

Chapter Seventeen—Coming down from the high of war

Celestia teleported me and Spike to a city that was called Ramla. The main population of that place was apparently sheep. I honestly wanted to make a joke about that, but I couldn't find it in me. I just wanted to get healed and get some undisturbed sleep. And then some food.

When we arrived, it was to some manner of bedroom. We were the only ones there at the time.

"Do you want me to take care of those scars on your face?" Celestia sweetly asked before I could do much looking around.

I gave her a dead look. "There's a lot more wrong with me than my face, Celestia," I answered.

She raised an eyebrow and kept her smile. "Did you get a few scratches playing with your cat friend?" she asked. "I'm sure Luna would—What are you doing?" I was taking my shirt off.

She gasped in horror. Spike echoed it.

My entire back was a mass of scars, some of which might have been leaking blood. There was a brand on my chest. I had a tattoo on one shoulder. There was more that I don't want to talk about.

"Whenever you're done staring," I said. It all hurt. A lot. There were times I had to be dragged behind some of the slaves because I just couldn't move. I still haven't figured out how I was able to do so many raids. I like to think it was for Spike; I figured if I didn't help he would be hurt. It's one thing to not let Kat rape me. It's another thing to tell Jocasta no.

Celestia stopped gaping and rushed to my side. Her horn glowed a beautiful gold and gave me sweet release from the pain. She backed away from me with a confused look on her face.

Before she could say anything I pulled out my dagger. "Get ready to heal me some more," I warned. "I'm not leaving this filthy thing on my skin." I put the dagger to the tattoo, but Celestia stopped me with magic.

"We have a better way of dealing with that," she said, her voice strained. "We'll do it later. What happened to you?"

I looked down at Spike, who was still staring at my body in horror. I looked back up to Celestia. "I fell down some stairs. We'll *never* speak of this again."

"Nav, stairs don't do that to a pony!" Spike finally spoke up. "I knew you were hurt from your raids, but I never knew it was *that* bad!"

I looked at him. "I think you remember the agreement we made to never speak of this again," I said. "Stop it." He blinked. I turned back to Celestia. "I need a bed."

She looked like she was about to cry. "I didn't know they were torturing you, Nav..." she whispered. She saw my face harden and she sighed. "Take this bed. There was going to be a feast of sorts to welcome you back, but I think you need this more. Spike, come with me."

He gulped and gave me one last look before hesitantly following her out. I was in bed before they got out the door and asleep before they were a few steps away.

I woke up from what I later learned was nearly twenty hours of sleep. Being healed takes a lot out of someone, and my previous sleep deprivation, dehydration, blood loss, and hunger did a serious number on me as well.

Needless to say, I woke up feeling terrible. More so when I found I went to bed with all of my weapons on me, so I had a dagger jabbed in my side the entire time. And I was also terrified, given that I had no idea where the hell I was. A quick look around showed me I was safe, thankfully. The room was well-furnished, a few steps down from what I would call opulent. I saw a heavily curtained window, but I didn't feel like checking it out.

Of course, given that I had just spent over a month living in a tent, all that it took for a room to be nice was a bed and no crazy cat lady doing terrifying things to me. I achingly got to my feet, pulled the knife away from my stomach so it didn't hit the spot where it had been all night, and began to stretch. With my body limbered and a little less sore, I looked around and quickly found a bathroom. There, I took the most glorious shower I had ever had, though a lot of the water ended up in my mouth instead of on my body. I was still thirsty as hell, after all.

When I got as much of the dirt, grime, shame, and blood off of me as I could, I got out. I didn't have any change of clothes since I was in a large hurry to get away from the cats, so it was with much disappointment that I put on the nasty pants that took me through the deserts. I didn't bother with a shirt; no one here but Spike, Celestia, and Twilight knew that I even wore one.

Then I looked down and noticed my unwanted tattoo and put the shirt on.

I settled on the bed with a sigh. Some of what Kat did to me... I would probably never mentally recover from some of it. Some of what I was forced to do I would also probably not recover from. But such is life, I suppose.

I was enjoying the shade from being inside and the sensation of not moving for what was probably an hour when there was a gentle knocking at my door. I pushed myself out of bed and answered it, finding myself face-to-air with a small sheep. I suppose for her it was face-to-stomach. "Yes?" I whispered, my voice a bit unused to speaking. I coughed and tried again, sounding much louder.

The sheep jumped when I coughed. "The princess sent me here to see if you needed anything," she answered, eyes downcast.

"Food and clothes. And something to drink. I haven't eaten much of anything in days and this is the only pair of clothing I have. After that, I'll need a way to remove a tattoo." I didn't expect clothing and the tattoo removal any time soon, honestly. If it meant getting food, I didn't care. I could feel a hole gnawing its way through my stomach.

Fifteen minutes later, I was wondering why I even fucking bothered getting out of bed. I looked down at the plate of flowers. Then up at the sheep. Then back down. "I can't eat this," I finally said, looking up again. "Where are the kitchens? I'll just go loot them instead."

She smiled shee—No, I'm not going to resort to puns. She smiled nervously. "They're quite good, I can assure you."

I sighed and rubbed my temple. "My biology makes eating flowers bad for me. If I ate these, I would be sick and could possibly die. I forgot that this would be a problem, since I've been living among carnivores for so long." She blanched at that, but I kept going, "I need to get to the kitchens so I can get something I can eat."

She still didn't look that happy. "The princess wanted you to stay here for a little while longer..."

I pulled out my knife. "I can eat sheep, if you're interested in me staying here."

She led me to the kitchen at a pace that was somewhat hard to keep up with. I saw quite a few ponies around, but most of them were guards. A few of them nodded to me.

When I got to the kitchen, I promptly looted the shit out of it. By which I mean I showed up, scared the staff on accident, and poked around until they asked me what I wanted. I grabbed some stuff and was thrown out the kitchen into a small cafeteria, where I was the only one there. Leftover stew—vegetable, sadly—bread, a few apples... I didn't feel that great when I finished, but by God I wasn't hungry anymore. Thankfully, the cafeteria I was shown to didn't make me wash my own dishes, so I just found the little sheep staring at me fearfully from the door and had her lead me back.

"I'm not really going to eat you," I said on the way. She flinched. "And I can't read minds either." She flinched again. "I don't eat things that can talk, and I would never be the only one eating meat among a large group of herbivores." That didn't seem to calm her down too much, but I also didn't really care.

"The princess is going to kill me," she finally moaned.

"You're still worried about *that*? Jesus, just tell her—if she asks, that is—that I needed to tell the kitchen workers what I could eat. She'll understand. And if she doesn't ask, don't volunteer the information; what she doesn't know can't hurt her."

Thankfully, we got back to my room before anything more was said. When we did, she said, "The princess wishes to invite you to dinner, guest. The meal will begin in eight hours, I believe." She checked a clock in my room and nodded smartly, regaining some of her composure. "If there is anything you require, I—" She gulped. "—I am to be your liaison."

"Anything?" I asked, my voice drooping to what I was taught was seductive.

She gulped again.

I bent down closer to her, close enough that I was able to smell her light strawberry shampoo. "I need," I whispered... And then stood up straight and continued in a regular voice, "Clothes and a way to remove a tattoo. And then I have a few questions."

She let out a small sigh and said with a bit of a frown, "I don't know where I can get clothing your size, but tattoo removal shouldn't be that hard. There's a court unicorn in the palace that claims to know you. I bet she could do it."

"It has been a while since I saw Twilight... But no, she doesn't need to know of this."

Don't mention it to her; it can wait. If you know of either a good tailor or a place I could wash the clothing I have. Either would do. I refuse to go near Celestia again with clothing this dirty; I may be irreverent, but I am not suicidal."

Her eyes lit up a bit. "I can drop your clothes off at the palace laundry room. They should be done fairly quickly."

I looked down at her. She looked up at me, smiling to finally be able to do something useful—or to get away from me for a while.

"I'll be right back," I said, going to the bathroom. I wasn't about to strip in front of her. I took all my clothing off, removed all the hidden weapons, tied a massive pony towel around my waist, draped another around my shoulders so the tattoo would be hidden, and walked back out. I found her staring at me with the same happy expression. "You're way too chipper," I said as I gave her the clothes.

"The princess sent me here personally to help you!" she beamed. And she was bipolar. Maybe she just really wanted to get out of here. Or maybe no one here ever flirted with her.

I didn't care either way. "Bring them back when they're cleaned. I can get more clothing later."

She didn't move. "Can I... see your tattoo?" she asked.

I looked at her. "How old are you?" I finally asked.

She wasn't expecting that question. "Uh... old enough?"

I snorted. "No one's old enough to see this. Even Celestia was horrified. Go on. I'll need you to show me how to get to Twilight when you get back with those cleaned."

"I could do that on the way, you know," she said, still not moving.

I turned my back to her. "See you in an hour or so," I said as I moved to the bed. I heard the door open and shut as I went to the bed. I plopped back down, grateful to be alone in silence once again.

An hour later, I was on my way to Twilight's lab. The sheep had calmed down and was now neither happy nor scared. I was beginning to think she really was bipolar. Thankfully, she didn't put up a fight to take me to Twilight; I think she talked to Celestia or something.

Apparently, Twilight's room was clear across the palace, because it took us nearly ten minutes of walking to get there. We passed several large windows on the way, giving me a nice look at the city. It was a pretty cool place, and I saw herbivores of all races walking its streets. There was a coastline off in the distance.

When we got to Twilight's room, I sent the servant chick on her way. I found that Twilight had a pretty nice pad, much nicer than the room I was given. Not that I was really complaining, of course; I was happy to have a room at all.

"About time you woke up," Twilight said when she saw me walk in. She pointed a hoof at a morose looking Spike and said, "He's been whining for hours. I don't know what you did to him in that month and a half you spent playing in the desert, but you need to bring him back to

his senses.”

My hands balled into fists at her wording. Spike was glaring at her and I probably was too. “Playing?” I whispered. She looked at me like I was an idiot. “Tell that to the cats I killed—and the cats I saved,” I said louder. She flinched. “Spike, let’s go. We’ll be back before the feast, Twilight.”

“Where are you going?” she demanded. I looked at her as Spike came to my side.

“Out,” I answered.

We turned to go. “Out where?” she asked.

“To do guy things,” I said as I opened the door. She sniffed but didn’t stop us. I was hoping this meeting would be a lot happier, but if she was going to be like that... So be it.

We were a few feet down the hall when Spike asked, “So where are we going, anyway?”

“Fuck if I know. I woke up a few hours ago and haven’t gone anywhere but my room and the kitchens. If you’ve found anywhere nice and peaceful to sit and talk, we can go there.”

I saw him shrugging out of the corner of my eye. “When I left you, the princess took me to the throne room, where we talked about... some things. Ever since then, I’ve been with Twilight.”

“Then let’s just head to my room.” I started retracing the steps to get there. “Why does Twilight think you’re sulking?” I looked down and noticed him having a bit of a hard time keeping up. I picked him up and gave him a piggy-back ride.

He sighed and leaned over onto my head. “There’s no meat here,” he finally said. “And no gems,” he hastily tacked on. “I had to eat vegetable stew last night! After so long of eating meat, it was...” I felt him shiver slightly. “Not that great.”

It might have been near starvation talking, but I thought it was pretty good. “We’re back in herbivore territory, Spike. We’re not going to get anywhere by eating meat in front of them. Maybe when we get back home I’ll teach you how to hunt.” He perked up a bit at that. “I think my crossbow might have a bit too much of a kick for you to use, but it’ll still do you good to learn.”

We talked a bit about hunting on the way to my room. The walk between the two rooms seems to take much less time when you’re actually talking to a friend. We made it there quickly enough. Thankfully, nothing had been disturbed. I set Spike down and we sat in silence for a moment.

“Nav, about...” He stopped, looking at me. I saw his eyes flick to where he knew I was tattooed. He sighed and shook his head. “What happened?”

“Kat happened,” I answered. “And that is all you need to know. I never want you to ask about it and I never want to hear you bring it up again.” He didn’t look that pleased with the answer, but it was all he was going to get. I started searching the room, since I hadn’t actually looked around before. “Look around, see if you can find anything worth noting,” I said.

He shook his head, but did so. “So what are we looking for?” he finally asked.

“Money. Food. Anything, really. I don’t know if Celestia prepped these rooms for me or

not, but if there's money here I'm planning on going into town and finding a tailor."

"And what if the money we find wasn't meant for you?" he asked.

I scoffed. "What are they going to do, send me back to Egypt? Flog me? *Brand* me?" I sniffed. "There's not much they can do to me that hasn't been done."

He looked at me with a bit of concern before turning back to the search. With a grunt he hefted a small bag and pulled the strings. "I found a few bits," he said, tossing the bag up lightly. I held my hand out and he tossed the bag to me.

I checked it. "Should be enough," I said with a small nod. "Now, about Twilight," I started, only to be stopped by a knock at the door.

"Navarone, are you in there?" I heard Celestia's voice ring out.

I turned to Spike and put a finger to my lips. I didn't want to talk to Celestia just yet, because I knew what she would want to talk about. I quietly walked to my window and peeled the curtain back. I smiled at what I saw: My room was facing away from the palace and we were on the second or third floor. I eagerly wrenched the windows open, thanking whoever was listening to my wordless pleas that the hinges were silent. I motioned to Spike, who came over to me with a questioning look.

I put the bag in a pocket and picked Spike up without a word. I heard a knock again and without a thought I defenestrated myself, letting my wings unfurl.

"Why are we running from the princess?" Spike finally asked when we were a few feet out the window.

"We're not," I answered. "We're flying from her. And I consider it more of a tactical retreat than a case of 'running away.' I simply don't wish to talk to her right now, and opening the door would require doing so."

"That sounds an awful lot like running away, Nav," he said doubtfully.

I smiled. "It's all about perspective. Honestly, I'm surprised she even took the time to come see me. Kind of makes me feel bad about this, but then I remember that I just did the most painful thing in my life for her. Least she can do is wait a few damn hours."

"Well when you put it that way... It still makes you seem kind of like a jerk."

We were pretty low to the ground now, and getting close to what I considered a decent landing point, but I still had time to say, "A fall from this height might not kill you, but that just means it'll hurt longer." He just shook his head. It's good that he didn't keep going, since I had no intention of dropping him.

I landed with a practiced ease and set Spike down. We were in a large square in the city proper, and there was quite a large group of sheep staring at us in what was probably fear. *Take me to your leader! Wait, I'm running from her...* I sighed inwardly. Things are never as easy as they are in the movies.

I looked down at Spike who was looking at the sheep with what looked like hunger in his eyes. "Spike, how long has it been since you ate?" I asked.

He blinked and looked away from the sheep. "Uh... Last night, probably. I didn't feel up

to eating breakfast...”

I stuck my hand in my pocket and fingered the bag of coins. *Enough to get food, if nothing else.* “Let’s find a bazaar or something and get you some food, then. I’m not going to have you...” I looked at the crowd that was still staring at us in fear. I decided against saying what I was going to say. “Let’s go.”

“Can we find some meat?” he asked, hunger evident in his voice. I closed my eyes so I didn’t have to see everyone in the audience flinch.

“Dammit, Spike...” I grabbed him and put him over my shoulder. “Watch my back. If one of them tries to come at me, let me know.” So I got a bit paranoid in Egypt. I’m okay with that.

You know, I kind of forgot there was a whole starvation thing going on. I passed several stalls with withered fruit and all wanted more than I was willing to pay. We were looking for nearly an hour when I leaned against a side wall, Spike at my side.

“Celestia is going to starve me back to the castle, like it or not,” I wearily said. I actually didn’t have a problem with that. She was usually fun to talk to, and living in the royal seat of power has all manner of benefits. But I liked having options if I needed to get somewhere else. Still, living near the coast gave me options. “If it comes down to it, I’ll teach you how to fish,” I finally said. Spike didn’t say anything. He was too busy watching the crowds of passing sheep with hunger in his eyes.

The sheep were relatively used to us now, but many of them still stopped and stared until they noticed that Spike was staring back with a terrifying expression. He might be a *baby* dragon, but he was still a predator, and his time with the cats gave him a taste for meat. When I looked into his eyes now, I saw more of a dangerous glint in them. It looked less like he was going to talk to someone and more like he was going to hunt them down and make them a little snack.

I was so proud.

Now because that seems perhaps cruel, let me put this in perspective for you. Spike is a motherfucking dragon. A. Dragon. The kings of the mythology of my world. And he is working as a servant for a unicorn. A unicorn is the living embodiment of purity in my world. They only appear for virgins and ha-ha laugh it up at my first pony encounter all you want, it’s fucking true. So a dragon out of legends born of blood and fire is a servant to a symbol of weakness and purity. That just seems fucked up to me.

Don’t get me wrong: I think it’s cool that he’s friends with all of the ponies, but it still doesn’t seem right that he’s Twilight’s assistant. Maybe I’m just biased from my legends and myths, though; he certainly seemed happy enough, back then.

I shook myself. “Spike, we aren’t going to find any affordable food. Let’s go find a tailor.”

He looked at one young ram. “I don’t know, Nav. I see plenty of easy food out there.”

I looked at him in disgust. “If you talk about eating something that can talk one more time, I’m going to tell Twilight. It’s one thing to eat animals that aren’t sapient, but when you

start eating things that think, there's a problem."

He looked up to me in shock. "How do you know what we were eating in Egypt wasn't... that word you used?"

I shrugged. "I didn't kill it and I would have starved if I didn't eat it. I would never willingly kill and eat something that is smart enough to communicate with me. Ignorance, however, is bliss. Now let's stop talking about this before one of these damn sheep calls the guards." He sighed as I put him back on my back. "Now you know how I've felt all this time," I said as a means of consolation. He didn't answer.

Unfortunately, I wasn't able to find a tailor willing to accommodate me. I talked to most of the damn tailors in the city, too. The most frequent answer I heard was a gentle no. A few of them let their eyes flick to Spike before saying no. I tried leaving him outside once to see if the result was different, and it wasn't.

So four hours later, we began making our way back to the castle.

"What was the point of that, Nav?" Spike asked as we trudged our way up the stairs of an inn, a sheep shaking in fear leading the way ahead of us.

"It got us away from Twilight and Celestia for a few hours," I sadly answered.

"You never did say why you were avoiding her."

I didn't know which 'her' he meant. "I don't want to talk to Celestia and Twilight was being a bitch." I think Spike smiled at that, but he was behind me so I couldn't tell.

The sheep turned to look at me. "Y-y-you know the p-p-p-princess?" he squeaked.

"Yeah, we both do," I answered. "She's my boss and she's his boss's boss. Pretty nice lady, for the most part."

I thought the sheep was terrified before. Now he was barely able to stand.

Thankfully, we quickly reached the door leading to the roof. The sheep did everything he could but shove us out to get us outside, and he slammed the door behind us. I looked out over the city and sighed. "This world sucks, Spike," I finally said.

He snorted. "Better than the one you left behind," he answered. That was a lot more sagely than anything I would have expected from him.

I didn't have an answer, so I just picked him up and jumped off the roof, letting my wings carry us back to the palace.

Thankfully, my window was still open. It was a lot easier to jump out of than it was to land in, but I managed it with a liberal dose of cursing and climbing. There was a note on my pillow. I set Spike down and checked it.

'I'm letting you get away with this because of what you went through. If you ever do it again, I will not let you get two meters before bringing you back—and if you don't have a good excuse, you better be kneeling. Meet me in the throne room when you are ready to stop sulking – C'

About what I expected, all things considered. I showed it to Spike. He read it quickly and shrugged. "Are you really surprised?" he asked.

“Nope. I’m just glad I’m too useful to her to be punished too severely.” I paused for a moment. “I wonder why she’s in the throne room. Isn’t she supposed to be fixing the weather or something?”

Spike shrugged. “Twilight told me that today is an off day. She was in one of her moods because Princess Celestia refuses to let her work on this day of the week. The sheep believe it has some special significance or something.”

Well, we *are* in Israel. Lamb of God and all that.

“You won’t hear me complaining,” I said. “Do you think I’m ready to stop sulking? I feel like sulking some more, but I don’t know if Celestia would really let me.”

He rolled his eyes and pointed at the door. I gave a small sigh and snapped my fingers in disappointment.

“Well, she didn’t say I couldn’t bring an arbitrator,” I said. “And I have no idea where the throne room is. You want to sit in on a meeting between Celestia and the foreign ambassador of the humans?”

“Not really,” he sighed. “But I also don’t feel like going back to Twilight.”

I pulled out one of my coins. “Heads for Twilight, tai—Wait.” I looked at the coin. One side had the sun and the other side had the moon. “For fuck’s sake! Sun for Celestia, moon for Twilight.” I flipped it and let it fly for a moment before snatching it out of the air. He watched it with his purple eyes. “Now, when it was in the air which side did you want it to land on?”

He blinked. “The sun,” he finally said. I opened my hand to see the moon facing up.

I smiled down at him. “That’s how you tell what you really want to do. And now that you know the trick, I can tell you that it only works until you know it. Lead the way,” I finished with a wave of my arm.

He took the lead, shaking his head in confusion. It didn’t take us long to get there, and we passed increasing numbers of guards and servants on the way. When we got to the entrance to the throne room, I expected to be patted down for weapons. I was kind of surprised when they let us right in. Then I remembered that this was Celestia. She was pretty much the sun goddess and an incredibly powerful mage. Sure, a knife can cut her down... but good luck using it on her.

Spike and I walked down the long carpet leading up to Celestia, sitting in her throne and attended by a mix of sheep and ponies. When we got to within the appropriate distance expected of a visitor of royalty, we stopped. Spike stood at my side, looking around. I stood at a general at-ease position, looking at Celestia’s servants.

One of them, a sheep in what looked like dyed wool clothing, glared at me. “Are you not going to bow, creature?” she asked harshly. “This is your princess!”

I looked at Celestia to see if she would speak up. She seemed content to watch with that little smile she always wears. I looked back at the sheep. “I make no obeisance to any living thing, sheep. Celestia—” All the sheep in the room flinched when I said her name. “—has earned my respect, but I do not bow.”

The sheep I was speaking to gave me a look of hate for that, and I’m pretty sure if she

was a guy she would have challenged me to some manner of duel. She opened her mouth again, but Celestia cut her off, “I don’t suppose you would think to ask *why* he doesn’t bow, would you?”

The sheep changed what she was going to say and instead hissed out, “Why, creature?”

I smiled darkly. “Where I came from, we killed our kings and queens—and princes and princesses—when they decided they wanted more power than was appropriate. I’ve lived in a nation without a monarch all of my life. Royal blood sheds just as easily as commoner blood, so there’s no reason to respect it more. I respect Celestia for being wise and kind, but the title of princess means nothing to me.”

Most of the people in that room were quite shocked at that. I think the only ones that weren’t were me and Celestia. Even Spike was a little off-put—I don’t think he ever knew why I was so callous.

“Enough about me,” I said, waking everyone from their reverie of horror. “I believe I was called here for a reason.”

Celestia was still wearing her little smile. “I was going to do this in a more private area, but since you disappeared on me, I suppose we’ll have to do it here. Remove your shirt, Navarone,” she said.

The looks of horror moved to her now instead of me. I smirked and took it off. I knew she was trying to shame me, but I wasn’t going to give her the satisfaction of blushing. I looked at the guards. “Come now, soldiers: If she wanted to seduce me, she knows where I sleep. She just wishes to rid me of a nasty blight.”

They turned and saw the tattoo on me. Those that weren’t blushing before were now. This day was turning out to be very odd for them, it seemed. Celestia beckoned me closer and I came forward. She reached her horn out and gently pressed it on the area with the horrid thing. It slowly ripped out of my skin, the ink collecting around her horn. When it was all pulled out, she pushed the ink into a blob and pulled a bottle of ink over from a small writing table and let the ink flow into it. I backed away and put my shirt on.

“Painless, as I promised,” Celestia said.

“My method would have been faster,” I replied, stroking a hand over the handle of the dagger in my belt. “Still, a tattoo removal back where I came from would cost me quite a bit. Thank you.”

Her little smile deepened a bit. “No pony said this was to be free, Navarone,” she said. “You should know to ask for prices before receiving a service.”

I shrugged. “Whatever the price is, I’ve been through worse. Being brutally raped every night for a week at the hand of a very sadistic cat bitch gives a man perspective when it comes to high prices.”

She flinched slightly at the mention of that, and I knew I would hear words from Spike on that later. Celestia’s smile never wavered, though. “My price will not be that steep, I believe. Unless, of course, you consider dinner to be a terrifying ordeal.”

“Dinner would be nice,” I answered. “I know Spike, at least, has been hungry. Unless,” I said with a raised eyebrow and a smile of my own, “you meant this to be more of a private affair?”

“There will be others there, of course,” she said. Man, Celestia is really good at this—nothing I say trips her up! Though, she’s also had a few thousand years of experience. “If, however, you *are* interested in a more private meal, I’m sure something can be arranged...”

She almost tripped me up there. But... “I’m afraid I’ll have to decline, Celestia,” I said with a weary shake of my head. “I have someone waiting for me back home, and I fear she would be most displeased with me if she found I was cavorting with another—by choice, that is.” I think ‘displeased’ might be an understatement of what Luna would be if she found I was trying things with her sister.

Her smile dropped and her eyes narrowed. “Remember that the next time you stoop to flirting with the maids.”

I sniffed. “Sheep are uglier than ponies. I wasn’t flirting, I was asking for clothes. It’s hardly my fault if she had a flight of youthful naiveté and misconstrued it.” I think I insulted pretty much every female in the room with that statement. I was okay with that. Either way, I’m pretty sure Celestia knew what I did to the poor chick, even though I honestly don’t consider that flirting.

She was giving me the Princess Look. If I didn’t know better, I would think she was going to summon an executioner. “Don’t discuss your adventures with Twilight—or anypony else—until we have a talk in private, Navarone,” she finally said. “You are both dismissed.”

I nodded and turned to go. Spike followed me out of the throne room. “That went well,” I said as the doors shut behind us.

He looked up at me in fear. “Well?” he croaked. “You’re lucky she didn’t banish you!”

I wanted to ruffle his hair, but he didn’t have any. “I’m too useful to be banished,” I finally said. “I’ll manage it someday, but I think that for now she needs me.” The guards at the door didn’t look that happy about that statement, but I also didn’t care. We moved down the halls a ways and I asked, “Where to now?”

He sighed.

I said, “I know you don’t want to, but sooner or later you’re going to have to see her. You are still Twilight’s assistant, even if she is being annoying right now. After Celestia has her little talk with me, I’ll have a talk with Twilight and things might get better. Until then, though, you’re going to have to put up with her. If nothing else, I’ll be there as a buffer for you.”

“I don’t know, Nav...”

“Look, if I have to deal with Celestia breathing down my neck after the *hell* I went through for her, you can deal with Twilight being annoying after the ‘adventure’ you had.”

He turned and started down the hall. I followed. After a moment, he spoke up, “It’s not just that, Nav. She’s... Well, the only caretaker I’ve ever known, really. But she didn’t tell me so much about myself! I never even knew I could eat meat! I never knew the desert climate felt so

good. I never knew being around warlike ponies would feel so natural. What else could she be hiding from me, Nav?”

“I don’t know, Spike. Hell, in my world, the dragons of legend are warlike and powerful, often raiding villages and the like for food and riches. They are usually considered evil, but there are some notable exceptions. And of course there are some noble dragons as well. We have all manner of stuff on them back where I come from. We also have plenty of legends on unicorns and pegasi, and I know most of it doesn’t fit, so take what I tell you of dragons with a grain of salt.”

He sighed again. “Maybe there are books back home that can tell me more.”

“Dude, maybe there are books *here* that can tell you more. You never know until you start searching.”

He looked up at me, hope in his eyes. “Can you help me look?”

“If I have time, yeah. I don’t know what Celestia is going to be having me doing. I’m sure Twilight would help you as well, if you told her why you were looking.”

He shook his head. “You think she’ll help me find information that she’s been hiding from me? If anything, she’ll go straight to the correct books, pretend to look through them, and then discard them while telling me they’re useless!”

“That’s assuming she’s actually hiding this from you and isn’t just ignorant. I mean, I can’t imagine too many ponies would be willing to try to interview a dragon. There might not be much information on you guys.”

“Maybe I’ll have to find out some other way... Still, it doesn’t hurt to look.”

We were silent for a moment. He hesitantly asked, “So what do your legends say about... girl dragons?”

“Mostly nothing,” I answered. “Or at least, nothing that I know of. A lot of stories have male dragons kidnapping princesses and the like, but the reason is usually because she’s considered beautiful and a treasure worth having, and the dragon covets her for that reason. A few legends have female dragons falling in love with male humans, but again the reasoning is rarely explained. In the few legends there are of them, females are often described as graceful and beautiful and very, very deadly. I don’t know anything else.”

The rest of the walk to Twilight’s room was in silence. When we got there, though... “Where have you two been?” Twilight demanded in an angry tone.

Spike and I looked at her. I turned to him. “Wait outside for a moment.” He left without a word. Twilight stared daggers at me. When the door clicked closed, I turned to her. “Are you in heat?”

Her eyes softened and she gave a bright red blush. “That’s personal!”

I nodded slowly. “That explains a lot.” It did, actually. I thought back over all the little episodes of insanity she went through often, and many of them coincided with what her estrus cycle probably was. I’ve noticed that estrus doesn’t seem to be synchronized for the ponies and is instead more like a human girl’s period, with a whole lot more horniness. “I think Spike will be

staying with me for a few days while you deal with this. We just got back from some seriously trying times, and I don't think it would be a good idea for him to be around a considerably more volatile you."

She was still blushing heavily, but she whispered, "That might be... best." At least she had an excuse for her bitchiness. I nodded and turned to go. "Nav, wait..." I turned back to her. It looked like she really wanted to say something, but after a moment she seemed to deflate. "Don't tell anypony about this, please."

"Don't worry, Twilight. I know how to be discreet when I need to be. If anyone asks, just tell them Spike has been hanging around me for so long he wants to keep doing so."

She gave a hesitant nod. "One more thing," she said suddenly, as though just thinking of it. "Here's your bag." She used her magic to throw my bag of clothes from Equestria at me. I checked it. Most of the clothes I had brought were in there. They were all way, way too big on me now, but they were still better than wearing the same damn thing every day.

I nodded at her. "Thanks, Twilight." She smiled. I turned and left the room. I found Spike looking around innocently. I knew he had been listening at the door. Still, I had to pretend. "You're going to be staying with me for a few days," I told him as I pulled the door shut behind me. "Just until we think you're more acclimatized to things here." We started walking back to my room.

He shrugged. "I'm okay with that. I'm more used to sleeping on a bed anyway, now."

"If you're going to be sleeping in that bed, it'll be because I'm next to you. I'm not sleeping on the floor just so you can have the bed to yourself."

"I know you're used to sharing a bed anyway," he said. My eyes shot down at him in surprise, which quickly turned to anger, which melted to ambivalence when I realized he didn't mean anything by that. "I don't know what happened to your other bed, but I know you ended up having to sleep next to Kat." Well, that was sort of true; we didn't do too much sleeping. He continued, "I just hope you don't have too many more nightmares." He shuddered slightly. "I heard you screaming, one night."

I nodded. "I'm glad you're innocent, Spike."

He looked up at me as though remembering something. "Nav, what does... rape mean?"

I sighed. "Don't worry about it. And don't ask anyone else. Pretend you never even heard it."

"Okay... So what was that on your shoulder?"

I unconsciously rubbed at the spot where the filthy thing was. "Just a bad memory, is all. Don't worry about it either, and don't tell anyone you saw it."

"Nav, why are you hiding things from me?"

"You'll feel bad if I tell you," I cautioned.

"I'd rather feel bad than not know."

"Because what was done to me was the worst crime possible for one living thing to commit against another, and you don't need to know about that." He stopped walking. I kept

going.

After a moment he caught up. “And you’re just... okay with that?” he asked in a quiet voice.

“Nope. I’m pretty sure my mind is still in shock. After what I went through and the things I did, I’ll probably never have a comfortable night’s sleep again and there’s a decent chance I’ll have flashbacks forever.”

“Then why did you...” He stopped again, probably getting it. “This is all my fault!”

“Did I say that?” I asked, stopping and turning to him. He looked down, unable to meet my blank gaze. “Don’t put words in my mouth, Spike. It wasn’t your fault. It was the fault of those that used you. Never blame yourself for something you have no control over, and never blame someone else for something they have no control over.”

He still couldn’t look up.

“Now you know why I didn’t want to tell you,” I said. He didn’t move. I walked up to him, picked him up, put him over my shoulders, and continued the walk to my room.

Over the next few days, I got more clothes, Twilight’s estrus cycle slowly petered out, Spike stopped staying with me, and I didn’t see Celestia again.

I’m pretty sure Celestia sent messages out to all the tailors in the city to refuse me service, though I’m not certain why. My first guess was so that she could keep me dependent on her; after everything I went through, she wanted to make sure I knew I had nowhere else to go.

I threw that idea out, because Celestia isn’t a bitch and she has shown me *mostly* nothing but kindness. I know her mind is probably really cold and calculating, but for the most part, I believe she does what she does out of kindness.

My second idea was that she just didn’t want me to waste money. But since the only money I had was given to me by her... I threw that idea out, too.

The third idea was that she didn’t want me outside of the palace, in which case she pretty much fucked up big time, since Spike and I left often in those days.

I don’t really suppose it matters. Either way, I got more clothes and they were all free and relatively well-fitting, despite my shrunken frame. And since Celestia never came by to talk, I never got to ask her why. And that’s assuming she actually was the one that sent the message out, or if there was a message at all. It might all have been a figment of my paranoia.

Oh, and in case you’re wondering, the dinner went well. I was celebrated as some manner of Equestrian hero or something and the ‘true’ fight to save the area was officially begun. Namely, getting food and rain to the people that needed it. That wasn’t my problem or my field of expertise, but I knew I’d probably still end up busy because of it.

Don’t get me wrong: Celestia and Twilight hadn’t been idle in the month I was away. Twilight was doing all manner of research into crop productions and whatnot, who needed what and where and when and all that crap. Whenever she brought that up to me, I told her to either shut up or to change the topic. Celestia was apparently sending shitloads—well, Twilight told me

the actual unit of measurement, but I didn't think it was worth remembering—of magic into the atmosphere to summon enough water to send everywhere it was needed. I don't know why they didn't just use the ocean, but I don't think this world has evaporation.

No, I don't know how rain is created in places where there are no ponies. Look, even *I* realize that there are some things that just are never going to make sense to me. Laws of reality are more like suggestions around here. I mean, gravity? Fuck that, I'm a human with wings that can fly. No way that shit should work. Maybe one day I'll just start saying 'because magic.'

Anyway, they were doing all that while I was in Egypt. They finished their stuff around the time I was nearing the end of my labors. With the border secure, the way was clear to begin the true work.

A day after Spike left, I got a visit from Shining Armor. I was in my room trying to figure out a way to drown my memories without booze when he opened the door with no preamble and just stared at me.

"Can I help you?" I asked, tightly gripping the dagger I had been considering cu—well, that's not important.

"Tell me about your... relationship... with my sister, human," he demanded.

I gave him a dead look with my bloodshot eyes. "She's a friend," I said, giving him no emotion in my voice. That said, I dropped my gaze back down to the dagger, expecting him to leave.

"Is that all you see her as?" he asked, a bit of... concern, perhaps, in his voice.

I looked back up, surprised he was still there. "Yes. What did you think I saw her as? A... special somepony, I believe you people call it?" I snorted. "That would be a match made in hell."

He shifted his stance a bit. "You live with her," he commented.

"I have nowhere else to go and I like living in a library among books. She is a decent enough roommate, if occasionally demanding. I help as I can and stay out of the way when I can't. We are friends and nothing more." I looked back down to the knife.

"And if she wanted more?" he asked.

"I would find somewhere else to live," I answered without looking back up.

"Look at me." I looked up at him again. "Do you know why I am a captain of the royal guard?"

I shrugged. "You probably know how to kick ass the best. Or you're smarter than the other rabble that is typically let into the guard. One or the other."

"I can fight well, yes. But it was my magic that really got me the position." *Why do earth ponies even bother?* Seriously, I've yet to see a single one other than the mayor of Ponyville in any manner of power. Even Applejack got showed up by Twilight in Applejack's special talent—while Applejack can kick a tree and make apples rain down, Twilight can take an entire orchard of apples in one go in the same amount of time.

“Congratulations,” I drily answered. He growled lightly but before he could say anything, I continued, “I am not going to date your sister. I do not *want* to date your sister. I don’t know how I can make that any clearer.”

He sighed. “You really aren’t making this easy on me.” I blinked, and then it all became a clear to me. He was probably sent here by either Twilight or Celestia to try to befriend me.

“Who sent you?” I asked.

He gave a sheepish smile. “Twily—Er, Twilight. She thinks you’re in a bad mood or that you’re not telling her something or something like that. She sent me to find out what and why.”

“The what can’t be told. The why is that Celestia told me not to. Some things shouldn’t be heard by the ears of those that are still innocent—or any ears at all, really. And if she thinks I am in a bad mood, well, after what I went through, I think it might be a bit justified.” I stood, sheathed my dagger, and walked to the window. I put my hands on the sill, leaning and watching the city.

After a moment, he finally asked, “Well, what did you go through?”

“I’m not allowed to talk about it,” I answered without turning. “Nor do I particularly want to. There are a small number of people I would like to discuss it with. One of them is currently ignoring me. The others are... inaccessible.” I don’t think I ever missed my family as much as I did in that small period of time.

“As much as Twilight seems to like you, I think you can trust her,” he said.

“I *can* trust her, but this isn’t something to burden her with. Besides, as I said, I can’t tell her yet anyway.”

“You do know the princess holds court every day, right? You could talk to her any day.”

You’re not that smart, are you? “If she orders me to not talk about something, I do not think she would appreciate me talking about something in front of all of her guards and the courtiers that surround her. I believe it would be best to wait for her to come to me, so I know she is ready to discuss it.”

He was about to respond when my door slammed open. Before the sound finished reverberating across the room, one of my knives was already on its way to the person standing in the open door. It stopped an inch in front of Twilight’s nose, hanging in a pale blue aura. It dropped after a moment.

I turned back to the window. “Knock next time,” I said, leaning back to my original position.

“You... you almost killed her!” Shining Armor said, more than a little shocked.

“Reflex,” I answered, not looking at either of them. I *did* almost kill her, though. That was not a good thing.

“It’s... it’s alright, brother,” Twilight whispered.

“No, it’s not,” Shining Armor and I both said at the same time. I turned to them. “I am not used to being around ponies anymore,” I said. “Twilight, you are going to safe-guard my weapons until I am. I will not risk hurting any of you.” I pulled the knife off my belt and let it hit

the floor. I pulled my shirt off and unbuckled the two belts of throwing knives I had on me and let them hit the floor as well. As an afterthought, I went over to one of the drawers in my room and pulled out another dagger and threw that on the little pile.

“Nav, this is... unnecessary. It was just one incident!” Twilight said.

“One incident that almost killed you, Twily!” Shining Armor answered.

“He’s right,” I said. “I should be safe here. I do not need these weapons, so I will not have them until I stop jumping at shadows.” And given what I was thinking about doing before Shining Armor walked in, I probably didn’t need them around for my own sake.

“In that case... Aren’t you forgetting one?”

I flinched slightly. With a sigh, I pulled the crossbow off the little sling I had on my bedpost for it and added it to the pile. “Just keep them all safe,” I said. “Those things took me through a lot, and I have a depressing feeling that I’ll need them again.”

“Don’t worry Nav. They’ll be fine.” There was a lull in the conversation as I walked back over to the window. “So what were you two talking about?”

“Oh, nothing,” Shining Armor answered. He was a terrible liar.

“We were discussing how you sent your brother to try to get me to talk about something I have been disallowed from discussing,” I said.

I heard a bit of nervous laughter from behind me, coming from two sources.

Twilight said, “It’s just... You seemed so upset the few times I’ve seen you since you got back. And since we haven’t been able to talk easily... I just want to know what’s wrong.”

I turned to face them again. “I understand,” I said. “And it is a noble cause. However, I ask that you stop. I am not supposed to discuss it. Celestia’s orders,” I finished with a shrug. If Celestia’s name didn’t get Twilight to stop, nothing would.

And it worked. Her face dropped a bit and turned slightly red. “I didn’t realize,” she stammered.

“Considering I almost just killed you, I think it’s fair that I tell you to stop worrying about it,” I said with another shrug.

She frowned slightly. “How *did* you react that quickly, though? Both of you, at that! The knife would have hit me before I even realized it, and you stopped it dead in its tracks!” That last was directed at her brother.

“As I said: reflex,” I answered. “It’s something I picked up in Egypt.”

“And I just saw you in danger and acted,” her brother said. I almost smiled at the imagery there. Death and life fighting over a soul, the moves to the dance they fight so deeply ingrained that they come naturally, quick as lightning.

Instead, I just said, “It’s amazing what people can do in times of stress. You’ll have to wait a while to test my reaction speeds, though; I think we might be busy for a while in the coming months.”

“We’ll have *some* off time, Nav! Princess Celestia isn’t so cruel as to make us work every day like that.”

“I don’t know what you do in your off days, Twilight, but I don’t do experiments on mine,” I said.

“He’s right, Twily. You need to lighten up. I thought you were getting better!”

She blushed lightly. “Always looking out for your little sister,” she said with a smile. I turned back to the window so they couldn’t see my facial expressions, or how close I came to crying when she said that. Seeing them together like that brought home some things I thought I had long ago dealt with. *I’ll never see them again.*

I wasn’t in the mood to deal with that shit right then. “I’ll be back when I’m back,” I said right before I jumped out the window. *I run from my problems way too much.* I flew up into the sky and found a nice sized cloud to lie on. There were more and more of them, what with all the magic Celestia was using to make them.

I sighed as I finally got to lie on my back again. It was a nice feeling. It’s a shame I had to ruin it by thinking.

It was a week after I got back that Celestia deigned to visit me again. I know I shouldn’t say it like that, because I know she’s a very busy lady, but still.

Anyway, I was chilling in the palace library, helping Spike go through all manner of books looking for anything about dragons. We were finding nothing. There was plenty of stuff about how dragons are mysterious and dangerous and whatnot, but nothing concrete.

Celestia walked in completely unannounced and stood watching us for some time. It took a while for us to notice her. I was back in the stacks, looking for anything related to dragons. It was a hellish search, given that there was practically no organizational system. Spike was up front, going through everything I had found for him.

I was walking back up front with a few more books for him. “I’m telling you man, this place is terrible.” I saw Celestia and kept walking to Spike, who was darting looks between me and her. “It has less organization than Twilight’s library before I got there. I got what I could, but I wouldn’t expect too much more, and I don’t think I’d expect much from what we have.”

“Does Twilight have you working on a special project?” Celestia asked with her little smile.

“Nope,” I answered.

She waited for more, but I wasn’t going to give her anything; if Twilight *was* hiding stuff from Spike, she was probably doing it because Celestia told her to. “I think we need to have a talk, Navarone,” Celestia finally said.

“What about?” I asked, wiping my dusty hands on my shorts.

“You’re too smart to play dumb,” she replied. “Come along. Let’s not bother Spike’s search.” She turned and I followed her out of the library. We walked in silence to my room.

When we got there, she stepped inside and looked around a bit. The room was pretty much immaculate, since I don’t tend to make messes or collect random crap. I walked over to the open window and leaned back against the windowsill, letting my wings taste the open air. If I

had to, I could fall back and escape just long enough for her to magic me back.

Well, when I put it like that...

She was looking at me with her haunting eyes. "Why didn't you tell me, Navarone? I could have helped you."

"They screened my letters. Now please, I really don't want to talk about this."

Her gaze hardened. "I have never mentioned this before, but there is a spell that gives a unicorn complete access to another's mind. You can either give me the answers to the questions I ask or I will force them from you."

"If you use that spell on me, I. Will. Kill. You. I don't care what repercussions it will have on this world. I don't care if I don't survive the act. You will cease to live if you ever do that to me. The same goes for anyone else that does it to me."

"Then don't make it necessary. What did she do to you?"

I went through the list. It was... painful to talk about. Painful to relive as I thought about it.

"How did you even survive?" she asked, horrified.

"They sometimes gave me painkillers. Sometimes they put something on my cuts. I still think I should be dead. And I also think my mind should be broken after what happened. Killing, rape, violence, all that fun stuff." I shrugged. "Such is life."

She shook her head. "No, Nav. That's not life. That's just terrible." She sighed. "Don't tell any of my little ponies what Kat did to you. You are free to tell them anything else you think they're capable of hearing. If you ever need to talk, come to me and I will make time for you."

I nodded slowly. "I might do that." I was never planning on doing that. I know she was nice and all, but I still felt intimidated by the fact that she could crush my head like a grape without noticing.

"You don't have to be afraid of me, Nav," she said. Great, and now she can read minds.

"I know," is all I said.

She gave me a sad smile. "Then why are you?"

"Because you are dangerous and I know what you're capable of."

"But you also know I would never do any of it to you."

"Unless you thought it was funny, I bet. Or if you thought it was necessary, like what you threatened to do to me a few minutes ago. You are unpredictable and I know what you are capable of, so I think it might be in my best interest to keep a healthy amount of fear."

Her little smile returned. "But not enough fear to disrespect me in front of my servants and guards?"

"Consider that my way of testing the waters. Either way, I want to trust you, but you are making it somewhat hard. Your magic and your power both make it very hard for me to trust you, and your actions and words don't help either."

She raised an eyebrow. "I knew you feared magic, but is your fear of it so deep that it won't allow you to trust somepony that has never made a move to harm you?"

“Yes. You have a power over me that I can’t do anything about. Even knowing that you *might* use it is bad enough for me. I don’t think you will unless I do something to deserve it, but that doesn’t change the fact that you can.”

“Maybe one day you’ll learn,” she said, her voice rather morose. There was nothing I could say to that, not really. She left, going back to wherever she goes. After a little while of sitting and thinking, I went and rejoined Spike.

We didn’t find anything.

Of course, we weren’t quite able to go home yet; there was still the matter of food distribution and dealing with the drought. But that was boring as piss. Like, that was the most boring thing I have ever done in my life.

Basically, I went out with Twilight and a team of observers every few days to see the effects the rain Celestia was producing was having, if any.

We did that for six months. Not once was I actually needed to protect them. Sometimes I defused odd situations, but nothing worth writing down.

So six months later, we went back home. All in all, about eight months had passed since we left. We left for home in September, so I had been in Pony World for about two years. It took us a month after leaving to get back, due to a lot of stops for royal visits.

We definitely missed the Gala, which was instead hosted by Princess Luna. I heard she did reasonably well for herself. All of Twilight’s friends were invited and did attend, though they all reported when we got back that it was boring as hell.

Twilight, Spike, and I stopped a few days in Canterlot. I couldn’t avoid meeting Luna; after almost a year of being alone in the palace, she forged some contacts with the servants. Not a day after we returned, I had an invitation to meet with Princess Luna at my earliest convenience.

A royal invitation. That said ‘at my earliest convenience.’

I didn’t even change, just went in my desert clothes that I had gotten used to wearing; they were comfortable even in the chill of October, and they concealed my body well enough. Since I think over a year had passed since she was imprisoned, she was allowed to see me again.

With the invitation in hand, I had no trouble getting into the palace. Getting to Luna was just as easy, since she had a few servants looking out for me. Her guards refused to leave us alone, thankfully. Which was a good thing; I had no desire to be alone with her anymore.

When we first got together in a lounge-type room, it went well enough. She was polite but distant, as a princess should be. It was basically a debrief on some of my time in Africa and after. I won’t explain what I said, because it’s all detailed before. I didn’t lie, though I didn’t mention some things.

She was even nice enough to send for some minor refreshments. Servants brought in drinks and fruit and set them on the table. She was drinking some manner of juice or something

and I had... a purple bubbling drink. *What the fuck?*

"Luna, what is this?" I asked, holding it up.

She looked at it. "Oh, that's a special concoction I asked the staff to prepare for you. It's an old brew that was popular with ponies back in my day. I never was a fan of it, but most of them were."

"Why is it bubbling?"

She shrugged. "Something to do with the process of making it, I suppose. There's magic involved."

I looked closer at it. "Wait, are those... *hearts?*" A purple drink that had bubbling hearts. *What the hell?*

She nodded. "They are. Another odd property of the drink. It's quite safe to drink."

I looked at it for a bit longer, wondering what the fuck Luna had been smoking and where I could find some.

"Don't you trust me?" she finally asked, batting her pretty cyan eyes at me.

I looked up at her for a moment and then back down to the drink. *I've done stranger.* With a shrug, I downed it...

...And immediately started coughing. I couldn't help it; whatever was in that damn drink felt like it was trying to beat the shit out of my body from the inside. I ended up on my hands and knees on the floor, Luna looking on with concern.

When I couldn't cough any more, the purple stuff shot out of my mouth and flowed back into the glass. Like, I was on the floor and the glass was on the table but it went from my mouth to the glass. I don't know how.

When the last of it was out and the wretches subsided, I managed a sort of kneeling position. "At least we have similar tastes," I croaked. She was looking at the glass of purple stuff in astonishment. I shifted my gaze that way and saw that the stuff was now inky black. The bubbles were spitting up oily skulls. *Badass.*

"That... wasn't supposed to happen," Luna whispered.

I pulled myself to my feet and sat down again. "What *was* supposed to happen?" I asked, my voice feeling a little bit better.

She blinked and turned to me, blushing. "It was supposed to taste good," she answered. "I... I have *never* seen it do that before!"

I poked the glass. "So what is this stuff? Whatever it was before looked like a love potion or something. Now it looks like a hate potion." *Or poison.*

Her horn glowed for a moment and a drop of the liquid jerked into the air. She looked it over. After a moment it slowly turned purple. It dropped back into the glass with a quiet sizzle as the entire glass turned purple again. She nodded with a smile. "It was aligned with hate," she said. "But love conquers all." She beamed at me and I put on a poker face smile in return. *No wonder my body rejected it.*

With the little snack done, she took me on a walk through the garden, which wasn't that

odd by itself. But she asked that I keep a hand on her at all times. I wasn't wearing the head piece or the cape to my suit at the time, but I did have the gloves of it on. When she saw that, she asked me to take them off. I did, with a frown on my face.

The guards, too, were getting a bit concerned, but didn't do anything. When I did as she asked, she smiled, and we continued our walk and our talk. She wanted more details about Africa, of course. More than, "I fought for a cause that I didn't belong to. I killed, I murdered, and I saved. I did things I didn't want to for people I didn't like against a people I didn't know. It was not the best time in my life, and it's not particularly something I want to do again."

She wanted gritty details. Numbers, tactics used, personal deeds and heroics, and all kinds of that shit. It sounded almost like she wanted to hear some of my stories so she could compare them against hers.

I didn't have anything that I wanted to tell anyone. I personally watched a slave child get cut down by a guard as the child was running. I could have gotten in the way of the blow to save the child, but I was worth more alive than that child was, to both me and the movement. I could turn myself into a martyr, but I'd rather live long enough to be hated than to be remembered as a hero after an early death.

I didn't tell her that story, though—more fool me, I suppose. I stuck to heroics done by other people, of which there were a few stories to tell. Miguel, as it happened, came upon a group of guards attacking some of our camp followers that strayed too far from the main group. Without pausing a second, he jumped into the mass of guards to buy our people time to escape. I think he was doing it because he was a murderous psychopath that took any excuse he could get to kill rather than to save lives, but the effect was the same. Either way, he was venerated as a hero for that.

And Rock... God, Rock was an absolute monster in that last attack, I heard. When the assassins failed to keep one of the gates open, he personally led a sortie against it, wielding a massive hammer. He dealt blow after blow to the iron-reinforced gates, and eventually somehow forced a hole into the gates large enough for his men to pass through to open it from the other side. After that, he systematically slaughtered over thirty-five enemy troops himself, and led a squad that killed over one hundred. He was wounded doing that, but didn't let it slow him down until the fight in the city was over.

But all my attempts to pass any heroism off my back were met by gentle rebukes, calling me humble. I was tempted to tell her about the naga attack, but she probably would have found a good way to spin that, too. That actually tempted me to tell her even more, as I still couldn't figure out a good way to spin that in my mind.

We were starting our second circuit around the garden. The guards were still watching us with a small amount of concern. I felt their horror. I had a bad feeling.

"Tell me," she finally asked, "what is the most beautiful thing you've seen?"

Trap question. "The most beautiful location, you mean?"

A smile, followed by "Yes."

“There was a cave I found when I was dealing with a group of naga... it was underground, a massive chamber, half full of water. It was the purest water you could ever find anywhere. In it, fish were chasing one another, some bioluminescent and some blind. On the ceiling were rows and rows of lit torches, each in patterns corresponding to the night sky. At the very bottom of the lake was the naga society. Hundreds of them, living silently underwater, without a care in the world.”

She smiled at that description, and said to me, “Close your eyes and don’t let go.” *Uh oh.*

What happened next, I can barely describe. I just... went weightless all of a sudden. Every movement felt exaggerated, like it was about to throw me off the ground. I knew where we were before she even said, “Open your eyes.”

She brought me to the motherfucking goddamn son of a bitch *moon!*

I croaked out, “How?”

“Magic. As long as you’re touching me you’ll be fine.” I was tempted to test that, but I didn’t. I felt... fine. No extra heat, no extra cold, I was able to breathe. The weightless problem was slowly sorting itself out, as Luna’s magic coursed itself through me.

And then I caught sight of the Earth.

I can’t describe it. I won’t even try.

After a few minutes of silent staring, I managed, “It’s... Why did you bring me here?”

“I thought it would be nice to show you for what you fought.” There wasn’t much to say to that, so I just hugged her.

And that’s all we did. She was a pony, I was a human. So get your mind out of the gutter.

“You know, Celestia is not going to be happy about this. And I’m pretty sure it violates the ‘no leaving Canterlot’ thing,” I finally told her.

“It was worth it,” was her response.

I want to say that nothing bad came from that, but Celestia was more than not happy. She was pretty much about as mad as I’ve ever seen her. At me and at Luna, though Luna didn’t get any of the wrath.

No, for some reason that was reserved for me. Because I should have taken the invitation directly to Celestia as soon as I got it, so she could be there when we met.

So instead of getting mad at the guards for not informing her, the servants for actually delivering the note, or Luna for actually being the one to take me away, I got yelled at for ten minutes. And here’s the kicker: She did it in that same fucking sitting room.

I didn’t even bother trying to defend myself. She didn’t want to hear it.

I was starting to think that Celestia needed a break.

Of course, when Twilight’s friends heard we were back on the continent, they were pretty much ecstatic. I imagined Pinkie Pie had a party planned out perfectly for when we got back. I was somewhat surprised they even waited for us to get to Ponyville; I was kind of

expecting Rainbow Dash, if no one else, to come flying out to see us. Her, because she was the fastest one and could make it easily enough.

None did, though. I was okay with that; after that long away from home, we really wanted some time to sleep on a bed that, if not perfectly familiar, was at least not moving and not completely stifling.

We stayed in Canterlot for about three days, and finally returned to Ponyville in October.

Yeah, there was a party. It was—for one of Pinkie Pie's parties—completely badass, though I was very, very disappointed in Applejack for letting it get that way.

Oh yeah. We got all of Ponyville completely and totally motherfucking trashed. It was hilarious. The mayor had to declare the following day a holiday because everyone was so hung over.

That alone almost made the Africa campaign worth it.

It was good to be back, all things told.