



By Pen Stroke
Assisted by Batty Gloom

Table of Contents:

| | | |
|------------------|-------------------|-----------|
| Chapter 1 | Signs | 3 |
| Chapter 2 | Aggression | 31 |
| Chapter 3 | Nightmares | 58 |

Chapter 1

Signs

While cities such as Manehattan and Canterlot were known for their night life and constant buzz, the small town of Ponyville tended to shut down after the sunset. The hardworking ponies of the rural community retreated into their homes as the hour grew late, fleeing the chill of the autumn night to relax near warm fires before slipping off to bed.

Yet, on this night, the quiet streets of Ponyville were not empty. A lone figure strode down one road in particular, coming from the direction of the Everfree Forest. It was a figure who had, in the past, sent all of Ponyville running to hide. A pony who was spoken of only in whispers, avoided like a plague, and who possessed haunting eyes that glowed beneath the shadow of her hood.

Continuing along the streets, the figure approached her destination: the Ponyville Library. The library shone like a lighthouse. Its windows glowed, their light interrupted only by the occasional shadow of a pony moving within. Muffled music seeped through the walls to dance on the wind, drawing in the cloaked figure who, upon reaching the door, knocked three times.

The warm light and cheerful music inside the library spilled out across her when the door opened. A single balloon snuck out the door, floating lazily towards the star-speckled sky only to get caught in the library's branches. "Zecora!" Twilight Sparkle greeted with a warm smile, "I'm glad you were able to come."

The cloaked figure lowered her hood, the zebra returning the smile. "I am glad as well Twilight, to be joining you this night. It is quite nice to step out of my home, though I do not know why this party was thrown."

Twilight stepped to one side so Zecora could come in. "Oh, it's just Pinkie Pie. She's throwing the party to kick off the season of Nightmare Night."

Zecora nodded, looking through the door at the party's ghoulish decorations: pumpkins, paper bats, fake spiders, fabric cobwebs, and everything else a spooky party needed. "A party to start the season of night, to get us all in the mood for a fright."

"Yep. Now please, come in and let me give you the quick tour," Twilight said, motioning for Zecora to follow her before pointing around the room. "We've got some music and dancing over there, the buffet table is over there by the fireplace, and Pinkie Pie set up a bunch of fun games down in the basement. In fact, she was looking for somepony to play a game with her not too long ago."

Zecora smiled and turned towards the basement staircase. "If a challenge is Pinkie's desire, then I shall gladly be her supplier."

"All right, have fun," Twilight said before going back to the library door to greet another set of guests. As Zecora made her way across the room, she received warm greetings from a number of ponies. Zecora gladly returned each greeting with a warm smile and the occasional laugh. Still, the zebra did not allow herself to become swayed from her path, keeping her course focused until she passed through the basement door and began descending the stairs.

Upon reaching the bottom of the steps, Zecora saw the full extent of the games that had been setup. There was Pin the Tail on the Pony, but in proper Nightmare Night spirit there were other games too. She saw a barrel filled with green water and apples, perfect for bobbing, as well as a game of Spider Toss.

"Hey there, Zecora, I'm so glad you could make it," a familiar, energetic voice chirped. Zecora turned at the sound of the voice to see Pinkie Pie bouncing in her direction. "You don't come to nearly enough of my parties, but that's okay because when you *do* come it's so much fun!"

"I do not come by as often as I'd like, but then again the trip here is quite the hike."

Pinkie Pie came to a stop beside the zebra. "Well, yeah, that's because you live all the way out in the Everfree Forest. Why do you live out there anyway?"

“The forest provides rare herbs, roots, and moss, without which I would be at quite a loss.”

“Oh, okay, that sounds like a good reason to me,” Pinkie Pie said with a bounce. The pink party pony then got very serious. She furrowed her eyebrows and put a hoof on Zecora’s chest. “Oh, and I just remembered, you and I have a score to settle.”

A confident smile formed Zecora’s lips as she met Pinkie Pie’s serious stare with her own. “Is this truly a path you wish to pursue? Because I will show no mercy in round two.”

Pinkie Pie nodded, zipping away and returning with a box held in her teeth. “Pick your color,” she mumbled out around the box in her mouth.

“The color I choose is white,” Zecora announced before she reached into the box and bit down on something. When she drew her head back, the zebra gently held a pin in her mouth, attached to which was a white colored paper pony tail, “for I shall not lose this night.”

Pinkie Pie huffed, taking Zecora’s challenge seriously as she went around the room to find more ponies for the game. Soon, a half dozen guests were gathered in front of one wall in the library’s basement, on which hung a poster of a pony that was missing its tail and had a small ‘X’ on its flank. It was a game of Pin the Tail on the Pony, and Pinkie Pie was out to reclaim her title as Ponyville champion from Zecora.

The rest of the ponies took their turns before Zecora and Pinkie Pie. Some managed to pin their paper tails close to the ‘X’. Others weren’t as successful. Their tails ended up on the nose, hooves, and eyes of the pony on the poster. By the time Pinkie Pie’s turn finally came around, a small crowd had gathered. “You aren’t going to beat me this time, Zecora,” Pinkie Pie said as she was blind-folded. “I’ve been practicing.”

Zecora allowed herself a single chuckle. “First you should pin your tail upon the wall; then we’ll see who shall be the one to fall.”

With a huff, Pinkie Pie gave a nod, signalling that she was ready to be spun. Yet, despite the disorienting spin, Pinkie Pie was able to make a b-

line for the poster. She placed her pink, paper pony tail and pushed the pin in as deep as it would go before she stepped back and removed her blindfold. Once Pinkie Pie registered how well she had done, a broad smile exploded onto her lips. She somersaulted back over to Zecora and pointed a proud hoof at the poster.

“HA! Bulls-eye!” Pinkie Pie boasted while the other ponies playing cheered. Zecora, however, seem unfazed and maintained her confident smile. She was blindfolded and spun while Pinkie Pie’s tail was removed from the poster so that she would have an equal chance to hit the bulls-eye.

Still, after Zecora was spun, she did not walk forward towards the poster. She instead shifted her stance ever so slightly and brought her head back to one side. She then swung her head forward and threw her pin, with the attached paper tail, into the air.

All eyes in the crowd watched as the tail arched through the air, and gasped when the pin stuck to the posters directly on the ‘X’. It was a perfect bulls-eye.

“How... how did you?” Pinkie Pie asked as Zecora removed her blindfold with a proud smile.

“You’ve practiced, Pinkie Pie... Well, in truth, so have I.”

“Phhhh, that’s not that impressive,” Rainbow Dash said as she came out of the crowd. “I mean, how hard can it be to pin something to a poster?”

“It’s hard enough for you, as I recall. Last time we played you missed the wall,” Zecora said with a small laugh.

Rainbow Dash huffed, not about to back down from a challenge, even when she was the one that had made the challenge in the first place.

“Yeah, well, I was just tired last time. I’d been bucking clouds all day, but this time I’m going to beat you both.” With that Rainbow Dash grabbed one of the paper pony tails and secured her own blindfold.

“You sure about this, Rainbow Dash? I mean... you’re not really good at this game,” Pinkie Pie noted, remembering a time when Dash pinned the tail on somepony’s flank.

“Hey, don’t worry, I got this. I’ll even spin myself.” With that Dash hopped into the air, and used her wings to spin herself into a chromatic twister. Then, after spinning herself around at least a dozen times, Dash stopped and wavered in the air before smiling. “All right, watch as I pin this tail right on that poster.”

“But Rainbow Dash-” Pinkie Pie tried to warn. Still, her words came too late. Rainbow Dash soared forward in the completely wrong direction. With a loud crash, Rainbow Dash collided with the basement’s chandelier and then dove straight into the Bobbing for Apples barrel. The impact caused a huge splash, which sent green-tinted water and apples flying everywhere. The floor, ceiling, walls, books, and party guests were all doused in the liquid.

A party guest lifted his hoof out of a puddle with a grimace. “What is *with* this water? Why is it sticky?

“Oh, that’s because it’s green apple punch,” Pinkie Pie answered happily as she lifted some of her drenched mane away from her face. “I mean, what’s more fun than bobbing for apples in green apple punch?”

“Whoa, what happened down here?” Twilight asked, she and Rarity standing at the top of the basement staircase, overlooking the disastrous mess.

Zecora tossed her head in an attempt to shake off some of the green apple punch. “A disaster, both sticky and wet, and to think the night isn’t over yet.”

“Oh... it will take forever to clean all of this,” Twilight groaned before turning her head to the basement door. “Spike, bring the-”

“Oh, Twilight, don’t worry, I’ll take care of it,” Rarity offered politely.

“You will?”

Rarity gave a nod. “I might remind you that you aren’t the only unicorn around. I just happen to know a little spell that can take care of all this. It’s

a little something I learned after Sweetie Belle accidentally spilled several gallons of grape juice in my boutique.”

Twilight cocked an eyebrow. “Several gallons? How did she-”

“Don’t ask,” Rarity interrupted.

“Okay... but are you sure you can clean all this up?”

“Oh, of course,” Rarity chuckled confidently. “All it takes is a flick of my horn and...” With that she tossed her head as a wave of light burst out from her horn. The spell washed over the entire room, doing nothing at first. Yet, once it began to recede, the spell drew up the punch and condensed the spilled liquid into a single floating sphere near Rarity’s head.

Twilight looked about the once again dry room, impressed at the spells results. “Wow, Rarity, you have to teach me that!”

“I’d be happy to, Twilight, especially since you’ll probably be able to get more use out of it than I can. This spell just takes a little too much out of me to use it regularly,” Rarity answered wearily as she inspected the sphere of collected green apple punch and took note of the dust and black soot that her spell had also gathered. “Now, where is the nearest sink so I can dispose of-”

It was at this moment the lights all around the library went out, causing a few panicked screams as well as a resounding splash. The darkness didn’t last for long. The candles and oil lamps regained their flames quickly, and the library was once again filled with light. The sudden and short lived darkness left almost every party guest mumbling in concern and confusion.

It also left Rarity shaking, though not in fear. In the moment of sudden darkness, she lost her concentration on her spell, dropped the sphere of liquid, and drenched herself with the sticky punch. Breathing tensely through her nose, Rarity struggled not to scream as the green apple punch dripped off her coat, mane, and tail. “Twilight... bathtub... Now!”

Rarity’s words snapped Twilight out of her own daze. She looked to the lights, wondering why they had gone out, but then shook her head and focused on Rarity. “Of... of course, Rarity, just follow me upstairs.”

Soon, most of the party goers went back to their games, food, and dancing, but one did not. Zecora made her way to the library's front door, and poked her head outside while keeping her hooves just inside the door frame.

She glanced up and down the street, but saw nothing nothing out of the ordinary. Zecora shrugged, muttered something under her breath in her native tongue, and turned to rejoin the party, though for the rest of the evening she remained slightly on edge.

~~~

A few days later, Twilight Sparkle stifled a yawn as she made her way down the library steps. Morning light streamed through the windows, and the sweet aromas of breakfast drew Twilight from the covers of her bed. It was unusual for Spike to be up so early, but Twilight wasn't about to complain once she stepped into the kitchen and saw Spike making oatmeal.

"Morning," Twilight chimed as she took a seat at the table. It had been set with silverware, bowls, two tall glasses of orange juice, and even a vase with a freshly picked flower. It was a wonderfully laid out table, and at the sight of it Twilight let out a knowing chuckle. "All right, what happened?"

"Nothing happened," Spike answered too quickly as he came over from the stove and served Twilight a big helping of oatmeal. "I just decided the most magically-talented unicorn in Ponyville deserved a nice warm breakfast."

"Uh-huh," Twilight said with a disbelieving tone.

"No, really," Spike stressed. "You study so hard, and you've got to eat a big breakfast to fuel that big, smart brain of yours."

Twilight rolled her eyes, levitated a spoon, and sunk it into her oatmeal. "Spike, there's no point in trying to butter me up. Now, what happened?"

"Okay, you got me," Spike admitted in defeat. He set the pot of oatmeal on a nearby counter and nervously grabbed his tail. "Now, don't get mad or anything, but... I think I forgot to lock the library door last night."

“What makes you think that?” Twilight asked before she placed a spoonful of oatmeal in her mouth.

“Well, I was coming out of the bathroom and going back to bed when I though I heard something moving around down here,” Spike explained. “You were already asleep, so I thought it might have been Owlowicious. Still, when I got down here I didn’t see anything, except that the door was cracked open. I must have forgotten to lock it and somepony was in here and...” Spike fell silent at this. He rubbed the back of his neck and anxiously waited for his punishment.

Twilight honestly wasn’t that mad at Spike. He was always very good about locking up the library at night, and it was obviously an accident. In truth, Twilight didn’t think locking the door was that important. It wasn’t like there were any burglars in Ponyville. She, however, understood why Spike was so worried about it. Rainbow Dash had scared him with stories about Everfree creatures sneaking into homes around Ponyville. Ever since, despite her feelings that it wasn’t necessary, Spike had dutifully locked the library door every night.

“Don’t worry about it,” Twilight finally answered with a smile. “I know it was just an accident. Still, if you really want to make up for it, you could run upstairs and make my bed for me.”

Spike nodded eagerly, more than willing to accept such a light punishment, “You got it, Twi. I’ll back in a jiffy.”

With that he ran out of the room, leaving Twilight to chuckle to herself as she continued to enjoy the oatmeal. She listened to the sound of Spike’s claws on the library’s second floor until they fell silent, a sign that he had reached and was making her bed. In that silence Twilight let the smile on her face widen. It was the kind of quiet she enjoyed: a moment where she could be alone with her thoughts.

She spooned another bite of oatmeal into her mouth, and was about to take another when something felt wrong. Twilight turned her head away from her bowl to look at the rest of the kitchen. Her ears swiveled forward and she strained her hearing. The library almost felt too quiet for a moment, like she should have been able to hear something.

Letting her eyes slowly scan the room, Twilight tried to find the the source of the strange disturbance. None of the cupboards were open. The sink wasn't dripping. The only thing not put away was the pot of oatmeal Spike had set down on the counter. Nothing was out of place, yet something was wrong.

Twilight shook her head, trying to banish the strange, sudden paranoia, and returned to eating her oatmeal. She sunk the spoon down into the mush, lifted it up, and after licking her lips placed the spoonful in her mouth.

**“Yeeeeeeooowwww!”**

“Twilight!” Spike shouted as he sprinted down the stairs and into the kitchen. “Are you okay?”

“Ow ow ow ow ow ow ow!” Twilight repeated over and over as she danced on the tip of three hooves while using her right foreleg to fan her open mouth. She grabbed both glasses of orange juice from the table, guzzling down one and then the other as quickly as she could.

“What? What happened?” Spike asked once Twilight finished drinking the orange juice.

“I burned mythelf,” Twilight mumbled as she kept her tongue out of her mouth, letting it cool in the open air.

“On what?”

She pointed an accusing hoof at the bowl on the table. “On the oatmeal! You made it too hot!”

Spike cocked a confused eyebrow. “But... it wasn't too hot when I left to make the bed.”

Twilight took in a breath to argue, but the words died in her mouth. Spike was right. She was eating the oatmeal before he left without any trouble. That and, upon re-examining the oatmeal, Twilight found it was no longer burning hot. It had returned to its original, pleasantly-warm temperature.

~~~

“Oh, Spike, I’m sure you’re just letting your imagination get the better of you,” Rarity commented as she magically plucked a pin from the dragon’s back and used it to secure a piece of fabric. She was working on her Nightmare Night costume, and was sure it would wow and impress everypony... if she could get it done in time.

Spike stood with his back arched next to the mannequin, several pins sticking out of his thick scales. “I don’t know, Rarity. There’s been a lot of weird things happening around the library lately. I mean, first there was the morning Twilight somehow burned her mouth on oatmeal that was barely warm. Then there was the morning we found a bunch of books had fallen off the shelves. Then, last night, Twilight woke up screaming because of some nightmare.”

Rarity removed a pin from Spike’s back and used it to secure a future seam on her costume. “What was the nightmare about?”

“That’s the weirdest thing: she can’t really remember,” Spike answered while Rarity removed another pin from his back. “All she remembers is that it was really colorful and it felt like she was being ripped apart.”

Rarity adjusted a piece of fabric she was pinning into place. “Ripped apart... My, how gruesome, but I still wouldn’t worry too much about it, Spike.”

“Worry too much about what?” a third voice asked. When Spike and Rarity turned to see who had spoken up, they saw Rainbow Dash entering the boutique.

“Oh, Spike’s just fretting about Twilight,” Rarity answered. “Still, I’ve assured him it’s nothing to worry about. Now, what brings you to my boutique, Rainbow Dash?”

Rainbow Dash came to a stop beside Spike. “I was wondering if could get some fabric. I’ve got something sweet planned for my Nightmare Night costume, but I need some fabric if I’m going to make it.”

“Oh, and what are you going as?”

“I’d rather keep it a secret. You know, so it will be a surprise,” Rainbow answered. “So, do you have some fabric I could use?”

Rarity glance away from her mannequin and in Rainbow Dash’s direction. “That depends; what kind of fabric do you need and what colors do you need it in?”

“Don’t really know about the kind of fabric,” Rainbow Dash admitted. “I guess I just need something strong, but I do know I need it in black, purple, yellow, and some white.”

Rarity pushed her lips together and levitated off her work glasses. “My, I can’t imagine what you’d be making with that particular color combination. But yes, I do believe I have some spools I can part with. Just give me a moment to go check in the back.” With that, Rarity turned and trotted into the back of the store, leaving Spike and Rainbow Dash waiting in the front.

“Whoa, Spike, you going to be a pin cushion for Nightmare Night?” Rainbow Dash teased as she playfully poked at one of the pins in Spike’s back.

“Nah, I just came by to talk to Rarity and decided to lend her a claw,” Spike answered. “Trust me, my costume is a lot better than being a pin cushion. I’m going to go as a dragon.”

“But... you *are* a dragon,” Rainbow Dash pointed out.

“I mean an adult dragon. You know, a dragon with horns and really sharp teeth.”

Rainbow Dash thought about the costume idea for a moment before shrugging her shoulders. “Okay... I guess that could be cool. Still, what were you and Rarity talking about when I came in?”

Spike adjusted a few of the pins on his back so he could stand up straight. “Just some of the stuff that’s been going on at the library lately. Twilight had a really bad dream last night about colors and being torn apart. There was the one morning Twilight’s oatmeal got burning hot, and another morning when a lot of books had fallen off the shelves. I say something’s going on, but Rarity and Twilight keep saying it’s just my imagination.”

“That... or the library’s haaaauunnnntttteed,” Rainbow Dash teased while wearing a mischievous grin and waving her hooves menacingly.

Spike swallowed nervously. “Ha-ha-haunted!?”

Rainbow jumped into the air and began to hover slowly around Spike. “Yeah, I bet there’s some creepy ghost hanging around. Something lurking by the shelves, hiding in the basement, floating across the floor... waiting in the shadows for the perfect time... **To strike!**”

Dash shouted the last part at the top of her lungs, causing Spike to leap straight up into the air. He jumped high enough to reach and hang from one of the ceiling’s rafters, trembling like a leaf, while Rainbow Dash broke down into a fit of laughter.

“What is going on out here?” Rarity asked as she stuck her head out of the back room. A few spools of fabric were levitating near her head, none of which were the colors Dash had asked for.

“Rainbow Dash says the library is haunted!” Spike tattled while pointing a claw at Rainbow, who was still laughing her head off.

“Now Rainbow Dash, there is no need to scare Spike like that,” Rarity scolded while she helped him down from the rafters. “Now, I don’t want to hear another word about it or you can forget about getting this fabric.”

Dash wiped a tear from her eye and worked to gain control of her laughter. “Okay, okay, I’ll stop.” Rarity didn’t seem entirely convinced by Rainbow’s words, but she returned to her search for the fabric all the same. That left Spike and Rainbow Dash alone again, and for a time the pair kept to themselves. Dash snickered under her breath while Spike nervously held his tail.

“S-so... do you really think the library is haunted?” Spike asked quietly, unable to get the thought out of his head. “I mean, if it is, shouldn’t we do something about it?”

Rainbow Dash smiled, seeing an opportunity to have a little more fun at Spike’s expense. “Sure, we should have a seance.”

“What’s a seance?” Spike asked, not liking the sound of that word.

“It’s when we try to talk with the ghost and ask why it’s haunting the library,” Dash answered with a hushed voice. “That way we know why it’s there and how we can get rid of it.”

“C-c-can we really talk to spirits?”

Dash gave an assuring nod. “Oh yeah, I got just what we need back at my house. You just make sure Twilight goes to sleep early tonight and I’ll take care of the rest.”

~~~

“I don’t know, Dashie, it sure sounds like Spike’s really freaked out about this,” Pinkie Pie commented as she bounced along side Dash, the pair making their way towards the library. It was a few hours after sunset. The Ponyville streetlamps were lit, and the two mares were some of the few ponies still outside.

“Yeah, that’s what’s going to make this so awesome! He’s ripe for a good scare,” Rainbow Dash answered with a mischievous grin. “Besides, it’s just a week until Nightmare Night. This is the best time to pull some really good pranks.”

“I guess,” Pinkie Pie anxiously agreed, “but we need to be careful not to go too far. I don’t want to freak Spike out and make him miss Nightmare Night.”

“Don’t worry, we won’t go too far,” Dash promised as she and Pinkie Pie reached their rendezvous point. “And who knows, this might just help Spike get over what’s been happening. We’ll scare him, and then tell him it was a prank. After that, he’ll either laugh with us or be mad at us, but I’d bet my wings he won’t be scared anymore.”

Pinkie Pie smiled. “Yeah, you’re right! So, when do we start the prank?”

“Just as soon as Spike lets us in,” Rainbow assured her. The rendezvous point was across the street from the library, and after standing there for a

few minutes they saw the library's front door open. Spike stood in the doorway and, after glancing around to make sure the coast was clear, waved the pair of mares inside.

"Are you sure this is going to work?" Spike asked once Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie were in the library and he had shut the door.

Dash nodded and took off her saddlebags before setting them down on the floor. "Yeah, I promise. Now, is Twilight asleep?"

"Yes," Spike answered while watching Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie unpack something from the saddlebags. "I made sure she was asleep before I snuck out of my basket. Now, what is that?"

"This is how we're going to talk to the ghost," Rainbow Dash answered as she waved a hoof over the item. It was like a large board game, but instead of having colorful squares it was a plain brown color with a bunch of black letters on it. There was also a wooden pointer with a thin glass lens sitting on top of the board.

"It's called a Phantom Speller," Dash explained while she turned down the room's lights and placed a few candles near the letter-covered board. Once lit, the candles created a small pocket of light around the board while casting harsh shadows across the library walls. It was a creepy effect that Rainbow Dash had crafted, and she couldn't help but smile at her work before taking a seat beside the Phantom Speller.

"H-how does it work?" asked Spike.

"We each put a hoof, or claw, on the pointer, then we ask the ghost a question and it'll use the pointer to spell out an answer."

Spike approached the supposedly mystical board in awe. "Wow... and it really works?"

Rainbow Dash covered her mouth with a hoof to keep herself from laughing and ruining the prank. "Yeah, it sure does. Now come on, let's talk with a ghost."



Pinkie Pie and Spike nodded, taking their places beside the board. The two mares and dragon then reached out and touched the board's pointer, and after a few tense moments Dash asked the first question. "Are there any spirits here with us?"

For a time nothing seemed to happen, but Spike gasped and glanced at Pinkie Pie when the pointer began to move. "Are you doing that?"

"No Spike, we're not moving it," Pinkie Pie answered.

"Yeah," Dash said, once again struggling with her laughter, "we're not moving it."

"But that means..." Spike began before trailing off and looking nervously at the board. He, Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash all watched as the pointer continued to creep across the board until it finally came to a stop. Through the magnifying glass embedded inside the pointer, the trio could clearly see one of the few words printed on the board.

... Yes...

Spike took his claw off the pointer. "Okay... you know what, I don't think this is a good idea." He tried to get up from his seat, but Rainbow Dash used a hoof to push him back down.

"Ah, come on, Spike, you want the ghost to leave, don't ya?"

"Of course I do!" Spike answered. "What sane dragon wants a ghost in his home?"

"Then you have to stay here and help us. We can't figure out how to make it go away unless we talk to it," Rainbow Dash explained while motioning for Spike to put his claw back on the board. It was obvious Spike didn't like the idea of talking with the ghost, but the prospect of being able to make it go away was tempting. In the end, Spike put his claw back on the pointer.

"Okay, next question: are you a spirit?" Rainbow Dash asked, calling out with a spooky waver in her voice. This time, the board didn't take as long to reply, the pointer crossing over to the board's adjacent corner.

... No...

"No?" Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash read together, glancing up at one another. "But I thought we agreed-"

"Come on," Spike said, interrupting the two mares. "Just ask it what it wants."

"Okay, okay," Dash said, trying to calm Spike down, though the smile on her face had disappeared. "What do you want?"

In response to the question, the pointer moved down from the corners of the board. It slid about the letters laid out in the center, pausing above specific characters as it spelled out a response.

... W... H... A... T... I... S... M... I... N... E...

"Whatismine?" Pinkie Pie echoed, tilting her head in confusion.

"I think it wanted to say 'What is mine,'" Rainbow Dash said as she gave Pinkie Pie a confused and somewhat freaked-out look before silently mouthing, "What are you doing?"

"Nothing," Pinkie Pie mouthed back.

Spike, oblivious to the exchange going on between the two mares, kept his eyes fixed on the Phantom Speller. "What is mine?" he echoed while his brain turned over the phrase. "Was something taken from you?"

It only took a moment for the pointer to start moving again, sliding back across board.

... Yes...

"Whoa, okay, I need a quick break," Rainbow Dash said as she took her hoof off the pointer. "Hey, Spike, you mind if Pinkie Pie and I raid the kitchen?"

"No, go ahead," the baby dragon answered. "I think I could use a break too. I need to, uh... go to the bathroom. Yeah, that's it."

The group split in two. Spike crept up stairs to go to the bathroom while Rainbow Dash dragged Pinkie Pie into the kitchen. Once there, Rainbow Dash shut the door and turned to glare at Pinkie.

“What are you *doing*? This isn’t what we rehearsed,” Rainbow Dash snapped, trying to keep her voice down so they wouldn’t run the risk of waking Twilight.

“Me!? What are *you* doing? You’re the one moving the pointer!” Pinkie Pie accused.

“I am not!”

“Yes you are!”

“Pinkie Pie, I swear, it’s not me,” Rainbow Dash assured her.

“But, if *you’re* not the one doing it and *I’m* not the one doing it... and if Spike’s not the one doing it...” Pinkie Pie rattled off before falling silent, her eyes growing as wide as dinner plates. “Then... oh my gosh, do you think there’s a real ghost?! Oh, that is so exciting! I’ve never talked to a real ghost before!”

“But Pinkie Pie, this is only supposed to be a prank,” Rainbow Dash said before glancing over her shoulder. “I mean, the library wasn’t actually supposed to be haunted.”

Pinkie Pie hooked her foreleg around Rainbow’s shoulders and put on a confident smile. “Relax, Rainbow Dash, nothings changed. We’re just doing this for real now instead of pretend. We’ll ask the spirit what it wants, and then help Spike and Twilight get rid of it. It will be just like the time we got rid of that dragon in the mountains, or the time Twilight rocked that Ursa Minor to sleep.”

“But... ” Rainbow Dash tried to protest.

“Come on, I thought you *liked* being scared.”

Rainbow puffed out her chest. "I do, if something can actually scare me. But ghosts... no, I'm not scared of ghosts."

"Great! Let's get back out there before it leaves," Pinkie Pie said excitedly before bouncing out of the kitchen and returning to her place beside the Phantom Speller. Rainbow Dash wasn't as eager. She lingered in the kitchen a moment to take a deep breath. She then flared her wings, put on an air of courage, and strode out into the main room before sitting back down beside the Phantom Speller.

Spike came back from the bathroom a few minutes after the two mares had returned to the board. His face was dripping with water, but he acted as if nothing was amiss. He simply sat down. Even as water dripped to the floor, neither Pinkie Pie nor Rainbow Dash pushed for answers. Instead, the trio turned their attention back to the Phantom Spell and replaced their hooves and claw on the pointer.

"Okay," Rainbow Dash breathed, trying to calm the quiver in her voice, "can you tell us what was taken from you?"

For a few moments the pointer remained still, like the spirit had left, but then the pointer twitched once. That twitch was followed by movement as the pointer crossed to the upper right corner of the board.

... No...

"You can't tell us what was taken?" Pinkie Pie asked, echoing the spirit's answer. "Then... can you tell us who stole from you?"

... Yes...

"Oh, who was it?" Pinkie Pie chirped all too eagerly. The pointer began its reply as soon the question had left her lips. It spelled out the spirit's answer while she, Rainbow Dash, and Spike leaned in to watch with anticipation. Each worked mentally to keep track of the motion. Rainbow Dash even mouthed the letters to herself.

... S... H... E... T... O... O... K... H... E... R...

“No no no,” Pinkie Pie said while shaking her head at the same rhythm. “I asked who was it? Who is she?”

... S... H... E... T... O... O... K... H... E... R...

“No, I asked who is she,” Pinkie Pie corrected again. “I mean, it’s not that hard of question. All I’m asking for is a name.”

... S... H... E... T... O... O... K... H... E... R...

“Uh, Pinkie Pie, maybe we should-” Dash tried to interrupted, but Pinkie was too intently focused on the board to hear her.

“Oh come on, won’t you please tell me who she is? Pretty please with sugar on top?” Pinkie Pie sang, as if asking nicely would entice the spirit to give up the truth.

... S... H... E... T... O... O... K... H... E... R...

Dash abruptly took her hoof off the pointer and stood up from the board. “Whoa... okay, would you look at the time? I got someplace to be. So... ya, see you two later.” With that Rainbow Dash quickly made her way to the library door, only for Pinkie Pie to speed ahead and block the exit.

“Come on, Rainbow Dash, don’t go yet. I mean, this is so fun! We’re actually talking to a spirit!”

“Sorry, I’d... uh, *really* like to stay but, you know, I’ve got some clouds to clear.”

“In the middle of the night?” Pinkie Pie questioned.

“Uh... yeah, in the... middle of the night,” Rainbow Dash assured Pinkie with a weak smile.

“Aw, Rainbow Dash, you don’t have to be scared. Just remember you have to *~giggle at the ghostly, guffaw at the~*”

Rainbow Dash stuck a hoof in Pinkie Pie's mouth, ending the song before it could continue. "I am not scared," she said firmly, "and don't sing. Do you want to wake Twilight up and get us caught?"

"Uh, girls?" Spike tried to interrupt to no avail.

"No," Pinkie Pie replied once Rainbow Dash had lowered her hoof, "but I'm just saying it's okay to be scared. I mean, that's what this part of the year is all about; it's fun to be scared."

"I told you, I'm not scared!" Rainbow Dash snapped.

"But then why do you want to leave so bad?"

"It's because-"

"Girls!" Spike shouted. He had gotten up from the board and walked over to where the two mares were arguing, ensuring he was heard.

"What is it?" Dash asked, obviously wanting to get back to her argument with Pinkie Pie.

Spike pointed back at the board. "It's still going!"

The two mares turned their heads, and saw that Spike was telling the truth. The pointer was still moving, sliding between letters even though there was no pony or dragon touching it.

For almost a minute none of them approached the Phantom Speller. They remained rooted to the floor, watching the pointer slide from a distance. The first one to shore up enough courage to move closer was Pinkie Pie, though the expression on her face made it clear that she wasn't enjoying the ghostly encounter any more. Pinkie's courage let Rainbow Dash and Spike approach the board as well.

The pair followed behind Pinkie until all three of them were close enough to read what the pointer was spelling out.

... S... H... E... T... O... O... K... H... E... R...  
... I ... W... A... N... T... H... E... R... B... A... C... K...

... S... H... E... T... O... O... K... H... E... R...  
... I... W... A... N... T... H... E... R... B... A... C... K...  
... S... H... E... T... O... O... K... H... E... R...  
... I... W... A... N... T... H... E... R... B... A... C... K...  
... S... H... E... W... I... L... L... H... E... L... P... M... E... G... E... T... H... E...  
R...  
... S... H... E... W... I... L... L... B... E... M... I... N... E...

The pointer came to an abrupt stop, leaving the last letter magnified in its lens as the room fell into an uneasy silence. Rainbow Dash, Pinkie Pie, and Spike all stood, eyes locked on the Phantom Speller. None of them dared to move or even breath as the watched and waited to see if the spirit would continue to speak.

“Is... is it gone?” Spike asked quietly several tense moments later.

“What are you three doing?!”

Pinkie Pie, Rainbow Dash, and Spike all jumped and screamed at the top of their lungs. Spike bolted to hide under the library’s reading table while Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash hugged each other for dear life. It was then the lights around the room came on, magically lit by a very angry and tired-looking Twilight who glared at her friends from the base of the staircase.

Rainbow Dash put a hoof to her chest as she tried to calm her pounding heart. “Oh...geeze, Twilight! Don’t *do* that!”

“What, come downstairs to find out what all the shouting was about?!” Twilight snapped at her two friends. “And what are you two even *doing* here?”

“Twilight!” Spike wailed as he ran over and clung to Twilight’s leg. “Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie said they were going to help get rid of the ghost and-”

“Spike, I told you, there are no such thing as ghosts,” Twilight lectured.

“But Rainbow Dash said-”

“So it was Rainbow Dash,” Twilight grumbled as she turned her glare on Rainbow, who put up a hoof defensively.

“Okay, I know what this looks like, and I’ll admit Pinkie Pie and I *were* going to prank Spike, but-”

“Ha! See, Spike? These two were just playing a trick!” Twilight said while pointing an accusing hoof.

“We were *going* to play a trick,” Pinkie Pie corrected, “but then something actually started to happen. We actually got to talk to a real ghost. It was so scary, but so fun!”

“Oh yes, I’m *sure* it was,” Twilight sassed in disbelief before returning to her serious, scolding tone. “I can’t believe you two. I know you two like to pull pranks, but scaring Spike like this is going too far.”

“But-” Pinkie Pie tried to protest only for Twilight to cut her off.

“No, Pinkie Pie, I don’t want to hear any more.”

“But Twilight, there really *is* something-” Rainbow Dash tried to stress, but Twilight didn’t give her a chance to finish. With her horn glowing, she opened the library door and pointed at it with a hoof.

“No, you’ve had your fun. Now I think it’s time you two went home.”

“But Twilight,” Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash said in unison, only to fall silent at the stern, unforgiving glare in Twilight’s eyes. Unable to face their friend’s gaze, Rainbow and Pinkie made a quick retreat, running out of the library and to the street outside.

“Good night!” were the final words Twilight yelled to her friends before she slammed the library door shut and set the locks. She then released a tense breath before shelving her anger and looking down at Spike. He clung tightly to her leg, looking around the room with wide, terrified eyes.

“Look, Spike, I promise nothing is here,” Twilight said as she tried to comfort the baby dragon. “Those two were just playing a trick on you.”

Spike nodded, stepping away from Twilight and looking around the room. “O-o-okay, but what about Rainbow Dash’s...”



Twilight followed Spike's gaze, trying to find what he was looking at.  
"Rainbow Dash's what?"

"Rainbow's Phantom Speller, where did it go?"

"I'm sure she took it with her when she left," Twilight answered while she moved towards the stairs. "Now, come on, your up way past your bedtime."

Spike nodded, but remained standing where he was for a moment, staring at the place where the Phantom Speller had been. He tried to remember if he had seen Rainbow Dash grab the board when she left, but he couldn't recall seeing it in her hooves. Still, something like that couldn't just up and vanish... could it?

~~~

"Thanks again for helping out, Applejack," Twilight said with a weary smile. She stood on the porch of the Apple family farmhouse, unloading several items from her saddlebags and setting them just in the door. The sun was setting in the distance, just minutes from disappearing completely.

"I'm always happy to help out a friend in need, Twilight, but you mind tellin' me why you want Spike to spend a few nights here?" Applejack asked as she watched Twilight continue to unload blankets, pillows, and the occasional gemstone. "That letter you sent earlier didn't say that much."

"I'm sorry, I meant to explain everything but I was in a hurry this morning," Twilight apologized. "The reason I want Spike to spend a few nights here is because he hasn't been able to sleep at the library. Ever since he, Rainbow Dash, and Pinkie Pie were playing with that stupid Phantom Speller, he's been having really bad nightmares."

"Did you try tellin' him there's no such thing as ghosts?" asked Applejack.

"Of course," Twilight answered defensively. "I've probably told him a hundred times, but it doesn't help. He hasn't been able to sleep for two days, and when he's awake he's constantly on edge; he's just so scared."

“He isn’t the only one, Sugarcube. Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie came by here and told me what happened, and they were pretty spooked too.”

“Good. Maybe that will teach them it isn’t a good idea to scare your friends so badly,” Twilight seethed coldly.

Applejack reached out a hoof and touched Twilight’s shoulder, offering a sympathetic expression. “Now, Twilight, I know you’re mad at Rainbow and Pinkie for scarin’ Spike, but don’t be too hard on them. From the way it sounds, they didn’t mean for things to get so out of hoof.”

“I know,” Twilight admitted with a sigh as she turned to look at Applejack, “but I’m just worried about Spike. He’s just a baby dragon; he needs his sleep.”

“Well, don’t you worry none about that, Twilight,” Applejack said with a reassuring smile. “We’ll make sure he gets a good night’s sleep tonight.”

“Thank you, Applejack. I’m hoping that a change of scenery will help, and having so many other ponies around should make him feel safer as well. Still, I’d keep him away from Apple Bloom. I wouldn’t want him to tell her about what happened and give her nightmares too.”

“We’ll keep that in mind. Shoot, maybe you’d like to spend the night too. You’re lookin’ awful tired, Twilight, and we’ve got more than enough spare bedrooms.”

Twilight finished unloading the last of Spike’s things. “Thank you, but no thank you. I’ll admit, because of Spike’s nightmares, I haven’t been able to get as much sleep as I normally would, but I refuse to be driven out of the library by something that doesn’t even exist. Besides, I’ve got some reading I want to get done.”

“Well, all right then, if you’re sure.”

Twilight gave a nod and turned to leave. “I am, and thank you again. I really do appreciate this. I’ll come back tomorrow to check on Spike.”

“All right, see you tomorrow then, Sugarcube,” Applejack said, waving goodbye to Twilight. She remained on the farmhouse’s front porch,

watching Twilight until she had reached the farm's front gate. Once Twilight had turned and started heading in the direction of Ponyville, Applejack slipped inside the farmhouse to help Spike get settled in.

~~~

There was a deep frown on Twilight's face as she tapped on her bedroom window for what was the third time that evening.

Since her return from Sweet Apple Acres a few hours before, Twilight had been trying to read her book on illusions spells. She blazed through the first chapter without any trouble at all. Yet, upon trying to start the second chapter, Twilight found herself unable to concentrate. She began feeling a draft: a cold chill on one side of her body. Now, feeling a draft in the library was no strange occurrence, and Twilight had a properly prepared checklist for taking care of a draft whenever she felt one.

And she went down that checklist almost an hour and a half ago. First, she made sure all the windows were closed. Then, she placed a quick charm on the windows so they were better insulated. Then, as a final touch, she started a small fire in the fireplace. She hit every point on her checklist, and as expected she couldn't feel the draft any more and was able to return to her reading.

At least until the draft decided to return. Just as Twilight reached reached the bottom of the page she was on, the right side of her body was cold again, and it baffled her. She had gone down her checklist. She hit every point. There was no possible way she could still be feeling a draft. Yet the cold sensation on Twilight's right side was evidence to the contrary.

So Twilight went down the checklist again. She checked and enchanted the windows before throwing a fresh log into the fireplace. She stayed close to the fireplace, soaking in the heat from the flames until the cold sensation was gone. For a second time, Twilight was sure the draft was defeated, but the moment she tried to go back to her reading the chill returned.

Mind flaring with determination, Twilight embarked on a crusade to defeat the strange draft that kept her from reading. She triple-checked the windows, checked to make sure the draft wasn't coming from the front door, and, as a final touch, took her book off her reading desk and brought

it over beside the fireplace. She laid down with her right side facing the flames, smiling smugly at the room as if daring it to try and make her feel cold again.

It was a dare the library accepted. The moment Twilight returned to her reading a chill crawled up her spine. Her right side was cold again.

“Oh for Celestia’s sake!” Twilight bellowed out in aggravation as she jumped to her hooves and stomped upstairs. She didn’t know what was going on or where that draft was coming from, but she wasn’t going to let it keep her from her studies any longer. With a violent tug, Twilight took the blanket off her bed and draped it across her back. She then stomped back downstairs, laid back down by the fire, and wrapped the blanket around her body as tightly as she could.

“There; now there’s no way I can be cold,” Twilight stated firmly, every part of her body, except her horn and eyes, cocooned in her blanket. Still, instead of going straight back to her reading, Twilight decided to sit and wait for a minute and see if the draft returned. When it didn’t, Twilight let herself smile and revel in her triumph over the draft as she levitated up her book, intent on picking up where she had left off.

*but the bitterness in the young one's heart had transformed her into a wicked mare of-*

Twilight blinked, closing the book and checking the cover. It was not her book on illusion magic. Instead, Twilight found herself holding a book about Equestria’s history: the same book where she had first read about Nightmare Moon and the Elements of Harmony.

Twilight cocked an eyebrow in confusion and tossed back the part of the blanket wrapped around her head. “Where did this come from?” she asked herself as she cracked open the book again. She quickly flipped back to the passage where she had been, her eyes focusing on the two illustrations that were visible to her. The one on the left was a depiction of Luna and Celestia standing on a pair of clouds, Luna’s head turned away from Celestia. The image on the right side page was of Nightmare Moon, rearing back in a frightful pose.

“Mine...”

Twilight turned her head abruptly and glanced around while her ears swiveled forward. She then shut her book and stood up, keeping the blanket wrapped tightly around her body as she took a few steps away from the fireplace.

“Hello, is somepony there?” Twilight called out to the empty library. She strained her ears listening for the slightest whisper of a reply. The silence, however, persisted. The only thing that Twilight heard was the sound of her own breathing mixed with the crackling of the fireplace.

After listening intently for a few minutes, Twilight huffed and shook her head before turning back in the direction of the fireplace. “Come on, Twilight, pull yourself together. The front door and windows are locked, Spike is at Applejack’s, and there is nopony else here. Just go back to reading your-”

Twilight stopped, her voice falling silent and her eyes focusing on the section of the floor where she left the book. It had disappeared, and in its place was a letter-covered board with a pointer: a Phantom Speller.

A shiver ran down Twilight’s spine and she grappled with the fear that was growing in her chest. She didn’t own a Phantom Speller; it was just a silly board game with no foundation in real magic. Yet, as Twilight approached the board, she couldn’t deny that it was there. She even reached out a hoof and touched it, proving to herself that it was physical and real.

Inching closer, Twilight craned her neck over the board and focused on the pointer. It was positioned over the upper left hoof corner of the board, the small embedded glass lens directly above the word “Yes”. The sight of that word magnified in the pointer’s lens made Twilight feel uneasy, and she retreated from the board. She then took in a deep breath and shook her head.

“No, there’s no such thing as ghosts. I’m just... I’m just tired,” Twilight told herself, her mind latching onto the admittedly weak explanation. “Yes, I’m sure I just dozed while I was reading and slept walk. Also, this Phantom Speller, I bet it’s Rainbow Dash’s. She probably left it here after I made her leave the other night.”

Upon saying her explanation out-loud, Twilight realized how far-fetched it sounded. She, however, forced herself to ignore the weaknesses in the argument. She walked back up to the Phantom Speller, and without giving the board or its pointer a second look, put it in a drawer.

Twilight closed the drawer with a firm push of her hoof. "There, out of sight, out of mind. Now, where did my book go?"

It took some time, but Twilight was able to find her book on illusion spells and return to her place by the fireplace. Yet, as Twilight tried to focus on her reading, she found the silence of the library had become uncomfortable. It was just too quiet, and the strange happenings of the evening were still lingering on the edges of her thoughts.

Despite her every desire to keep reading, Twilight could tell her efforts that evening would be fruitless. She heaved a sigh of defeat, and after tossing the book onto her reading desk, retreated upstairs to the bedroom. She shut off the lights, laid down in her bed, and grumbled under her breath as she closed her eyes for the night.

"There are no such things as ghosts."

# Chapter 2

## Aggression

Twilight stumbled into her bathroom the next morning, heavy bags under her eyes. Her body was on autopilot, going through the motions of her morning routine with very little guidance. Into the bathroom, turn on the light, start the shower, wait for shower to warm up, adjust temperature, and finally climb in.

The water helped to drive away the clinging haze that consumed Twilight's mind, but could not clear it away completely. She had only been able to scrape together two hours of decent sleep during the night, and blamed her imagination. As she laid in bed, trying to sleep, she kept opening her eyes and looking out into the darkness of the bedroom. She couldn't shake the feeling she was being watched. She even tried sleeping with a light on, something she hadn't done since she was a filly, but it didn't help.

Lifting a hoof to her mouth, Twilight covered a yawn before going about the process of scrubbing her coat, mane, and tail clean. It was a routine she usually did with a rote efficiency, since she had other things she wanted to get done in the morning. This morning, however, she allowed herself the small luxury of just enjoying the warm shower. It also gave her more time to wake up and scrape together what little energy she had gained from her few hours of sleep.

Twilight stayed in the shower until the hot water was about to run out, only shutting the faucets off when she felt the water beginning to cool. She then remained in the tub for a while, letting herself air dry before she climbed out to finish the process with a towel.

Her long time in the shower left the room choked with warm steam, which Twilight didn't bother trying to vent as she cast a spell on her mirror. She warmed up the glass, evaporating the fog that had condensed on its surface as she wrapped her towel around her head in a bun. Then, once the mirror was clear, Twilight levitated her toothbrush and applied a carefully measured portion of toothpaste to the bristles before beginning to brush her teeth.

It was another part of her routine Twilight had down to a stone cold checklist: brushing the sides of her teeth in well-practiced order as her mind wandered to other subjects. She began thinking about what was on her schedule for the day. She had to go and pick up some candy for Nightmare Night from Bon-Bon's sweet shop. Then she needed to go check on Spike and see if staying at Sweet Apple Acres helped him get some sleep. Then she-

Something moved in the mirror behind her.

Twilight tensed and held the toothbrush still in her partially-foamed mouth. She leaned in to the reflective surface, inspecting the image as she tried to discern the source of the movement.

It was the steam in the room. The mist behind her was still twisting, though it had lost much of its momentum. Twilight turned and stared at the steam directly for a time before a small smile formed on her lips. She gave her tail a small flick, and set the mist swirling again.

Satisfied she had solved the mystery of the swirling steam, Twilight resumed brushing her teeth. She scrubbed each tooth with due diligence, and then set her toothbrush down. She sipped some water from the faucet, gargled, and rinsed before looking at her reflection to make sure she hadn't missed anything.

The glance turned into panic. Twilight stumbled away from the mirror and ended up falling back into the empty bathtub with a loud thud. The fall left her head spinning. She laid belly-up in the tub, and once her head had cleared, she righted herself as fast as her hooves would allow and stared at the mirror.

Twilight took several deep breaths, trying to calm her now racing heart. She had seen something, though she wasn't sure what it was. A shadow, a silhouette... whatever it was, the simple sight of it had scared her witless.

As she regained her composure, Twilight cursed herself and climbed out of the tub. It was that same unfounded fear that had kept her up all night and she was tired of dealing with it. There was nothing in the mirror and there hadn't been anything there. She was just imagining things.



Turning on the sink, Twilight rinsed her mouth of the lingering toothpaste foam and then stomped out of the bathroom, sweeping a good portion of the shower steam into the bedroom with her. Without pausing a moment, she grabbed up her to-do list and saddlebags before heading down the library stairs, fully intent on distracting herself from her foolish fears by diving right into her day's tasks.

"There are no such things as ghosts!" Twilight lectured herself as she slammed the bedroom door shut and stomped down the stairs. She left the bedroom utterly empty except for the steam, which continued to drift out of the bathroom: steam that swirled, as if nudged by something.

~~~

Spike groaned, turned over, and forced his eyes shut. He laid on the porch swing of the Sweet Apple Acres' farmhouse, resting his head on a pillow as he made a fresh attempt at getting some sleep. The swing gently rocked back and forth, driven by Granny Smith, who was sitting nearby, looking out across the farm with a pleasant, relaxed smile on her face. It was late afternoon, about the time Ponyville started shutting down and ponies began leaving work to return to their homes and families.

"You know, you should stop tossin' and turnin' and just get some rest," Granny Smith lectured without taking her eyes off the distant horizon.

"Easy for you to say," Spike grumbled and rolled over onto his back. "You didn't have to deal with a ghost."

"Ghost... ha, that's a lot of poppycock," Granny Smith sneered, her wrinkled face contorting. "No such thing as invisible ponies and spirits. Besides, I didn't have the luxury of thinkin' about things like that when I was growin' up, we had too much apple buckin' to do. Yep, from dawn to dusk we were workin' the fields, makin' this place the best it could be."

Spike groaned, covering his head with a pillow as braced himself for what he sensed was going to be a long, rambling speech about how things used to be.

“Nope, I had to work for my supper, not like some of the other ponies in town. Like Applejack’s friend, Rainbow Dash. She’s supposed to be our town’s weathermare, but she spends half her time napping or practicing her tricks. I say, if she has that much free time, she should find a way to be more productive. Celestia knows we could use the help on the farm.

“And it’s not just her. There’s been a lot of lazy do-nothings here in Ponyville. Why, when I was in school, there was this filly named Tarot. You know what her special talent ended up being?”

“No,” Spike moaned from beneath his pillow.

“Fortune telling. What kind of talent is that? She just sits around all day reading ponies’ hooves and playing with tarot cards. I swear, she hasn’t done an honest day’s work her entire life. About the only thing she did right was that family of hers. Those two colts of hers grew up right, but it’s mostly thanks to their father. Now he was good, hard-working stallion.”

Spike poked his nose out from beneath the pillow, defeat heavy in his voice. There was no hope of escaping Granny Smith’s ramblings. “Uh-huh.”

“Speaking of loafers, there was another one I knew that was even worse than Tarot,” Granny Smith announced, as if it was some great epiphany. “He was the town’s librarian back when I first got married, but he wasn’t like Applejack’s friend, Twilight Sparkle. No, she does it right; she’s the librarian *and* she’s Celestia’s student. She keeps herself busy, but Third Eye... bah, he had too much time on his hooves. He was a right creepy unicorn too, always jumpin’ at shadows. He even ran into the barn and started burnin’ somethin’ that stank like rotten eggs and garlic while ranting about how he was ‘banishin’ the spirits.’”

Spike bolted upright. He took the pillow off his head and spun around in his seat to look at Granny Smith intently. “Wait, banishing what?”

Granny Smith blinked a few times, surprised somepony was listening to her ramblings. “Uh... spirits. It was just a little while after my husband and I got married. Third Eye came by the farm to pick up an order of some special apples. While we were gettin’ them apples out of the barn he just started shoutin’ for no reason. We didn’t know what to make of it.”

“What happened after that?” Spike asked

“Well, Third Eye started burning those weird stick and waving them all around, spreadin’ that nasty smellin’ smoke all over the place. Now, we Apples are known for our hospitality, but we didn’t need that strange smoke around our harvest, makin’ them smell bad. When we couldn’t get Third Eye to stop, my husband went and bucked him right off the farm. He hasn’t been welcom ‘round here since.”

“Where is Third Eye? Does he still live in Ponyville?” Spike asked as he stood and stepped towards the elderly mare.

“I don’t know what happened to Third Eye. I can’t even remember the last time I saw him,” Granny Smith admitted as she leaned away from Spike, re-establishing the personal space he had invaded. “Honestly, I wouldn’t be surprised to hear he’d kicked the bucket, most of the ponies my age have. Still, I suppose you could go ask at the mayor’s office. They would know if he’s still around.”

Spike jumped down from the porch swing, an excited smile on his face. “Oh, this is perfect! I’ll go find Third Eye, and he’ll be able to get rid of the ghost. Thanks, Granny Smith!”

“Now just hold your horses,” Granny Smith called out before Spike could run off. “Where do you think you’re goin’?”

“I’m going to go to the mayor’s office and ask them where Third Eye lives,” Spike answered.

“Then you’d best be turnin’ around, because the mayor’s office is gonna be closed by the time you get to town.”

“But Twilight-” Spike tried to protest.

“Now don’t get your spines in a twist,” Granny Smith lectured as she eased herself off the swing. “You can go to the mayor’s office tomorrow. Besides, it’s supper time and I could use a young pair of claws like yours in the kitchen. Applejack and Big Macintosh have been workin’ the orchards all day and they’re going to be needin’ a nice big supper.”

“But what about Twilight? She’s been all alone in the library with the ghost! What if it’s done something to her?” Spike asked, only for Granny Smith to nudge him in the side and direct him towards the farmhouse door.

“Now that’s enough of that ghost talk. Go wash those claws, we’ve got a supper to make.”

~~~

Twilight wore a smile on her face as she yawned and slipped into bed. It had been a good day. She had gotten everything done on her checklist and only thought about ghosts once, and that was when she was helping Pinkie Pie hang some fake ghosts outside of Sugarcube Corner for Nightmare Night. Yes, a totally normal day that helped clear away all of the crazy paranoia she had been experiencing the night before.

It had been a good day, but a long one as well and Twilight was dog tired. She couldn’t help but yawn again as she turned over in her bed and looked out the window at the moon. Her eyes began to slide shut, and soon she drifted off into a blissful and well-earned sleep.

~~~

Sqwweeee... sqwweeee Sqwweeee... sqwweeee

Twilight slowly opened her eyes, blinking a few times to bring the world into focus. It was dark, the only light coming from the moon and stars outside the window. She didn’t quite understand why she was awake; it was past midnight and sunrise wouldn’t be for about six hours. Still, she just shrugged it off and snuggled back into her pillow, fully intent on getting back to sleep.

Sqwweeee... sqwweeee Sqwweeee... sqwweeee

Twilight sat up in bed, ears swiveling forward as she listened for the sound. It was a familiar sound, but she couldn’t place it and was about to lay back down when the noise repeated for a fifth and sixth time. It was enough for her to get a bearing on where the sound was coming from; it was originating from the library’s main floor.

After getting out of bed, Twilight made her way downstairs. She didn't bother trying to light any of the library's lamps or candles, instead using her horn to light the way. She reached the ground floor without any difficulties, and began sweeping the beam of light from her horn across the room as she searched for the source of the noise.

Sqwweeee... sqwweeee

The sound repeated itself again, and with its help Twilight was able to zero in on the source. Her light fell on the door to the library's basement, just beyond which she saw her Smartypants doll sitting on the floor. She had gotten the doll back from Big Macintosh a few days after the commotion she caused, following an awkward and overly personal conversation she would have rather avoided.

Still, that wasn't really important at the moment. What puzzled Twilight was how Smartypants had gotten out. She usually kept her tucked away in the bedroom, and she couldn't recall taking Smartypants out since the incident with the "Want it, Need it" spell.

"What are you doing there?" Twilight asked the doll as she trotted towards it. The doll, of course, offered no reply, just lying on the floor as Twilight moved past the basement door and stood over it. She reached out a hoof and gently put it down on the doll, causing it to let out the squeaking noise she had been hearing from upstairs.

"Well, I don't know how you got here," Twilight said as she picked Smartypants up, "but we're putting you right back up-"

SLAM

Twilight jumped and spun around, dropping Smartypants as she moved to the now shut basement door. She tried to push it open, both with her body and magic, but it remained tightly shut. There was no lock on the door; there was no way it could stay closed unless somepony was holding it shut from the other side, and yet she could not get the door to budge.

Sqwweeee... sqwweeee

Twilight froze up as a shiver crawled up her spine. She turned slowly, refocusing the light from her horn on the patch of floor where she had dropped Smartypants. The toy was gone, and another squeak filled the air. She could tell it was coming from the pitch black basement below.

Unable to get out the door, Twilight swallowed nervously and made her way across the landing to the stairs. She went down a single step at a time as she strained her eyes and focused her magic, trying to pierce the darkness. The shadows around the room proved uncommonly persistent, but she pushed forward to reach the bottom steps before walking to the center of the basement.

She found Smartypants again. The toy was sitting up right in the center of the floor. She approached it, and was calling on her magic to pick it up when she felt a draft on the back of her neck, as if something with an icy breath had exhaled on her.

“Mine...”

Twilight spun and looked around frantically, flashing the light from her horn around the room. She couldn't see anything, but that didn't stop the growing panic in her chest. Her mind was flashing back to the events of that morning and the night before, and as those memories bubbled to the surface Twilight did the only thing she could. She began to chant to herself, a panicked chant to try and drive away her fear.

“There's no such thing as ghosts. There's no such thing as ghosts. There's no such thing as-”

Twilight's chant came to an abrupt end as she felt the cold draft on her neck again. The air felt wrong in so many ways.

“She was mine.”

With a panicked yelp Twilight bolted for the stairs, galloping up them at full force while her horn began to glow. She was on a collision course with the still blocked door, but just as she was about to crash she called on her magic. In a single bright flash, she teleported up to the bedroom.

The moment Twilight was sure her spell had worked, she proceeded to turn on every light in the bedroom and barricade the door before diving beneath the covers of her bed. There, she curled up into a small, shivering ball and resumed her panicked chanting. “There’s no such thing as ghosts. There’s no such thing as ghosts. There’s no such thing as ghosts. There’s no such thing-”

Sqwweeee... sqwweeee

Terror gripped at Twilight's chest. The squeak had come from Smartypants. Twilight could clearly remember leaving the doll in the basement, yet it sounded as if the squeaking was coming from right on the other side of the bedroom door.

Sqweeee... sqweeee Sqweeee... sqweeee Sqweeee... sqweeee

Over and over, something made Smartypants squeak. Twilight, however, didn't dare leave her bedroom a second time. She stayed right there, under the covers with the door barricaded and lights on. She would remain there for the entire night.

Sleep, however, was something Twilight couldn't risk. She was too scared and it was too dangerous to go to sleep. Even if it was safe to rest, the squeaking from Smartypants wouldn't have allowed her. Over and over the toy squeaked, persisting at a constant pace with the reliability of a finely tuned clock and tormenting Twilight for hours.

It only stopped once the sun had begun to rise.

~ ~ ~

“Now let me just be sure I understand you correctly,” Rarity began. “You want me to perform surgery on this doll to remove its squeaker just so you can look at it?”

Twilight nodded her head firmly, holding out Smartypants. As soon as she had been able to round up enough courage to leave her bedroom that morning, Twilight had grabbed Smartypants and bolted out the door. She then ran at a full sprint across Ponyville to Carousel Boutique, arriving just as Rarity was opening her shop for the day.

"I also want you to check for anything else that somepony might have stuck in there," Twilight instructed. "Spell stones, enchanted sticks, an advanced alchemical skeletal system... stuffing."

"But Twilight, Dear, it's *supposed* to be filled with stuffing."

"Take it out anyway; I have to make sure somepony didn't put a spell on it."

Rarity grimaced, but nodded her head and gingerly took Smartypants from Twilight, carrying the doll into her shop as Twilight followed. "All right, if you really want me to, I'll open up its seams and see what I can find. Still, Twilight, perhaps you would like to freshen up while you wait. You're looking a bit -well- ragged."

Twilight glanced at her reflection in one of the many mirrors located in the boutique's front room, agreeing with Rarity that she didn't look her best. She had left the library without taking a shower or brushing herself, so her mane, tail, and coat were a mess. The bags under her eyes also made it apparent that she hadn't been able to get as much sleep as she would have liked the night before.

Despite this, Twilight shook her head and continued to follow Rarity into the boutique's back room. "Thank you but no, I need to be there when you open up Smartypants. I've got some magic detection spells that should let me figure out why she was squeaking by herself last night."

Rarity set Smartypants down on one of her work tables before turning to look at Twilight. "Squeaking... by itself?"

"I know what it sounds like, Rarity, but that's why I need you to open Smartypants up so I can check her squeaker."

Rarity picked up a tool from her workbench: a seam opening "All right, let's have a look then."

With fine dexterity earned over her years of dress making, Rarity began the impromptu doll surgery. She began by removing the doll's blue, polka-dotted shorts and turning the doll over several times. The seamstress was examining every part of the doll, looking at every visible seam before

finding the one she was searching for. Since dolls need to be stuffed before they are finished, there was always one seam someplace that was more exposed than the others.

Rarity eventually found that seam on the doll's right side. With delicate precision, she cut the seam open and exposed the doll's aged stuffing, which had been stained and discolored by years of love and affection from its owner.

With the seam open, Rarity began to remove sections of the stuffing, setting them off to one side until she found the toy's squeaker. She then lifted the small device out, holding it up in the air with a small triumphant smile. "Ah, here it is."

"Give it!" Twilight snapped as she snatched the squeaker out of Rarity's magic and threw it on the floor. She then proceeded to cast a number of spells on the squeaker, her horn flashing brightly several times while Rarity looked on, both insulted Twilight had snatched the squeaker away so rudely and yet curious whether or not Twilight would find anything wrong with the noise-making device.

"No... that, that's impossible!" Twilight exclaimed as she shied back from the squeaker after casting her twenty-third magic detection spell.

"What's impossible, Twilight?"

"There's no spells on the squeaker; the only spell that's ever been cast on it was my 'Want it, Need it' spell," Twilight answered as she continued to back up, putting Rarity between her and the squeaker. "That means something else was making Smartypants squeak, a-a-and that means the library is..."

"Now Twilight, don't tell me you're actually starting to believe what Rainbow Dash and Spike are saying," Rarity lectured as she strode over to the squeaker and picked it up with her magic. "I'm sure you were just... Twilight?"

Rarity blinked a few times as she looked around the now empty room. Twilight had left without saying a word.

~~~

"Tell me why I'm flying you to Graitan again?" Rainbow Dash asked as she looked over her shoulder. She soared over rolling hills outside of Ponyville, following a dirt road as it wound its way west.

"Because that's where Third Eye lives," Spike answered from his seat on Rainbow Dash's back. "That, and I think you owe me a favor after that whole thing with the Phantom Speller."

"I already said I was sorry," Rainbow Dash protested, "and why do you need to find this stallion anyway?"

"From what Granny Smith told me, it sounds like he knows about ghosts and how to banish them."

"Oh, I get ya," Rainbow Dash said with an understanding nod, "you want him to get rid of whatever is haunting the library."

"Yep!" Spike confirmed. "I know Twilight says nothing is there, but I'd rather be safe than sorry. Now come on, Rainbow Dash, can't you go any faster?"

A devilish grin formed on Rainbow Dash's face. "Oh, you *want* me to go faster?"

"Uh... no, wait, I changed my mind. I changed my miiiiiiinnnnn-"

Spike's protests fell on deaf ears as Rainbow Dash circled once and then spirited forward, zipping through the air with her renowned speed. She bolted across the sky in the direction of Graitan, with Spike holding on for dear life.

~~~

"You sure this is the place?" Rainbow Dash asked as she and Spike stood next to one another on a dirt road. They were just outside the town limits of Graitan, surrounded on all sides by waving fields of grain. Directly in front of them stood a farmhouse, smaller than Applejack's home and also in a worse state of repair. There were shingles missing from the roof, and the

grass out front had been allowed to grow wild. It was nothing a good weekend of work couldn't fix, but it gave the home an ominous appearance.

"Yep, this is the right address," Spike confirmed as he looked at the note he had scrawled in the palm of his claw.

"Sure is creepy enough to be a house for a pony that deals with ghosts," Rainbow Dash commented as she and Spike made their way to the front door, her eyes drifting around the unkempt property while Spike remained focused on the door ahead.

"Good, because that's what we need."

After climbing onto the house's small front porch, Spike knocked on the door. His knocks were answered within moments. The door jerked open a crack, and through the small opening a dull green, panicked eye peered out at them.

"You're not dead," an aged voice from behind the door accused.

"Uh... no, we're not," Rainbow Dash said as she recovered from how abruptly the door had opened. "We're here looking for somepony named Third Eye. Is that you?"

"I'm Third Eye, but who are you?" the stallion behind the door asked, the tone of paranoia rising in his voice. "Did my brother send you? Are you with the nightmares?"

"No, we need to talk to you about a ghost that's haunting the Ponyville Library," Spike explained. He took a step towards the cracked open door only to have it slammed in his face.

"No! No no no! Impossible, Ponyville Library can't be haunted!" the stallion shouted from behind the closed door. "It's impossible. I *made* it impossible. Now go away!"

Spike knocked on the door again. "But we need your help. There's really something in the Ponyville Library. You see, Rainbow Dash brought a Phantom Speller in and-"

The front door of the home snapped back open and Third Eye peered through the crack again. "Phantom Speller, *what* Phantom Speller!? You took a Phantom Speller into the library!?"

Rainbow Dash stepped back anxiously. "Well... kind of, yeah."

Again, the front door of the house slammed shut. That loud slam was followed by the sound of a pony undoing chains and locks from the far side. The door then flashed as a spell was lifted off its wood before swinging open to reveal a dull, tombstone gray unicorn stallion. His cutie mark was purple lines in the shape of an eye inscribed within a triangle.

The stallion anxiously leaned forward and looked intently at Spike and Rainbow Dash, revealing his thinning mane. His tail, which was the same stringy silver color of his remaining mane, twitched anxiously, and the frown of his lips only worsened his wrinkles, which made it clear he was as old as Granny Smith.

"You aren't possessed," Third Eye said. "No... your auras have traces, but only from contact. No, not possession, just contact. Contact with... with..."

"With wha-" Rainbow Dash tried to ask, only to be cut off as Third Eye jumped back into his house with a panicked look on his face. His horn glowed, and before Spike and Rainbow Dash could react they were dragged into the house.

Rainbow Dash struggled against Third Eye's magic. "Hey! Let us go!"

"No, not yet. We can't talk yet. House must be secure before we can talk," Third Eye muttered to himself. He returned to the door, shutting it with a slam and putting a dozen locks and chains in place. He then touched his horn to the door, causing the wood to flash with a pale white tone.

Only once the door was secure did Third Eye calm down. "Okay, we're safe now. We're safe from the glowing eyes. We're safe from it."

"Safe from what?" Rainbow Dash asked once she and Spike were released from the levitation magic.

“The nightmare... the nightmare that’s touched you, that’s been near you. The nightmare that’s after me. But no... that’s impossible. The library is safe. I made sure it was safe. If... if it’s not safe, then there is a chance-” Third Eye fell silent and his pupil’s narrowed. He bolted into the old home’s living room, and began shoving furniture against the walls.

Spike and Rainbow Dash stood back and watched as Third Eye moved one final piece of furniture. He then levitated the large rug in the center of the floor off to one side and started pacing in a circle around the now exposed boards. “What... is he doing?” Spike asked.

Rainbow Dash leaned in close to Spike so she could whisper in his ear. “I don’t know, but I think this stallion’s crazy. We should go.”

“No!” Spike whispered back. “We have to at least ask him if he knows how to get rid of the ghost.”

“It isn’t a ghost!” Third Eye barked, having overheard the pair. “No, your auras are tinged by what it really is, a nightmare.”

“Wait, are you saying a bad dream is what’s haunting the library?”

Third Eye shook his head and dropped down onto the floor to closely inspect the wooden boards that had been covered by the rug. “No, other kind of nightmare; something that lives beyond the dreams. Not a ghost, not a spirit... your auras were touched by a nightmare. The nightmare. But no, it’s impossible. The library is safe, just like this place is safe. Nothing can get in... can it?”

Third Eye touched his horn to the floor, its pale glow spreading to the boards. Soon, a large, complex symbol took shape on the floor, the sight of which seemed to calm Third Eye’s breathing. “Yes. The ward is good. The ward still works.”

“What... what is that?” Rainbow Dash asked as she and Spike approached the glowing drawing.

“It’s a spirit ward. It keeps them all away. They cannot enter this house without permission as long as it’s here, but the library has a ward. Library

should be protected, but you've been haunted. There is something there, but the ward should keep them away, should keep it away."

Rainbow Dash reached out to touch the diagram. "How does this-"

Before her hoof could come in contact with the glowing lines, Third Eye tackled Rainbow Dash. The pair rolled across the floor and crashed into the far wall with a resounding thud.

"Do not touch it!" Third Eye ordered. He wrestled vigorously with the pegasus for a brief moment, but his age caught up and he soon fell off her with a wheeze.

Rainbow Dash pulled herself away from the stallion with angry huff. She reared back, put up her front hooves, and began to box at the air while jumping on her back hooves. . "Hey, you want to go, let's go!"

"No, Rainbow Dash, we need his help," Spike said as he put himself between the two ponies.

"But he tackled me!"

"Because you were going to touch the ward!" Third Eye accused through his wheezing. "The ward must not be touched. The ward is delicate; it is written in ash. You could have ruined it, and then they'd come for me. It would come for me."

Spike turned to face Third Eye, holding up his claws and speaking as gently as possible. "Okay... it's okay. Rainbow Dash isn't going to touch the thing on the floor. Just calm down. We're safe here."

Third Eye's breathing slowed and his tension began to dissipate. "Yes... The ward is safe, so we're safe; everypony is safe."

"That's it," Spike encouraged. "Now, please, we need your help."

"Yes, help," Third Eye said, nodding his head. He levitated the rug back onto the floor to cover the glowing symbol. "You need help. You've been touched by a nightmare; your auras are marked. No denying it, but how?

Nightmare can't get in without permission. The ward prevents that... unless it's damaged. Yes, ward in the basement must have been damaged."

"What ward in the basement?" Spike asked.

Third Eye used a hoof to make sure the rug was lying perfectly flat. "I lived at the library. I was the librarian. I did a good job. I kept all the books in order, cleaned the shelves, helped ponies."

Third Eye turned away from the rug and motioned to his flank. "But my talent, *my special talent*, is seeing things other ponies can't. I can see the spirits, see the nightmares. I can see them all, and I thought I'd help. I was going to make all the spirits go away, make Ponyville safe."

"But then I fought with a nightmare, a strong Nightmare," Third Eye whispered as a shiver of fear gripped his body. "I tried to bind it in bones, tried to stop it, but it didn't work. Only made it worse, I only made it worse. I couldn't beat it, could only run, but it chased. I had to protect myself, protect the library. That's when I put a ward on the basement floor. The ward kept the nightmare out, but it went after me whenever I left. Started putting wards all around town, hiding them where they wouldn't get broken."

Third Eye focused his gaze on Rainbow Dash and Spike, stepping towards them. "I was only trying to protect the ponies. I didn't want to scare them, just protect. I told them about the nightmare. I told them about its hunger and cursed eyes. I told them to watch out, but then the mayor got angry. The mayor said I was spreading rumors, scaring everypony. They... made me leave."

Third Eye shivered and he looked out a window as if expecting something to be out there, watching him. "Came here, but the nightmare followed. The nightmare was angry. It wanted to get me, so I put a ward on this house, put a ward on the yard, and protected myself. Nightmare finally left, but I know it will come back. It will always come back. Nightmares are patient, they get what they want... but it can't get me here. The ward protects me."

"And one of these wards is in the basement of the Ponyville library?"

“Yes,” Third eye confirmed. “But the ward may have been damaged, it doesn’t take much. A pony walking on ward directly can damage it. Liquid can damage it too, wash it away. I must never spill, never spill.”

“Wait, Spike, you remember Pinkie Pie’s ‘Welcome to the Season Party’?” Rainbow Dash asked, her anger at Third Eye replaced by concern.

“Yeah, what about it?” Spike asked.

“You remember what happened when I tried to play ‘Pin the Tail on the Pony’? I ended up missing the poster and crashing into the bobbing for apples barrel.”

“Of course I remember ,” Spike said. “You spilled punch everywhere, and then lights went out and my poor, sweet Rarity-”

“Wait...” Third Eye interrupted. “*Spilled* punch in the basement? The lights went out? How long were they out? Did you have to relight them?”

“The lights were only out for a few seconds, and then they came back on all on their own,” Spike answered.

“The spilled punch... the punch, it was the punch!” Third Eye yelled. “The punch broke the ward; the punch washed it away, and the spirit got in. The wards are still safe. The wards still work, but now library isn’t safe.”

“So do you believe us now, that there’s a ghost in the library?” Rainbow Dash questioned, struggling to follow Third Eye’s ramblings.

Third Eye nodded his head furiously and began to pace. “Yes, the library is haunted, but not by ghost. Ghosts aren’t always bad, but nightmares *are*. Nightmares are the worst. They always want something. That’s the way they are, they always want. They can be patient, but they always want. But what does it want now?”

“Hey, we may know that!” Rainbow Dash perked up. “It told us what it wanted when we were using the Phantom Speller.”

Third Eye tensed at the mention of the Phantom Speller. “No... those are bad. They give the nightmares power; they make it easier. Still, the damage

is done. We can't undo the damage. Can only make best of it. Yes, we'll make the best of it. Use the information against the nightmare, banish it, make it go away... make it go away."

The old stallion's eyes flashed with fresh life as his manic speech slowed. "Yes... make it go away. The tinge on your auras, it looks like the nightmare's aura. Yes, its the same nightmare. If we beat it, then it will be gone. Then I wouldn't need the wards. There would be no more wards, and no more wards means no more hiding. I could go outside, go to town... I haven't been town in a long time. I want to go town. It would be nice to go to town."

For a moment Third Eye's spastic speech cleared and he locked his gaze on Spike. "Tell me everything!"

~~~

Spike ended the explanation several minutes later. The group had moved to Third Eye's kitchen. The stallion had become calmer and less nervous, though he still sporadically twitched and looked about, as if fearful something was about to jump out at him. Still, he was focusing, speaking more slowly as he thought about what he had just been told.

"And Twilight," Spike said as a final addition, "she refuses to believe there's a gh- I mean, nightmare in the library. She doesn't believe in things like that, period. She'd also be mad that we came all the way out here to find you, but... I just know something is there."

Third Eye rocked his head from one side to the other. "She took her. I want her back. She will help me get her. She will be mine."

"What do you think it means?" Spike asked anxiously, getting chills as he remembered seeing the those words being spelled out on the Phantom Speller.

"She... she and her, her and she," Third Eye mused, as if he was rolling around the thoughts in his mouth. "The nightmare is speaking of two females, likely two ponies. Yes, two ponies, and the nightmare had one, but it was taken. That means nightmare had one pony possessed."

“But she... who is she?” Third Eye asked nopony in particular. “The events began before the Phantom Speller was in the library. That means she was already there. It also means the nightmare is powerful, but I knew that. The nightmare I tried to beat was powerful. It would be able to haunt before the Phantom Speller gave it strength. It’s only stronger now, but we can beat it. I want to beat it. I want to be able to go town. I can go to town when the nightmare is beaten.”

Third Eye heaved a weary breath, looking up at the ceiling while continuing to think out loud. “Yes... go to town, but not now. Need to focus. There were only two in library. She is not baby dragon, baby dragon a boy. Yes... the unicorn is the she. So ‘she took her’ means the unicorn took the her away from the nightmare.”

“So, wait a minute. Is Twilight the her or the she?” Rainbow Dash asked, drawing Third Eye out of his thoughts.

“Your friend is the she. Your friend is the one that took her away from the Nightmare. She is the one that will help the nightmare take her back. She is also the one that the nightmare wants, but who is her? Who is the one your friend took?”

“We don’t know,” Rainbow Dash answered, though she wasn’t entirely sure whether or not Third Eye wanted his question answered. “The spirit wouldn’t tell us.”

“Not a spirit, it is a nightmare,” Third Eye corrected. “It also doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter what was taken. We know the nightmare’s motive. It’s angry; it had something taken away. It wants to take that thing, that pony, back... but it can’t get it. It can’t take the pony back; it needs help. Nightmare is going to use the unicorn to get her back. That is why it haunts, it wants the unicorn. It wants the unicorn to get her back.”

Spike jumped up from his seat. “So that thing is after Twilight! We need to get back to Ponyville and warn her!”

“No! You don’t leave now. You can’t leave now!” Third Eye said firmly as he pointed to one of the windows. “It too late in the afternoon, far too late. We won’t get to Ponyville before it’s dark. We can’t go out in the dark, can’t arrive there in the dark. Nightmare has power in the dark. Celestia’s sun

holds the nightmares back, but during the night they can stand. Even with Luna back, nightmares have strength at night.”

“But what about Twilight!?” asked Spike.

“Twilight will be fine; she will be fine. The nightmare wants to possess her, but it can’t. Nightmares can’t possess those who don’t believe. Doesn’t help me; I do believe. How can I not believe when I *can* see them? But she can’t see them. It can haunt, but it can’t possess. It can only possess those who believe.”

“Why would that make a difference?” Rainbow Dash asked, only for Third Eye to shrug in reply.

“Don’t know. That’s just the rule. Don’t know why it’s a rule, but it’s a rule. That’s always been the rule. I think it’s Celestia; I think she protects Equestria, but not me. She won’t, she can’t, help me. It’s because I can see them, because of my cutie mark. I can see them, thus I believe in them, thus they can haunt me. Wish I couldn’t, but I can’t change my cutie mark. That’s the rule; I just can’t change my cutie mark.”

Rainbow Dash sighed, exhausted from trying to keep up with Third Eye.  
“So, what do you think we should do?”

“Wait till morning. I’ll be ready, and then we can go. We can go replace the ward, and make the spirit go away. Just in time too, Nightmare Night is two days away. Nightmares are strongest on Nightmare Night, because for one night everypony pretends to believe. Belief gives them strength, allows them to possess. Even pretending is enough, but we’ll replace the ward before Nightmare Night. We’ll do it before, and the library will be safe again.”

“And just where are we supposed to stay until morning?” Rainbow Dash asked.

“You can stay here, sleep here. My couch folds out; it makes a nice bed. You can sleep here where it’s safe, and in the morning, we’ll go get it. Yes, we’ll defeat the nightmare, and I’ll be free.” Third Eye stood up from the table, continuing his ramblings as he went into the living room to unfold the couch’s sleeper bed. “I’m sure it’s the same nightmare. It’s the same

nightmare, and when we beat it I'll be able to go to town. Yes, go to town and... maybe have ice cream."

"Okay, after this, we're officially even. Dealing with this guy more than makes up for the Phantom Speller prank I was going to pull," Rainbow Dash stated firmly, not liking the idea of staying the night in the creepy house with the unpredictable Third Eye. "Just look at him! He's not just a few apples short of a bushel, he's missing about half the bushel! Are you sure he can even help?"

"You saw that thing he has on his living room floor," Spike pointed, remembering the glowing symbol. "And everything he's said kind of make sense."

Rainbow Dash huffed as she stood up from the table. "Great, I just *love* having sleep overs with crazy ponies." Dash turned to go into the living room, but glanced back at Spike to see him staring anxiously out the dining room window. "Listen, Spike, if you actually believe what Third Eye says, then you don't have to worry. Twilight will be fine. I mean, she's the last pony I'd expect to believe in ghosts."

Spike perked up a bit as he turned away from the window with a chuckle. "Yeah... Twilight would believe in the tooth fairy before she believed in ghosts."

~~~

Twilight flinched as she looked up from her book, breathing anxiously as she surveyed the bedroom. She wasn't sure if she had just heard something or not, but after seeing that the room was empty, she forced herself to go back to her reading.

Glancing out the window, Twilight saw that night had fallen. She yawned, exhausted by a long day and her lack of sleep the night before. She wanted nothing more than to go to sleep, but she had to remain awake. Her bed was piled with books, and she was reading as fast as her eyes would allow.

After leaving the Carousel Boutique, Twilight had gone straight back to the library and pulled every book she could find on spirits, ghosts, and the

paranormal. It was actually surprising how many books the library had on the subject, and most of them were tucked away on a specific shelf in the basement. She had been reading since then, reading every page she could lay her eyes on... and through all her reading Twilight had come to a startling conclusion.

Ghosts *were* real, and her library *was* haunted.

Still, with that admission came resolve. While she had yet to find specific instructions, scrawled notes in the margins of the book seemed to indicate that there were ways to fight back against ghosts and other paranormal things. There was a way to fight back, she just had to find it.

Another sound made Twilight look up from her feverish reading, but this time it wasn't a thump or some other sound she hadn't been able to pinpoint. This time it was the library's clock announcing the hour. It was midnight, and sunrise wasn't for several more hours. She felt her heart sink at the prospect of having to remain awake all night, but she wouldn't stop. This was her library, and she wasn't going to let a ghost chase her out. She was close to an answer, and once she had it she would use her magic to make the ghost leave. All she had to do was keep studying and find the solution.

Yet, through the haze of her worry and exhaustion, Twilight found herself focusing on the clock. She counted off each chime, finding her mind calmed by the reliable, rhythmic tones.

one... two... three... four... five... six... seven... eight... nine... ten... eleven...

Twilight perked her ears up, straining to hear the final chime. The library had fallen into an uncomfortable silence, one that sent a shiver down her spine. She knew she hadn't missed a chime; she had counted each one.

Twilight sat up in her bed and levitated the nearby candle into the air, holding it high as she looked around. It was coming; she knew it was coming, but how would it come? It had burned her mouth with oatmeal, sent a chill down her spine, and taunted her with Smartypants. It had never done the same thing twice, so what was the ghost going to do?

Waving the candle around, Twilight began to jump at shadows. Everything in the room became suspect; the ghost could use anything. The books could start falling off the shelves on their own. The window could open. The paranormal books she had managed to read had made it clear that ghosts could affect anything physically.

Still, as Twilight looked about nothing seemed out of place. Everything was normal, and for a moment she tried to calm herself down. Maybe... maybe she had just miscounted, missed one of the clock's chimes. It was entirely possible; between being scared witless and her lack of sleep, Twilight knew she wasn't at the top of her game.

Twilight set the candle down on her bedside table and shut her eyes as she focused on calming her breathing. "It's all right," she said to herself. "Nothing's there... nothing's there. It's all right."

THUMP

Twilight froze, not daring to open her eyes. She wasn't sure if she had actually heard something or if it was her imagination playing tricks on her, but for a moment she just listened. Only when she was sure she didn't hear anything else did she dare open her eyes and look to see what had caused the noise.

It was a book, a single book laying open on the floor. Twilight couldn't clearly see the words from where she was, but she could make out the pictures on the book's exposed pages.

Forcing down a swallow, Twilight gathered up the faint traces of courage she had remaining and climbed down from her bed. She picked up the candle from her beside table, and very cautiously approached the book. Inch by inch she got closer, and as she did she began to recognize the pictures on the page. One was of Celestia and Luna, standing together on clouds with Luna turned away. The other was of Nightmare Moon, rearing back in a frightful pose.

But there was something else about the pages: they had been torn. Something had shredded the text beneath the pictures, and for a moment Twilight's concern over her books overpowered her fear. She closed the

distance between her and the book in a few steps, picking it up as she began to inspect the damage to the pages.

It was like the book had been shredded by claws. The words and most of the illustrations were destroyed. The only pictures that had survived were the ones of Luna and Nightmare Moon. Twilight closed the book and looked on the cover. It was also shredded, and jagged letters had been clawed into the book's cover.

She was MINE!

An unworldly scream erupted in the air. It shattered the silence of the library, and sounded like it was coming from all around. It painfully grated on the ears, and smashed every thought in Twilight's mind. The scream was followed by a stomping on the library's staircase. Something was coming upstairs, and it was coming quickly.

Twilight did the only thing she could think of: run! She bolted for the bathroom, leaping inside with her candle and slamming the door shut. Normally, the bathroom door didn't have a lock, but in a rush of adrenaline and fear, Twilight called on her magic and transformed the door handle into a deadbolt lock. Just as something threw itself against the door, she clicked the latch shut.

Again and again something large and heavy slammed against the door. The ghost was trying to break in, and Twilight was in a panic. She climbed into the bathtub and drew the shower curtains shut, curling around the small flickering flame of her candle as she shut her eyes. Tears streamed down her face, but Twilight kept a hoof over her mouth to muffle her crying.

She was trapped; trapped in her own home. Her only hope of escape was her teleporation spell, but each time she attempted it, her concentration was ruined by whatever was slamming against the door.

Tears began to stream down Twilight's face. Already, her mind was filling with horrible thoughts of just what would happen if the ghost got in. Would it devour her, attack her, or do something worse? She couldn't even imagine anything else as the dreadful pounding of the door continued. Each slam shattered her thoughts like fragile glass. She couldn't get away. She could

only hide until morning and hope that the ghost couldn't break through the door.

Then the pounding stopped, and for several minutes the only sound Twilight could hear was her own muffled whimpering. She didn't dare believe that the ghost was gone. She knew it was still out there, someplace in the library, but now that it wasn't pounding on the door she was able to calm herself down a little and catch her breath.

Looking in the candle's flame, Twilight tried to focus in on its gentle flickering light. It brought some peace to her mind, but only enough to make Twilight realize she couldn't stay in the library. She had to escape. The ghost had never haunted her outside the library. If she could get outside, then she could get someplace safe and get help. She could go to Applejack or Rarity for help, or maybe even go straight to Canterlot. If anypony could protect her from a ghost, surely Princess Celestia could.

But she had to get outside the library first. Maybe... maybe she could manage to teleport herself that far. The shorter the distance, the less magic and concentration her spell took. Yes, she could just teleport to the street outside the library. Then, she could gallop away and get help.

Struggling to her hooves, Twilight forcibly calmed her breathing as she set the candle down in the bathtub. Her knees were shaking and she felt nauseous from her fear, but Twilight made herself focus. She called on her magic, and after sucking in a deep breath Twilight unleashed the spell.

It was over in a second, and Twilight knew immediately it had worked. She could feel the dirt of the road beneath her hooves and the cool night air on her coat. She opened her eyes and looked up at the nighttime sky. The glittering stars never looked as beautiful to Twilight as they did at that moment. She then looked back, letting a wisp of a triumphant smile form on her lips as she looked over the darkened library. She had teleported to the exact place she wanted to be; she had escaped.

"HA!" Twilight called out in a mixture of panic and triumphant joy. "You can't get me out here!"

The nightmare proved Twilight wrong. The library door swung open violently, slamming against the bookcases inside. Then, before she could

take a single step, something grabbed one of her hind hooves and pulled, knocking her to the ground.

“NO!” Twilight screamed as she was dragged backwards. She scrambled, kicking her hind legs as her forelegs struggled to get a grip on the loose dirt. When that didn’t help, she looked to see the library’s dark entryway yawning wider, like some mouth about to swallow her.

“**NO!** Let me go! **Let me go!** Help! Somepony **HELP!**” Twilight cried out desperately, but there was nopony around to hear her. She continued to scream and claw at the ground as she was dragged inch by inch towards the library door. Then, once she was actually inside, the door slammed shut.

“**NO!** Leave me alone! **Leave! Me! Alone!**”

Twilight’s final screams echoed through the streets. The library’s dark windows revealed nothing. Only one light remained, a single candle that continued to flicker from its place in the bathtub. Then, even that light was extinguished, leaving the entire library consumed in darkness.

Chapter 3

Nightmares

Rarity looked at the Nightmare Night decorations spread all down the street, and cursed herself for her procrastination. Nightmare Night was tomorrow evening, meaning she only had the rest of that day and the next to finish her costume.

She should have been done already, but so much had gotten in the way. Customers came in wanting last minute adjustments to their costumes, and then Opal went and shredded part of Sweetie Belle's vampire cape. It took Rarity time to remake it, and while she was happy to do it for her little sister, that was time Rarity didn't really have to spare.

That and, after Twilight's abrupt departure, Rarity hadn't been able to properly concentrate on her work. Twilight looked so scared, and she had left her Smartypants doll behind with its squeaker lying in the middle of the floor. The fact Twilight kept the toy past fillyhood spoke to how much she cared for it, and Rarity doubted her friend would just abandon the doll at the boutique so heartlessly, had not something terrified her into fleeing.

So, in hopes of cheering Twilight up and easing her own concerns, Rarity decided to dip into her dwindling supply of time and fix Smartypants. She re-secured its loose eye, replaced all the old stuffing, and gave the doll a good washing. Smartypants was still old and well-loved, but it looked as good as it possibly could, all things considered.

Nearing the library, Rarity levitated the doll out of her saddlebags and carefully adjusted the yarn that made up the fake mane before stepping onto the front step. She gave the door a few firm knocks, and didn't have to wait long for the door to open.

"Oh, Twilight, you're looking..." Rarity's voice trailed off and she stared at the pony who answered the library's door. Twilight was looked worse than she did the day before. Her mane was still a mess, as was her coat, but on top of that her eyes were distant and her belly was dusty. It was like she had been rolling around in the street.

Rarity forced a smile and held the doll up. "So... I just thought I'd bring Smartypants back. You left in such a rush yesterday you forgot her. Oh, and I hope you don't mind, but I decided to clean her up a bit. Personally, I think she's never looked better."

Twilight's gaze did not shift at all. Her expression and eyes remained hollow. She just stared at Rarity. She did not smile, did not frown, didn't do anything; she just stared. Rarity forced a laugh to disrupt the uneasy silence, and held Smartypants a little closer to Twilight. This forced her to take notice of the doll. She took it with her magic and placed it just inside the door.

"Thank you," Twilight said mechanically. She turned her gaze back to Rarity, sending a shiver up her spine.

"O-of course, Twilight, anytime. So..." Rarity craned her neck, looking past Twilight and into the library. The lights were out and the curtains were drawn shut, trapping the library in darkness. "What are you doing today? Are you getting ready for Nightmare Night?"

"I'm studying," Twilight answered as she took a step back and placed her hoof on the door, preparing to close it.

"In the dark?"

Twilight began shutting the door slowly. "I like the dark."

"But Twilight," Rarity protested, putting her hoof on the door to keep it open, "reading in the dark like that can't be good for your eyes. That, and I must say it looks like you haven't slept a wink. So, how about you take a small break, and we-"

"Go away!"

If Rarity had been any slower pulling her hoof away, it would have been crushed. Twilight, with that one guttural shout, slammed the library door shut. Normally, Rarity wasn't one to suffer silently when a pony was so blatantly disrespectful, but she was unable to find her voice. Her heart was racing and her knees were weak.

In that brief moment, Twilight was one most frightening thing Rarity had ever seen, right up beside Nightmare Moon and Discord.

“W-what’s gotten into her?” Rarity asked herself. She turned away from the door and stepped into the street, only to jump back a moment later. A cart skidded to a stop within inches of where she was standing.

“Hey, watch where you’re going! You almost-” Rarity began to shout, only to stop when she saw who was pulling the rickety cart. “Rainbow Dash, what in Equestria are you doing?”

Rainbow Dash slipped out of the cart’s harness. “Sorry Rarity, I didn’t see you there.”

“You were going so fast, I shouldn’t be surprised. Next time, you should be more careful.” Rarity lectured firmly before looking at the back of the cart, where Spike was helping an older stallion out onto the street. “What are you doing pulling a cart anyway? Who is that? Is he a relative of yours?”

“He’s *not* related to me,” Rainbow Dash said firmly, as if wanting to make that fact perfectly clear. “His name is Third Eye. We brought him here to get rid of the ghost that’s haunting the library.”

“No!” Third Eye snapped as he fixed his faded eyes on Rainbow Dash. “It is not a ghost, it is a nightmare, the nightmare.” The old unicorn looked to the library with a hard gaze and inspected its exterior. “Yes... just as I thought, the ward is gone. The ward was damaged, got washed away, and that let it in.”

“Oh, well isn’t he... charming,” Rarity said with a weak smile before looking back at Rainbow Dash. “But don’t you think you’re taking this prank of yours too far? Haven’t you scared Spike enough?”

Rainbow Dash bristled and her wings flared. “This isn’t a prank! I mean, come on, I’d never take something like this so far. That and I’d never pull a cart all the way from Graiton carrying some crazy unicorn just for a prank.”

“So, just to be sure I understand, you’re telling me Twilight’s library is haunted and you went all the way to Graiton to get this... gentlestallion so that he could get rid of the ghost?”

“Nightmare!” Third Eye bellowed before resuming his examination of the library’s exterior.

“Pardon, to get rid of the nightmare,” Rarity corrected. “Is that a good summary of the situation?”

Rainbow Dash nodded as Spike came up beside her. “Yeah, pretty much.”

Rarity huffed, rolled her eyes, and strode towards Third Eye. “I have had quite enough of this. It’s bad enough you tried to prank Spike, but now you’re believing your own lie. Personally, I think it’s high time we put an end to this once and for all. Excuse me, Sir?”

Third Eye turned, his right eye twitched as he looked he over. “You! You’ve been near the nightmare as well. Yes... I’m sure now, it’s the same nightmare, but I can beat it now. We’ll beat it this time, and then I’ll be free. I’ll be free, and then there will be no more wards. No more wards, ever.”

“Of course,” Rarity said sweetly, forcing a smile. She began to lead Third Eye towards the library door. “Rainbow Dash and Spike seem fairly certain that you can get rid of this nasty nightmare. So, the sooner we get you in the library the sooner we can put this whole business behind us.”

“Yes... must force the nightmare out, force it out into the daylight. It will be weaker in the daylight. Then, then I can beat it. I’ll beat it and then be free.”

Despite her concerns about how demented the old stallion was, Rarity kept up her pleasant smile as she helped him up onto the library’s front step. She knocked on the door for him, and as before it only took a few moments for Twilight to answer.

“I’m terribly sorry to bother you again, Twilight,” Rarity apologized. “but I was wondering if you’d mind letting me show this gentlestallion around the library for a moment. He’s a friend of...” Rarity trailed off. She had turned to look at Third Eye and found he was no longer standing beside her.

He had retreated back several steps and lowered down into a defensive pose. He was visibly shaking, but it was hard to tell if was caused by fear or from forcing his old body into such a strenuous position.

“No... this is worse. This is worse than what you said,” Third Eye said with an accusing tone. He looked back at Rainbow Dash and Spike, who retreated a few steps from him and his scolding words. “You said she didn’t believe. You said she would never believe, but she must believe!” Third Eye looked back at Twilight. “She must have believed, because it has her now. We aren’t ready to face the nightmare if it has her. No, we are not ready!”

Rarity made no effort to hide her confusion or irritation. “Sir... pardon me for asking, but what are you talking about?”

“See... you must see. You must see what I see, if only for a moment. Yes... I’ll make you see. You’ll all see, then you’ll all know, and then we can fight it,” Third Eye rambled. Before Rarity or anypony could stop him, a beam of light shot from his horn. The beam struck Twilight, and for a moment the unicorn’s appearance shifted.

Twilight’s eyes, which had been hollow and distant, became pitch black and glossy. Her mane and tail changed from merely dirty to looking sickly and faded, like they were on the verge of falling out. Her teeth changed, becoming jagged fangs meant to rip and tear into meat: the teeth of a predator.

With a gasp, Rarity stumbled and fell back, landing on the ground with a thud. Normally, getting so much dirt on her mane would have made Rarity jump right back to her hooves, but instead she remained where she was and focused her gaze on Twilight. Twilight’s frightening appearance had disappeared, and she once again looked simply sleep deprived and dirty. Her hollow gaze, however, became a hateful glare focused intently on Third Eye.

“She is mine!” Twilight growled in an unnatural, low voice before stepping back into the library and slamming the door shut. That slam was soon followed by others as furniture inside the library was tossed and thrown against every door and window. Within moments, the library was barricaded against the outside world.

~~~

With the discovery that Twilight had succumb to the nightmare, Third Eye became hysterical. His paranoid ramblings gained fresh fervor and he began to prepare a complicated spell right in the middle of the street. The stallion, however, wasn't allowed to continue his work. He was whisked back to Carousal Boutique at Rarity's insistence.

Rarity's concern was that Third Eye's behavior, his unrestrained ramblings of nightmares, ghosts, and danger, was just the sort of thing to cause mass panic in Ponyville. That was the last thing she felt they needed. Thus, she decided it was better if they kept Third Eye hidden away in her boutique until after nightfall.

Third Eye rebelled against the idea, ranting about how nightmares only got stronger at night, but he was no match for Rarity's wits. She convinced him that he could use the time until nightfall to prepare his exorcism spell, and that she would assist him.

That gave Third Eye something productive to focus his pent up, paranoid energy on. While he and Rarity worked, Rainbow Dash and Spike went out to the rest of their friends, telling them what was going on and to meet at the library that evening.

Once night fell and the streetlamps around Ponyville were lit, the group of friends began to gather. Applejack was the last to arrive, having to wait until everypony at Sweet Apple Acres had gone to sleep before she could sneak out. When she galloped up to the scene, her friends were all standing outside the library while an aged unicorn mumbled and ranted to himself. He was in the process of drawing a strange symbol on the ground with a bag of salt, just outside the library door.

"Sorry I'm late, y'all. I didn't want big Macintosh to see me leavin' and wonder what was goin' on," Applejack apologized as she came to a stop beside her friends.

"That's quite all right, Applejack. Third Eye is still preparing the exorcism spell," Rarity said. "It shouldn't take much longer, though."

Applejack glanced at Third Eye. "That's good, but why is he settin' up out here? Twilight's in the library."

"Well, for one, the library's been barricaded, Something heavy is leaning against the front door and we can't get in. That, and Third Eye says that the nightmare wouldn't let him setup inside. It would try to disrupt his work, and that's why we have to go in and bring Twilight to the exorcism spell."

"Now, don't nopony take this the wrong way, but did any of y'all think to try and ask Princess Celestia for help?"

"I tried sending a letter while Rainbow Dash and I were on our way back from Graitant, when we knew something really was going on," Spike answered, "but the reply I got was from one of her assistants. Princess Celestia is on a diplomatic visit to the griffin kingdom and can't receive any letters right now. It has something to do with a griffin cultural tradition."

"And when is the princess supposed ta be comin' back?" Applejack asked.

"The Princess's assistant said it would be a few days, not until after Nightmare Night."

"Horse apples," Applejack cursed. "I guess that means we got ta handle this ourselves."

"B-b-b-b-but," Fluttershy stuttered. She was hiding behind Rainbow Dash, her head down and body trembling. "That means we have to go in to the library. W-w-what if whatever possessed Twilight goes after one of us? Won't it be d-d-dangerous?"

"Dangerous or not, I'm not going leave Twilight in there with that thing," Rainbow Dash stated firmly.

"She's right," Applejack said with a nod. "We can't go leavin' Twilight in there. Still, I hope one of y'all have a plan."

"Yes, though it is a simple one," Rarity commented as she levitated a trio of candles into the middle of the group. "While three of us go in to the library to secure Twilight, three of us will remain outside. Those who stay here will be helping Third Eye with his exorcism spell by holding these candles at



specific locations. Somehow, it will keep the nightmare and Twilight contained once we get her outside.”

Applejack cocked her head to one side and looked at the candles “Wait, why can’t we just put the candles on the ground? “They look like they’d be able to stand on their own pretty well.”

“Third Eye says they have to be held so that they can ‘channel the living energy of its holder to bind the nightmare’.” Rarity answered. She then glanced about the group, taking notice of the curious stares she was getting. “Don’t look at me like that! I’m just telling you what he said.”

“Well, fine then, I guess three of us will just have to wait out here. So, who’s goin’ in?”

Rainbow Dash flared her wings and put a hoof to her chest. “You *know* I’m going in.”

“As am I,” Rarity said with a toss of her mane. “I may not be on Twilight’s level, but you’ll be at a disadvantage against her without another unicorn.”

Applejack adjusted her hat, “And I make three. Spike, that means you, Fluttershy, and Pinkie Pie are going to be out here helpin’ Third Eye. You think you can manage that?”

Pinkie Pie and Spike gave their heads a firm nod and saluted Applejack. Fluttershy, however, was trembling like a leaf. She was looking up at the library like it was a giant dragon that was about to eat her. It took a nudge from Pinkie Pie to snap Fluttershy out of her fear.

“Sugarcube, you sure you’re goin’ to be all right?” Applejack asked. She moved over to Fluttershy and placed a hoof on her shoulder. “We won’t think any less of you if you want us to find somepony else to help.”

“N-n-n-no,” Fluttershy stuttered out. She forced herself up to her hooves, though her knees continued to shake. “Twilight’s m-m-m-my friend too, and I’m going to h-h-help her... even if we are facing a terrible, frightening, could-scare-a-pony-to-death nightmare.”

Applejack gave Fluttershy a reassuring smile. "I'm sure Twilight appreciates that. Now, you just stay out here, do what Third Eye tells ya, and leave gettin' Twilight to us."

Fluttershy's knees stopped shaking, her courage reinforced by the kind words. "Thank you, Applejack, but... how are you going to get Twilight outside? She's barricaded all of the doors."

Applejack's comforting smile shifted to one of confidence. "Oh, I reckon that won't be too much trouble."

~~~

With a resounding crash the library door burst open, throwing back the bookcase that was leaning against it. On the other side, Applejack was turning back around, smiling proudly as she took a step inside. In addition to her normal cowpony hat, she was carrying a length of rope around her neck. "I told y'all, buckin' down a door ain't no different than buckin' an apple tree."

"Yes, and *do* remind me never to get on your bad side, Applejack," Rarity mused. She and Rainbow Dash followed Applejack inside. From the crashing and smashing Rarity and Rainbow Dash had heard earlier, they expected the library to be a disheveled mess. Yet, it looked only mildly disturbed. Excluding the few bookcases that were barricading the windows and front door, the rest of the library seemed untouched.

The cleanliness of the library, however, didn't ease the three mares' nerves as they moved inside. While each of them had been in the library more times than they cared to count, it had never felt so threatening before. It was like they were walking into the Everfree Forest, entering a place where danger could be lurking anywhere.

"Yikes, this place got creepy," Rainbow Dash whispered while she hovered near Applejack. "Where do you think Twilight is?"

Applejack looked across the room. "I don't rightly know, but she's got ta be here someplace. Where should we start lookin'?"

"I say we start in the bedroom and work our way down to the basement," Rarity suggested. "That way we'll make sure Twilight is cornered."

"Cornered doesn't mean nothing to her, Sugarcube. After all, Twilight knows how to teleport," Applejack pointed out.

Rarity frowned. "Oh... I guess you're right."

"Maybe we should split up," Rainbow Dash suggested. "This place only has three floors. One of us can look here, one of us can check upstairs, and the third can look downstairs."

Applejack shook her head. "Oh no, Sugarcube, we ain't splittin' up. Don't y'all remember what happened the last time we got separated?"

"I do," Rarity said with a shudder. "That dreadful draconequus Discord picked us off one by one in the palace's hedge maze."

"Then what are we going to do?" Rainbow Dash asked.

"We're just gonna to start searchin' and hope we can figure out how to wrangle Twilight before she up and disappears on us," Applejack said as she started up the library stairs, shrugging her shoulders to adjust the loop of rope she was carrying. "Still, let's give Rarity's idea a try. We'll start from the top and work our way down."

The other two mares nodded, following Applejack to the bedroom. The staircase was just as foreboding as the library's main floor if not more so. As they climbed the steps, the air became colder and colder; it was like the mares were climbing some tall, snow-capped mountain. By the time they reached the bedroom door, each of them was breathing out puffs of steam.

"Why is it so cold?" Rarity shivered as Applejack put a hoof on the bedroom door and started to open it.

"It's probably the nightmare," Applejack guessed. "It must like it cold."

"Humph; if I had known *that* I would have brought my scarf," grumbled Rarity as the trio of mares entered the bedroom. The windows were covered in a thick frost, and a mountain of books had been stacked in front

of the bathroom door. There was no sign of Twilight, but there was something that drew their attention.

“Hey, that’s my Phantom Speller,” Rainbow Dash said as she flew ahead. The game board and pointer were lying in the middle of the floor, flanked on either side by a pair of weakly glowing candles.

Rainbwo Dash landed beside the board. “I was wondering what happened to it. I must have left it here.”

“But what’s it doing in the middle of the floor?” Rarity asked while she and Applejack approached the board. “Do you think the nightmare put it out?”

“I don’t rightly know,” said Applejack. “I’ve never wrangled with anythin’ like this before. Still, we got to stay focused. We’re here to find Twilight, and we ain’t leavin’ until we do. Now, everypony fan out and start searchin’.”

“Hey, wait a second,” Rainbow Dash called out. “The pointer is moving.”

Rarity and Applejack turned their attention back to the Phantom Speller, and with Rainbow watched as the pointer slid across the board with eerie efficiency. It paused and moved between letters at a constant, almost rhythmic pace, spelling out its message to the three watching mares.

... S... H... E... I... S... M... I... N... E...

“No she ain’t,” Applejack snapped at the board. “Twilight don’t belong to you or nopony for that matter. Now, I’m gonna give you once chance. Give her back!”

... S... H... E... I... S... M... I... N... E...

“All right, if that’s the way you want to be, then we’ll just take her back. Girls, start searchin’. Twilight’s got to be in here someplace.”

Rainbow Dash and Rarity both nodded in determination, stepping away from the Phantom Speller as they began to search the room, taking books off shelves and checking every nook and cranny they thought Twilight could squeeze into. As they did, the Phantom Speller continued to slide

across the board, moving faster and faster as it spelled out its words with growing fervor.

... S... H... E... I... S... M... I... N... E...
.. S.. H.. E.. I.. S.. M.. I.. N.. E..
. S. H. E. I. S. M. I. N. E.
SHEISMINE SHEISMINE SHEISMINE SHEISMINE

The constant, grating sound of the Phantom Speller's pointer moving across the board finally got to Applejack. She stomped over to the board and brought her front hoof down hard on the pointer, smashing it to pieces.

"Hey! Why'd you do that?" Rainbow Dash asked as she flew over and examined the crushed remains of her Phantom Speller.

"Cause I was tired of listening to it," Applejack said firmly. She turned to resume searching the bedroom. "And I don't like the idea of a nightmare talkin' behind my back."

Rainbow Dash furrowed her eyebrows, "You could have just taken the pointer off the board."

"Yeah... well, if it meant that much to ya I'll buy a new one after Nightmare Night," Applejack said. "Though, personally Sugarcube, I wouldn't want nothing like that in my house, especially after everythin' that's hap-r."

Applejack got cut off. She was nearing the bathroom door, which was blocked by a mountain of books, when something hit her in the chest. It was a strong force, strong enough that it sent the farm mare skidding back several feet. She, however, kept on her hooves, gritted her teeth, and fixed her gaze on the bathroom door. "Oh, so y'all don't want me going near that there bathroom. Well, only one reason for that. Rarity, Rainbow, Twilight is in the bathroom. Get them books out of the way while I get ready to hogtie her."

"You got it," Rainbow Dash said before dive bombing at the tomes and scooping up several at once before soaring away and dropping them at the far side of the room. Rarity also helped, though she was a bit more organized. She levitated the literature away piece by piece and stacked

each tome neatly to one side. Still, despite their differences in approach, Rarity and Rainbow Dash both made quick work of the blockade.

And as they worked, Applejack took the rope she had brought into the library and tied one end into a lasso before tying the the other end to her tail. The farm mare started swinging her tail around, getting the lasso to circle in the air as she prepared to hogtie whatever happened to be on the other side of the bathroom door.

“SHE IS MINE!” the three mares heard a voice call out to them, or rather two voices. The first and strongest voice was a deep, guttural, threatening voice that sounded like it came from some horrible beast. The other voice, which was underneath the first, was Twilight’s.

That scream ushered chaos into the library. Just as Rainbow Dash and Rarity were clearing away the last books from the bathroom door it forced itself open and a figure came barreling out at them. The figure charged across the room, plowing through Rarity and Rainbow before jumping and tackling Applejack, pinning her to the floor.

It was Smartypants. The doll had been transfigured and morphed from something of fond childhood memories to something found only in the most horrible of nightmares. It was now the size of Big Macintosh and just as strong. Her button eyes were replaced with ‘X’ shaped stitches along with a pair of stitched eyebrows which were bent down in rage. All across its body a number of its seams had opened to become dozens of gaping, hungry mouths filled with jagged, razor sharp teeth.

“Can I do my homework?” the twisted version of Smartypants asked, its many mouths speaking in a horrible chorus. “It’s a report on my favorite food... *pony*.”

Rainbow Dash sprinted across the room. “Hey! Get your hooves off her!” She fully intended to knock Smartypants off of Applejack. The doll, however, jumped clear at the last moment, leaving Rainbow Dash to careen into the library wall and become buried in a book avalanche.

“W-where did it go?” Applejack asked. She scrambled to her hooves and looked about the room.

Rarity rushed over beside Applejack. "I don't know, I didn't see. I was too busy watching Rainbow Dash. Is she going to be okay?"

"Yeah, I've seen her take worse licks than getting buried under some books. She'll be fine. Besides, we have bigger things to worry about. Now, where did it go?"

Sqwweeee... sqwweeee

Both Rarity and Applejack turned their heads up to the ceiling. Smartypants clung to the rafters just above them, its many mouths twisted into manic smiles. "Don't you like my mane?"

"No, I really *don't* like your mane!" Rarity snapped firmly, though she quickly regretted the insult. The harsh words made Smartypants's many mouths cry out in an ear splitting rage before dropped down from the ceiling. Smartypants would have fallen on both of them if Applejack hadn't shoved Rarity clear.

Applejack's shove sent Rarity tumbling to the floor, but she clamored back to her hooves quickly. "Are you alright Applejack!?"

"I'm fine!" she called back while wrestling with Smartypants, "just figure out a way to help me!"

"But... b-b-b-but what can I do?"

"Rarity, this thing is made of fabric!" Applejack snapped. "Gosh darn it, Girl, ain't you good at dealing with fabric?!"

For a moment Rarity paused, but then her eyes flashed with determination. She ignited the magic in her horn. She waved her horn around and followed its silent directions. She passed by the avalanche of books where Rainbow Dash was struggling to free herself and came to a stop beside Twilight's bed.

"Rarity, what are you doing?" Applejack asked, putting her hoof on Smartypants's head. It was all she could do to keep herself from getting bitten by the doll's many mouths.

“Improvising!” Rarity called out. She shoved Twilight’s bed to one side and picked up a box that had been hidden underneath. There was writing on the side of the box that read, “Spike’s Property: Do No Open!” She ignored the warning and flipped open the box’s lid to reveal a private collection of gemstones.

A smile spread onto Rarity’s lips while she levitated the many fine jewels into the air. She inspected them for a brief moment, a pang flashing on her face. She regretted what she was about to do, but she did not hesitate moment more. In a single bright flash, Rarity smashed the many pristine jewels into a cloud of jagged, razor sharp pieces. She turned and launched the gemstone shards at Smartypants.

The shards ripped through Smartypants’s fabric like it was tissue paper, causing the possessed doll to stumble away from Applejack as painful cries escaped its many mouths. Still, Rarity persisted, drawing back the gemstone shards. With a circular wave of her horn, she turned the cloud of shards into a lethal vortex that encircled and consumed Smartypants.

Rarity kept that vortex of shards going for a full minute before relenting from her attack. The tornado dissipated all at once, and the many gemstone shards fell to the floor to reveal a shredded mass of stuffing and fabric.

“Shoot... Rarity, nice work!” Applejack panted out as she as walked over to her friend.

“Yes... well, I certainly hope Twilight can forgive me for destroying her old toy.”

Applejack set a hoof on Rarity’s shoulder. “I’m sure she will, Sugarcube, and thank you. That thing was fixin’ to take a bite out of me.”

“You’re quite welcome, Applejack,” Rarity said before a strong shiver washed over her body and she dropped to a sitting position. “But... oh, by Celestia, I think I need a moment to rest. This experience has just been so taxing.”

“Well, you go ahead and rest a spell. You’ve earned it,” Applejack said as she turned away. “I’m just going to pull Rainbow Dash out from under those books.”

Rarity just nodded, trying to steady her breathing while Applejack trotted over to the pile of fallen books. It took some digging, but she was able to pull Rainbow Dash out from beneath the the tomes within a few minutes.

“Heh, thanks,” Rainbow Dash said when she was finally free. She turned and walked towards the pile of stuffing, shredded fabric, and gemstone shards. “So, what made this thing? Was it the nightmare?”

“Don’t know,” Applejack answered. She came up beside Rainbow and looked down at the mess. “Could have been the nightmare, but it could have been Twilight. After all, Third Eye says that nightmare’s possessed her. It could be using her magic to try and defend itself.”

Rainbow Dash bent her head down and nudged at one fabric pieces. “Yikes, maybe we should try and get Princess Celestia’s help. I mean, she may not be able to receive letters, but I could just fly to the griffin kingdom and get her.”

“Yes, but that’s a long way to fly. Maybe we could try talking ta Princess Luna. I-”

Applejack was cut off as the shreds of fabric that had once made up Smartypants leapt up at her. Before she could duck away or protest, the swarm of tiny bits of fabric overwhelmed her and forced her down to the floor. Rainbow Dash tried to help her, but no matter how hard she tried she was unable to pull the pieces of fabric off of Applejack. They stuck to her like glue.

“Get them off me!” Applejack hollered. She flailed her hooves around, trying to fight back against the swarm.

“I’m trying!” Rainbow Dash shouted, only to be knocked away a moment later. The blow came from Applejack’s own hoof, an intentional strike that sent Rainbow Dash faltering back while holding her gut.

“Hey, what was that for?”

"It wasn't me, Rainbow," Applejack grunted out as she got to her hooves. Her entire body was now covered in the pieces of fabric, which were stitching themselves back together. Soon, Smartypants and her many threatening mouths reformed, clinging tightly to Applejack like a well-fitting suit. The only part of Applejack left uncovered was her mane, tail, and her right eye, which was wide with panic. "This thing's got a hold of me."

"She is mine now," Smartypants's many mouths chanted out. "They are both mine. You won't warn her. They will help me get her. She will be mine. She will be mine!"

With that final cry Smartypants threw herself at Rainbow Dash. Running on adrenaline and instincts, Rainbow turned and bucked at the doll. The blow was solid, and it sent Smartypants soaring across the room. At the same time, it made Applejack grunt out in pain, both when she was bucked as well as when she hit the floor.

"Oh my gosh! Applejack!"

"It's... it's all right, Sugarcube. I'm okay," Applejack said as her body was forced back to its hooves by Smartypants. "But... this thing's got control of me like a puppet on strings. You and Rarity best hurry up and find Twilight. I don't want to hurt ya."

"But where should we look?" Rarity asked. She forced herself back to her hooves, ending her short moment of respite.

"The bathroom!" Applejack shouted from inside the Smartypants costume as it turned to face Rainbow Dash. "This thing came runnin' out of the bathroom. I bet it's tryin' to protect it. Twilight must be-" Applejack's last words were silenced as the fabric that covered her mouth constricted and forcing her jaw shut. The doll's mouths let out a horrible chorus of screams before charging Rainbow Dash down a second time.

Instead of bucking Smartypants right away as she had done before, Rainbow Dash jumped into the air and dodged. She circled once to make sure Applejack was still alright before bolting for the bathroom. "Rarity, keep it distracted, I'll check the bathroom."

Rarity gave a nod and stood in front of Smartypants. She picked up the gemstone shards she used to defeat Smartypants earlier, intent on using the same trick a second time. Her resolve, however, faltered when she looked at Smartypants. She saw Applejack's right eye staring back from inside the the doll's fabric, and she dropped the many shards. She could not shred Smartypants as she done earlier. The doll had become a costume which clung relentlessly to her dear friend.

Smartypants took a step towards Rarity, its many mouths turned up in devilish grins.

"R-r-r-rainbow Dash," Rarity stuttered and kept her distance from the ever approaching Smartypants. "Is Twilight in the bathroom? Rainbow Dash!?"

Looking back, Rarity's heart skipped a beat when she saw the bathroom door was once again shut and blockaded by a mountain of books. Rarity also became aware of the sounds coming out from behind the bathroom door. It sounded as if the shower was running, and Rainbow Dash was pounding on the door. Her words were muffled by all the literature in front of the door, but the panic in her voice was quite audible.

Rarity's breathing became more panicked. She turned to look back at Smartypants. It was now just a few feet away from her, its many mouths dripping with drool. The many seam-mouths began to chant and lick their lips in a ghastly chorus. "You will be mine! You will all be mine! Then, with you, I'll make her mine! She will be mine! She will be mine again!"

It was all too much for Rarity. With an ear splitting scream she sprinted for the door. Guilt already wrenched her chest. She was abandoning her friends, but the simple truth was they were in over their heads.

Upon reaching the stairs, Rarity chanced a look back and saw that Smartypants was hot on her hooves. The glance back turned out to be a mistake. She tripped on one of the steps and fell forward just as she reached the bottom of the stairwell. On instinct, she curled into a ball and, after hitting the floor, rolled across the library's ground level, crashed through the door to the basement, rolled across the landing, and tumbled down the basement stairs. The grand fall all ended with her sprawled out heap on the basement's floor.

Rarity's head swam for several moments. She lifted her hoof to a sore spot on her skull, and was thankful when she didn't feel any bleeding. She pulled herself back to her hooves, and took notice that the basement of the library was filled with a purple glow which emanated from the center of the room.

There, seated in the center of a spell, was Twilight. The unicorn's eyes were rolled back into her head and her horn was pointed at the ceiling. The spell being cast around her seemed to pull on the very darkness of the room. Black tendrils swirled in the air as they were drawn into Twilight's horn, which looked as if it had grown longer since the last time Rarity saw it.

"Twilight... what is this thing doing to you?" Rarity asked in a hushed voice.

"She is mine!"

Rarity turned her head to the side just in time to see Smartypants leap at her from the top of the basement staircase. For a moment she thought only of dodging. After all, she didn't want to hurt Applejack. Still, as Smartypants flew closer Rarity chanced a glance at Twilight. Her mind flashed with an idea.

Horn flaring, Rarity called on her magic as quickly as she could. She did not have enough time to grab Smartypants out of the air, but she did have enough to change its trajectory. With a shove from her magic, she sent Smartypants soaring at Twilight like a sack of potatoes. The pair collided with a thud. Smartypants plowed into Twilight and knocked her clear of the dark spell.

The pair rolled to a stop at the far side of the room, and as Rarity galloped over a smile formed on her lips. Applejack was getting up while the Smartypants costume broke back into shreds and falling to the floor.

"I'm so sorry, Applejack! You aren't hurt, are you?"

Applejack coughed, winced, and held her chest with a hoof. "I am, but don't you worry, I'll live. Still, that was some good quick thinkin', Rarity."

“Yes, but we can’t celebrate just yet,” Rarity said. She picked Twilight up in a levitation spell and headed for the staircase. “There’s no telling when the nightmare will regain its strength. Go and help Rainbow Dash out of the bathroom while I get Twilight outside.”

~~~

Applejack and Rainbow Dash came out of the library a few minutes later. Applejack was limping and Rainbow Dash was soaking wet from being trapped in a flooding bathroom. Thankfully, when Twilight was knocked free of the spell, much of what was happening in the library stopped. The clogged drains in the bathroom opened and the faucets turned off, allowing the water in the bathroom to drain down to a more manageable level by the time Applejack got the door open.

“Just so we’re clear, if this thing does have a flank to buck, I get first dibs,” Rainbow Dash grumbled as she tossed her head to get some of her sopping wet mane out of her eyes.

“Only after me, Sugarcube,” Applejack forced out through a grunt of pain. She and Rainbow Dash approached the exorcism spell. Twilight had been placed in the center, and standing around her in a triangle, while holding lit candles, was Pinkie Pie, Fluttershy, and Spike.

“W-w-what happened in there?” Fluttershy asked when her two friends got close. “We heard a lot of screaming and shouting.”

“Trust me, you don’t want to know, Fluttershy,” Applejack said. She took a seat just outside the spell. “Just tell me y’all are gonna to be able to get Twilight back to normal.”

Third Eye, who was anxiously pacing outside the triangle formed by the candle-holding ponies and dragon, nodded his head. “Yes... we can get her back. The nightmare is stunned; it was stunned when the its spell was interrupted. It can’t defend itself right now. Yes, we can beat it. We can beat it, and I can be free.”

“What was it trying to do with that spell anyway?” Rarity asked as she looked down at Twilight.

“It was trying to reshape her,” Third Eye answered as his horn began to glow. “Make her into something it could use. ‘She will help me get her’. The nightmare was changing this unicorn to help it get the her. Still don’t know who her is, but it doesn’t matter. We stop the nightmare now; we defeat it now.”

Twilight’s body became wrapped in Third Eye’s magic and slowly lifted off the ground. He held her in the air for a few moments, and then his horn flashed. Twilight’s eyes opened wide and her body began to thrash violently in the air.

“H-h-hey, what are you doing?” Fluttershy asked. “You’re hurting her!”

“She is in no pain,” Third Eye grunted out. His old body was having difficulty conjuring the complex magic. “It is the nightmare; it is fighting back, but I’ll beat it this time. I. Will. Beat. It!”

Another flash of light erupted from Third Eye’s horn, and at the same time Twilight let out a dreadful scream. Her friends squirmed where they stood, each wanting to rush forward and help Twilight. They all, however, held back as they watched something black seep out of her. It was like a living shadow, and after all of it was drawn out Twilight flopped to the ground, unconscious.

“Yes!” Third Eye cheered. “I have it, I have caught it and now I can beat it! No more nightmare, no more wards! I’ll be free; I’ll be free! I’ll be-”

Third Eye’s celebration came to an abrupt stop. He looked at the living shadow, his dull green eyes focusing. He stared at it in utter silence as his excited breathing became panicked panting. He stumbled back, looking around in every direction. “No... no no no no no no no no no! Not the same. Not the same! It’s not the same!”

“Whoa there, what’s wrong?” Applejack asked. She tried to approach Third Eye, but he scrambled away from her.

“Not the same, it’s not the same! This is not the same nightmare! This is a different nightmare. Just as strong, maybe stronger, but not the same. It’s not the same, and that means other nightmare is still out there. The nightmare is out there, and it still wants me. It wants to get me... and you,

you brought me outside the wards! You brought me outside, where it isn't safe. You brought me where it isn't safe!"

Third Eye's gaze hardened into a glare. "This, this is a trap! You work for the nightmare, that's why your auras are tainted! You work for it, and it wants me here. It wants to get me, and you're helping it. It's coming for me. It's coming for me!"

"Easy there, just take a breath," Applejack said. She reached out for Third Eye in an effort to calm him. He, however, batted her hoof away.

"No, you work for it! I know you work for it, and it's coming. It's coming to get me! I gotta get away. Got to go where it's safe, but don't know anyplace that's safe." Third Eye panicked, looking around. "I'm too far from my home, I'm too far from my wards. No place is safe!"

Third Eye looked to the library, and his face lit up as if he had found salvation. "Wait, the library! It's ward is damaged, but I can fix it. The library can be safe again. Just got to get inside; I gotta get inside."

With that Third Eye broke into a gallop, charging past Applejack and bumping into Fluttershy. The sudden impact caused her to juggle with her candle before dropping it, the flame extinguishing as it hit the ground.

With one of the three candles gone, the shadow that was the nightmare poured back into Twilight. When the last traces had gone back inside, her eyes opened and her horn glowed. "She is MINE!" Twilight screamed, her voice once again echoing with the deep, guttural roar of the nightmare.

"Hurry, Spike, get that candle re-lit!" Applejack shouted. She jumped Twilight, grabbing hold of her and pinning her to the ground. "And somepony get Third Eye back out here! We need him to finish that sp-oof!" Applejack stumbled as she struggled to catch her breath. The possessed Twilight had just bucked her in the stomach.

Without anypony holding her down, Twilight floated into the air above the street. Her eyes were a ghastly black and her teeth changed, becoming the fangs of predator. She was calling on all of her magic at once. Her horn glowed brightly while mane and tail flowed, as if she was submerged underwater.

“She is mine!” Twilight shouted. Her booming voice echoed across town and drew ponies out of their homes to form a large crowd around the library. “She will help me get her! I will get her back! She was mine! She will be mine again! Everything will be mine!” With that final proclamation, Twilight began picking up and hurling anything within reach at the crowd of ponies below. Branches from the library, rocks, everything and anything became a weapon for her.

Panicked screams and shouts began to fill the air. The ponies who had come out their homes quickly ran away while Twilight’s friends remained behind. They jumped and dodged around the attacks of the possessed Twilight, trying to figure out not only how to recapture their friend but convince Third Eye to finish his spell.

It was amidst the chaos that a green cloud of smoke appeared. It enveloped the street, blinding everypony as it across the town, going into every door and window. The cloud, however, did not originate from Twilight, and it was affecting her just as it affected everypony.

As every resident of Ponyville fell into a deep slumber, the possessed Twilight fought against the cloud’s effects. She thrashed, waving her hooves to dispel the cloud while searching for the one responsible. Her eyes eventually fell on a figure walking amongst the sickly green haze. The pony wore a cloak, and was moving over to where Third Eye had collapsed. The sleep-inducing cloud had gotten to him while he was being drug back out of the library by Rainbow Dash.

Roaring with her nightmarish echo, the possessed Twilight dove out of the air with murderous intent. “Mine! This is all mine!” she screamed at the top of her lungs.

“You are a spoiled brat. Worse, you’re a greedy rat.” The figure lectured before jumping into the air and spinning around. The spin became a roundhouse kick, one that connected with Twilight’s chest and sent her crashing to the ground. The blow rattled the nightmare within Twilight, and for a moment her head cleared.



“Wh-o? What? Where am I?” Twilight asked. She looked around, only to cringe and put a hoof to her head as the nightmare inside began retaking its control.

“It matters not who, what, when, or where. Only about the nightmare do I care.” The cloaked figure snapped as she strode up to Twilight. She put a heavy hoof down on Twilight, pinning her to the ground. “Now as I pull it from your spine, let it know Ponyville is mine!”

The eyes of the cloaked figure lit up, and the pony’s teeth began jagged and monstrous. She arched her head back, and with a loud roar, like a predator pouncing on its pray, lashed forward to attack. Twilight let out an ear splitting scream. She felt the figure biting down on her neck.

~~~

Twilight bolted up in her bed, drenched in a cold sweat and panting heavily. She looked around in a panic and quickly lifted her hooves to her neck. She breathed a heavy, relieved sigh when she didn’t feel any bite marks. It had all been just a bad dream. It was just been a dream... but what had the dream been about? Already her mind was having difficulty holding onto the memory. All her friends were there, and Smartypants was a part of the dream as well. There was also something about a ghost and... a Phantom Speller? Then it all ended when some really scary figure attacked her.

Groaning, Twilight held her head as the memories of her dream faded. Whatever it had been, it had been scary, but that was over now. The sun was up, she was in her bed, and she was perfectly safe. The library looked to be in perfect order, and on a whim Twilight checked on her Smartypants doll and saw that she too was exactly where she was supposed to be.

Looking out her bedroom window, Twilight saw that ponies were already outside and running around in their costumes, despite the fact Nightmare Night didn’t start until that evening. She even saw Pinkie Pie, and couldn’t help but laugh at the sight of her friend dressed as a chicken and pecking at the ground. The morning seemed utterly perfect, except for a green haze that seemed to linger in the air.

Still, Twilight didn’t give the haze a second thought. She got out of bed, taking notice that it hurt a little to move. Her chest was particularly sore, but Twilight just chalked it up to needing a shower. She trotted over to the

bathroom and began to plan out her day. She would get cleaned up real quick, and start getting ready for what would be one of her best Nightmare Nights ever. She had a great costume, she was going to hang out with good friends, and she would probably eat far more candy than she should in one evening.

In all, it was a Nightmare Night she was eagerly looking forward to.

~~~

Some distance away from the Ponyville Library, later that afternoon, another unicorn awoke. Third Eye groaned and blinked several times to clear his vision as he came to. He was lying on the floor, hogtied, in pitch black room. From the soreness of his side, Third Eye guessed he had been there for several hours. He tried to use his horn to undo the knots that bound him, but his magic slipped off the rope like it was greased. He could not get a grip.

"It's been too long, Third Eye. The years haven't been kind to you."

Third Eye tensed. The words sounded as if they had been spoken by two ponies in unison, one voice deep and threatening while the other was more feminine, wise, and almost motherly. It was a pair of voices Third Eye knew came from a single source, for it was a pair of voices he had heard before.

"No... no no no no no no," Third Eye said and struggled at the ropes around his legs. "This can't be happening. This isn't happening. I was always careful, always careful. This shouldn't be happening."

The darkness of the room broke as a fire came to life. The fire was beneath a large cauldron, heating its contents and filling the room with a nausea-inducing odor. A figure moved back and forth in the space between Third Eye and the fire, the harsh shadows making her appear as nothing more than a silhouette.

"Oh, Third Eye, I would think you'd be happy to see me. It's been so long since we last encountered one another," the two voices said as the figure measured out a spoonful of a powder for her brew.

“So it was them. You set a trap! Those ponies were in league with you. They got me to leave the wards. They were in league with you!”

The figure chuckled and added some ground leaves to the bubbling cauldron. “You flatter me, Third Eye. While I can be quite cunning, I didn’t plan this. I just... took advantage of an opportunity.”

“The other nightmare. It was acting alone! No, that cannot be true! You had a hoof in this. You wanted revenge! Nightmares are patient. You are patient! You would have waited and planned. I almost beat you, and I bound you in bones. I warned the town about you. Warned them of your hunger and cursed eyes. I warned them of your glowing gaze. Yes, this is your plan. This is your plan for revenge,” Third Eye rambled. He tried to crawl away, only to find the ropes around his legs were tied to a heavy chest.

“Good, I’m glad you remember all the things you did to try and stop me,” the figure mused before pouring a liquid into her brew. She emptied the contents of the entire bottle, which turned cauldron’s contents into a sickly green color, before continuing. “Yes, the wards, the spell, and the rumors were an annoyance at first, but I’ve learned how to deal with them. In fact, I’d say I’m better off now than I ever was. After all, it’s because of you I can walk amongst the ponies of Ponyville without drawing any suspicion.”

“No, that cannot be true! I bound you in bones to make Ponyville safe. You cannot walk amongst them freely, you can’t!” Third Eye roared.

“There’s that pride of yours again, Third Eye. If I recall correctly, it was that pride that got you in trouble back when you first attacked me. You were so confident that you could destroy me, and you were just as confident last night. I would have thought you’ve learned your lesson the first time.”

“No! The wards are safe! I made Ponyville safe! You cannot enter a building protected by the wards! The wards are safe!”

The figure added some dry berries to the cauldron. “Unless I’m invited.”

“In... invited!?” Third Eye stuttered out.

“Oh yes. Did you forget that little part of your warding spell? Your wards only keep unwanted spirits out. It's so, if there was ever a good-natured spirit that needed your help, you would be able to let it enter your home.”

Third Eye struggled at his ropes. “But they would not invite you! They fear you. I made sure they feared you! I told them of your cursed eyes and your hunger. They should fear you!”

“I won't deny that your nasty rumors made things difficult. Everypony in town was scared of me. One of them even made up a little song about me.” The figure paused to chuckle. “Yes, I was quite the outcast for so very long, but now that's different. I am now welcome in Ponyville.”

Third Eye shook his head. “No, that's impossible. It's impossible, impossible, impossible. They would not welcome you. You are bound only to bones! You are nothing but a skeleton possessed!”

The figure chuckled and rounded the cauldron, her face becoming illuminated by the fire and bubbling brew. She was a zebra with gold rings in her ears and around her neck, blue eyes, and a grim smile on her face.

“No... no no no no no no!” Third Eye rambled and shook his head. “This is impossible! I bound you in bones, only bones. You cannot be of living flesh and blood! How... how how how!?”

“Again, Third Eye, your spells are not as well-crafted as you think they are,” Zecora said with the nightmare's echo in her voice. “Yes, I was bound in bones, zebra bones, and I was forced to walk as a skeleton for quite some time. But then I found a little loophole in your enchantment. That which is attached to these bones can become part of me. After I realized that, all I had to do was find a few generous Everfree beasts to donate a few pieces of themselves.”

“No! You're just trying to trick me! I bound you in bones, you cannot have a living body! I warned the town of you: the evil of the Everfree Forest with glowing eyes that can enslave a pony in a dark trance. They would not have welcomed you in! No, they would hear your voice. They would hear your voice as I hear it now. They would hear your true voice whenever you speak plain Equestrian!”

“True,” Zecora began, but as she continued to speak one of the two voices coming from her mouth faded. The deep, threatening voice fell silent so only the motherly, feminine one remained. “plain Equestrian is out of my reach, but there are many different forms of speech. All it takes is a simple rhyme, and I can speak freely any time.”

“No... no no no no! Lies! Lies! Lies! These are all lies! You are bound in bones, not flesh and blood! You cannot speak to those of Ponyville! They would hear your true nature! No! These are all lies! I protected them from you! I protected them!”

“Say what you want, it does not change what is true,” Zecora commented. She held her head over the cauldron and sniffed at it. “Ah, it seems that I can now enjoy my stew.”

“Stew!?”

Zecora laughed deeply from her throat. “Perhaps you would like a look. I have become quite the cook.”

At that Third Eye found himself being lifted off the floor. To any other pony, it was like he was floating without support. He, however, could see the trails of nightmare energy that seeped out from behind the cauldron and carried him in view of the bubbling soup.

Zecora waved a hoof over the contents of her cauldron. “Truly, this night has been quite grand, something I couldn’t have planned. Not only were you brought to my front door, I was able to catch this nightmare spore.”

Third Eye’s gaze went wide as he looked into the sickly green stew and saw, thanks to his special talent, that a nightmare was trapped within the liquid. It was the same nightmare that possessed the purple unicorn at the library. It was being cooked alive, its energy being drawn out by the potent potion it was submerged in.

“It really is amazing,” Zecora said, ending her rhymes as the second, dark, guttural voice rejoined her pleasant feminine one. “This nightmare is far older and stronger than I am. If it weren’t for you and those mares, I would not have been able to capture it. In fact, I do believe it’s the same nightmare that possessed her royal highness, Princess Luna.”

Struck with understanding, Third Eye began to ramble and think aloud. "Princess Luna!? The her... Princess Luna is the her! The nightmare possessed the princess and made her Nightmare Moon. She was then saved and taken away from the nightmare. The nightmare was going to use the unicorn at the library to get the princess back. But why? What did the unicorn do? Who was the unicorn?"

"Oh, were you never properly introduced?" Zecora asked mockingly. "Why, the unicorn you were trying to save was Twilight Sparkle: bearer of the Element of Magic."

"'She took her'," Third Eye muttered under his breath. "Yes... yes, the Elements of Harmony saved Princess Luna, they took her away from the nightmare. The elements are joined together by the Element of Magic. Yes... it makes sense. Twilight took Luna from the nightmare, and nightmares don't like when things are taken from them."

"No," Third Eye said with a shake of his head, "nightmares don't like it when things get away, but nightmares are patient. Yes, they are patient. They are willing to wait. The nightmare that possessed the princess waited for a chance to possess Twilight. It waited until the ward in the library's basement was damaged. Yes... it waited, and when it saw an opportunity, it attacked."

Zecora licked her lips and fixed her gaze on Third Eye. "Yes, we nightmares are truly patient. After all, I've been waiting for this for decades."

Third Eye felt himself being lifted higher. The tendrils of nightmare energy that flowed from Zecora raised him into the air above the bubbling cauldron. Third Eye quickly realized what was about to happen, and struggled with as much strength as his aged body could provide.

"No... no no no no no!"

"Oh yes, Third Eye, your time has finally arrived," Zecora taunted, her demonic echo disappearing as she began to rhyme again. "For too long, of this meal, have I been deprived."

“But I was only trying to protect Ponyville! You were haunting the farms, sucking the life from their plants! You’re a nightmare of gluttony, with hunger insatiable. The farmers didn’t understand why their plants were dying, but I could see. Yes, I could see you. You were sucking the life from the plants. That’s why I tried to stop you. I was just trying to protect them!”

“Like a proud soldier you took up arms, to protect Ponyville and its farms. Yet soldiers who leave in the morning to fight should know they may not return with evening’s light. You have lost to me, Third Eye, victory is mine. You shall now become my dinner, a meal quite fine.”

With that Zecora released Third Eye, a single, final scream escaping from the aged unicorn’s throat as he dropped into the cauldron’s bubbling brew. He did not surface even once, the powerful potion already rending soul from body. All the while Zecora watched with an eager smile as her appearance shifted. Her teeth became jagged and her eyes began to glow with a haunting yellow light.

~~~

Zecora licked her lips a few hours later while she stepped out of her hut, letting her tongue pick up on the last traces of her very filling meal. She was already dressed in her Nightmare Night costume, and was thankful she chose to wear such a long dress. It worked well to hide her slightly distended gut.

“It has been too long since I’ve had such a meal. There is no way to describe how full I feel,” Zecora rhymed with a smile. She began to walk down the path that lead to Ponyville as sun descended towards the western horizon. “It’s too bad Third Eye’s soul was able to flee, his fate should have been to be devoured by me. Still, my meal was delicious all the same; it was a stew worthy of royal fame. A fellow nightmare and fresh pony flesh, I would not have guessed those flavors would mesh.”

As her hut fell out of sight and she continued along the forest path, Zecora pulled at her costume and inspected a pocket, seeing a quantity of green powder inside. Her supply was running low, since it took most of her stockpile to erase the other nightmare’s presence from Ponyville. Still, Zecora smiled and confirmed she had enough for the evening, despite

repairing damage and altering memories the night before. After all, she couldn't let another nightmare ruin Ponyville.

As Zecora's mind wandered to the subject of Ponyville, she thought about what she would find upon arrival. She imagined the many ponies in costume, running around so full of life, and it made drool form on her lips. She licked it away eagerly. "Tonight my garden will be quiet the buffet. There will be many fillies and colts out to play. All through the night they'll be seeking things sweet and sour. They'll all be awake until at least the witching hour."

Zecora's teeth began to mutate, the flat surfaces turning into carnivorous fangs. "Perhaps I am not as full as I would like. I may just have room for another small bite. Yes, my stomach is quite full of bone, skin, and flesh, but I always have space for some soul when it's fresh. Just a tiny nibble here and a small sip there. I take so little, I'm sure that nopony cares."

With her hunger continuing to build, Zecora's eyes glowed a bright yellow. "What a feast it would be to eat each one, tall and small; I wish I could devour each pony, soul and all."

"But such a feast would be my terrible end," Zecora told herself. She reined in her hunger and forced her teeth and eyes back to normal, "With Celestia then I would have to contend. No, it is better for things to be as they are, for me to nibble and dine on souls from afar."

Zecora allowed a smile to form on her lips and a deep chuckle to emanate from her throat. "Oh yes, my little ponies, you are each like a tree. Your only purpose is to live and bear fruit for me."

=====

The End?

=====