Chapter One Hundred and Nine—Ice, ice, baby!

The day after we left, I woke up to a very welcome surprise: A complete lack of blood flowing from my funhole. That was good, because I was running out of towels. But it was also kinda bad, because it meant I had been stuck in the wrong body for around a week. Longer, if you count the time spent in South America.

But it at least put me in a better mood, a mood that Flo decided to ruin. "There's a small problem with going that far south," she said while I was getting ready for the day. "It will be too far for me to do anything except guard your rest."

"That certainly sucks. But I have a feeling that I'll be asleep for most of the trip, anyway. That's one reason I didn't care too much that it would take us almost two months."

"I rather doubt that will be the case," she said. "Naturally, yes. But you have magic on your side. Twilight might not allow you to sleep if she's stuck on guard duty."

"I'm not above slapping her shit. Luna kept telling me that keeping me awake with magic was a bad idea. I can only assume that there's a good reason why, a reason I don't really want to find out."

"Most of the unicorns on the ship would probably make you stay up, actually. It's only fair, after all. You signed them up for the trip. You should suffer it with them. And besides, I have a feeling Ms. Crabapple and her employees might be less than pleased if you were constantly unavailable, given that you're technically the leader of the ship."

"...And I don't really want to mess with her security detail, even if there are only three of them." One very large diamond dog, one griffin, and one minotaur that thankfully didn't recognize me as a forerunner or whatever. Each one looked like they had seen their fair share of action. None could really do much of anything to me or my crew, but still.

When I got up to the deck, Gourd called down from the helm, "We're going *around* South Equestria this time, right?"

"Fuck yes we're going around," I called back. "I'm not about to fight hordes of giant spiders while we have civilians on board." Many of which were on deck, actually, because there wasn't any room for them to sleep inside. Needless to say, they all heard that little exchange and very quickly nodded, adding their agreements.

"Just checking," Gourd said. "We should be there within four days."

"How long until it starts getting cold?" I asked. "We'll need to find space somehow for some of these guys to get inside, if they have to sleep in that."

"We can use a shield to keep the worst of it out," he said. "All the wind and the snow. The cold can be staved off with blankets. I know Crabby packed plenty."

"It's Crabapple," the mare said, stepping out from the hole heading below. She was one of the only ones in the mining group that had an actual room. "My miners are being paid to deal with the cold. They will manage. What was that about spiders?"

"The big landmass south of Equestria," I said. "It's mostly covered in an extremely

hostile race of giant spiders. We actually have a less hostile one on board, but I told him to stay out of sight as much as possible so your miners wouldn't freak out."

"You should have informed me of this, Navarone," she coldly said.

"Spider is a member of my crew. His presence here is non-negotiable. And he's a child, so he's mostly harmless anyway."

"...Oh. A child." *She sounds almost… disappointed?* "Very well, then. He shall not be a concern. And you said that the others are hostile?"

"Extremely."

"Then I suppose a visit would be ill-advised. I doubt there is much to mine there anyway."

"Silk. Someone on my crew makes clothing and she made a small fortune off selling the stuff she made from the silk we gathered. If you could get a few spiders to constantly make silk for you, there's no telling how much you could make. It would be hard to feed them and keep your secret hidden, though."

"...Interesting. How much would you charge for going back and capturing some of them for us?"

"There isn't enough gold in the world. Besides, I left on… decent relations with them. I'm not about to ruin that by attacking them."

"Very well. I'm sure I can find somepony that would be interested in it."

"Their funeral," I answered with a shrug. "When we get to Antarctica, how long will it take for your crew to set up so we can get to where we need to dig?"

"A week at most. It is hard to know for sure, with the conditions down there. You will, of course, leave most of your crew behind, to protect us."

"Right. We only need so many people blasting rocks to get us to our goal."

"Which is what, exactly? If we are going to be partners, I would like to know what my partner is looking for."

"Fair enough. Come with me." She didn't comment as I led her back into the ship, and then to my room. Unfortunately, I didn't have anywhere else to keep Ice since the cargo hold was now open to the miners. So he was just chilling in my room.

Get it? Chilling? Because his name is—Yeah, fuck you, too.

Crabby didn't even notice him when she walked in. Probably because he was completely silent and it was dark. "So why did you need privacy?" she asked.

"Meet Ice," I said, pointing to him. As soon as I said his name, he lit up slightly, going into a more active state.

"Hello, Miss Crabapple," he said, bowing slightly.

She stared at him, the first expression other than boredom or disdain on her face that I had ever seen: Surprise or wonder. "What… are you?"

"What he is isn't important," I said. "What *is* important is that there are two more like him trapped under the ice. We're going to get them. That is why we needed your company."

"And what exactly does he… do?" she asked.

"He's a helper," I said. "Long story short, they can do a lot of things. And they happen to be useful to me, so I'm going to get them. If it makes you feel any better, Celestia herself knows I'm doing this."

"Yes, I've read about you in the papers. Sir Navarone, defender of harmony and several other titles. I suppose they give the 'sir' title even to female knights. I was wondering why you turned mercenary."

"I imagine several people are. Is your professional curiosity sated?"

"Yes, now that I know you won't be competing against us in the mining scene. I take it you want this kept quiet?"

"You take it correctly," I said, nodding. "Though that means poor Ice here is gonna be stuck in my cabin instead of actually being able to help around the ship."

"Why does it matter if anyone knows about me?" he asked. "You told Spider that as long as he was careful, he could move around on the ship."

"All of my miners have non-disclosure agreements," Crabby said. "It would be a simple thing to just tell them not to say a word."

"...Wish I had known that. I wouldn't have had you watching me sleep last night. Ice, you're free to do whatever. Just, you know, remember where we're going and how cold it is."

"I understand," he said, nodding and turning slightly pink. "It will be nice to make some friends…"

"No it won't," Crabby said. "Is there anything else you need to show me, Navarone? Or tell me about? Perhaps some magical automaton that's liable to go crazy?"

"No, Jak isn't finished with that yet. He's working on it, though, don't you worry."

She pursed her lips before saying, "It's a shame we need this ship. I'm going to go find this spider. I'd rather know what it looks like before it runs into my miners."

"Have fun with that," I told her, nodding.

"Unlikely. I despise children." She walked off, heading down the hall.

"She isn't very nice," Ice said.

"Just needs to get laid," I replied with a shrug. "Well, feel free to mingle, then. I don't suggest getting too close to the miners, because we're not taking any of them with us when we leave."

"Hmmm… I think I'm going to get to know Miss Crabapple!"

"Good luck with that. She seems like the type to get very angry at people that bother her over trivial things like friendship."

"But doesn't everyone need friends?" he asked, honestly seeming confused.

"...You've been talking to Twilight too much."

"Well, you *did* tell me to ask her about friendship."

Oh boy. "Like I said, good luck. I'm washing my hands of it."

"Do you need some water?" he asked. "I have plenty you could use. Though they don't

look dirty…"

"Wow. You are out there, man. Go make friends."

"...You know, *we* could become better friends. I-if you want, that is."

Ugh. "I know someone you'll get along with perfectly, actually. Let's go find her."

"Okay!"

Flo, are there other elementals like this? I mentally asked as I led the way out into the hall.

"He's young… comparatively speaking. And without knowing for sure, I'd say that Naiad and Mist kept him very sheltered. Male water elementals are rare, after all."

Why would being male matter? You can't tell me that you guys reproduce with something as mundane as sex.

"Rare things are usually protected. And male company is always welcome, with or without the possibility of reproduction. Our hosts are usually of the opposite gender."

"So who are we going to meet?" Ice asked.

I knocked on Fluttershy's door. It opened a few seconds later, the timid buttery mare inside looking up at me in surprise. "Oh, Nav! Did you… need something?"

"Fluttershy, this is Ice. He wants to be your friend."

"Hello, Miss Fluttershy," the water fellow said, moving forward.

"Oh! Hello… Nav, have you been avoiding me?"

"Fluttershy, if I had been avoiding you, why would I come to your room right now? I would just send Ice your way. That's just silly."

"So do you want to stay and talk with me and Mr. Ice?"

"Look over there, a distraction!" I pointed behind her and didn't even look to see if she fell for it before running away back to my room. When I got there, I firmly pushed the door shut and locked it.

"That was rather rude," Rarity said.

I jumped and turned around, seeing her in my room. "How did you—I *just* left!"

"Then I suppose I just missed you. I was just going to ask about clothing and blankets for our trip south."

"Well, ask away."

"It was mostly concerning the miners. Despite our destination, it seems that many of them don't have proper coverings. I was wondering if I should make warmer clothing for them with the silk that I have."

"Ask first. Like, ask them first. Or ask Crabby. I'm okay with you doing it, as long as you focus on my crew and the soldiers first. After all, we're the ones protecting them. They have unicorns to put up a field base as soon as we get there, but if there's any fighting, we'll be doing it, probably outside."

"That's certainly understandable. I'll have to recruit Fluttershy to help me get them out in time, though."

"Well, you knew we were gonna be headed south soon…"

"Actually, I *didn't*. You have made it a point not to tell anypony anything, Navarone. You are unhealthily keeping to yourself, wallowing in misery and self-loathing. As somepony who has been there, I know the signs."

"That's nice. I think Crabby was looking for Spider, so if you want to talk to her, look for him."

"You need an outlet, Navarone. Preferably somepony to talk to."

"I have one. She lives in my head. Why do you think I've been in here so much? I've been talking to her." *Come on, buy it…*

"He's lying," Flo said through my mouth.

"Don't listen to her!" I said. Rarity lifted an eyebrow. "Flo likes making me suffer. She'll take any chance she can get. Now…" I unlocked the door and opened it for her. "...feel free to go talk to Crabby now."

Rarity walked over and sat on my bed, staring at me. "So let's talk, then."

"Look over there, a mirror!" Once again, I was out the door before I had a chance to see if she looked. I didn't go very far, though, because Taya's room was right next door. Thankfully, she wasn't diddling herself, because I let myself in without knocking. At least this time I made sure to look around before locking the door.

"Daddy, what are you doing?" Taya yawned, just having woken up.

"Avoiding people," I answered with a shrug, walking in further so I could hug her. "And making sure my adorable, loving daughter is feeling okay."

"...What did you do?" she asked, just sitting in her bed and accepting the hug like the cuddle slut she is.

"Nothing, nothing." Rarity started knocking on the door, then. "Just ignore that."

She sighed, slowly face-hooving. "I know you're in there, Nav!" Rarity called through the door.

"She doesn't actually know that," I whispered.

"Daddy, you can't use me to hide from everything."

"Sure I can! Or at least, the things like this that I want to hide from."

"If you don't go out there and talk to her, I'm going to start calling you mommy."

I flinched, instinctively hugging her tighter. "C-come on, Taya. Don't joke about that! We can talk about this…"

"I'm not joking about anything, *mommy.*"

"Surely there's something else you want. It doesn't have to be like this!"

"She's going to get bored soon and leave, mommy. And then… Well, I think you know what'll happen."

"Oh come on. There has to be some kinda price. Just name it!"

"...Anything?" she slowly asked.

"Within reason. You know my limits, my loving, wonderful daughter."

"Remember when you first found me, and we… slept together?"

"Yeah. How could I forget?"

"Can we go back to doing that? I… I never had bad dreams, with you right there. And since we're going further and further south, into the cold…"

"That's perfectly alright," I said, nodding. *Especially now, since I don't have to worry about morning wood.* "Just, you know, these beds are really small."

"I know, daddy," she said, finally hugging me back. "Now, shhh." She pulled away and her horn lit up. I jumped in surprise when I realized I was invisible. She hopped off the bed and walked over the door, opening it to reveal an irate Rarity. "Yes?"

"Where's your father? I know he came in here!"

Taya looked behind her, beholding an empty room. Rarity also poked her head in. "You know how he is," Taya said with a shrug. "He probably just opened and closed my door to make you think he came in here."

"...Perhaps. Well, if you see him, tell him that his friends very much want to speak with him. He has been avoiding the subject for far too long."

"It isn't the human way to talk about things like that," Taya said, shrugging. "What is there to say, after all?"

Rarity sighed and gently brushed her hoof down Taya's hair. "You really don't spend enough time around ponies, dear. I know Nav is your father, but you should spend more time with your own species."

Taya pulled away, used magic to push Rarity away, slammed the door, and then locked it. She turned back to me and made me visible again. "Problem solved," she said.

"Yep. When did you learn that invisibility spell?"

"Twilight taught it to me when we all pooled our magic together to cover the ship when we went to scare the spiders. It's really hard and I can only hold it for a minute or two on my own, though."

"Just need more practice with it, I guess. It's definitely a useful spell. Anyway, Rarity's probably fucked off by now, so I'll let you take a shower."

"Daddy, are you saying that I stink?"

"I'm saying that you need a shower. It's good to take one when you first get up. Helps you keep your eyes open. And also, yes, you stink. See you later, dear."

When I hopped up to head to the door, she hugged me. "It's not that bad, is it?" she asked.

"I love you, stinky or not," I said, patting her on the head with one hand while using the other to hold my nose shut. "But if it's all the same, I'd prefer you clean. So yeah, have fun."

She sighed as I walked on out. Truth be told, she really didn't stink. I'm just a bad person that wanted to be alone. But, you know, she also needed a shower. Unfortunately, I didn't get my desire, given that Smiles was in my room when I got there.

"Seriously? *Again*? I swear, I need to put a fucking sign on my door that says *do not*

enter. I was gone for less than five minutes!"

"Well sor*ry*," he said. "I was just gonna tell you that your armor is ready. You need to come try it on."

"Well, that's a plus," I sighed. "At least you aren't here to bother me, like Rarity was."

"I could if you wanted, sir."

"Shut up, Smiles," I said, walking back out. He followed me as we went to the smithing room. "If I get there and the armor is pink, I'm castrating you."

"I know."

"And if it accentuates my chesticals, I'm giving you to Rarity and letting her play with you."

"...Chesticals?"

"Boobs. Breasts. Tits. Mammary glands. These things on my chest, Smiles."

"Oh, those. Speaking of which, what do they even feel like?"

"Like a fist to the face," I said. "Wanna try?"

"...No sir."

"You sure? I'm having a special today. Touch both and you'll get a kidney punch to go along with your face punch!"

"...I'm not interested, sir."

"Good. You'd still fuck me in the ass though, right?"

He sighed and said, "Nav, I'm sorry for harassing you like I did. I know it was wrong. That's why I stopped. You don't have to get revenge…"

"I know, but it's funny. And now *you* get to feel awkwardly uncomfortable. Everybody wins!"

He sighed, but said, "To answer your question, yes."

"Which question?"

"Yes, I would still fuck you in the ass. But only from behind, so I don't have to remember you're a girl."

"Oooh, kinky!" Thankfully, we got to the armory, so I didn't have to continue that awkward conversation. And my armor was sitting on a table, so I started putting it on immediately. "Any modifications that I should know about?" I asked.

"Just size, sir."

"Good." I went silent as I continued putting it on until I was finally done. "Yep, fits like it should," I said, nodding. "How's Jak's project doing?"

"He moved it onto the deck last night," Smiles answered. "I warned him it was gonna get cold, but that didn't stop him."

How did I miss that earlier? "Well, that's on him. As long as he doesn't get frostbite, whatever. Did he fix up my armor, or was that you?"

"I did most of it, under his supervision. All of my practice was with pony armor, not… biped armor."

"Well, ya did good. Now, I'll let you get back to whatever you were doing."

"I wasn't doing anything."

"Then I'll let you get back to it. See you later, Smiles."

"...Yes sir." I walked off yet again, content in the knowledge that my steel armor was once again ready to be used. Even if, you know, I had a set of carbon fiber armor that was considerably stronger. It was also more giving, which led to problems.

Thankfully, my room was finally empty when I got back. I peeled the armor off and hung it back on the ceiling where it belonged, then pulled out a book. Before I could start reading it, Flo said, "Rarity was right, you know. Not about you talking, but about needing an outlet. You've been using fighting practice and sex as band-aids for a while, but with Kumani not really interested and with all the miners and their equipment on deck, there's not much you can do."

I tossed the book aside, walked up to the door, closed it, dropped my pants and panties, and walked to the bed. Then I furiously touched myself, just to prove Flo wrong. It took a while, but I've fucked enough chicks to know where their right spots were. When I was done, I cleaned myself up, put the panties back on, grabbed the book again, and settled down. I'll give the monkeys one thing: Those silk panties were freakishly comfortable against my new contours.

"You have problems," Flo said.

"And you don't?"

"Just because I might have some problems doesn't mean that I can't point out that you have some as well. Though I already know you know."

"Then why say it?"

"Because reminding myself that I'm the normal one in this relationship keeps me sane. I'm really looking forward to the day I get freed. Being able to see you again will be nice."

"Note to self: Make sure to free you last and make sure the other elementals will protect me…"

"But I thought you liked being more huggy! I just want to snuggle you, Navi."

"And you call *me* the weird one. You better be willing to put out or I'll have to limit your hugs."

"Like you could stop me. I'll team up with Taya and Twilight. We'll hold you down and hug you forever."

"Ugh. You people are weird."

"Maybe, but you love us anyway."

Feh. I finally started reading my book, happy to be left alone.

It took us exactly as long as Gourd predicted for us to get there. Thankfully, the weather was actually clear instead of extremely cloudy. If we had been dealing with both darkness and clouds, finding the spot Crabapple wanted us to annex would have been impossible. Even without cloud cover, though, it was colder than the ninth layer of hell down there. Temperatures were easily in the negative forties.

Because of that, Watcher and I ordered that everyone stay inside the ship unless they absolutely had to be on deck. The halls were cramped with all the miners in there, but at least no one would die of exposure. Unfortunately, I was stuck on deck since I was in charge. Not so unfortunately, I was standing cuddled against Kumani, who didn't seem bothered by the cold in the slightest. Hell, she was actually putting off heat.

"Nice and clear out here," she said as we flew over the icy terrain.

"Dark, though. And cold," I replied. "I can honestly say that I hope we don't have to do any fighting down here."

"Well, it's a long shot, but…" She pulled one of my naga daggers out of its sheath and used it to pierce her underbelly, where the scales were the weakest. "Try drinking some of my blood."

"What."

"Look, dragons are magic. We have some interesting properties. I know drinking dragon blood does really, really weird things to some of those that have tried it. So just… try it. It might keep you warm."

"...Okay, but I want you to know this is weird."

"Yeah, yeah." I just sighed and leaned in to her belly, taking a lick at the blood. The first sensation I felt was absolute pain, since it felt like the stuff was on fire. But I was used to that from all the time I spent eating her out, so I kept licking it up and swallowing it. Thankfully, my tongue was completely numb from the cold and then the heat, so I didn't taste it.

When it stopped bleeding, I pulled away. I actually did feel a fire in my stomach, making me wonder if I would have diarrhea for the first time in years. Instead, that warmness started spreading throughout my body, leaving a tingling sensation as it went. "It's… working," I said, my eyes widening at the feeling.

"Whoa, really? I just wanted to see if I could get you to taste my blood!"

"...Why?"

"I dunno. So you actually feel warm now?"

"Warmer, yeah. Thanks, babe. But I don't plan on making a habit of it."

"Good. That kinda hurt. Though your tongue did feel nice…"

"Let me stop you right there. I am not and will *never* be into anything involving blood."

"Just sayin'," she muttered, rubbing at the spot with one claw while the other passed me the dagger.

I licked off the small bit of blood still on the tip before sheathing it with a click. "Looks like we're slowing down," I said, looking back to the helm. "We there?" I called.

"Just about," Gourd called back. He was the only one up there, because he didn't believe in making someone do something he didn't want to do himself. "You lovebirds having fun?"

"I would," I said, "but she's too afraid her tongue will freeze to my snatch. That would be pretty awkward for the miners to walk up on, so we're behaving."

"You are some kinda twisted," Gourd called back, shaking his head. "Mind going down

there and telling everyone we're just about there? I think Watcher wanted to do a short scouting op."

"Easy enough." I pocketed my gloved hands to preserve at least a little warmth before walking to the doors heading down. Kumani didn't follow me, since she was out there as our quick responder in case anything happened. As soon as I opened the door, I got a number of groans and gripes from the miners that felt the painfully cold wind shooting in. Of course, I paid them no mind, though I did close the door as quickly as possible. "Almost there," I said, not walking further in.

Watcher was standing near the door, thankfully, so he just nodded. "I'll get a team ready. You mind if I send Spike with 'em?"

"Go for it. The cold doesn't even bother Kumani, so I assume it won't bother him either."

"Good. I'll have them ready in five."

"Tell them to pack flashlights. It's dark out there."

"We all have the same eyes you do, Nav," he said. "We're ex-night guard, after all."

I just shrugged. "Whatevs. I'm going back up."

"See you in five, then." I nodded and popped the door, to the sound of more groans and whimpers. "If you didn't like the cold, you shouldn't have signed up for this damn trip," I said, stepping back out and pulling the door shut. "Damn crybabies. Watcher's getting his team together," I called up to Gourd. "This the place?"

We seemed to have stopped, at least. "Yes sir," Gourd said. "Looks pretty clear to me, though Celestia knows I don't have eyes like yours."

"I'm not seeing anything either," Kumani said. "Want me to take a quick look around?"

"Make it really fast," I said, nodding. She spread her wings and jumped off, flying around the ship a few times before landing.

"Nothing. As far as I can tell, it's perfectly clear. Why this spot, anyway?"

"Surveyors picked it," I answered with a shrug. "We get paid no matter what they find here, so it's not like I care. Crabby said there was a lot of metal under us, so I figure they just want to be close to where they're working."

"Makes sense. Just keep the tunnels heated and they don't even have to worry about building an actual base."

"Hey, I wouldn't mind helping found Raven Rock down here. Mind, I wouldn't want to actually *live* here, but a nice little mining colony would be neat."

"...What?"

"Never mind." Thankfully, the doors opening and a few people stepping out into the frigid cold saved me from having to explain myself further. Out walked Spike, two of the pegasi, and Watcher. Three of them flinched from the cold, but Spike didn't seem to mind it, as I was expecting. "Bitter, ain't it?" I asked, smiling.

"I'm far, far too old to be in this kind of weather," Watcher said. "You three know your jobs. Get to them." The two soldiers nodded and took off, not wasting the time or breath in the

freezing air to reply.

Spike looked down at Watcher in concern. “If this is bad for you, you should go inside!”

“If I wanted your opinion, I would give it to you. You have a job to do. Do it.” Spike sighed and took to the air, flying to catch up to the two scouts that had left him behind. “Children,” Watcher sighed, shaking his head. “For all his tough act, Spike is still young.”

“Why do you think I haven’t given him much to do?” I asked. “He’s mature in some ways, but childish in others. I don’t trust him with too much just yet.”

“Good. Maybe in a few years, but not now. Anyway, it *is* cold up here. I didn’t even realize how bad it would be.”

“Intellectually, I *knew*,” I said. “But I’ve never felt anything like this. If we have to fight anything out here, what are we gonna do?”

“It’s possible to put up a weather shield for a short time. And our pegasi can keep the skies clear. I think Rainbow Dash was some kind of weather pony back in Ponyville. Fighting out here will be hard, but possible. We’ll have to melt off the snow and ice around the base and rebuild it with something more stable, if whatever’s under the ice isn’t stone.”

“I definitely don’t want to be fighting on ice, that’s for sure. Did we ever find out what exactly we’re supposed to be protecting them *from*?”

“I asked. Crabapple didn’t say. One of my troops started a pool, though. The main contenders are undead, penguins, and boredom.”

“I’d put my money on boredom. I doubt there’s anything hostile out there. Maybe a few curious animals that we’ll scare away or kill for food.”

“I hope it’s undead,” Kumani said, smiling. “I’d love to burn those with dragon fire. What about you, old man?”

“I’m not a betting pony,” Watcher answered grimly. “I’ve never been this far south. Never even heard rumors about it. That’s a sign, to me. In a world full of this many species, surely we would have heard *something* about this area, even to just stay away.”

“You didn’t know anything about South America or Africa,” I said. “The cats were living right next door to Equestria and no one even knew what they were.”

“Not true,” Watcher replied, shaking his head. “A few of us knew. We just didn’t know the information was important until the expedition had already left. And we knew very clearly to stay away from South America. Here, it’s just a… void. A discomforting lack of information. I’m not a betting pony… but it’s not a bet to say there’s a *reason* we haven’t heard anything about this area.”

If that didn’t spook me out, I don’t think there’s much else that *could*. Either way, the scouting group got back a few seconds after he finished, so they took our attention. “Nothing to report,” one of the soldiers said. “This place is empty, as far as we can tell.”

“Think we should check to see if the ground’s stable?” I asked.

“Yes, that would be wise,” Watcher said, nodding.

“Kumani, stay here this time, please,” I said.

"Hey, I didn't know we were *right over a mining shaft.*"

"Yeah, and we don't know that we're not this time, either. So let's just assume it's going to break and send us careening to a more lethal death if it gets too much weight on it."

"...Are you calling me fat?"

"That's my cue to bail." Before she could reply, I jumped over the side. Thankfully, she didn't follow me down. The two guards did, though, which gave me the chance to see that they were the same two that fell into the hole with me before. "You two get all the shit duties, don't you?" I asked when we were on the ground.

"We're specialized in cold ops with limited movement," Nightshade answered.

"And besides, being a scout is more fun than sitting on the ship," Shadow Fall added.

"I'd rather be warm than in this shit," I muttered, slowly walking around. All I heard in the massive wasteland of snow and bitter cold was the crunch of snow under my booted feet and their hooves as they followed me. After nothing happened for a few steps, I started kicking some of the snow off the top to see if I could get a look at the ground. Turns out there was nothing under the snow but ice. "Thoughts?" I asked, turning to them.

"Seems fine."

"We can't check anything else without magic. And didn't this place already get surveyed? I think it'll be fine."

"Good enough for me," I answered with a shrug. "Let's get back to the ship." They both nodded and we took off, flying back up. "It's fine, as far as we can tell," I said when we got up there.

It seemed Miss Crabbypants came up top to see what the holdup was, because she replied, "Good. Bring your ship in close and we will begin unloading immediately. I'd rather get this done before night."

"...Before night?" I asked, looking up.

"Yes, before night."

I shrugged and called up, "Gourd, bring us lower. We're going to start unloading."

"You got it, Nav," he called back, kicking the ship into whatever gear it is that brings us down.

"Make sure your miners work quickly," I told the chick. "We don't want to risk getting caught in a storm with them outside."

"I am well aware, Navarone," she said, walking back to the door. When she got to it, she started calling instructions down. Soon enough, a few grumpy miners came out on deck and started grabbing the shit they left sprawled around on deck. When we got low enough, they started tossing some of it off the side while the rest of it went to the sides, to be lowered down more carefully.

Of course, Crabby demanded that all of our guards be on station, since loading and unloading the ship would be our most exposed moment. Thankfully, Watcher and I both actually agreed with that, and so it was done. As expected, most of them didn't like it. Also as expected,

Watcher and I didn't really care that they didn't like it, since both of us were out in that shit, too.

Though I *did* have the benefits of a hot dragoness standing next to me, her blood and body keeping me warm. Not that I was really a fan of having her blood in me, but still.

"You know what would be fun?" Pinkie asked from her spot next to me. I didn't want her there at all, but I couldn't really force her to stay below. I figured, you know, the -40 degree weather would do that.

"Getting my dick wet," I said.

"But you don't have a—"

"Finish that and I'll cut off your tail."

"We should play some music from the ship's speakers!"

Kumani nodded and said, "Yeah, that does sound fun. Might get these lazy guys to speed up."

"You know what *wouldn't* be fun?" I asked.

"Getting my tail chopped off?" Pinkie replied.

"Blasting loud music, in the dark, over a massive, flat field made of ice. If the lights on the ship weren't projecting our presence enough, the music would probably do it. We don't want to make it easier for whatever we're guarding against to find us. And God help us if the noise breaks the ice under us or something."

"Who's God?" Pinkie asked.

"I'll tell you now," I said.

"Really?!"

"Sure, why not. Half of my species hates the other half, so they made up a thing called religion. In charge of this religion is a person named God, who has ultimate power over absolutely everything. And this God person is an absolute dick, so it's a good thing he either doesn't exist or just doesn't care enough to do anything. A lot of people worship him since they believe in ancient stories made up by sheepherders in a time before writing."

"Huh. Then why do you thank him all the time?"

"...What part of anything I've done makes you think I'm a smart person? Besides, I grew up around it and I don't like change."

"But I grew up around rocks and I don't like them!"

"Yeah, but your parents and grandparents didn't tell you that you would be tortured for all eternity if you didn't like them. Because that's very much what happens when you don't believe in God like a good little peon. Stockholm syndrome is fun, ain't it?"

"...That doesn't sound like fun," Pinkie slowly said, looking at me dubiously.

"*Now* you're thinking with religion," I said, smiling. "Imagine sitting in a building for an hour while someone older and supposedly wiser tells the entire room full of people that are all smiling and nodding that each one of them is a monster, an evil, horrible monster that deserves to burn for all eternity. And then you sing songs praising the person that made you that way, for the privilege of going against our very human nature so we don't get tortured when we die."

"...I don't want to imagine that," she said, looking away.

"Yeah… If it makes you feel any better, I don't have to imagine it. I *lived* it." I heard a crack on the deck and jerked my head to the cause. One of the miners accidentally slammed something into one of the siege weapons on board. "You break that, you better know how to repair it!" I shouted at him. He flinched and quickly moved away from the heavy weapons. "Damn groundies," I muttered, my wings twitching. "What were we talking about?" I asked.

"...Cupcakes," Pinkie answered.

"Bleh. You know muffins are better."

"I've never had either," Kumani said with a shrug.

Pinkie's head snapped to her so quickly I almost thought it broke before I remembered that it was Pinkie. "We're going to have to change that," she quietly said, her eyes wide and a smile coming to her face.

"No giving the dragon diabetes," I said warningly.

"If Spike can eat ten tubs of ice cream with no problems, Kumani can eat a few cupcakes, Nav!"

"Don't know if I want to, though," she said, pulling me close. "Nav here is sweet enough as it is."

"I wouldn't know," Pinkie sighed, shaking her head. "She never let me taste…"

"You know what we should do?" Kumani asked.

"Is it fun?"

"We should use Nav to glaze the cupcakes!"

"Alright, that's just disgusting," I said, breaking in. "So you better find me some alcohol first so my inhibitions are lowered."

"I'll go find Zecora," Pinkie quickly said with a smile, before I could tell her that I was probably joking.

"What better way to warm up?" Kumani asked, lifting me up for a hug.

"I thought you didn't like sharing."

"Eh. Besides, I never said I'd be sharing them. I mostly just wanted her to go away."

"Well, it worked. And do you mind putting me down?" She let go and I fell back to the deck. "You know, if they had your mighty muscles helping them unload, it would probably go faster."

"Yeah, it probably would," she said, not moving.

"You want to go help them out?" I asked.

"Not really."

"What if I offer to kiss you?"

"You know I could just steal all the kisses I wanted, right?"

"Yeah, but then it wouldn't be as fun anymore. It would be an all the time thing, not a special thing."

She rolled her eyes at the sappiness and said, "Alright, I'll go help them. But I'm

collecting when I get back!"

"Of course, of course…"

With Kumani's help, the unloading went a lot faster. I watched in some manner of awe as the unicorns with the miners very hastily put up a partially pre-built housing area. Of course, most of what they had to do was stack parts together and add bolts, but it was still really interesting to see an entire building get built so quickly.

"It won't last very long," Twilight said, looking at it. "A few snow storms and I bet it'll collapse."

"It isn't made to last long," Crabby replied. "Just to get my miners off the ship and working while the unicorns begin building the more permanent structure around the mine itself."

"Hold on," I said. "You're going to make the miners live on top of the mine?"

"That is standard, yes," she said, nodding.

"...Do you ever sometimes lose entire mining crews, just having them die in their sleep?"

"Once or twice," she said. "I believe the cause was some kind of ghost, since nopony saw what did it."

"Wow. You guys are… Wow."

"What, Nav?" Twilight asked.

"Alright, you know how you breathe to live, right?" I asked.

"Nav, I'm not a foal."

"Right, sure. Then you know that there are other gases out there that will kill you if you breathe them, right?"

"Of course. You made some yourself and put them in some cannisters."

"Yeah. Some of those poisonous gases occur naturally, underground. Those gases rise up above the air when they're released. So if there were miners sleeping above the mine, in a place with poor ventilation, and some of their friends happened to hit those gases…"

"...They would die," Twilight gasped, her eyes going wide.

"Which is why my crew is going to be sleeping on the ship," I said, nodding.

"That's preposterous," Crabby said. "If such a thing was true, somepony would know about it!"

"Oh yeah, because you guys are so science-oriented," I said. "You still believe Celestia makes the fucking sun move. Of course you don't believe in poisonous gases. Whatever, though. As long as I get paid, I don't care. Don't expect me to go down into the mines without a little mockingbird next to me, though."

"...Why a mockingbird?" Twilight hesitantly asked, thankfully ignoring what I said about Celestia.

"Because my people had a way of detecting that gas back before we had the technology to do so. Put a bird of some kind in a cage and carry it with you. It's smaller, needs less air to live. So if it suddenly stops singing…"

"...You found poison," Twilight said, sighing and hanging her head. "I should have

known it would be morbid…"

"Yeah, you should've."

"How do you even know all this, anyway?" Twilight asked.

"I read a lot. If you want to improve the survivability of your miners, I suggest putting them in a separate building. Attach the two with a covered hallway so they don't freeze, and have a way to seal off the mine."

"I will bring that up with my supervisors the next time I see them," Crabby sarcastically answered. "Now, I have business to attend to." With that, she stretched her wings and jumped off.

"She doesn't seem like a very nice pony," Twilight said.

"Just needs to get laid."

"...Aqua doesn't think that would help."

"Eh. We won't have to deal with her too much. Our job ends soon enough, after all. Also, how can you still hear Aqua?"

"She moved closer. And she said she's also more powerful than Flo because she's in her native element rather than trapped in stone."

"Lucky you. It's quiet in my head. I'm already feeling lonely."

"You can always talk to your *good* friends," she said, moving closer to me with a big ol' smile on her face.

"I lost those when the stones broke," I said.

She blinked a few times before she got it and her smile dropped. "Ugh. I meant *us*, Nav. While it's nice to see you spending more time with Taya, we know you're just doing it to avoid us. And she probably knows it too, which just does wonders for her self-esteem. We're your friends, but now that you have this big ship and all these soldiers, you're pretending like you barely even know us."

"...Sorry, what was your name again? It's been bothering me for the longest time."

"Nav, I'm being serious!"

"Hi, Being Serious. I'm Nava—Ow!" She fucking *bit me*! Right on the arm! I mean, the heavy jacket I was wearing absorbed most of the damage, but still! "What the hell, Being?"

Being Serious narrowed her eyes and said, "Nav, if you don't stop this right now, bad things are going to happen to you."

"Stop what? Why would my good friend do anything bad to me? You should be nicer than that, Being."

...It took me three hours to remove all the snow she stuffed into my clothing. Most of it melted, leaving my room a nasty, cold, wet mess.

Three days later, we finally saw another living thing. It had been eerily quiet and calm up to that point, with no clouds forming and no movement at all on the wastes. We didn't even feel any *wind*. Every one of us knew that was unnatural, so tensions were starting to get high on the

ship. Thankfully, the miners were blissfully unaware of all that, since they were underground or in their hab all the time.

Anyway, back to the penguin we saw. It was way off in the distance and we only noticed it because Gilda drew the short straw when it came to watch duty. “Hey Nav!” she called down from her spot on the balloon.

As it turns out, I also got really unlucky when drawing straws. “What?” I called back.

“The fuck is that thing?” she asked, pointing toward it. Turns out she was picking up some of my curses. Fuck sounds better than buck, apparently.

I looked up to see where she was pointing, then followed her talon. Since I couldn’t see whatever it was for shit at that distance, I pulled up my rifle scope and looked through that instead. I didn’t have the actual rifle up there, because I figured the stuff inside it wouldn’t take too kindly to ‘fuck you’ degrees of cold.

Anyway, I zoomed in as far as the scope could go to get a better look at the thing. Most of it was black and I saw a tiny bit of orange at the top. I put apples and oranges together for the fruit salad and realized it was a penguin. I just couldn’t see the white half because it was standing god knows how far away on an icy, snowy plain.

“It’s a penguin,” I called back.

“Think it’s edible?” she asked.

“Give it a few minutes, see if it comes closer,” I said. “If it doesn’t disappear, we’ll find out. I wouldn’t mind some fresh meat.” *But wouldn’t that sorta be cannibalism?* Sadly, Flo didn’t sarcastically answer me.

“Works for me, I guess,” Gilda said, probably shrugging. “Want me to keep an eye on it?”

“Nah. I got the scope on it. You keep looking for other things.”

“Eh, whatever.” She started doing that while I just watched the penguin fuck around for about ten minutes. There wasn’t too much for it to do, since it was a penguin in an icy place. I was in the middle of wondering how it got food when Gilda called down, “Can I go get it yet?”

“Go for it,” I said. “But if it starts talking, don’t hurt it.”

“Yeah, sure, whatever.”

“I’m serious, Gilda. I’m okay with hunting. I’m not okay with murder.”

“I know, Nav. Don’t be such a dweeb about it.”

“What did I say about that word?”

“Hey, it’s been a few weeks since I said it! Now shut up and let me fly.” I didn’t reply, but she didn’t wait for me to anyway.

How the penguin reacted to Gilda flying at it was unexpected. First, in that he noticed her at all. For penguins, death comes from below or laterally, not from above. Second, in that he started waving a flipper at her. Then she snatched it from the ground and started quickly flying back.

When she landed, she hit the deck and then dropped the dazed penguin in front of me. “There, happy? I didn’t kill it.”

"...Did it talk?" I asked.

"Yep. I don't think it liked being carried, either."

The penguin slowly sat up. When it saw me, its eyes jerked open and it yelled, "Wack!"

"Dude, chill," I said before I realized. Gilda gave me a short glare for the accidental humor. "We don't bite, only nibble."

"Psh, speak for yourself," Gilda said. "I don't nibble, I just suck. And then swallow, of course."

"Slut. Penguin, do you understand what we're saying?"

"Wack wack wack!"

I slowly looked over to Gilda. "You said it was talking."

"You don't understand that? He said yes and asked for your name."

"You're joking, right?"

"Dude, why would I be joking? How can you not understand him?"

"Because he just keeps saying wack!"

"No, he's saying *wack*." She paused for a few seconds before blinking and adding, "Oh yeah, you don't speak bird."

"God dammit, Gilda."

"Wack wack wack wack wack wack."

"He says his name is Gunter."

"Well, take Gunter back to where you found him. I don't need a fucking Amber Alert: penguin edition added to the list of bullshit I have to deal with."

"Alright, whatever." She shrugged and grabbed the penguin again before taking off. A minute later, she was back on board. "He said you remind him of his ice king or something, whoever that is."

"Fucking penguins. Got an entire civilization down here with their own king, but they can't even speak common. Whatever. As long as they stay on their side of the frozen wonderland, I don't even fucking care."

"If they start bothering us, can we eat them?"

"...I'll think about it."

"Awesome. I'll keep an eye out, then." She went back up to her roost on the top of the balloon. I just shook my head and went back to watching the endless ice for anything out of place.

Finally, after we were there for about a week, the large mining hab was finished. That meant a few things. First, that the mining could truly begin in earnest. Second, that excavations for the elementals could also begin. Third, that my ship left, leaving me behind with most of the soldiers.

I volunteered to lead the detachment left on the base because I figured I wouldn't have to go outside as much and I couldn't use Flo to find the elementals anyway. Guess which one I told

the others. Most of the unicorns went with them, since they needed to blast rock and ice out of the way. Ice also went with them, though we weren't planning on melting the elementals until we had them back in the base.

Unfortunately, Spike drew the short straw for being the dragon that got to stay behind. So Kumani went with the ship as a heavy lifter, meaning I didn't have anything to relieve the burning sexual desire I almost constantly felt. Though to be fair, I couldn't have fucked her anyway since it was so damn cramped in the mining building. The stares I kept feeling from the miners and Crabby's security detachment didn't make me feel any better about that.

But I was able to zone them all out with my laptop, though my attention kept getting demanded by a bored Spike or a moderately irate Ames. The naga wanted to spar, even though there was absolutely no room for that kinda bullshit. The biggest empty space in the entire place was about five feet by five feet, and he can take up about half of that with his tail alone. I just showed Spike porn and that shut him up for hours, though he would often cast very quick and furtive glances my way.

That was life for two weeks. The ship would come and go, filling me in on the progress it was making. Thankfully, the weather finally stopped being constant and started to get pretty ugly, but Dash led our group of pegasi and broke that shit up quickly. I don't think the weather gods liked that, so they responded with more and more clouds. After four hours of cloudbusting, even Rainbow Dash was exhausted.

Oh, the weather outside was frightful, but the fire inside's delightful. And since we had no place to go, we let it snow.

Snow it did. The amount that fell was disturbing and also kinda ridiculous, but we were at the south pole, so I wasn't expecting anything better. When the ship got back, they melted all that shit off of us.

Then it snowed again, covering us anew. That was the pattern for the first three weeks there. No snow for the first two, then nothing but snow for the third. It was miserable.

But it was better than what came after. "We have a problem," Crabby told me. At that point, I had been kept awake by magic for nearly an entire week, and I was starting to feel a little… jittery. I dreaded to think how I would feel in a month.

"What kinda problem?" I asked, dreading the answer.

"We're not finding any ore here," she said.

"Sounds like a problem, alright," I said. "*Your* problem, not mine."

"But we found something else."

"What kind of something else?" I sighed, getting bored.

"A door."

"A door? Where does it lead?"

"We couldn't open it. Magic works on it, but it's not budging and we can't seem to melt it open."

"Then go around it. Or under it."

"There's nothing around it. And I decided to wait for you to check it out to begin going under it."

"Why would I check it out? It's a door, not a monster."

"Some of my crew heard… whispers."

"So it's a whispering door, now."

She narrowed her eyes. "As your boss, I order you to investigate this door, Navarone. You and your team have done nothing so far but use up our resources. So start doing your job!"

"Fine, geez." I turned the laptop off and set it aside, then grabbed my sword belt. "The reason we ain't done nothing is because there ain't nothing for us to *do*."

"I'm well aware. But now that there *is* something for you to do, you are going to do it."

"Yeah, yeah. Lead the way to this scary door."

"Grab a jacket. It is much, much colder in the mines."

Ugh. "Give me five minutes to get changed, then. I'm not about to go down there in a skirt." ...As it turned out, skirts were also really comfortable, as long as you didn't mind showing off occasionally.

"Very well. I shall be waiting at the mine entrance." She walked off.

One thing I quickly realized is that there were almost no female miners and there were *no* private rooms. Everything was communal. That made for an awkward time when I changed, because just about every single straight guy stared. Of course, I'm a complete and total slut, so I made sure to put on a little show each time.

Unfortunately for them, I didn't have the time to be doing anything fun like that. They still stared, but they didn't see anything but me changing into something a lot warmer.

"You going somewhere, Nav?" Spike asked when he realized I was changing.

"Yeah. Miners found something. I'm gonna go check it out."

"They found something? Something cool?"

"I'll let you know when I get back," I said.

"Can I go with you?"

"Nah. Danger's more likely to come from out there than under us. But be ready to come and help me if I need it. You start hearing screams from the tunnels, grab everyone you can and bring them to me."

"Uh… Alright, I guess. But don't you think you should at least bring someone? I know I'm really bored up here…"

"I'll be fine, Spike. What's the worst that could happen?"

"...I'll be listening at the mine entrance," he said. "You need any help, just call for it."

I rolled my eyes and buckled the sword belt on again, finally in warmer clothes. The heat was already making me sweat, so I just said, "Whatever. I'm going down, now. Let everyone know where I am."

"Sure thing, I guess." He watched nervously as I walked on over to the mine entrance,

where Crabby was impatiently waiting. It was a good thing Taya was with the ship, or she would probably come with me whether or not I wanted her to.

Which, as it turns out, would have been a really, really bad thing.

"Are you finally ready?" the chick asked.

"Ready enough, yeah," I said, nodding. She turned and led the way into the mine without a word. "Did you find anything else down here at all?" I asked. "Or has it been completely empty?"

"We found a few bones that we didn't bother looking at before just melting. Mostly just ice, frozen dirt, and stone. Some of the workers have started having nightmares about failure, too."

"Sure they're about possibly failing?" I asked.

"There's nothing else to have nightmares down here about," she said. "As far as I can tell, we didn't even need your crew for protection. The ship was nice, but we don't really need the rest of you."

"Company's always nice. And I think Doppel is helping keep your miners' spirit high."

"...Yes, she is. What she does is disgusting, but it seems to increase productivity. I might look into hiring a changeling full time."

"Good luck finding one that feeds off lust. They're pretty rare. Might cost a pretty penny."

"And yet *you* have one."

"I'm also a close personal friend to their queen, and I've saved her life. She didn't mind doing me a few favors."

"What does it say about you, that one of your favors was asking for a female servant that survives off lust?"

"Hey, I never said I asked for Doppel. That said, I'm definitely glad I got her. She's been a lot of fun, and not just for sex."

"Right. Of course."

I rolled my eyes, though I honestly didn't care what she thought. "Anyway, doesn't this mine seem really basic?" I asked. "No carts, not many lights, no heating. No *lift*."

"Yes, this mine *is* basic," she answered, nodding. "It also just began a few weeks ago. We brought enough supplies to get started, but not do much else. And since the mine is still in its survey stages where we're looking more at what we'll find than anything else, it won't get that much more advanced for a while. Why sink too much gold into a project that won't take off?"

"Fair enough, I guess. But then why were you willing to pay me and my crew so much?"

"Because if this mine *does* take off, we believe we'll make that money back very quickly. The ore down here is supposed to be very high-quality." That raised a little flag in my head, but I didn't pay it too much mind. "And we needed to get started quickly, because we believed a rival company was going to make a move as well."

"So you needed to stake your claim so they couldn't beat you to it."

"...And we needed protection from them, in case they decided to push a claim anyway. Having a big-name hero here with a very well-armed ship and an experienced crew would be a good tool for convincing them that trying anything would be a bad idea."

"Oooh, now it makes sense. It sure woulda been nice to know that beforehand."

"You were told what you needed to know. But normally, a contract alone would take a week to draft up. I completed it in a day because of that urgency. I almost hope they do come down here, just to see the looks on their faces when they find out that you're here."

"I don't like being used."

"Then you shouldn't have signed a contract. We're coming up on the door now." I could see a group of miners ahead of us, standing in front of a bend in the hallway. If I had to guess, I'd say they were burning through the ice before realizing there was something to the side, then burning that way.

As soon as we got close, one of the miners quietly said, "The whispers stopped…"

"Good," Crabby said, making them all jump in surprise. "Hopefully that means they're afraid of our guards. Navarone, check it out."

"Sure thing," I sighed, walking past the miners. They all caught their breath as I turned the corner and discovered a massive vault door with three numbers carved into it, and then a sign in what looked like… *Russian*! "616?" I read aloud from the numbers, reaching my hands up to trace them.

"You can read that?" one of the miners asked. "They're just scribbles!"

Oh God. Just what did we find? "This is a human installation," I slowly said, backing away from the door. It seems something I said was a trigger, because I heard a loud click from the door, making one of the miners yelp in surprise.

After the click, something in the wall slowly started sliding down before breaking and falling off. Inside of that little panel was a hand-shaped pad. As if in a dream, I slowly pulled my right glove off and put my hand onto the pad. After a few tantalizing seconds, I heard another click and the door started rumbling.

"What did you do?" Crabby demanded as I pulled my hand back.

"Opened it," I said, moving to stand in front of it. *How could it possibly still have power, after so many years?*

"How? Nothing we did could make it budge!"

"I had the magic touch," I said as the door finally started slowly opening, making the most horrendous screeching sound I had ever heard. Everyone in the tunnels flinched and covered their ears in pain as the ancient human mechanisms forced the door open.

After nearly a minute of excruciating pain, the doors were either fully open or stuck. Either way, when they stopped, I heard a sudden hiss and then a massively loud bang, followed by howling, as a rush of air slammed past us, rushing to fill the empty space that was apparently inside the vault.

"What did you do?!" Crabby screamed at me as we all did our best not to get sucked into

the doors.

"It was vacuum sealed!" I shouted back.

"Make it stop!"

"I ca—" Just like that, it stopped, the inside apparently full of air. "Well then."

"The door is open. Great," Crabby said. "Now go make sure there isn't anything dangerous inside."

"Nothing dangerous could be living in there," I said. "The entire place had no air. Nothing to breathe. It was completely unlivable."

"I don't care. Go check it out!"

I sighed and rolled my eyes. "Whatever. Do any of you guys have a flashlight?" I could see just fine in dim lighting. Hell, even mostly dark places. But complete blackness was really hard to see in.

One of the miners held one up. "Here, ma'am. Just put in a new power crystal this morning. It ain't gonna fail you."

"Thank you," I said, taking it. "Let's see what we have, then."

I clicked the flashlight on and started walking into the chamber on the other side of the door. My initial review of the place told me that it was a bit small. Really small. There was no way all the air that came past us could have *only* gone into that room. So I started tapping on walls, listening for any points that might have been hollow. Each wall was made of metal and was completely nondescript, so they weren't giving me any hints.

When I found nothing, I stopped in the middle of the room, tapping my foot in some manner of confusion. That's when I realized the *floor* was hollow. I slowly looked down and tapped my foot against it, harder. The echo seemed to go on forever. Since I knew it was the floor that led somewhere, I started tapping my feet around looking for a hatch around all the rust. That brought up a small flag in my mind as well. If there's rust, there has to be oxygen. I could only assume it rusted over some time before the place was sealed.

After a few minutes of searching, I learned the hard way why you don't stand on rusty metal. I was walking back into the mining tunnel when I heard the first crack. My entire body had the exact opposite reaction it should have and I froze, my eyes looking down.

Then I heard another crack. My head shot up and my body started moving just in time for the entire floor to break under me, sending me into the darkness right in front of the mining crew.