

Chapter Twenty-Five—A chance meeting of a lifetime

Darkness greeted me when I cracked open the door. With that darkness came a bone-chilling cold. I wasn't surprised about either. It was nearing sunset by the time we got to the Sphinx, and if my internal clock was anything close to correct, I had been down there for at least two hours. I sighed and pulled myself out of the tunnel.

I figured it was too late to go see the king, so I started picking my way toward the embassy. I was hoping it would be easier, now that it was night and there were less people on the streets. I decided to leave the covering off my wings, to hopefully give any footpads the hint that I was not to be fucked with.

Of course, doing that also had the effect that I called a lot more attention onto myself than I was used to. And I was not at all in a good part of town. A lot of that attention involved whores, and I had no desire to work on the spy network at that point, or hire a cheap whore. So I decided to start walking alleys when I thought I could use them to skip large parts of the road. Not safe, I know, and probably not that smart either, but I never did decock the crossbow, so I was feeling a bit confident.

I was making pretty good time, and I only occasionally had to ward off crazy homeless cat or dog people. Most of them took one look at me and fled deeper into their squalor and filth, but a few thought it was a good idea to challenge me. I showed them some bare steel and that shut them down.

And then I ran into a little filly.

She fled before I could get a good look at her, any more to tell than that she was a young pony. Without even thinking about it, I gave chase. She wasn't hard to catch up to, but she was hard to coax out of her little pit where I couldn't reach her for life or money. I think the only thing that convinced her to come out was brushing her with one of my wings.

Looking back, I don't know why I decided to chase her. Not honestly. But 'why' isn't important, I don't suppose. When she came out into the moonlight, I couldn't help but gasp. The little girl was filthy and starving. I got a look at her head and found out that she was a unicorn. I couldn't tell much more about her from that.

"Where are your parents?" I asked. She looked back in her hovel, like she was going to run into it again. I could tell this was going to be difficult.

"What's your name?" I tried. Nothing. "I'm Navarone." I waved my wings at her. "Have you ever seen these before? Or anything like them?" She weakly nodded. "Can you tell me where?"

She barely opened her mouth, and I think she was trying to say something, but her mouth failed her. "Do you want to go somewhere warm?" I asked. A long hesitation, and I started to think I had made a mistake, before I got a nod. I pulled my wing cape/cloak thing out. "I'm going to put this blanket over you, and then pick you up. Is that okay?" She was certainly small enough for it. I don't think I could carry a filly the size of Applebloom for very far, and this one looked to be her age, but she was so malnourished I could probably carry her for miles.

I waited even longer this time before I got a smaller, more hesitant nod. I very gently and slowly draped the cloak over her back, and picked her up with as little force as I could. She still flinched and almost panicked when I touched her, but by that point there was nowhere she could really run. I held her in my arms and couldn't help but feel distressed at how light she felt. There was no telling how long she had lived here, alone. If her parents were unicorns, they had to be

long gone. Either dead or teleported away. Dead, probably. What parent could abandon a child like that? And there was no telling what she had seen, or what had been done to her.

After that, I stuck on the main roads, and carried her straight to the embassy, quietly whistling an old song to hopefully help keep her calm. If I knew of a hospital, I would have taken her there instead. Thankfully, the embassy was in the nicer part of town, so the road traffic lessened gradually the closer to it we got.

On the way, I kept up a chatter with the kid, trying to get her to say something. I avoided talk about her parents, or anything that might make her panic again. I just stuck to the weather and the food and bath she was about to get. She perked up slightly at the mention of food. I knew from books and TV that you can't give someone as malnourished as she was too much food too fast, or they'll get just as sick as giving them nothing would do. However, I was neither a doctor nor a pony chef, so I didn't know what light meals for a very young and malnourished pony would be. I was hoping the cook we had at the embassy would know how much a young pony normally ate, and that we could half it.

We got to the embassy in good time. The night guards were very curious about the little lass, and I honestly couldn't tell them much since she hadn't told me anything. I did, however, know that she started huddling even deeper in the blanket in my arms as soon as the guards got close enough to try to look at her. I sent one away to get Emerald and one to get the cook. "Tell them to meet me in the kitchen. Tell them to hurry but don't say why."

They went away and I took her into the kitchen. I didn't want to risk setting her down until the others were there, so instead I sat down, still holding her. "A pony and a cat are about to come in here, little one. A unicorn. They won't hurt you. The cat will even give you food."

We didn't have to wait long. The cook made it first, and she quickly followed my instructions to make something small. I don't even know if she saw the pony I was holding.

Emerald most definitely did, when she came in. "Nav, what's this ab—Oh my word!"

"Shhh." The bundle in my arms started quaking again when Emerald exclaimed.

Emerald tried again, practically whispering, "What happened?"

"I found her in a back alley on the way back. No parents, no guardians, nothing to keep her warm, no food. She's so light... I couldn't leave her there, Emerald."

"No, you couldn't have. What's her name?"

"I don't know. I haven't heard a word from her. The only reason she even came with me is because I had wings like a pegasus, I think." *Or an angel. Or the Sphinx.* I don't know why she responded to them.

It doesn't take long to make a small meal for a pony. Just throw some salad ingredients together. The chef finished and put it on the table in front of me by the time I finished the explanation.

"I'm going to set you down, now. This food is for you. Okay?" I very gently set her down, but left her the cloak.

She looked at the plate, and then back to me. I didn't know how to pantomime eating for a pony, so I just grabbed a shred of lettuce and took a bite out of it, and then held it up to her mouth. She ate.

I thanked the chef and sent her back to bed, and then turned to Emerald. "I think I should take her with me to Equestria when I leave, give her to Celestia's orphanage."

"We don't know where her parents are, though."

I stepped in really close to her and spoke as quietly as I could. "Her parents are either

dead or they abandoned her. When the law passed that made it illegal for ponies to leave, the very few unicorns teleported out and the pegasi flew out. Her parents were probably too weak to teleport her with them. The king was looking to kidnap unicorns, for magic purposes.” As far as I know, that was a lie. But it was a plausible sounding lie. “With a daughter in custody to use as leverage, the king would have had her parents as slaves. So if the king didn’t have the daughter in custody when he was killed, it was because the parents were either dead or gone. There’s no telling how long she’s been alone.” I made most of that up off the top of my head, but I was not going to risk letting her end up back on the street. And it was very plausible.

“So what do you propose we do with her in the mean time?”

“I’ll have to take a few days off from doing whatever to get her used to the embassy, so we can leave her here with the guards when we’re off doing important things. We can’t carry her with us, either of us, when we’re doing state business.”

“Why you? I think she’d be more comfortable dealing with me.”

“Probably. But you can’t take off. I’m just a guard here. You’re the ambassador. With the king’s task done—I’ll give you a report for him—I have nothing official to work on. I can take a few days off.”

“I... don’t know. No offense, Nav, but you don’t exactly strike me as a good choice for rehabilitating somepony who has been through what she probably has.”

“I’m not. But I am the only real choice we have. I refuse to let any cat person be alone with her. Any abuse she has suffered will have been at their hands, so there’s no telling how she’ll react to them. Besides, she seems to respond to my wings. The guards aren’t human enough to deal with her, I don’t think.”

“*Human* enough?”

“Shit... I don’t think they feel enough to be able to do it, emotionally. I don’t know how else to say it.”

“Well... you found her. I suppose you might as well take responsibility for her. If she’s okay with that.”

The little girl had just finished eating and was doing her best to snuggle against my leg. I don’t know if she was trying to hide next to me or if I was warm or if she was trying to thank me or what.

I just said, “I don’t think she’ll mind. You’ll have to help me bathe her, though. I have no idea how ponies bathe, and I don’t know if she’ll do it herself or not.”

“When do you want to do that?” she asked.

“If she’s sleeping in my room tonight, right now.”

“Yeah, that’s probably for the best. I’ll go draw up a bath in the bathroom connected to your room. Do your best to get her up there.”

A ridiculously large amount of time later found me and Emerald looking at a light purple unicorn with hollow purple eyes. Her mane was a darker purple with some bits of white. “Well,” I said, “she’s clean.” The bath water was disgusting, too. Emerald had to use magic to do most of the cleaning, and I had to hold one of the little one’s hooves to keep her calm throughout the endeavor. After getting over her initial shock of getting wet, she pretty much sat in the water making almost no movements and very little noise, just watching the things Emerald was manipulating with magic float around her.

“What kind of sleeping arrangements are you going to use?” Emerald asked me.

“She can have the bed. The desk chair is comfortable enough for me. When she gets more

used to this place, she can have one of the spare rooms. But I don't want to leave her alone just yet."

"Fair enough. And she needs to get used to you if you're going to be the one showing her around over the next few days. But how are you going to sleep in the chair with your wings?"

"...Shit. I *still* forget about them sometimes. I'll sleep on the damn floor, then. If I need you for anything, I'll holler."

"I'll leave my door cracked."

"Goodnight, then. Let's hope this works well."

She left, leaving me alone with the child. I carried her over to the bed and set her down. "If you get cold in the night, just pull the covers up," I said. "If you need anything at all, I'll be right over here," I said, waving my arm to the most carpeted area of the room.

I locked the door and settled down on the floor. It was due to be a long and uncomfortable night.

I was lying in the darkness for what felt like half a day but was more likely half an hour when I felt something plop down on my back. I almost freaked out, until reason reasserted itself and told me that any assassin would just stab me and call it done. I figured it was the unicorn, and confirmed that by gently feeling my back. She was slightly crushing my wings, so with a bit of gentle redistribution of weight, I settled us down well enough. She was lying lengthwise across my lower back, with my wings resting over her face and flank. It was still a bit awkward, and I felt even more uncomfortable then, but at least my back was warm.

I woke up in the morning feeling very cramped and very sore. The filly on my back was still out cold, so I decided to just lay there for a while. It was a nice change, being able to actually relax for a bit. Before, I had been too worried about the whole assassin thing. Now I was as safe as I could be in Egypt. The only thing I had to worry about was the little blob of fur on my back.

I didn't really want to wake her, since this was probably the first safe night she had in a long time, and probably the best sleep she's gotten, judging by her previous living conditions. Even if she was sleeping on my back on the floor. I also didn't want to risk scaring her, and I was somewhat worried about what she would do if she woke up in an unfamiliar place. She might be weak from malnourishment, but hooves are dangerous.

I was saved from having to do anything by a rattling at my door, followed by a knocking. It woke her up, and I think she was more afraid then than she was when I first found her. She scrambled all around the room before stopping behind or under the bed, leaving my back a nasty mess of bruises.

I achingly got to my feet and padded softly to the door. "Who is it?"

"Kat. The guards said not to bother you but refused to tell me why. Can I come in?"

"Not now. Go talk to Emerald Script. She'll tell you why if she thinks you should know."

"I'll figure out whatever you're hiding from me, you know. And I could pick this lock if I really wanted to."

"That's nice. Go talk to Emerald." With a few dirty mutterings I was supposed to hear but dutifully ignored, she presumably stalked off. I went to find the little pony to try to coax her out of another hole.

"It's okay. She's gone. You want to come out and get something to eat?"

It took her a while, but she did come out. The promise of food helped with that, I'm sure. "Do you want me to carry you again?" In response, she walked over to the door. "Just stay near

me, then.”

I draped a random knife belt over my shoulder, not even bothering to strap it on—it was there more out of paranoia than because I thought someone would actually attack us. I went to the door and opened it up. I rested my hand on top of her head to make sure she knew I was there and we walked on down to the kitchen to a rather mixed fanfare. The guards knew she was there, from the night sentry’s warning, but they didn’t know how to take her. I just told them to leave her be, as she stiffened as soon as she saw them.

Kat was a bit of a different story. She thought the unicorn was cute. And she most definitely did not think I should be her temporary guardian. “She belongs in a hospital. And then an orphanage.”

“She’s going to an orphanage, an orphanage back home. As soon as Emerald Script decides I can leave, she’s going with me to Equestria.”

“She belongs in an orphanage here. She’s a citizen of Egypt, not Equestria.”

“This isn’t open for debate. She’s coming with me.”

“The king might take issue with that.”

“The king told me yesterday that he’ll pay whatever my services were worth for a job I just finished last night. If he wants to take issue with it, I’ll take my payment in the form of expatriation for this child. I will not let her become a weapon of magic for anyone.”

And just so you don’t think we were talking over the unicorn’s head, she was currently eating, with us standing off to the side, arguing in fierce whispers. I had her on half meals, so it didn’t take her long to finish. She stepped back into what was apparently my protective aura when I finished that small tirade.

Kat was not pleased at being unable to respond. “This isn’t over, Nav,” she promised me.

“We’ll see.” I took the unicorn back up to my room to write up the report for the king, including the warning that the naga are apparently looking for some manner of ‘chosen one’ for something or another. I also included the demand for my reward, with the caveat that one way or another she was coming with me, but that I’d rather it be done legally.

I took it and we set off to find Emerald. We found her sitting in her room. “I’ve got the report for the king. We might have a bit more trouble than I thought getting this one to Equestria.”

“Yes, I had my ears talked off by Kat as well. Do you have any suggestions?”

“This report will probably be all we need. He told me to pick my price for my work. I did.”

“Good. How is she?”

“Still hasn’t said a word. She’ll get better.”

“I hope so... If you don’t need anything else, I suppose I should go drop this off. I hope this won’t cause a big incident.”

“If it starts being a problem, I’ll just leave ahead of schedule. I was only supposed to be here for a few weeks anyway.”

“It probably won’t come to that. Just be ready to go on a moment’s notice.”

“I always am. But I’ll go check again, just in case.”

We headed on back to my room, the unicorn still dogging my steps. The benefit to owning practically nothing but a few weapons and a small amount of clothing is that leaving a place is always as easy as picking up a bag and strapping on a few belts. If push came to shove, I could steal food, or do my best to rely on my status as Liberator.

When we got back to my room, I stowed most of my clothes back in my main travel bag. That done, I did my best to get the filly to talk.

"I don't suppose you've ever heard of Princess Celestia?" No response. "She's the leader—well, one of the leaders—of Equestria. Have you ever heard of Equestria?" Nothing. "Come now, all ponies have heard of Equestria. The land of milk and honey, peace and happiness." *Unless you're me.* No response, though. "We're going there in a few weeks, you and I. It'll take us a month or two to get there, though. Have you ever been on a boat?" Nothing. "First time? It can be a bit scary, if you aren't used to it. Nothing but water as far as the eye can see, where we're going. If I ever get the chance, I'll teach you to swim before we go. Or I'll have one of the guards teach you. I don't know how a pony swims. Do you think you'd like that?"

In a voice so low I almost didn't even catch it, she said, "I know how to swim."

Finally. "Good. The only place we'd have to teach you in is the river. That place is pretty nasty. If you like swimming, though, you'll probably have plenty of chances over in Equestria. I don't know if there's a pool at the palace, but I don't doubt it. Princess Celestia doesn't gimp out when it comes to niceties like that. You'll have the chance to learn magic and go to school once you get over there. And you'll have plenty of chances to get your cutie mark. I wouldn't mind seeing that. I've only ever seen it happen once, when I helped three little fillies with something back home. There will probably be plenty of fillies around your age to play with there, too."

That might or might not be true. There weren't many orphans in Equestria at all. But I figured there were plenty of servants with kids that she could play with, and I still remembered talking to that one group of colts in Canterlot a while back.

"Or if you turn out like I was, there will be plenty of books for you to read. I suppose I'll teach you how to do that, one of these days, if you don't already know..."

Nothing.

"It isn't too hard to learn. The only reason it took me so long is because I didn't have anyone teaching me that had a great passion for reading. You won't have that handicap, if you let me teach you. I can't teach you magic, though. Emerald might be able to, if she ever gets a break. I can teach you a lot of other things if you're ever interested, though. Math. History, though I don't suppose you care about that. And I don't guess there's a reason to teach you grammar since I can't teach you to write... I guess I could teach you political maneuvering... Nah, let's just stick with reading. Do you want me to teach you to read?"

Nothing.

"Well, we'll be here a while anyway. And we'll be in transit for a while as well. Might as well leave us something to do in the future. I would offer to teach you to fight, but I don't suppose you can hold a dagger. The guards might could teach you to use your hooves as weapons, but I don't know if they'd be willing to. You probably wouldn't want to learn that anyway. Not like you'll need it. No one is stupid enough to attack the embassy anymore, and when you get to Equestria you'll never see another fight again."

Nothing.

"Do you want to explore the embassy? It won't do to have you cramped in this room all day."

A nod.

"Well, lead the way," I said, waving out the door. She looked at it uncertainly, and then took a few slow steps forward and looked back. When she saw I was following, she walked out more confidently.

We explored the embassy. She didn't try to open any closed doors, but most of them were open. Whenever she ran into a guard or a servant she stopped until I was next to her and then walked at my speed until they were out of sight, and she always made sure to be on the opposite side of me that the other person was on.

Some of the guards we passed asked about her. I just told them she was a shy guest, and to ask Emerald if they wanted more details. None of the servants really cared, just nodding to us as they hurried past.

As I've explained before, the embassy isn't a very large place. But it took us over an hour to get through the whole thing, due to her stopping so much. We were nearing the last bit of the place when Emerald got back.

"Well, Nav, we're in the clear. The king was happy to give you that boon. That might be because he didn't know she's a unicorn. Or it might be that you threatened to kill anypony he sent after you."

"I didn't use those words."

"You wrote that one way or another you were leaving with her. That pretty much says you would kill anypony that tried to stop you."

"If that's how he chose to take it and that's what got us here, I'm willing to let it go."

Emerald dropped her voice. "How long do you think it'll take to get her talking?"

I matched her tone. "I got a few words out of her earlier. Nothing much. She's cracking, don't worry."

Emerald looked relieved. "Good. See if you can learn her name. I can ask around. Her parents might be out there somewhere, even if they don't want her and abandoned her on purpose."

"I'll try, but no promises. It's slow going."

"I understand." The little unicorn stopped in front of a closed door and just looked at it. I looked to Emerald, shrugged, and went to knock on the door. When I got no response, I opened it. I followed her in, while Emerald went on to do whatever it is she does in her free time.

I looked around to find we were in a small sitting room. I don't know what was so special about this room that made her want to come in, but whatever. We didn't stay long.

I feel I should mention that I kept up a running commentary on things we were seeing or people we were passing as we went along, just so you don't think we were creepily walking through the place with nary a word escaping my lips. I asked a few more questions, but got no answers.

When there was nothing more for her to explore, she went back to the kitchen. "Hungry again? Well, I've never been much of a chef, but how hard can it be to make a salad?"

Thankfully, not very. I set the plate down in front of her.

"Always hated the stuff, myself, unless it had some decent dressing over it. You ponies have a considerably different palate from us humans, though. Give me meat any day. Or fruit, if it's ripe enough. Some vegetables are okay, but raw lettuce leaves? You can keep it. Better than some of the ponies back home, though. They eat flowers or grass. I can't even *live* off that stuff, and they eat it like there's no tomorrow. And a friend of mine, a dragon, he'll eat gemstones, meat, grass, anything you give him."

She perked up a bit at the mention of the dragon.

"Over there, we're limited to vegetables or fruits, mostly. You'll likely have your pick of the larder, once you get to the palace. Princess Celestia has the best stocked vegetarian kitchen in

the world, I think. Wouldn't kill her to keep a bit of bacon for her few extra-pony servants, I don't think, but that's just my opinion. You want more?"

She had finished her plate, and was looking at it with a spark of life. She looked up and shook her head.

"You're probably thirsty. Haven't had much to drink... Some ponies get enough water from what they eat, but then, they eat stuff that's full of water. Hold on a sec." I poured her a glass of water and gave her a straw. "There you go. I never did figure out how horses could use straws. I don't think you even have lips! Just another thing in this world that makes no sense to me. Like how Rainbow Dash could crash through my window and hit the wall moving so fast I couldn't see her and have no more pains than a bruised pride. And yet at the same time she was able to get so hungover she was seeing double for hours. Sometimes I regret ever getting forced into this world..."

Another small answer, "I don't."

Another one. "You and a lot of the other ponies. And a few of the cats. And some of the naga. I've been very useful to Princess Celestia. I've helped my other friends quite a bit, but sometimes I can't help but wonder if they'd be better off without me. But then, I'd be thinking the same thing if I was still in my world. The naga I helped would probably be worse off if I hadn't shown up. They would have ground themselves against a rival group until one or the other of them was dead and gone. I managed to end that conflict rather quickly. Same for the cats. And I suppose when I get back, I'll be sent off to indebt another group of people to Princess Celestia. C'est la vie."

She finished her water.

"You want some more?"

A small nod. I got up to fill it again.

"If you had told me before that you were thirsty... Well, you didn't. You know where the kitchen is now, if you ever need anything and I'm not around. You're free to go anywhere in the embassy, as long as the door is open and no one tells you to stay out. If you ever need anything and I'm not here, ask a guard or Emerald Script for help. And never go outside without me or Emerald."

She gave me a scared look.

"Don't get that look on your face; I'll be around most of the time, and I'll definitely be here over the next few days. No one here will hurt you. And if anyone does, tell me. I will deal with it." I patted my knife belt. "Emerald Script would trust her life with any of the ponies here, and I've grown to trust her as a semi-decent judge of character."

One of the day guards happened to be walking by the kitchen when I said that, and interrupted me. "You said *Emerald* would trust her life with us. You wouldn't?"

"The only people in this world I would trust my life with are Celestia and Luna. Otherwise, I'd probably be better off with my life in my own hands."

"One day, you and I will have to get in a sparring match, human. We've all seen your record, and I know you took down those assassins easily enough, but none of us have ever seen you fight."

"I have a record? And you've read it? Was it kind to me?"

"The princess asked for volunteers to work with you and the ambassadors, and everypony that volunteered was given a copy of your records, as well as those of the ambassadors. After reading all of them, most of the volunteers changed their minds. But I assure you, none of them

changed their minds because of you. I'm sure some of the volunteers stayed on because of it. But so far, we've yet to see you in action, aside from that nasty business in the desert, which was no proper fight."

"That *was* a proper fight, as far as I'm concerned. That's how most of my battles go. What my... record... probably failed to mention was my *modus operandi*. I do not get in fights. I kill people. If someone looks like they're going to try to fight me, I shoot them. If they don't know I'm there, I cut their throat. If we ever sparred, you'd probably win. But if it came down to it, you couldn't stop me from achieving my objective." The guard was rolling his eyes. The little unicorn—who I had somehow forgotten about—was looking at me with wide eyes. "But that's enough of that."

"For now," the guard answered. "If you ever want to learn to fight like a stallion, come find me." He left.

"So, you need anything else?" I asked the filly.

A shake of the head.

"Well, I think we've been all over the embassy. I suppose we could head back to my room and talk some more, if you're interested."

Small nod.

"Lead the way." I wanted to test if she could find her way to my room. It wasn't hard, I just wanted to see if she remembered the layout. We made it easily enough. To be honest, I'm somewhat surprised I didn't scare her away to Emerald, talking with the guard like that. Maybe she wasn't lucid enough to understand everything I was saying.

When we got back to the room, she finally asked me a question. "Do you really kill people?"

"...Yes, I do."

"Would you ever kill me?"

"I only kill in self-defense. Would you ever attack me?" Only technically a lie. It's usually preemptive self-defense, as the people I kill usually *would* kill me, if they had the chance.

She shook her head no.

"What's your name?"

A long pause. "Taya."

"Taya, do you want to hear my story? Most of what happened in my life since I got here. I won't make you listen, if you don't want to. It'll help us pass the time, and it'll give you more information about me." The guard that stands outside Emerald's door, next-door to mine, leaned his head over where I could barely make it out from where I was sitting. I smiled slightly at that.

After a few seconds, she nodded her head. I started. The guard's head disappeared, and not a minute later two of the off-duty guards cantered into my room, with the guard outside Emerald's door standing closer to mine. I paused and looked at them. "If you ever wanted this story, you could have just asked." They smiled at me sheepishly. "Fine. But I'm not starting over." I talked up to dinner, telling them everything. The guards probably already knew about Luna and her little crush on me, and I figured it wouldn't matter if Taya knew, since she was going to the palace soon and might hear it anyway. I didn't tell them any of my other friend's secrets, since none of those were their business. I wasn't even a quarter of the way through when dinner was called. The guards had changed watch twice, with me getting a net gain of one listener.

I didn't tell any of it at dinner, but the news that I was telling it at all made the rounds there, and I figured I'd have more listeners after. Taya ate next to me at the main table, between me and Emerald. I figured the telling of the story would get her more used to the guards, which is why I let them stay.

After dinner, I filled a few water bottles to wet my throat periodically, though I wasn't planning on talking for too much longer. Five of the guards and Emerald were waiting for me when Taya and I got back upstairs. The only guard missing was watching the front door. "You too?" I asked accusatorily of Emerald.

"What? I'm curious! You're the only human any of us have ever seen, and we know almost nothing about you."

I rolled my eyes, and continued where I left off. However, I forgot that Emerald didn't know what happened between me and Luna. So it came as a very big surprise to me when I mentioned that offhand and she sat bolt upright.

"Oh, shit, you didn't know that story, did you?" I asked.

"No, I didn't! Are you serious?"

"Very. Just... don't tell anyone, I suppose. I forgot you didn't know."

"If I didn't know, why do the guards? Does Princess Celestia tell them everything?"

"Well, if you spend a lot of time around someone, stuff like that starts being obvious. And with rumors... I figured they already knew." The guards shrugged and nodded. "There you go." I continued where I left off.

We were all sitting in a somewhat-circle on the floor. Ponies don't do well with chairs and I can't sit in them for long before I forget my wings and try to lean back. A few hours after dinner, Taya leaned her head down in my lap and I realized how late it was.

"Hmm. I think we should continue this tomorrow," I said, rubbing Taya's back gently. "I know she's tired, and I'm getting there. And there's still plenty to go."

"Just let us all know before you start again, Nav," one of the guards told me.

"Yeah, I don't want to miss any more of it," Emerald said. "I still can't believe you accidentally seduced Princess Luna!"

"It gets worse. We haven't gotten to the Gala yet."

"I can only imagine! Wait..." She narrowed her eyes. "Were you...?"

"Don't ruin it for the rest of them," I told her. "All in good time. Now out, all of you. We're going to bed."

They filed out, talking to each other about some parts of what I was telling them. I just shook my head and closed the door behind them, then turned to Taya. "Well, do you want the same sleeping arrangements as last night? I can't imagine my back is really that comfortable."

"The bed is too soft..."

"Well, it's not too soft for me. Tell ya what, I'll sleep on the bed and you can drape yourself over my back. You get your hard, warm surface and I get my soft, warm bed. And a free half-blanket, at that."

I got into bed and she jumped on top of me, reminding me of all the bruises she put on my back from the morning. I got to sleep considerably easier that night, though every time she shifted too much, I was reminded of a bruise.

This time I slept a bit longer, but she was still asleep when I woke up, so I just lay there for a while. There were no knocks this time, so she slept for quite a while. It gave me a chance to compose some more of the story in my head.

When she finally stirred, I was around the mental point of the second meeting with the naga, to settle the true love issue. I felt her jolt awake, but instead of trying to bolt away, she just flinched and sighed.

“Finally awake?” She jumped down and I got up. “We probably both need baths...” I saw her looking at the door. “Fine, food first. But if anyone looks at us funny—or rather, sniffs at us funny—it’ll be your fault.”

She led the way to the kitchen. The cook was there, reading a book. “I don’t suppose you know how to make pancakes?” I asked, already knowing the answer: A blank look. “Fine. Salad and something with meat, I suppose.”

We ate and headed back up to bathe. I drew her a bath and left her to it. “You need anything, feel free to call,” I told her. I left the door open and pretended to make myself busy at my desk. She didn’t call.

When she was done, I bathed. I usually sit and soak for a good while, but she was making it somewhat awkward for me by watching me the whole damn time. Sometimes I have to remind myself that there’s no nakedness taboo in any of the cultures I’ve run into.

When I decided to start the story up again, all but one of the guards showed up again. Emerald walked in right as I continued. I figured none of them had told the servants, or else we’d have some of them here as well.

I started where I had left off, and the benefit of a bit of planning made telling some of it easier. I cut off for lunch, and picked it up again after. I finished right before dinner.

“And that’s why I’m so fucked up and a terrible person,” I finished.

Emerald spoke up first. “You know, I remember seeing Egill back at that party. I remember you talking with that white unicorn leaving her seething. I can hardly believe that was you. And that it was Princess Luna that put you there. But you seemed to make Luna’s night, at least. I can hardly believe that makes you a bad pony.” I just shrugged.

The night guard with us spoke up. “I remember the night with the moth, when you saved the life of Rainbow Dash by suggesting she go to a different room.” Not quite the way I remember it. “I... I was the guard stationed to make sure she died. I volunteered here to learn the mettle of the being that tamed the heart of Princess Luna, and earned the friendship of Princess Celestia while doing it. Neither of them would have any dealings with a bad pony.”

“Now that’s not entirely true,” I started, but I was interrupted by another guard.

“I remember when you were given the tour of Canterlot. I was one of the guards with you, then, one of those you made laugh. When you spoke with the pegasi with us, I heard the tenderness in their voices when they responded. Neither of them would talk like that to a bad pony.”

“I’m a pretty good actor, when I need to be,” I weakly said.

Another guard spoke up. “I was with you in the Middle East, when we were helping Twilight Sparkle with the water tables.” I rolled my eyes at that. “I remember going on patrol with you and Twilight and my squad and finding a small group of cats. They saw you and cheered and crowded us and gave us a feast they could hardly afford. Bad ponies don’t get accolades like that.”

“You’ve never seen pictures of Hitler with his boy scouts, then,” I retorted. Never thought I’d apply Godwin’s law to myself.

Yet another one spoke up. “I was the guard detached to pick you up after you dealt with the naga the first time. Where others might have fought to try to stay free from an uncertain and

dangerous future, you came very peacefully with me and brought nothing that could be used as a weapon. Can you think of any bad ponies that would have done something like that?"

"I had a very good reason for doing what I did, and I knew Celestia would understand," I answered.

The last guard spoke up. "I was there at your trial. I watched you support that vixen at your side, and give your testimony besides. You admit to disliking her, but you helped her when she was weak, and you defended her as you defended yourself. A bad pony would have used that weakness, rather than defend it, to further his own goals."

"I wasn't expecting to ever be declared guilty!"

Taya finally said something, very quietly. "I remember hiding in a gutter, watching a stranger try to coax me out of the hole I was in. He had no reason to try to help me, and every reason to ignore me and keep going. After a while in the dark, stinking, and dangerous alley, he finally got me out and brought me to a warm home with good food and nothing but the kindest people I've met in a long, long time. That stranger was not a bad person."

There wasn't much I could say to that.

Dinner was spent with the guards regaling each other with the parts of the story they missed to pull guard duty. I commented here and there to correct them, but let them do most of the work.

I also learned the reason the other night guard was here: Punishment detail. Apparently he had made a joke about Celestia and was heard by one of the two princesses. Poor bastard.

That was my first week in Catro, and the first seventeen days in Egypt the second time. I figured I would need to spend another week or so in Catro, unless something big came up.

Now that Taya was more comfortable around the guards and Emerald, I figured I could leave her in the embassy if I had to.

Three more days passed with nothing big happening, aside from me telling a few more stories about life on Earth. Then an overcast day came up, and I woke up to Kat banging on my door. Taya jumped off my back and I rolled out of bed and opened the door.

Before I could ask what she was doing, she said, "Let's go flying!"

I looked at her with weary eyes. "Give me some time to eat and get dressed."

"I've been waiting a week for this!"

"Then a few more minutes won't hurt you. Come on, Taya, let's go eat." The first time I saw Kat since she sulked off from the rebuke I gave her, and now she demands to go flying. Fair enough, since I owed her the trip, but still.

We finished eating and plodded back up to my room. I got dressed in outside clothes. I took Taya to Emerald's room. "Emerald, I'm going out for a bit to stretch my wings. Can you look after Taya for a bit?"

"Sure. I don't think the king needs to talk to me today. And good news for you: I finalized trade agreements yesterday. Trade between here and Equestria will open up soon, so you can get home."

"Best news I've heard in days. Thanks, Emerald."

"Don't mention it, Nav. Have fun with Kat."

We went on out, Taya watching my back from Emerald's room. I felt kind of guilty for leaving her, but she was going to have to get used to me not being around soon enough anyway.

When I dropped her off with Celestia, I probably wasn't going to be around that often to see her.

Instead of going to the front door, I pulled Kat to where I found the assassins hiding and went out the roof hatch. "It has been a few days since I flew. Give me a few minutes to warm up, and then I'll swoop down and lift you off your feet."

"I'll hold you to that, Nav," she said with a smile.

I did just that. I spent a few minutes flitting in and out of the clouds. When I felt comfortable, I pulled my wings in and dove down, squeaked out of the dive, and ripped Kat into the air on the updraft. She wasn't as light as Miguel had been, but I figured I could carry her for a good while. To prove that, I took her over the route we took to get to the naga, and managed in ten minutes what took us over an hour. I set down on the head of the Sphinx. She seemed speechless.

"I'll take us up in the clouds in a few minutes. Just give me a span to rest. That's the first real flight I've had since I was injured."

She finally regained her words. "That was... amazing! Why do you ever walk anywhere?"

"Flying loses its novelty. I felt the same way the first time I flew under my own power. After some time, it gets old."

"It seems like such an interesting thing, though! What kind of life do you lead that it would become boring?"

"Interesting isn't always good. Hell, in parts of my world, wishing someone an interesting life was a curse. You ready to go again?"

"Always."

"I'll be back in a minute, then." I jumped off and glided up and did the same thing as before. With my wingspan, it's usually harder for me to carry a person straight away, so I instead tend to grab them while I'm already in the air, if I can.

I carried Kat up into the clouds over the city. I didn't learn all the pegasus weather manipulation stuff, but I could move clouds around. I don't even know if I can learn to do some things. But I can sit on the clouds, and I can hold things while doing so. I was just hoping I could hold something as heavy as Kat while sitting on one.

I flitted around most of the clouds, and I had to go through some of them, but we finally pierced the heavens. I punched through the final layer and squinted at the brilliant sunlight that contrasted so heavily with the previous gloom. I soared a bit higher so we didn't hit any clouds that were around us. I did my best to slow down as much as I could, slowly gliding over the clouds as Kat did her best to pop her eyes out of her head in wonder.

I have to admit, it was a beautiful view, even to my jade eyes. The desert sun was straight overhead, and there was nothing under us but a vast white expanse, with a few openings here and there where bits of city or sand snuck through, giving tantalizing glimpses of what might be under us.

I slowly alighted on one small patch of cloud, surrounded by open space. I pulled Kat on top of me and lay back against the cloud. "Pretend I'm a table, and we're surrounded by lava." A variation of the old game, Floor is Lava. Except this time, falling off the table meant death instead of losing.

She reached down and waved her hand through the cloud, and presumably felt no resistance at all. She pulled her wet hand back. "What would happen if you were to do that?"

I grabbed a small chunk of cloud for her. "Open your mouth." With a raised eyebrow and

a small smile, she did. I fed her some cloud. As soon as it left my fingers, it melted in her mouth.

An undisclosed amount of time later, we made our way down in one of the riskiest things I've ever done: A full dive with a passenger. We held on to each other as tightly as we could and I just rolled off the cloud. We fell straight down, watching the ground approach disturbingly quickly.

We rose out of it just fine, but my wings took a lot more stress than usual. I dropped a bit more to compensate, and did my best to slow us down. I took us in a long, slow circle back around to the city. From where we dropped, we were almost directly over the palace, which is near the center of the city. By the time I got some modicum of control over how I pulled out of the dive, we were already beyond the city's outer limits.

Since my wings were so stressed from that dive, I decided to head on back home. It took twice as long for us to get there, due to how slow I was going. I knew the relative position of the embassy, but I had to get Kat to point it out to me.

We landed easily enough, since I was flying so slowly. I rubbed my wings a bit, trying to see how the injuries held up. Kat saw me and said, "You did great."

"Apart from almost killing us when we dropped out of the cloud, I think I did well enough, yeah."

She snorted at that. It was pretty much a lie anyway; I made sure we had more than enough room. I said, "Let's head on inside. We have some things to talk about, I think."

"Yeah, and I have a letter from the king for you."

"I can read that while you talk to Emerald, I suppose." She handed it over after we dropped into the hatch. I opened it as we headed on down to Emerald's room. I was bringing it up to scan over when we stepped into her room, and was interrupted by a purple furry mass flinging itself at me.

I caught her and barely managed to stop myself from falling over. Kat reached out a restraining arm to help balance me. That was the third time I had been flying tackle hugged by a pony, though the other two times had been backed up by the fastest wings in Equestria.

I carried Taya over to the chair and sat us down. It was low-backed, made for the cats that are mostly shorter than I am, so my wings weren't much of a problem. "We're back. We miss anything?"

Emerald answered, "Not really. Taya was missing you, though."

"I hadn't noticed..." I shifted her in my arms and brought up the letter. Yadda yadda, we caught the baron, court date tomorrow, show up to testify about the assassins, the naga sent a positive messenger in. I passed it over to Emerald.

Kat ahemmed. "That was for your eyes, Nav."

I looked at Kat and let Emerald take the letter. "Who do you think I'm loyal to, Kat? Jim Johnson or Celestia?"

"I'm just saying. What else did you want to talk about?"

"I'm heading home soon. A few days after the court date. I just wanted to tell you now so you and the king don't get blindsided by it."

"I knew you wouldn't be here forever. You're not the type of person to be content to guard an ambassador. Just tell me before you leave."

"Fair enough."

Emerald looked up from the letter. "This trial is a waste of time. If you want, I can send a

guard in your place. Any of them can give the testimony as well as you can, given that they're going to declare this baron guilty no matter what happens."

"I know, but there has to be a semblance of legitimacy in the proceedings. It shouldn't take me more than ten minutes to speak my piece and get out. Just don't send any of our people to the trial but me. That would be the best time and place to start a new uprising."

Kat smiled nastily at that. "King Johnson has a fun surprise planned for anyone trying to attack the courthouse."

"The naga?"

"Yep. They'll be very visible inside and outside the courthouse. And Rock will be standing right next to the baron with his biggest hammer, ready to smash him into oblivion the minute someone draws so much as a dagger. Or for when the baron gets declared guilty."

"I bet Rock is going to love taking down the strongest pro-slavery baron in Egypt."

"You don't even know the half of it. This baron was Rock's owner, back when Rock was a champion cage fighter. I don't think I need to tell you what he's been through."

"The justice of that is almost enough to make me wish I would stay for the whole thing."

"You really should. The biggest charge we got him on is hiring the assassins to attack foreign ambassadors. He's being killed 'as an example to anyone that attacks our new friends from Equestria.'" I couldn't help but smile at that.

"I would, but I get bored at court proceedings. I'll stay long enough to testify. I don't want to leave Taya for too long anyway." She was still sitting in my lap, but she wasn't clutching me like I was about to evaporate away anymore.

"Have you decided how you're planning on leaving yet?" Emerald asked.

"Give me two guards and I'll fly up to Alexandria. I'll stay there until I can catch a ship going to pony held lands, and from there I'll hitchhike until I get home."

"Why do you need guards?"

"I won't be able to make it in one day, even by flying. And I don't want to risk sleeping in the open and having anything sneak up on me. This way we can split watches, and they can split them again on the way back."

"And your orphan?" Kat asked.

"Coming with me, as I told you she would be. I even have the king's permission, as if I needed it. She's lighter than you are, so I won't have any problems taking her with me."

"The biggest problem will be finding a ship heading to pony lands," Emerald said. "And, of course, staying in the city long enough for that to happen."

"It's a port city. If nothing else, I'll find a smuggler. I'm well known enough in the Middle East that I can get us through any interdiction ships that try to stop us, which might be enough to hire anyone."

"It might also be enough to make you worth kidnapping," Kat warned.

"True. I've managed well enough so far, though. If I waited for the best solution to present itself, I'd be waiting until I died."

She shrugged, and said, "Your funeral."

"I'm just glad I *can* leave. I wasn't expecting any of our enemies to make a move so soon. Once this baron fellow gets deep sixed, our position here will be incredibly secure."

"Your political position, at least," Kat said. "But maybe not your social position. Ponies will probably never be popular in Egypt, and without a complete spy network, you'll never know how widespread that discontent is."

“Well, it was an interesting side project, but I never expected it to be overly useful no matter how large it grew. As it is, the contacts we made will be good enough for keeping tabs on a bit of the city.”

“Even though you’re dumping it all in my lap,” Emerald sighed.

“At least it’ll give you something to do if you ever get bored,” I said. “And you might make a few friends among the cats that come by to report.”

“I’m hardly here to make friends.”

“But they’re never a bad thing to have.”

“And I’ll still be stopping by from time to time, to check if you need anything,” Kat said with a small smile. I found myself feeling a bit sorry for the winged guards.

We talked a bit more, about the coming trial and some more about my homecoming plans. Kat left soon after lunch and the rest of the day went on by like the previous few: Slowly.

The next day was the bloody trial. Bloody as a descriptive word, not as an expletive. There was a large crowd around the courthouse that were fingering their weapons and looking at the naga with venom in their eyes, but none of them dared do a thing.

In the actual courthouse, the only people that had weapons to finger were me, Rock, and the guards. No one else had been allowed any, and several cats had to be forcefully removed from the entrance when told they had to surrender their weapons. Many of those that chose to give up their weapons to get inside were glaring at me with hate. But I had been glared at by two eternal princesses, so I was able to weather their hate easily enough.

The baron’s head bodyguard was trotted out as the first witness. He had been promised leniency to give his testimony. What he didn’t know was that by ‘leniency,’ he was going to be killed quickly instead of slowly. He condemned the baron in all manner of crimes and plots, including the attempted assassination of foreign ambassadors. After he sat down, I was called up, and I gave my testimony. Since things looked to be speeding along well enough, I decided to actually stay and watch the rest of it. Hardly twenty minutes had passed since the thing started. Apparently the cats don’t care about dealing with typical lawyer BS.

When I was done, two guards wheeled in what was left of the assassin apprentice. At this point, I was figuring he would say anything anyone told him to say, but he told the court basically what he told me. In return, I later learned, he was taken out back and had his throat slit. A mercy, I believe.

After the assassin was taken away, there was a small series of minor nobles that were accomplices of the baron. I don’t know what their punishments were, but they all pointed fingers at the baron and accused him of all manner of things.

When they were finished, the judge looked to the jury. He didn’t even tell them to go out, just looked at them. The head guy said guilty, of course. The judge turned his head and nodded to Rock, who was wearing the biggest grin on his face through the whole proceedings. Somehow the grin grew wider and he brought his massive hammer down in a wide arc, crushing the baron’s head and upper body with a sickening plop, showering the surrounding crowd with bodily detritus. It was pretty nasty, and I’m sure some people might have found it anticlimactic. Me, I was just happy it was finally over with.

All in all, the court proceedings took just over an hour. I decided I preferred the cat court system over the American court system. And the pony court system, since I wasn’t the one getting convicted.

Rock dragged the baron’s body out of the courtroom and threw it into the crowd of

onlookers. They dispersed, taking the body with them. I somewhat feared we had given them a martyr, but it wasn't my problem anymore. I flew back to the embassy, not wanting to risk my back to a stranger right then.

I got back to the embassy with little fanfare but from Taya, who repeated the previous day's performance of jumping in my arms. I was really hoping I didn't accidentally drill dependency issues into her.

The next few days were a whirlwind of nothing for any of us at the embassy and change and excitement for the rest of the city. With the baron's death and the removal of all his supporters from any real seat of power, most of the vestiges of pro-slave society quickly evaporated for fear of receiving the same punishment. That doesn't mean the remnants were pro-Equestria, but at least they weren't completely pissed at Celestia for stepping in.