you wanted to play with them earlier.” He hmm’d. “Don’t play with my wings.” He sighed.

Before too long, I heard his breathing slow down. Not too long after that, I felt the bed shift. I felt a hoof slowly trail down my wing. *This isn’t going to end well.* I jerked the wing up, out of his reach. He murmured something and shifted again.

Everything was going okay until I managed to fall asleep. I wasn’t out for five minutes before I felt myself rather rudely jerked backwards, even though I fell asleep on my stomach. I was apparently now on my side, and being spooned by a large bat-pony. *At least he doesn’t have a boner. Ponies don’t get morning wood, right?*

...Right?

OH GOD PONIES GET MORNING WOOD!

I tried pushing myself out of bed to find that I was completely trapped. His forelegs had my upper body trapped and his... *oh God...* had my lower body trapped. *There’s no way it should be that big! What is this guy, a hor—Oh yeah.*

I jabbed my elbow backwards into his ribs. He grunted and shifted, grinding against me. I looked down but couldn’t see much because of the lack of light. *How did he get that between my legs? What the fuck is wrong with this world?*

“WAKE UP, SMILES!” I punctuated that with a backwards head butt into what I was hoping his snout.

“Hmm, feisty today, Flare Runner,” he sleepily sighed. I felt a hoof start to descend from its iron lock around my chest. “I know what’ll make you go back to sleep.”

It’s times like these that I’m glad I sleep with a belt. “I’m not your boyfriend, Smiles,” I said in a voice that was bordering on panic.

“What he doesn’t know can’t hurt him,” he whispered.

“Alright, fuck this.” I clenched my legs together, tightening around his... ugh. I jerked them sideways, bending it unnaturally.

The forelegs around me squeezed tight and Smiles jolted awake with a cry of pain. I found myself flying across the room, colliding face first with the wall. I was out like a light.

I woke up to being shaken by a terrified Sunshine Smiles. “Oh Luna, please wake up, please wake up, assaulting an officer is bad enough, but killing one? Oh Luna...”

I groaned, feeling my face explode in pain. I pushed myself to a sitting position as Smiles let off a small cheer. I felt blood dripping down from my nose and saw a small puddle of it on the floor where I had been laying. “Get me some tissues,” I groaned.

He ran to the bathroom and came back with a towel. “I’m so sorry, sir! Please don’t castrate me!”

I took the towel. “You just earned yourself a ridiculous pet name. I’ll figure something out.”

I had time to see a massive smile on his face before being hugged. I noticed he was still having morning problems.

“Get away from me, dammit! That hurts!” He immediately pulled away, blushing. “Go take care of your... ugh, morning problem. Stop waving it in my face.” He grinned sheepishly.

“I’m sorry, Nav. I told you I was hoovsy...”

“I don’t want to talk about it. You’re sleeping on the fucking floor from now on.” I staggered to my feet, pressing the towel to my nose. “This better not be broken. Clean up the blood, I need a shower.”

“Are you sure you should...” At my look he shut up. I shakily walked to the bathroom, still holding the towel to my nose.

“God, my head hurts... Do any of the guards know healing spells?” We had three unicorn guards with us, thankfully. Two day and one night.

“All guards get rudimentary healing training. They should be strong enough to heal it if it isn’t broken...”

“If it’s still fucked up when I get out, we’ll find out.” I closed the door and checked the mirror. *Oh yeah, that’s bad.* My shirt was covered in blood and the towel was starting to drip.

Before I could get into the shower, there was a frenzied knocking at the door. I sighed and opened it. Smiles was there with the night unicorn.

“Sweet Luna, what did you do to him, Smiles?” the unicorn asked upon seeing me.

“I fell down some stairs,” I said. “Can you fix this?”

“I can certainly try, sir.” His dark horn flashed a bit as he stepped into the bathroom. He leaned down to me and I felt some healing magic pour in. After a moment he stepped away.

“Better, sir?”

“Yeah. The pain’s gone. I guess it isn’t broken after all.”

The night unicorn stepped out of the bathroom and looked around. He saw the puddle that my guard had yet to clean. “Stairs, sir? That doesn’t look like stairs to me.”

“Maybe you should get your eyes checked, then. Or maybe my memory’s a bit fuzzy. You

get my meaning?”

He looked up at me and gave a small nod. “Yes sir, I think I do.” He smiled. “It’s good to have a commander that looks after us.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. Now go to bed, I’m sure Shiny kept you up all night guarding Miss Prissy.”

He let a laugh out before he could stop himself. “It’s Missus Prissy now, sir.” I waved him away. He left as I was closing the door to the bathroom again.

I took a quick shower to get all the blood off. Quick, because apparently the griffins haven’t figured out how to heat water up. Or maybe I just had a fucktard moment and couldn’t figure out how to turn it up. Either way, it was colder than a dad’s stare when you bring his daughter back late. I got out, shivering. Thankfully, the towels were massive, allowing to me cover my entire body.

It was at that point that I noticed I didn’t bring any spare clothes in. I dried off as best I could and wrapped the towel around me. I left the bathroom. “If that shower makes hot water, you need to show me how,” I told Smiles as I dug through my bag. I stood to find him staring at me. “What?”

“I’ve just... always wondered what you looked like without your clothes. All of us have.”

“Well, you’ve already fucking molested me on accident...” I dropped the towel. “Nothing impressive, as I’m sure you can tell.”

He looked me up and down. “Damn. Frolic owes me five bits.” He shook his head as I started to get dressed. “The showers here are odd, from what I was told. The regular showers don’t get hot water, but ours do for a short period each day—or whenever a unicorn feels like taking a shower.”

“So, do you know anything about a schedule today?”

“No pony tells me anything.”

“I know that feeling... If you’re hungry, feel free to go eat. I’ll be fine here. If anyone needs me they know where I’m at.”

“Do you know where the mess hall is?”

“There’s a mess hall? I don’t know, ask one of the other guards. I’m sure they know where to get some food.”

“I suppose I can do that now... See you when I get back, then.”

It felt good to be alone again. Especially after the traumatizing events of the morning. Seriously, never again. I sat at the table and started writing again.

Smiles came back soon enough. I asked, “Have you ever guarded an ambassador before?”

“Yes, I have. I’ve guarded Princess Celestia and Prince Blueblood as they went to various nations. I was even with the princess when she came here, once.”

“Anything fun to do in town?”

“Most griffins don’t care for ponies. It’s nothing personal, they just view us as mostly

weak. I had to hoof-wrestle a maniac to get let into their bars.”

“And you won?”

He scoffed. “Tartarus no. I just put up enough of a fight that they let me in anyway. I don’t remember most of that night, either... Too much of a local drink, I guess. Mead, I think it’s called. Don’t know what’s in it. Kinda like that stuff you gave us at Shiny’s party.”

“Hm. Is there any kind of directory here? Any way to contact old friends?” Hell, if Gilda is in town, she could get me anywhere I want to go, I bet. She seemed like a party girl.

“Not that I know of. You might be able to find out from someone in the castle, though. You’d have to ask a servant or something.”

“I might just do that. You wouldn’t happen to know a Gilda, would you?”

“That’s a relatively common name here. I know the king has a daughter named Gilda. There are several noble families that do as well. How do you know her?”

“She has a friend in Ponyville and she came by to visit one time. She was pretty cool. I wouldn’t mind seeing her again, if she’s in town. I’m sure she knows all the fun things to do here.”

“For her to be rich enough to visit Equestria, she’d have to be pretty highly ranked. But for her to be there alone, she wouldn’t be the king’s daughter.” He shrugged. “She shouldn’t be hard to find, assuming she’s here. She might well be a native Equestrian griffin. There aren’t many, but it’s possible.”

“Eh, it’s not all important. I just don’t want to be sitting here for three fucking weeks. Especially not with Cadance and Shiny pissed at me.”

“Well, if you weren’t acting like you are...”

“Yeah, yeah. I wasn’t planning on spending too much time in this place anyway. Having them pissed is just a nice bonus. If they don’t need me, you want to explore the town?”

“Not much is going to be happening at this hour, but it shouldn’t be that hard to find places that’ll be full come night fall.”

“Oh. Oh no. I don’t need to be at any places come night fall. At least, not without a princess watching my back. The last time I went into a club without Luna, I got slipped a Mickey. I woke up in a pile of ponies with a very sticky and sore body.”

“Huh. Did you report that to the guard?”

“Nah. No harm done. I can’t get ponies preggers and I can’t get pony diseases.”

“Well, if you’re really worried, I’m guarding you for a reason. I won’t let anypony hurt you.”

I was somewhat worried about how he was planning on ‘guarding’ me. Especially given he would be guarding against griffins. He’d probably kiss me or something and say that I was his.

...Okay, that’s mean. I know what he did that morning was an accident. “I’ll think about it. My biology might not allow it anyway. I assume they accept bits here?”

“They do. It didn’t take them long to be converted to the Equestrian bit. It’s a lot more

stable than what they had before.”

“Good, then I’m rich here, too. Here’s hoping they don’t need me for much this week.” I went back to writing.

Of course, my life never gets to be that quiet. Not long after, there came a knocking at my door. *Maybe they have the wrong door?* Smiles opened it. “What is your business?”

“The king summons Sir Navarone. He will come with me.”

I stood and slipped the axe belt around my back. “Don’t worry about your armor, Smiles. You’ll be fine without it. Come on.”

“You are to come alone, he said,” the griffon responded.

“He can wait outside wherever we meet. But he will be coming with me. That is the desire of my liege lady, and I shan’t disappoint her.”

“You can discuss that with the king if you desire. You will meet him alone, though. I care not if your pet follows.”

“Then lead the way.” He did just that. I paused just long enough to lock the door behind us.

“There are no thieves in this castle,” the griffin said.

“Okay.” There is no more infuriating answer than that.

“Why did you lock your door?”

“Habit.”

“It is a habit you should break.”

“Comments like that are why I lock my door. That sounded entirely too ominous for my liking.”

“Are you insinuating that I am a thief?” His tone was sharp.

“Not you personally. I’m not even saying you know anything about it. But I wouldn’t be surprised to have that crossbow of mine disappear the first time I leave my door open. Tech like that—even tech as far behind as a crossbow—are marvels to a race with no natural ranged attacks and the inability to use bows. I don’t think it’ll happen just yet, but I believe the king will eventually ask me how to make it and if I don’t tell him the crossbow will disappear.”

“So you are calling my *king* a thief!”

“No. It wouldn’t be his hand—or talon—that did the taking. Anyway, do you know any griffins named Gilda that spent a lot of time in Equestria lately?”

He was shaking in rage at the moment, actually. I think it was only the fact that I was an ambassador that stopped him from attacking me. He didn’t answer my Gilda inquiry, just stalked through the palace with Smiles and I close behind. Smiles gave me a bit of a disapproving look, but he didn’t say anything. *I really should start being more diplomatic. Griffins are too arrogant to let me get away with this forever.*

The griffin finally stopped in front of a door. He seemed to calm himself for a moment before saying, “This is where he wanted to meet you. Leave your servant outside.”

“Don’t wander far, Smiles,” I told him. “I can just go in?” The servant nodded. I

shrugged and pushed the door open. I stepped inside and surveyed the scene in front of me. The king was at a desk on the far side of the room, his back to me. There was no one else there. The room itself was relatively bare. A few couches, a fireplace, a single bookshelf, the king's desk, and a window. There were no tapestries and no rugs. It was cold. "There are many that would question the sanity of a ruler that sits with his back to a door in a room with no guards," I said aloud, closing the door behind me.

"I would question the courage of one that wouldn't be willing to," he said without turning.

"There's a difference between being brave and being stupid, your highness. Your kingdom needs a living king more than they need a brave one."

He sighed, turning to face me. "Where were you fifty years ago?" He stood and began to pace. "So much could have been prevented if we had a foreign mind helping us think. It wouldn't even have to be a smart one! We just needed a different perspective! We needed a voice to tell me when I was making a stupid mistake. We needed someone that had no fear of me or my power. I had brown-beakers aplenty, but so few that were willing to tell me what I needed to do... and fewer still that I allowed to live. We avoided war with the ponies a few years ago by a feather's width. A firebrand noble's daughter was insulted and snubbed in a small town in Equestria. He used that as a kickoff point for massive political turmoil, all aimed at a war against Equestria. And all because one rich snob got her feathers tweaked." He guffawed. "She disappeared for nearly a year after that! The only reason the war didn't kick off from that alone was because when she came back she was completely changed. Apparently she was injured by a freak wind gust and had to spend a long time recovering in a small pony hamlet. They treated her with kindness despite her rash attitude and she slowly grew tolerable, or something silly like that." He waved a claw. "Either way, I was willing to listen to that idiot. I need a voice of reason in my court."

"Well, good luck with that. I'm stuck in Equestria."

"I know *you* are. But surely you aren't the only human. There are more where you come from, yes?"

"Yeah, seven billion more." He jerked to a stop, staring at me. "But I wouldn't bring a single one here for any reason. My life was ruined when I got dragged here. My family, gone. Friends, gone. I lost contact with my entire race and was thrust into a world that I have no chance of fully integrating with. I'm stuck here and I wouldn't wish this fate on anyone else."

"I see." He continued pacing. "The point remains that I need a voice of reason, one that doesn't fear me. One willing to tell me what I'm doing wrong and to tell me when I'm being stupid."

"Hire a mercenary from Egypt. The cat people there are as sly as I am, though perhaps not as militarily minded. I don't think the naga would like living up here in this cold, but if you could get one of them, that would be great. Most of the dogs aren't that bright, but if you could get one of the smarter ones, that would be good. I don't suggest a pony; most of them would be

intimidated, and very few are good with tactics at all. Or you could try to find a dragon. Princess Luna has one as a good friend, so I know it's possible."

"A dragon would be... useful. I will have to look into that. Naga don't like the cold, as you said. The dogs are our friends... I will ask if they can lend me an advisor. And I have always wanted to meet one of the cats. I might look into that as well. But I did not bring you here for this. Sit, sit. Let us talk."

"Before we begin, can I bring my guard in here? I would hate to have him chilling in the hall for however long we're in here."

"You don't need to be worried about this old bird, Navarone. I won't attack you."

"I know, but if I'm sitting on a comfortable couch, it only seems fair that he gets to as well. I don't think we'll be talking about state secrets."

He shrugged. "Fair enough. If either of you tries anything, you won't make it out of this country alive."

"Nah, if I wanted to kill you I would have done it last night by poisoning you. Your mug was wide open the entire time." He blinked but didn't say anything as I went to call Smiles in. He entered and bowed slightly to the king. "Have a seat anywhere. We were just about to get started and I didn't want to leave you in the hall."

"I have never seen a pony like this one before," the king said, looking at my guard. "Where do you come from?"

"Equestria, sir. I am one of Princess Luna's guards. She uses magic to modify our appearances to fit in better with the night. Sir Navarone had similar modifications, but had them removed."

"I see. Sit, both of you, and let's talk."

And that's just what we did. He was interested in all sorts of things. He kept us talking until lunch and we continued the conversation on the way there and while he and Smiles were eating. He finally shut up after we finished.

When he finally told us we were free to go, I said, "When we first started talking, you mentioned a griffin that had been in Equestria. I met her there, and was wondering if she's in town. Do you know?"

"I don't, but I'll have someone find out for you. If she is and wants to see you, she'll stop by. If not..." He shrugged. "A phrase you used, c'est la vie."

"Yep. See you later, Bloodbeak." It was hard to think of him as a rapist when he was so nice to me. For the king of the griffins—the second most arrogant race I've found here—he was pretty cool.

Of course, Shining Armor wanted to know where I was all day. He didn't seem that upset when I told him, thankfully. Though honestly I don't think I would have cared if he was.

Thankfully, I was left to my own devices for the next several days. I apparently pissed Shiny off enough to remove me from the guard roster, so I didn't have to take a turn 'guarding' Cadance when she went to see the king or another dignitary or anything like that. For a week, I

just lounged around. I passed the time by writing, playing card games with the guards, teaching griffins how to play card games, and occasionally exploring the castle. The king also summoned me a few times for more chats. It was nice.

By the first week, though, I was tired of lounging about in the castle. I still saw and heard no sign of Gilda, so I assumed she was either out of town or didn't want to hang out. This place wasn't like Egypt; I didn't have to worry about a pickpocket or worse coming after me. I also had no chance of blending in with the crowd, so I suppose there would be less of a chance of it anyway.

So Smiles and I spent a week exploring the town. We both got plenty of stares and even more questions—griffins were bold and upfront, after all. I stayed away from the booze and the parties, though I don't think a griffin would want to take advantage of me like that. I was also able to find the recipe for mead; it was pretty simple, once I offered up the recipe for applejack. A little variety in life is never bad, after all. A whole week was spent exploring the town, away from the castle as much as possible. Shining Armor and Cadance didn't much like it, but then, I don't think I could have won their approval at that point no matter what I did.

Honestly, nothing important happened those two weeks. It felt great to have a bit of time to myself on official business when I didn't have to actually do anything. I finally felt that the ponies could handle their own damn problems for once.

Nothing good ever lasts.

It was the start of the third week there in Gryphus. Sunshine Smiles actually found someone willing to make his night—calling me on that promise I made at the start. I wasn't expecting him to, honestly, but I guess that's what happens when someone gets too emotionally attached to those he is supposed to lead.

Anyway, I was sitting in the hall well away from my room—I sure didn't want to hear that shit—when I saw a griffin peeking its head down the hall. It was pretty late at night and by all rights I should have been asleep, so I was definitely nodding off. All I had on me was my axe—as I took it with me everywhere—my throwing knives, and my crossbow with a single bolt—I left the rest in my room and didn't bother unloading it.

Now, griffins wandering the halls weren't uncommon. After all, we were in their castle in their capital. They owned the joint, so they were free to walk its halls. Because of this, Shining Armor stopped putting up guards after the first week; it grew tiresome for every single griffin that passed through to be checked. I personally didn't think that was a wise move, but Shiny was in charge, not me. Besides, the griffins seemed pretty chill; why would they try to deep six any of us?

This griffin didn't get the memo. She noticed me nodding off, leaning haphazardly against the wall and looking quite like a puppet with its strings cut off, and did her best to quietly sidle up the hall. I noticed her and was watching her the entire way, but I didn't move; I didn't see any reason to and I figured she would be moving on.

She didn't. She also didn't seem to realize that I could see her perfectly. I mean, it was

dark in the halls and a normal pony or person wouldn't have been able to see her at all. She was making no noise, either. She got right up next to me and whispered something I couldn't hear. She slowly reached over to me and pulled a knife off my belt, whisking it out soundlessly. I didn't react, just waited to see what she would do.

She backed away from me and opened the door to Cadance's room. She entered without a sound, leaving the door open. I stood, thanking myself that I left everything that might have made noise in my room before Smiles took it over.

I was hoping to be proven wrong, but I wouldn't have put a bet on it no matter the odds.

I wasn't. The assassin was inching her way toward the bed, my knife clutched in one of her talons. I reached inside my left sleeve and withdrew a knife of my own. I wasted no time catching up to her; I didn't need to worry about being as noisy, after all.

She still didn't notice me, being completely absorbed on not making a single noise to wake the sleeping duo. I spared not a glance for them, my eyes only for the foolish little assassin before me.

I was at her side before she was halfway to the bed. In a normal, conversational tone, I said, "Drop the knife or it'll be your blood that paints the room this night."

I was pleasantly surprised to find that she did drop the knife rather quickly. I was less pleasantly surprised when she followed up by slashing me with her razor-sharp talons, opening a jagged tear along my ribs.

"Mistake," I hissed, kicking at her. She easily dodged, rushing toward the bed that contained a very rudely awoken magical couple. She was jumping at Cadance, talons outstretched, when my hand snatched her tail and yanked her back. I don't remember drawing my ax, but it was in my off hand. I barely managed to catch her talon on it as she struck at me again. She recovered before I could and swiped at me again, scoring a cut on my ax arm that completely disabled it. I dropped the ax, crying out. Shiny and Cadance were well and truly awake by now, and light flooded the room. The assassin, to her credit, did not flinch at the sudden light. I didn't either, my mind too far gone in shock.

She jerked away from me and back to Cadance, who had time to look on in horror as the griffin jumped at her again, once more to be caught by my good arm as I ripped her back so hard she actually collided into me. "I'm not finished with you, bitch!" I let her tail go and punched her in her very surprised face, cracking her beak.

She reared back, dazed from the blow. I had enough time to grab my axe, sticky with amber blood, before she recovered. "You made the mistake of taking out my wrong arm, you crazy cunt," I wheezed as we circled each other, watching for weaknesses. It was rather obvious where mine was.

She wasted little time in going for it, too; she fainted right, towards the hand with the axe, but clawed at my left side, further tearing open the wound on my ribs. The axe fell again and she turned back to Cadance, who was now doing her best to get over the panic to actually cast a spell.

Shining Armor jumped in front of her, standing between Cadance and the assassin. The assassin grinned, finding a new opponent. She pounced...

Just in time to catch a crossbow bolt in the back of her skull.

I dropped the crossbow from my right hand—the side of my body that had taken no punishment, miraculously. “Fuck. Assassins,” I managed before I collapsed. Thanks to the curse that Luna and Celestia gave me I wasn’t in an incredible amount of pain, but all the rips still stung and I had lost a lot of amber blood.

It’s funny. The first thing that came to my mind was the song “Amber” from back home. My real home, not Ponyville.

It didn’t stay funny for long. I picked myself off the bed I was laid upon and reached across to the basin of water left there. I could tell I had a bit of stubble and my face felt pretty nasty, so I knew I had been out at least all night, probably longer. I washed my face with the water there and stood, stretching. I could work my arm again, which was nice. I hadn’t been changed out of my clothes, so there were massive tears and a dark stain on it. It was a black shirt, though, so the stain was hardly noticeable.

I saw my axe leaning against a nightstand. I grabbed it and slid it into the loop on my back.

Then I thought for a moment and removed it. I pulled open the bag of my armor and started putting that on first. I was putting on my gauntlets when the door slammed open. A gauntlet promptly slammed into Shining Armor’s face. “That’ll teach you to knock,” I muttered as I buckled the axe belt over the armor.

“Good to see you’re awake,” he said when he recovered enough. “Though it’s a bit less good that you’re throwing things left and right.”

“Not left and right. Only at you. Pass me that gauntlet, would you?” He tossed it to me with magic. I slipped it on. I went over to the writing desk and grabbed my crossbow and loaded it, drawing the string back tight. I aimed down the sights to make sure it was still okay. “So when are we going to go confront the king?”

“We did, as soon as Cadance calmed down enough. You gave her quite the scare.”

“I’m sure. What happened? And where is my guard?”

“The king is not at fault. We can’t know who exactly is, since... well, the assassin is most definitely dead. You made sure of that.” I patted my crossbow with a grim smile. “It isn’t something to be happy about, Navarone. The king let us read him so we know he isn’t at fault. But we don’t know who—and probably never will, now—was.”

“Someone who would benefit from a dead king at the hands of the Equestrian Captain of the Guards. So basically, someone that would benefit from a war between Equestria and the griffons.”

His mouth tightened when I mentioned how he would have killed the king, but he didn’t dispute it. If Cadance had been assassinated in the night, Shining Armor would have went mad

and lashed out at the first target to seem responsible: The king.

“Although,” I continued, “the assassin took one of my knives in the hall. It is very possible she was trying to set me up as the fall guy. Although that would have been retarded as fuck, since you couldn’t exactly harm me and since I would allow any unicorn to read my mind to prove my innocence.” We were silent for a moment. I shrugged. “I guess we can’t know now. How’s the baby?”

“Just fine.” He seemed to slump a bit. “I don’t think she could have... Thank you, Navarone. We’ve had our differences, but... thank you.”

“So what do we do now? I assume we aren’t going to be spending much more time in Gryphus.”

He shook his head. “No, we’re going to be spending the same amount of time here. We can’t let the one who hired the assassin think we can be scared off that easily.” He gave me a dark grin. “Besides, I don’t think security will be a problem anymore. I have my shield up. No pony with any intentions to hurt somepony can get through.”

“Why didn’t we just do that in the first place? Save us all some time.”

“The shield takes a lot of energy to maintain and it shows distrust between us and the griffins. Since they haven’t exactly earned our trust this trip...” He shrugged.

“So how are we going to go about finding who called the hit on your wife?”

“We can’t. It would be impossible for us to get anywhere. We’re not in Egypt, Nav. You can’t just barhop for information.”

“That’s not how I got my info. I tortured the assassin until I learned what I needed, and then Celestia ordered him given to the king. So what is to be done now?”

“For us? Nothing. Just back to my normal schedule of guarding and your normal schedule of... whatever you’ve been doing these past weeks.”

I blinked. “You don’t need me to sniff around for info? Or try to find blackmail material for the king? Or kill someone that might or might not deserve it?”

“Uh... no?”

“Huh. That’s odd. Usually I have to do some kind of shit to fix the situation when something goes wrong.”

“Nav, you aren’t all important. You’ve been in some weird places, yeah, but there are others that can do a job like that just as well if not better than you. It’s being taken care of. Enjoy some time off.”

“Awesome. So uh... Where’s my guard, again?”

“Right outside. He hasn’t left your door since you got hurt. Though given that you only got hurt a few hours ago...” He shrugged again. “Just don’t go too far. Cadance wanted to speak to you when you woke up, but she’s off to see the king right now.”

“Did she say what she wanted?”

“No, but I think we can both make a good guess. She probably would have been dead if not for you.”

Maybe I should have given the assassin a few minutes. “I see. Send Smiles in on your way out.”

“He’s pretty distraught that he let you down, Nav.”

“I’ll talk to him.”

He nodded. “See you later, then.” With that, he walked out.

And in walked Sunshine Smiles. He wasn’t smiling now, that’s for sure. He shuffled in, staring at the floor. I crossed my arms, watching him. After a moment, I said, “Cadance would be dead if I had not been in the hall. If you hadn’t been having sex in my room, I would not have been in the hall. Don’t be ashamed.”

“You got hurt,” he sullenly replied.

“And I got better. I can heal ridiculously fast now. Most of what she did to me was more painful than damaging; she didn’t want to kill me, she wanted to disable me. I don’t blame you at all for what happened. As far as I see it, Luna doesn’t have to know this happened.”

He looked up. “She already does.”

“Welp, you’re boned. Not in the good way, either.” He gulped. “Relax, man, I’m kidding. I’ll talk to her. I’m sure she won’t freak out on you or anything.” I paused for a moment and he started to relax. “Probably.” I shrugged. “You know how women are.”

“What’s a woman?”

I fucking hate this place. “Mares. You know how mares are.”

“If you say so, Nav...” Oh yeah, I finally broke his habit of calling me sir.

I just shook my head and began to remove the armor. If Shiny gave us a shield, I wouldn’t exactly be needing it. I sighed as I returned to the desk to continue writing. I didn’t get far.

“Nav, I’ve... been meaning to ask you something.” I set the quill down and looked up. Smiles was looking at me kinda funny. “From everything I’ve heard, when you fight, you... well, you do your best to make sure the enemy goes down and stays down. But when you stop... how do you return to normal so easily?”

“I am not a pony, Sunny. My mind does not work the same way as a pony’s. We are built for fighting and for killing, in our mentality. We can tune out everything and focus on one single goal if we have to. That goal can be anything. When I get into fights, my goal is to make sure the enemy will no longer be a danger to me—ever. When the enemy is no longer a threat to me, my mind no longer needs to focus on that and I can go back to whatever I was doing. What I do might come back to me later, but at the same time, it might not. I don’t think killing this assassin will haunt my mind, since she deserved it.” I shrugged. “I fear it might just be a human thing.” Or perhaps a predator thing.

“I... see. It’s not something you can teach?”

“I don’t think so. I mean, it might be teachable, but I don’t know how. I wasn’t a soldier back in my world, I don’t know what kind of training they went through.”

“What were you?”

“A student. A nerd, in some ways. It’s interesting to see the changes, I suppose.” It was, actually. I used to be somewhat shy. Sure, I was no stranger to killing; I was a hunter, after all. But I had never taken a sapient life... Now, I just killed someone without batting an eye in the slightest. Maybe it’s not so much a human thing as it is an experience thing. Or maybe I’m just a sociopath.

Not like there’s a psychologist here that would tell me different.

“From everything I’ve heard, you’ve definitely been through a lot.”

“Yeah, I have.” I went back to writing, knowing he would want some elucidation. He was disciplined enough to not ask. Or he didn’t care. Either way.

The next interruption was a knock at the door. I turned to face that way as my guard answered it. Enter Cadance. She looked a bit happy to see me.

I sighed. “Must we continue this dance of love and hate, Cadance? Why won’t you just give in and let me wallow in my darkness?”

Her smile grew wider. “I wasn’t going to hug you, but just because of that, I will.” I wasn’t wearing my ring. I dove to where I left it, but I didn’t get halfway there before her magic gripped me. I gave off a long-suffering sigh as she dragged me over and wrapped her forelegs around me. After a moment, she levitated me back to my chair. “Now don’t you feel better?”

“I hate you so much right now it hurts,” I answered.

“I bet another hug would make you feel better!”

“I think your husband might get jealous.”

“Don’t be silly, Nav. We all know neither of us would ever consider *that*.” I shuddered at the very thought.

“Well, you’ve physically and emotionally tortured me. Is that all you needed?”

“Nope! I also wanted to thank you.”

“Well, now you have.”

She turned to Smiles. “Is he always this cranky after waking up from his wounds?” He shrugged. She turned back to me and did her best to put a serious face on. “Thank you, Navarone. I probably would have—” She held a foreleg up to her belly. “—*we* would have died, if not for you.”

“I was just doing my job, Cadance.”

“No, your job was to impress the king. You were doing something else, out in the hall. Why were you out there?”

I pointed to Smiles. “He was getting laid and I didn’t want to see that.” Her jaw dropped. “I promised him when we got here that he could use my bed, as long as he...” I looked at the bed and then back to Smiles. “You *did* change the sheets, right?” He looked down. “Oh you fucker! I swear to God, whoever you fucked better have a suction up his ass that kept all that gunk in, because if I just slept in that, I’m castrating you!” I paused for a moment, thinking back. With a shudder, I said, “Then again, it’s not like I haven’t done worse...”

Cadance looked like she was going to be sick. It was somewhat amusing, but nothing I

had never seen before. The guard looked sickeningly interested.

Before either could say anything, I giggled. “Imagine that, Cadance. You got saved because someone was having sex. Ain’t so horrid now, is it?”

She gulped and put on an uneasy grin. “Yeah,” she managed. She looked around before backing up a step. “I uh... I think I’ll see you later, Nav. Have a good time doing... whatever you’ve been doing.” With that, she was out.

“Too easy,” I sighed while shaking my head. Sunshine took a step backwards to the door. I shot my head his way. “Don’t think you’re getting off easy. Change the sheets. I should make you sleep in them, but you probably wouldn’t have a problem with that. When you’re done with that, clean my armor.” I sat back down as he sighed and began his work. I continued what I was working on.

It’s nice, knowing that the ponies—or perhaps the griffins—can occasionally be competent. Either way, I had another week off that was spent relaxing. It was nice and odd to be letting someone else do all the work for once.

“That was the most uneventful royal business I’ve ever been on,” I was saying to my guard as we boarded the airship home. “Aside from that one spurt of interest, I didn’t have to do shit!”

“You call killing somepony uneventful?” he replied. “I’ve never killed somepony that could talk back before!”

“Yeah, well, I’m not a royal guard. I specialize in killing, not guarding. That might be why.” He shivered slightly. “Don’t worry about it, Smiles. Just think: We’re going home!” I paused. “Well, *I’m* going home. I guess you’re going back to active duty. If Luna gives you grief about what happened, get word to me and I’ll do my best to bail you out.”

“I hope it doesn’t come to that. She’s usually understanding.”

“Yeah, usually. Overly so, it seems, if she still wants anything to do with me.”

“She loves you, Nav. Even if it isn’t announced, anypony that sees you and her together can tell it.”

“Yeah, but I’m not a pony. I can’t tell stuff like that.” Other humans could, of course, but not me. “I don’t know pony body language perfectly yet.”

“Well, there’s this thing mares do called winking and—”

“SHUT UP!” I shuddered at the memories. “Yes, I know about... *that*.” I don’t even want to talk about it.

“Well, that’s just the most obvious sign. There are plenty of other more subtle ones.”

“I really don’t want to talk about it. I think it’s a foregone conclusion that she likes me. The only hard part now is making it work. I believe we’ll have some time to figure it out, when we finally get together.”

“If you say so. It’ll be fun to watch, at least.”

“Well that’s comforting. At least someone will be having fun in the event of a falling

out.”

“Don’t think about it that way. Although... If you happen to pick a fight with her before the next year, I’ll be a very rich guard.”

“You’re already a rich guard! And why are you making bets for this kind of thing? What the hell, man?”

He shrugged. “The life of a guard is very boring. We have to do something to keep ourselves amused.”

“Why not make bets about Cadance instead? I mean, she’s an easy target, right?”

“For you. Most of the guards like her. And most of them definitely like Shining Armor, even if he is sometimes a bit of a—” He looked around, noticing Shiny and Cadance standing pretty close to us on the airship that began to move a few minutes ago. “Well, never mind.”

“I know that feel, bro. The princesses do their best to make my life hard, too. Although they usually do it in ways other than pointless drills and inspections.” Like libido spells or ordering me to kill people or getting me raped by Twilight.

...Wow. I just realized how blasé I got about killing people. That’s a serious problem.

Oh well.

I took my spot back at the front of the airship and watched as we left the griffin capital behind. It was a very nice break, all things considered. I bet if Celestia had been there, I totally would have been doing all kinds of work. I’m glad she wasn’t there.

Thankfully, I was left alone all the way back home. Not a word from anyone. It was... odd. And nice. Maybe Celestia sent me here with the orders that I be left alone by everyone as much as possible. That would have been nice of her, if true.

Either way, I was headed home.