

Chapter three

Big mac woke the next morning, stretched and yawned and buried his head in the pillow again. It felt softer on his cheek than usual. He opened an eye and glared at about four-hundred and eighteen threads of cotton per square inch, and then with quite a jolt remembered where he was.

Celestia was gone.

He sat up quickly, in a panic, and went into his default 'get out before angry husband arrives' mode. Looking around he spotted his horse collar lying by the bed, and quietly slipped it on.

"Going somewhere?" a voice said, and before he knew what had happened Celestia was slipping back into bed next to him, one wing gently resting on his back; not encircling, not boxing him in or guiding him back to bed, but just gently reminding him that there was for once no need to worry about getting caught. Big mac stared, wide eyed, as Celestia smiled at him; she looked better just woken up than most mares did after an hour's makeover. This did not reassure him any.

Oh gods, what did I do last night? This was a bad idea.

"Heh. Sorry your highness, get nervous waking up in strange places, panicked that the bed was empty. Where were you?" he asked nervously.

Celestia lay back with her wings outstretched and pushed all four legs up, stretching out. She nodded towards large veranda leading off from the bedchambers.

"On the veranda?" Big Mac asked, looking confused. She rolled her eyes and pointed with a wingtip. He looked again. Over the veranda there was a fine view. The sun was just rising, rosy-feathered, creeping over the horizon.

“Business to attend to.” She said. “Same old same old.”

He snorted with laughter. “I guess royalty can get you just about everything except a lie-in.” he said.

“Actually I find there are a great many things it can’t get; and for everything it brings you, it seems to put another beyond you.” She rolled over, and hugged him.

“But there are compensations, I’ll give you that.”

“Eeyup?”

“Yes ‘Eeyup’” she imitated, surprisingly well. “So, how was that for you? Be honest.”

“How honest?” Big mac asked.

“Very honest.”

“Um... Scary? Mad and unexpected and genuinely erotic and exciting, but *still* just a little scary. Just a little. You’re... you’re a touch intimidating your highness.”

“Just a touch? Must be out of practice.” she joked, before seeing his expression and getting a little more serious. “Well, yes. That’s par to the course. I get that the first time.”

“Just the first time?”

“It depends. Some ponies get used to it, some never do. Strangely it the ones who never quite loose that fear that make the best lovers. That sounds awful of me, but it’s true: wherever else you may say about it, lust tempered with genuine fear is a powerful experience, and few things can keep the

spark going in a relationship like one partner being very slightly afraid of the other. Adds excitement.”

“Ha. ‘Serving her Majesty: it’s not a career, it’s an adventure.’” Said Big Mac, parroting an old recruitment slogan

“Hum, exactly. If it helps, you only seemed nervous in a good way.”

“I felt it! Forgive me if I’m too frank your Highness, but I’ve done this a *lot* before, and you’re the first pony in a very long time when I’ve honestly been frightened of getting something wrong. Like ‘well, Big mac, I know you know how to get down to business, just whatever you do, don’t screw this up because this is Princess-Bucking-Celestia, so now would be a *real* bad time for Little Mac to fall asleep on the job.”

“Ha! Little mac! I’m sorry, that shouldn’t amuse me but really... hehehe. Ahem.” Celestia paused, composing herself “Continue.”

“Heh, sorry. But know, I guess I just wanted to make a good impression, and that made me so nervous. I felt like I was gonna forget where everything was down there or something, like a teenager at it for the first time.”

“Hummm? Really?” Yawed celesta, stretching, before adding with expertly practiced guilelessness. “Like your first time?”

Big mac froze.

“I... that was different.”

“Yes, you were raped.” Celestia agreed.

“No I wasn’t. Big mac protested getting defensive.

“You were raped.” Celestia replied, flatly. “Coercion, even if no physical threat is involved, is enough under Equestria’s laws. By an older Female in a position of considerable power. How *exactly* is this different?”

“I... but that’s was nothing like this! I was young then!”

“Really? and what’s the age-gap between us, exactly?”

“I was scared, vulnerable; she put me under a lot of pressure!”

“I had you brought here in the middle of the night by police.”

“She was in a position of power over me! And before you point to ya crown or something, it weren’t a *legal* use of power! She was breaking the law to get at me, and I felt I had no way of stopping that!”

“I had you brought here in the middle of the night by police *illegally*: you must have guessed that by the way the mayor must have reacted.”

“She threatened my family. We’d have lost the farm, we’d have been shamed!”

“I threatened to expose what you and the mayor were doing. The instructions I sent Wedge contained a paragraph threatening to make the matter fully public and expose you, the mayor, her sister and a whole lot of other ponies.” said Celestia, quite calmly. “It was an empty threat, but one I felt needed to be included.”

Mac remembered Wedge spinning the letter around to show the mayor a paragraph, and her shock when she saw it. He leapt up, furious. “Why!?”

“Because I knew the Mayor would try to protect you, and if Palace Guard hauled your plot away in the middle of the night on a dubious executive order she’s go the local police and talk to try and stop it, and I couldn’t risk that. I needed it kept quiet to keep you safe and to save your reputation and the mayor’s. Ironically threatening that same reputation seemed the best way to scare her into letting me do it.”

“I... you *manipulative*-”

“Yes! I’m manipulative! So how Am I different from the mayor’s sister! How am I different from the pony who raped you!”

“You’re different because ***You didn’t rape me!***” yelled Big Mac.

He stopped and stood, panting, glaring at Celestia. He had never been so angry with a pony before. In that moment, for the first time in his life, he hated her.

Celestia’s face was unreadable; then it broke into a smile. “Exactly.” She said, sweetly.

“...You ***what?***”

“I am different because I *didn’t* rape you Big Mac.” She said. “I’m different because I *wouldn’t* rape you. Whether you want to admit it or not, whether you even consciously know it or not, you’ve been left unable to think or feel properly about mares since what happened to you, and I think your decision to work as a gigolo stems from that. You feel you don’t have control, you can’t be in control, be safe, with mares, and so you’re trying to take control by making it about the money. It’s as if you feel you don’t have the power to say ‘no’ and so you’re doing the next best thing by making sure you at least get paid for it, and that’s not healthy. You’ve always had the power to say no: You could have walked away and lost the farm and it would have been horrible, but you could have done it, you could have walked away when I offered to help you, you could have got on your train and not

come back to me last night, You could walk away *right now* and quit whoreing forever, you just need to know you can, and this is the first step. Admitting to yourself that I am not the mayor's sister, that I have not, will not, and do not want to hurt you, is an important first step to realising that all mares are not the mayor's sister, that all mares have not, will not, and do not want to hurt you. You're using your profession as a shield, Big Mac. You wear it like armour or that somewhat battered horse-collar. You think it protects you, because so long as you do this, you can tell yourself it's just about the money, so you don't need to let anypony in. That's horse-apples, Mac, and you know it. Sooner or later, you will have to let somepony get to you. And guess what? They will hurt you. That happens. But that's doesn't make them the sort of monster that did this to you in the first place. That doesn't make them *her*. Do you understand that Big Mac?" said Celestia, her face close, embryonic tears in her eyes, pleading. "Do you understand that? Because if you don't, I'm really not certain that there is anything I or any other pony can do you help you until you do."

Big mac stared into her eyes, stunned. They were eyes you could drown in. They were not safe, or gentle, or easy eyes. They were the eyes of somepony who could hurt you. But they were kind: *could*, but would give everything not to. Steel, yes, but tempered with silk.

"I... I understand. You... you're not her. You're different Your majesty." said Big Mac, and for the first time since she had shown him that she had a sex drive, Celestia heard the genuine child-like awe in the words 'your majesty.'

"Call me Celestia." She said, letting go of his face and smiling as she whipped away tears and tried to hide how relieved she was to get him back.

They laid there on the bed for a while.

"You know, you didn't have to make that quite so hard." Big mac said, eventually. Celestia Laughed. Big Mac glared at her for a moment, but then he realised he was glaring at his head of state following a 'morning after' counselling session, and that idea seemed so ridiculous that he just had to laugh too.

"I didn't have to make that quite so hard?" asked Celestia, whipping away a tear with a wing tip. "I thought I'd lost you there for a second! That I'd never get you to start making progress. I was

genuinely frighten I'd screwed up. It was risky trying to get you to confront your feelings about mares, especially just woken up and possibly suffering Post-coital tristesse, but I needed to present you with certain ideas when they would be most shocking, so I risked it. I needed you angry: anger is good sometimes. It sure beats feeling helpless, but it needs to be managed. And you made me think I'd miss-judged badly for a second there. You frightened me. Me, frightened! I nearly peed myself!" Big Mac broke out into giggles at that, and Celestia was helpless to stop herself from joining him.

"A-ha-ha! And that bit about threatening to expose me and the mayor... that never happened did it?" Mac asked.

"NO! ahahaha! I made it up on the spur of the moment! I would never stoop that low and make it personal; I just needed you to hate me for that to work, and it was all I could think of!"

"Ha! Eh." Big mac lay down comfortably and sighed. Then his brow wrinkled in confusion.

"So what was the paragraph that Wedge showed the mayor that scared her?"

"Oh that. All executive orders include a clause reminding ponies that if they don't go along with them willingly then officers of the law are authorised to use any and all powers up to and including summary execution to enforce them." Celestia said, lighting another cigarette. She caught Big Mac's eye.

"What? I never said I didn't stoop *pretty* low, just that I draw the line at making it personal. It's still a bluff, no pony is expected to actually carry it out, just point meaningfully at that paragraph if ponies start to give them guff. Wedge is an intelligent stallion; he knows that if someone calls him on the bluff to contact me and await instructions. Any Guardspony actually using summary execution would have to explain why. To me. And they better do so in very visible semaphore, on account of the immense difficulty in hearing words given the three-hundred and eighty-four thousand kilometre gulf between Canterlot and the Sea of Serenity."

Big Mac stared at her for a moment, and then shrugged. "Fair enough. But you'd better make this up to the mayor somehow; she'll be worried stiff."

“Yes, yes: don’t worry: I’ve done this before.”

“Eeyup?” asked big mac. Snuggling up to Celestia. He hesitated: it wasn’t important, but it had been nagging at him since last night, so he asked.

“Um, you don’t actually *have* a *Droit du Seigneur* do you?”

“Don’t be disgusting.” Said Celestia, pulling a face. “Droit du Seigneur is a historical myth, made up by upper class ponies in the Enlightenment to try and reassure themselves that no matter how depraved their own actions they were still enlightened and civilised compared to ponies in the past. Personally, I quite liked the middle ages. Average life expectancy was low, but only due to high infant mortality skewing the figures; if you made adulthood you would live to a good age. Ponies washed a lot more than they did in the early modern period. Crime was quite low, compared to later periods: the rookeries of cities during the industrial revolution I still remember. Income was low but the cost of living so low that most peasants lived pretty well with eight hour working days, nap times, lots of beer at work and feast days and days off every third day: a lot of office workers now-a-days would kill for that. The feudal system I could have done without, but it was the best that I could do at the time: the infrastructure I had to work with was shot to hell and back after my sister’s little problem; magical storms and bandits took out Pegasus messengers and blocked magical communication most of the time, so centralised government couldn’t exist because you couldn’t communicate with the provinces, nor feed the court if they stayed put in one place for too long eating the locals out of house and home. I needed strong local leaders who could respond to crises with military action if needed, and I had to offer them something in return. Feudalism served its purpose, and when I could, I replaced it with something better. No: Droit du Seigneur never existed. As you can probably guess, some local officials abused their power to take sexual advantage of venerable individuals, but if they were caught they were severely punished. And they were caught: infrastructure was bad, but really that just makes it easier to run a spy network because nopony can cross-check to see if strangers really are who they claim to be. That and nopony other than be could think of a code worth a damn: they were still using basic alphabet substitution or writing on strips of parchments

wrapped around sticks and then unravelled for pitie's sakes! How hard is it to come up with one-time-pad, I ask you?"

"Okay. Just checking."

"Humph. Historians probably got the idea from a lord Seigneur having the right to a small cash payment each time one of his tenants married, but that was because he would be expected to officiate at the ceremony, care for any fruit of the union of the parents died, and put up with the mare taking time off from working the lords lands to care for the foal, and so it was not unreasonable that they be compensated. A false rumour went around a few hundred years later that they were paying for the lord *not* to have sex with the tenants. Speaking of which..." said Celestia, magicing a check out of no-where. "Coolts bank; payable to Sweet Apple Acers. I think this is yours."

Big Mac checked the check, and his eyes bugged and he swore and shot up. "This ain't right! you... you've paid for all the time I was here!"

"Yes. That was the idea."

"But... but I was asleep for half of the time, I can't take this! I didn't do anything to earn half of it!"

"Interesting. Did you not consider how much a pony like me might be willing to pay for a genuinely good night's sleep? I don't sleep well in an empty bed. Besides..." she said, tracing a hoof up and down on his chest. "If you're feeling you need to do a little more to earn that check... I've got an hour or two before my first meeting of the day-"

An alarm pinged somewhere in the room, just once, gently, like a wineglass flicked with a hoof. Celestia groaned.

"And so, once again, it begins. I'm sorry Mac, but the Realm comes first, and it seems the Realm needs me. I had hoped to talk a little with you before you left, discuss how all this made you feel, and, frankly, fool around some more, but that won't be possible now. I think it would be best if we

made an appointment to meet again in a week's time: this has been quite a busy night for you, and I think you would benefit from some time alone to think it over and analyse what just happened to you. The important thing here is-" the alarm pinged again, and Celestia swore. "Damn. Sorry, Big Mac. I have to go." She said, getting up. "Help yourself to anything you want from the sideboard, the fruit salad is usually very good. One you've breakfasted and bathed head out: Biggs and Wedge will drop you off wherever you like and-" the glass alarm pinged again. Celestia stopped and glared, getting out of bed and walked towards it, wings raised in annoyance.

"Three pings? What in the name of-" there was a distant knocking from the throne room door.

"Enter." called Celesta. Big mac yelped instinctively and tried to hide under the covers, Celestia watched with a mix of annoyance and genuine amusement, before turning back to the doors. A Pegasus guard stood alone in the throne room. Possibly one of the ones from the night before, but if he was honest with himself, Big Mac would have to admit he couldn't tell.

"Yes Wedge?"

"Majesty, I've been asked to tell you that the ambassador from the Gryphon Empire of the West and the emissary's from Saddle Arabia have arrived early, and are waiting in the slightly pink reception room. Coltsfoot is with them."

"Oh really? And has our good friend Congresspony Constellation met with them yet?"

"No, ma'am, as that would be most improper and a breach of both court etiquette and diplomatic protocol for the house leader to meet with a representative of a foreign power directly without your prior approval."

"But of course. How long has he been in there with them?"

“About fifteen minutes Ma’am. The gryphon military attaché looks about ready to throttle him, and I’m half inclined to let her.”

“I see.” Said Celestia: she could think of worse uses of diplomatic immunity. “ Very well Wedge, we will take tea and macaroons in the Western Solar. Use the good bone china and serve Zemlyaulan caravan to the gryphons and green tea with mint to the Saddle Arabians, I will be down shortly. Oh, and ready a flying chariot for departure from the east lawn: I would have you drop of a pony of interest in around twelve minutes, if that is agreeable.”

“Ma’am.” said Wedge, bowing to the empty throne. Big mac pulled down the sheet and stared, open mouthed.

“Perception filter.” said Celestia, watching Wedge walk out of the throne room. “What you see and what Wedge sees and what is really here are not necessarily one and the same.”

“He couldn’t see me?”

“Of course he could: I just overrode the part of his brain that interoperates what it is he is seeing; as far as Wedge knows, the palace doesn’t even have a bedchamber or suite of rooms leading off the throne room.”

“You’re kidding me?”

“Am I? How did you get into this room?”

“I came in through the door.” he said, pointing though the open doorway into the throne room.

“I see. And where exactly in the throne room is that door? Behind the throne or to one side or where?”

“Well it’s just by the.... Right by the...” Big mac squinted, trying to see what the view through the door was like. His brow knotted, and he bit his lip as he broke into a cold sweat. He closed his eyes, and shook his head convulsively, like he was trying to shake away a bad dream. “Ah’m sorry, your highness, what was the question again?”

Celestia sighed “Yes, exactly. Big Mac, I’m sorry but we have very little time, you may have to skip breakfast. Something has come up, and we need to get you out of here pretty sharpish.” She said, walking over to a depression in the marble floor. Big mac had admired it earlier; a set of stepped marble ledges lead down to a shallow, perfectly circular bronze dish, filled with fine white sand raked into swirling scallop-shell patterns, and covered with two inches of still water, on which water lily and lotus flowers floated. It was one of the more beautiful indoor water-features he had ever seen, quite unlike the gaudy fountains or brushed steel waterfalls with grey egg-sized pebbles that all the corporate headquarters in Canterlot seemed to sport these days. He particularly liked the way there was an identical stepped arrangement in the marble ceiling above it, where a burnished bronze dish identical to the water-filled one stood mirroring its partner, the Celestian sun icon shining at its centre.

Celestia walked into the centre of the pool, spread her wings wide, closed her eyes and said “In fact, you may have to skip your bath in favour of something quicker. Wash!” she commanded.

Even from where he was lying in bed, that last word burned.

There was a noise best described as *sq-whop!* and a sudden intense flash of vertigo and Celestia was standing in the bronze dish, now quite empty of sand, flowers or water, sodden wet with her eyes closed, a determined frown on her face, and her wings and mane thrown back dramatically. Her mane then flopped down and she knotted her eyes tight, *glowed* for a moment leaving her perfectly

dry, and then opened them and inspected her body as her mane resumed its usual defiance of gravity.

“Yes, yes that’s quite all right. Your turn, Big Mac.” Mac looked at Celestia, standing more beautiful than ever in the bronze dish inscribed with her icon, and then looked up.

On the ceiling, apparently as unconcerned by physics as Pinkie Pie, the lotus flowers floated on their still pool, about two inches from the finely raked sand. Upside down. On the ceiling.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me.”

“Now don’t be a big baby. It’s not quite the bubble bath I would like if I had the time but its... bracing.” Said Celestia. She ran this through her mind, checking that it wasn’t actually a lie. “It’s also exfoliating.” She added, with considerably more honesty.

“It’s having a half ton of sand and Celestia knows how much water dropped on me from the ceiling. Exfoliating wouldn’t cover it your highness. ‘fayed alive’ maybe...”

“Oh don’t be such a pansy.” said Celestia rolling her eyes, as she stepped out of the dish. There was another *sq-whop!* and the pool was on the floor again. “If you’re worried about it you can try an upwards-clean rather than a downwards one, if you must. But I wouldn’t recommend it. You should have gone for the downwards water drop; it does wonder for one’s coat. Oh, and its forty-two gallons, if you’re interested.”

“Eeyup? We’ll I’ll try I this way ‘round first, if you don’t mind.”

“But of course.” Said Celestia, trying not to grin mischievously.

Big Mac walked over to the pool, nervously, he put a hoof in the water, and was shocked to discover how cold it was. Gingerly he walked his way into the centre of the pool, and then stopped. *How bad could it be?* He asked himself.

He swallowed nervously. "Wash." he said.

sq-whop!

Big mac stared forwards for a second, and then cured up and let a thin, high whinny of pain seep out his clenched teeth. They weren't the only things that clenched. It sounded remarkably like the sound of air escaping from a balloon.

"Dry." Said Celesta. Big Mac felt warmed from inside. "I did tell you to go for the vertical drop." Celestia continued, on the edge of his hearing, somewhere beyond the pain. "The thing you've got to remember about hyper-accelerated mixtures of water and sand is that, especially if you're male, you ideally want them hitting your *back* first, not your crotch." She watched sympathetically as Big Mac tried to hobble out of the bronze dish without uncrossing his legs.

"On the plus side you look really, really, *really* clean."

"I feel it."

"Good for you. Now, you have to get home to your family, and I need to host an important diplomatic summit to try and stop two of my allies going to war with each other for a very poor reason. Wedge will take you home. Ask nicely and he may just stop for donuts."

"But you've only just got up. Won't all that diplomatic stuff be difficult?"

“Not really: like poker diplomacy is really quite simple so long as you know *exactly* what the other players, in this case the heads of state and their appointed diplomats, are thinking”

“And you know what these other heads of state are thinking?”

“Oh yes. When they’re dealing with me, they’re generally thinking some variation of ‘*don’t crash the sun into us don’t crash the sun into us oh please god don’t crash the sun into us*’.” said Celestia smiling. “At times it’s good to be the world’s sole fusion power.”