

The Empty Room

By Wanderer D



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Prologue

The hall had been quiet for all of half an hour when the door opened once more.

The two Earth Pony Guards standing outside of Princess Celestia's room glanced at each other before looking at the creaking door as Princess Luna made her way in. Again.

She walked towards them only to stand right in front of a blank wall. The two guards exchanged looks. When one was about to speak, the other one shook his head. Grumbling a bit, the first guard settled back to his post as they surreptitiously observed the Princess.

Luna paced in the hall for the sixth time that night, having walked out of the hall in a huff only to return shortly after.

The two guards followed her with their eyes, getting more and more nervous as she would stop and stare at a wall a few feet down from her sister's door, muttering to herself.

They exchanged glances once again when she shook her head.

“Hey... do you think she's going...” one of them started to whisper from the side of his muzzle.

“Damn it!” Luna suddenly roared making the two guards jump in fright.

The crash alerted Luna to what happened and she sheepishly watched a helmet roll past her. “Eh.. hehe... sorry.”

The two looked at her bewildered until the door behind them opened slowly and Princess Celestia walked out of her room, eyes heavy with sleep. “Luna?” she shook her head and looked down at the two guards who were still holding on to each other and blushing so hard their whole heads were

red. She arched an eyebrow and the two hastily separated to stand on their posts.

Still looking a bit embarrassed, Luna placed the helmet on the top of the guard's head using her magic. "Sorry sister..." she sighed.

"What happened?" Celestia asked, more awake now and trying to stifle a yawn. "It's pretty late at night."

Luna sighed. "I know, I know it's just... there is something strange here." her hoof swept in the direction of the empty hall. "I know I haven't been here for a thousand years but... wasn't there a room right next to yours?"

Celestia blinked. "What? I don't remember any rooms next to mine."

"But... I'm sure of it." Luna said making her way to where she thought it should be. "Did you rebuild anything around here while I was gone?"

"No..." Celestia said, walking up to her. "But, Luna, are you sure you're not confusing this hall with one in your old castle?"

Luna shook her head. "No... I distinctly remember there being a room right here... I can almost see the door."

Celestia turned and stared at the wall. Her eyes narrowed. She peered closer. Her left eyebrow twitched and then curved inquisitively. "No... I don't think there was anything there, Luna."

Luna groaned. "I feel something here sis! Really!"

Celestia blinked, looking at her sister's stern expression. "I can see that, Luna but there is nothing there."

Luna groaned then turned to look at the guards. "Hey, you two. Come over here."

The guards looked dubious but a Royal Order was, after all, a Royal Order. There was a reason the words were capitalized.

"Yes, your majesty?" one asked.

“Look over here and tell me what you see.” She pointed at the blank wall.

The guard stared at it. “I see... a wall, your majesty.”

“Me too.” the other added, then, as if suddenly inspired he smiled triumphantly. “I also see granite blocks, making the wall.”

The Moon Goddess seriously considering punching the guard in the face so hard he would meet the celestial body itself, but gritting her teeth she held back. “Celestia...”

“Luna, there is nothing there, really. You must be confused.” Celestia said kindly. “Maybe you're tired.”

“Sister.” Luna snapped. “Look at them. Guards. Look at where I am pointing.”

Celestia decided to humor her sister. After a moment, she frowned. “My loyal guards, please, look to where the princess is pointing.”

Both of the guards looked confused. “We are, your majesty.”

Celestia looked at Luna, who had a smug smile on her face. “I see. There is some sort of compulsion making them not look at the spot you are telling them about.”

“Not only them.” Luna said after a moment. “You too, sis.”

“What?!” Celestia reared up. “But... that can't be, the only other pony that could cast such a spell is you!”

Luna nodded. “And I didn't. Well, I'm sure the door is there, so, if you'll excuse me...” she quickly turned around and using her considerable strength kicked with her hind legs.

There was the sound of cracking wood, and for a moment, Celestia thought that she had seen something. She concentrated harder as her sister kicked again.

There! Just as her sister's kick had connected with the invisible door there had been a mirror-like sheen splintering for a second.

Concentrating her magic she waited for her sister's third kick and cast a strong dispelling spell. The magic and the damage to the door were too much for the illusion trying to protect it. With a crack that shook the hall the spell broke into ephemeral pieces that were visible to the naked eye for a split second before evaporating into nothing.

The guards stared in surprise at the sudden appearance of the room where there used to be nothing, but to their credit they recovered quickly and began to approach it.

“Wait.” Luna ordered. “My sister and I will go first, we don't know if there is any more magic in there that might affect you.” The guards looked slightly nervous at the prospect, and fell back after looking at Celestia for acknowledgment.

Celestia and Luna slowly made their way to the door and carefully kicked in the last pieces of the strong wooden door before walking inside, their magic bringing with them a couple of torches.

When they looked inside, they gasped.

“W-what does this mean?” Luna asked, looking around in wonder and some measure of horror as she looked at her sister.

Celestia for her part sank to her knees. Tears started flowing freely as she looked around the room. “I don't know sis... but... I... I can't stop crying...” her hoofs came to her eyes, she was confused and scared, but even worse, there was a horrible, sinking feeling inside of her.

Luna watched as her sister's eyes betrayed a terrible hurt. She hadn't seen anything like that since she had turned into Nightmare Moon a thousand years ago. Back then she had been disgusted at what she now recognized as the pain you can only feel for someone you love with your soul.

She walked slowly around the room avoiding the small bookshelf, the little table, the wooden blocks... until she stood in front of an empty crib standing

next to a small cabinet with some tiny dresses and a couple of cute diadems . The room still had magic in it, and it had preserved everything just like it had been the night or day it had been closed and hidden. On the sheets of the crib she could see the wrinkles around an empty space. Next to a small pillow lay two small dolls, one of which, with a pang of sudden pain, she recognized as herself, before she turned. The other one was of course, was a doll in the likeness of Celestia.

Luna noticed the guards approaching the room and quickly galloped to the entrance and blocked their view. "You cannot come in." she stated. "One of you, stand guard and let no-one inside and don't look in yourself, the other is to get Lance here."

The two guards scrambled to follow orders.

She looked back at her sister, who was looking at the room in desperation, searching for clues, tears still streaming out of her eyes. "There must be something!" her sister whispered. "Some clue, some sign... why was this hidden?" she looked at her sister. Luna cringed, there was so much pain in those eyes.

She had to ask. She hated to ask. But she had to. "Sister... did you ever have a filly?"

Chapter 1

The Great and Powerful Trixie growled as she looked at the map for the umpteenth time. She had followed the directions on it perfectly! The Great and Powerful Trixie looked around her at the dense forest and finally admitted that she was lost. Very lost. Completely, utterly, absolutely, undeniably, definitely lost. She was so lost her compass was not even trying to point North anymore.

It had given up on her. Just like all her *a/so* lost fans.

The Great and Powerful Trixie also admitted that she had no idea what to do now, but promised herself that if she ever saw a certain purple unicorn or the Earth Pony that had sold her the useless map in her hooves, The Great and Powerful Trixie would make them pay! Oh yes. And they would pay soooo hard. Because nopony humiliated or scammed The Great and Powerful Trixie and lived to tell the tale unscathed.

A treacherous voice inside Trixie's head however, reminded her that she was so lost that it would be pretty much impossible to meet those two ever again.

The Great and Powerful Trixie, however quenched that thought with so much force she passed out.

When The Great and Powerful Trixie woke up again, she had a splitting headache. It was also nighttime. Trixie cast a quick cantrip to tell the time. About two hours away from dawn. She then remembered that she *a/so* had a cantrip spell to know which direction she was facing. Her horn glowing with magic, she concentrated, only for her horn to shower her in sparks.

“Yaaaah!” The Great and Powerful Trixie squeaked in surprise. “What the hell? WHAT THE HELL?!” she shouted at the top of her lungs. “A silly compass I can understand! But a spell!? A SPELL?! What the hell is going on here?!”

A soft, rumbling growl quieted down The Great and Powerful Trixie, who looked around fearfully.

“Who daressss” a hissing voice made its way towards Trixie. “Who daresss awaken the Guardian?”

The Great and Powerful Trixie blinked then looked down at the map, where a circled red “X” marked a spot in the middle of no-where with the words “Temple of the Guardian” scribbled next to it.

“Oh.” Who knew. The Earth Pony that sold her the map had actually given her what she wanted. The Great and Powerful Trixie mentally removed him from the list of ponies that would suffer her wrath.

A slithering sound around her snapped her back to the present. “I await your ansssswear, little pony...” the voice hissed on her ear. Fearfully she turned around but there was nopony there. She tried to speak, but faltered.

Taking a deep breath, she looked defiantly into the darkness between the trees. “I, The Great and Powerful Trixie have awakened you Guardian. I made my way here through challenges that would have made any other pony shrink in fear! Facing dangers that none but The Great and Powerful Trixie would have been able to overcome!”

“And what doessss 'The Great and Powerful' Trixssssie, want with the Guardian?”

Trixie frowned. The Guardian had said her name in a way that sounded... condescending. No, it couldn't be. The Great and Powerful Trixie would never be treated condescendingly. She was the only one that deserved to look down on others. “Guardian! I, The Great and Powerful Trixie, have come here to learn from you the ancient Magics of the Guardians!”

A low rumble shook her and she looked around confused until she understood. The Guardian was laughing! At her! The Great and Powerful Trixie mentally added him to the list of ponies or whatever it was, that would suffer her wrath.

“Little Pony...” the voice hissed, amused. “Little, little Pony.” it chuckled. “Do you know who it issss you have... awakened?”

“Well, duh.” The Great and Powerful Trixie snorted. “The Guardian. You said so yourself.”

Mist slowly started to gather around her hoofs. “Yesssss.” the voice said. “But did it ever... occur to you to wonder... the Guardian of what, exssactly?”

Trixie opened her mouth to answer, but then slowly closed it. The Great and Powerful Trixie had not, in fact, wondered what the Guardians she was looking for actually guarded.

“Uh... I guess you guard great power?” she ventured.

There was a pause. “Well... Yesss, I do.” the voice said eventually. “But! That is not all... I possssesss great power, true, but it iss not for poniessss to learn.”

“Damn it.” The Great and Powerful Trixie swore adding the stupid Earth Pony to her mental list again. “Are you sure?” she asked hopefully. “I had heard that you had vast knowledge of Magic. Surely you can teach me something?”

There was silence again. This time though, even the slithering and rustling around her had quieted down to nothing. The Great and Powerful Trixie shifted nervously, asking herself if this had been a good idea after all.

Then the voice spoke. “Yessss. I ssssupossse there iss ssssomething I could teach you, oh Great and Powerful Trixie.” the voice said.

“Really?!” Trixie smiled genuinely, fears forgotten. “Please do! Anything I can do to make those that humiliated me pay!”

The Great and Powerful Trixie debated whether or not to take the Earth Pony and the Guardian off of her list, but decided to wait until she learned the new magic. If it was cool and powerful, she would take them off, if not... Well... they didn't need to know anyway until she exacted her revenge.

“Yesssss.” The voice said, once again whispering in her ear and sending shivers up her spine. “I will teach you now.”

Slowly The Great and Powerful Trixie turned around and looked up. And up. Until she could see the face of the Guardian. For a moment she stared at... it. And then, with quick move giant jaws descended upon her.

Her screams echoed in the jungle until they slowly died away... only to be followed by a very loud belch.

o.O.o

Twilight Sparkle jumped in her bed when Spike belched loudly. On the way down she completely missed the bed and crashed next to the still snoring baby dragon.

“Oww...” she moaned, shooting the sleeping reptile a glare that slowly melted away when he grumbled in his sleep and turned. Really. Who could stay angry at such a cute-
Her thoughts were interrupted when a scroll bumped her just behind her horn, making her go cross-eyed for a second.

Shaking her head, she levitated the scroll with her magic, noticing that the seal was not Princess Celestia's, having a moon in it instead of the sun.

“I've never received mail from Princess Luna...” she whispered as she opened the scroll. “Explains the hour, though.” she chuckled, noticing that it was still dark outside.

As she was about to read the scroll, the door to her balcony was kicked in.

“What the...” Twilight shot to her feet. With a flash of her horn the candles in the room were ignited. “Rainbow Dash?! What are you doing here at this time of night?!”

Breathing heavy, Rainbow Dash looked at her and shook her head. “Twi... [gasp] this is... [cough] not... nighttime!”

Twilight blinked. “Dash, you are clearly mistaken. Just look outside. The moon's still up.”

"I know that!" Rainbow Dash snapped, having finally regained her breath. "But it should have been gone by now! Everypony's in a panic!"

"What?" Twilight walked to a small water clock she had received as a present from Princess Celestia. She stared. It was eight AM. "But that's..." "Everyone is starting to think that Nightmare Moon has returned!" Rainbow Dash said, and in the distance, Twilight could hear confused shouting.

Remembering the scroll at the mention of Luna's alter-ego, Twilight quickly returned to it and read as fast as she could.

Rainbow Dash paced around as she observed her friend. "Twilight?" she asked as the unicorn's hold of the scroll ended abruptly. The piece of parchment fell to the floor next to the still snoring Spike. "Are you okay? You look pale."

"I... I need to go to Canterlot." she said shaking her head, but obviously still in shock. "The Princessess need me. Immediately. They've already sent the chariot."

"What?!" Dash's eyes followed her friend as she started packing things with her magic, still obviously in a daze as she was trying to pack Spike, bed and all into her bag. "But... if the moon is out... it has to be Luna! You can't go there!"

"Dash!" Twilight said, her magic twisting Spike upside down and trying to force him into the bag. "Princess Celestia can't bring the sun up! They need me there!"

"Then you are not goin' alone, sugarcubes." a voice said from the entrance to her room, and the pair turned around to see Applejack, flanked by Rarity and Fluttershy, with Pinkie Pie bouncing behind them, muffled "I can't see! I can't see!" making their way to them.

Twilight felt her fears calm down a little bit, but she was still very worried about Princess Celestia. "I... thank you... please go get ready, I need to finish packing and write back to Princess Luna."

Chapter 2

“Hey!”

The Guardian looked around, licking his fangs clean, but it would not look at her.

“I said HEY! Look at ME you... you... reptile!” The Great and Powerful Trixie shouted at the oblivious creature.

Trixie growled. NOPONY ignored the Great and Powerful Trixie! “Oh! You are going to pay! RIGHT NOW!”

Her horn flared with magic which took the form of a big bucket of water. With a smug face, Trixie proceeded to dump it on top of the Guardian's head.... only for the spell to fizzle into nothingness the moment she ordered it to do something.

Trixie blinked, confused. Then her eyes narrowed in anger. “You stupid Guardian! Stop affecting the magic of The Great and Powerful Trixie!” she stomped up to the huge creature and kicked it with her hind legs.

However, her hooves met no resistance and she lost her balance. The Great and Powerful Trixie landed in a heap on the floor and turned around to glare at the creature as it moved away.

“What the hell was that?! You were supposed to teach me something! And all you did was scare me half to death!” she paused. “N-not that The Great and Powerful Trixie was even scared to begin with! But it was a good attempt! I'll give you that!” the Guardian did not turn around.

“HEY! STOP IGNORING THE GREAT AND POWERFUL TRIXIE!”

“He's not ignoring you.” A small, almost nasal voice said from right next to her.

“YAA
AAAAAH!!!” Trixie jumped several feet into the air and landed face first
facing the cloaked pony that had startled her so.

Her eyes followed the cloak up to the skull hidden under the hood. Two
burning red dots fixed on her under a strangely shaped (and apparently
very sharp) horn. Now, The Great and Powerful Trixie could be pretty
dense at times, but she had not gotten far as a showmare by pure luck
alone...

“Who the hell are you and why are your skin and muscles missing?”

... then again, she could be pretty dense at times.

As the mysterious pony was about to answer, she interrupted him. “And
what the hell do you mean that he wasn't ignoring me? I was shouting at
him and even kicked him!”

The pony seemed to sigh. “He wasn't ignoring you. Look around you.”

For the first time The Great and Powerful Trixie looked around the small
clearing. “Well, what do you want me to see? I mean there's a lot of red
liquid around, and pieces of blue... mane...” in a panic she looked at herself
and sighed in relief when she noticed her mane seemed to be in perfect
condition. Then she noticed something that made her tremble to the core of
her being.

She slowly edged towards... it.

“I-is that...”

“Yes.”

“But...” she motioned with her hoofs at her face, obviously still in place. And
in one piece.

“Let's just say that the Guardian did not just... 'try' to scare you.”

“Oh.” The Great and Powerful Trixie grew confused as she started to float and glow softly, wisps of light floating out of her and disappearing into the night. “Wha-what’s happening?”

The skeletal pony seemed to shrug once more. It was hard to tell, with his body covered in that black cloak. “Nothing. You are going beyond. As your ties to this world are broken you will begin the next journey.”

Trixie fell silent.

Seeing that his charge was well on her way, Mort nodded to himself and turned to go to his next appointment. Maybe soon he would get another interesting pony. Like that drummer. Or maybe a lead singer? He could get more autographs that way.

Trixie looked sadly at the world around her. From her vantage point, now that she was floating over the treetops, she could now make the lights of a distant city... a city she would never be able to perform at... all those ponies that would be deprived of her greatness... the revenge she wouldn’t be able to achieve... slowly the lights around her body died as she grew angry.

“Oh, hell no. The Great and Powerful Trixie is NOT going quietly after becoming lunch for an overgrown snake!”

Her form, almost ethereal by now, seemed to solidify as she slowly floated down to ground level. When her hoofs touched the jungle floor she grinned. She would get her revenge!

o.o.o

“Princess Luna!”

Luna turned to stare at the guard, who shuffled uncomfortably in place. “I thought I ordered the whole hall to be out of bounds for everything but the most important of matters.” she said, calmly walking up to the terrified guard. “What could be so important as to make you burst into the hall without even knocking?”

“Uh...” he took a deep breath. “Twilight Sparkle and her friends are here. You asked us to let you know immediately as soon as their chariot landed and uh... there is no other way to reach you than to walk into the hall.”

“ ... ”

The Guard cast a glance at the exit, calculating how quickly he could get there.

“Oh.” Luna said finally. “So I did. Well done, guard. Bring Twilight Sparkle here... alone, and have her friends tended to.”

“At once your highness...” he hesitated.

“Yes?” Luna asked.

“Um... how is Princess Celestia feeling? We are all worried about her.”

Luna sighed wearily. “She... she will recuperate... please tell everypony that the sun will return to its daily routine soon, its... just a personal matter.”

The guard nodded sadly and left immediately, leaving Luna alone in the hall with her thoughts.

o.O.o

Twilight Sparkle walked slowly through Canterlot, her friends following her a few steps behind. Around them ponies of all types argued amongst themselves about the situation, and who was responsible. More than once a reference to Nightmare Moon reached her ears.

She sighed. “I wish they would not speak of Princess Luna like that.” she said.

“Well...” Dash said from where she hovered. “You have to admit it looks suspicious. The last time something like this happened it was her fault, you know?”

Twilight nodded.

“Guessing is not going to get us anywhere.” Applejack said after a moment. “Let's hurry up and meet with the Princess. Then we'll find out what's happening.”

It was then that a group of guards approached them. “Lady Twilight.” one of them said “Princesses Luna and Celestia require your presence... in private.”

“Hold on!” Applejack said, stepping up to the guard. “We are all here friends of Princess Luna, Twilight and loyal subjects of Princess Celestia, we should be able to go with her.”

The guard sighed. “Princess Luna knows you are here as well. She needs to speak to Lady Twilight in private. I imagine you will find out what's happening after that... maybe even with the rest of us.”

“So, none of you know what's happening?” Twilight asked the guards.

“I'm afraid not, my Lady Twilight.” The guard said gruffly. “The only one that knows at this time is Captain Lance, and he hasn't left either Princesses' side since Princess Luna called for him.”

Twilight Sparkle blinked. “I see...” she turned to look at the others. “This sounds very serious... please let me go first, I promise that if I can tell you anything, I will.” she looked pleadingly at the others, who smiled at her to a pony.

“Aw, don't worry about it, Twilight!” Pinkie Pie giggled. “I'm sure we can find something to do in the meantime! It's not like we have been here in Canterlot that much!”

Rarity nodded. “She's right my dear. Please go ahead. Maybe Spike could show us around?”

“Come to think of it... where is Spike?” Twilight asked turning around.

o.O.o

In another part of the castle, in Twilight's old room, where the guards had carried her luggage, a powerful snore shook one of her saddle bags from the inside.

o.O.o

“He must have stayed in the Library, I guess.” Applejack said, while Rainbow Dash tried to stifle a giggle.

“Don't worry,” the head guard spoke up. “Princess Luna asked that you were tended to for your stay, we have already assigned you rooms and some of the hoofmares will be along shortly to show you about the castle.”

“Sounds good to me!” Applejack said.

“Very well then,” Twilight Sparkle said, smiling at the head guard. “Please, take me to the princesses.”

At once two of the guards escorted Twilight away, leaving the friends behind with a couple of other guards.

“Hey, wasn't it funny how Twilight flinched every time they called her Lady Twilight?” Dash asked the others.

“Yes... it was very strange... I think... maybe.” Fluttershy said, noticing that the guards had traded looks when Rainbow Dash had asked that. A fact that the others, except for Rarity, seemed not to have caught on to.

“Yeah, since when has she been Lady Twilight?” Applejack chuckled. “Why, they make her sound like a noble!”

One of the guards was about to speak up, but Rarity spoke first.

“Oh dear.” The unicorn sighed, her hoof massaging her temple. “You really don't know, do you?”

“Know what?” Rainbow Dash asked.

“Well... I shouldn't be surprised...” Rarity said after a moment. “You don't think that Twilight Sparkle is a normal unicorn, right?”

“Well duh!” Pinkie Pie piped up. “Of course not, silly! She's the Element of Magic!”

The guards traded glances again. This was new to them.

“What I mean is... you didn't think she was a... *common* unicorn.”

“Honey, I think Pinkie Pie already pointed out that there is nothing common about Twilight Sparkle.” Applejack said gently. “If anything she is unusual.”

The unicorn whirled around to face away from the group. “Argh! How dense can...” Rarity grumbled and muttered incoherently to herself for a few seconds, then, taking a deep, calming breath and forcing a smile, she turned to face the others again. “Okay, let me spell it out for you... she is a N-o-b-l-e.”

“Oh, we knew that.” Rainbow Dash said.

Rarity and the guards blinked. “You did?”

“Yes! We know she is a noble, honest, over-working, wise pony.” Dash listed.

Rarity gritted her teeth. “Not noble that way! NOBLE capital 'N'!”

“Ooooooooooh...” the collective light of understanding in their eyes was at that moment as beautiful a gem as she had ever seen.

“Wait... so... she's rich?” Rainbow Dash asked, then grew excited. “Wow! And she probably knows a lot of influential and famous ponies right? So she might actually know one of the Wonderbolts! That makes her like... 20% cooler!”

“Is this true?” Applejack asked the guards, who nodded.

“But how did you know?” Pinkie Pie asked Rarity, who blinked in surprise.

“Well, she grew up in Canterlot, she could afford going to the most prestigious university in all of Equestria, she was selected to be Princess Celestia's personal student...”

“Wait! But that was because she really impressed her when she applied to start!” Rainbow Dash interrupted. “She told us herself!”

“Well, yes,” Rarity nodded. “But you cannot apply to Canterlot Magical University if you are a commoner.”

“Oh my...” a new voice said. “Did you just hear that?”

The group observed a pair of unicorns that strutted up to them. “I believe I saw these five walk through the hall in the company of Twilight Sparkle. Could they be her servants?” One of them said.

The other peered at them closely. “They are not dressed as hoofmaids... and I have never seen them in Canterlot before.”

“Hey! Who are you calling a servant? We are Twilight's friends!” Rainbow Dash asked, glaring at the unicorn. “And for your information we have been here before! We came to the Grand Galloping Gala.”

“My, how... rash.” the unicorn sneered at the pegasus. “And the way you call her... ugh. I can't believe she associates with someone that does not know their proper place in society. Why don't you go back to whatever... place... you came from? Guards, please escort them out.”

Dash was about to reply but one of the guards stepped in front of her. “I am afraid, Lady Glitter Horn that these ladies are guests of Princesses Celestia and Luna, as well as Lady Twilight.”

The unicorn looked at them with scorn. “I don't know why the Princesses bother with this... rabble.”

“Come now, dear.” the other unicorn said, sniffing rudely. “Let us be away from them.”

The group watched them prance away with complete disgust. “If that is the kind of people that she has to deal with daily it's no wonder Princess Celestia was so happy we crashed the Gala.” Applejack muttered.

“Why, I should break her horn and shove it up her-”

“Please ignore them, Rainbow Dash.” a new voice said, making the whole group turn around. “Glitter is just as her name suggests, pretty, but useless.”

“Lyra?” Rarity blinked. “Why are you here?”

Lyra smiled shyly. “Well... I have family here in Canterlot and I attended the University here along with Twilight Sparkle... and those two.”

“I... I never knew...” Rarity stammered.

Lyra smiled. “It's okay. If it is fine with the guards, I could take you on a tour of the palace.”

The guards looked at each other, and one shrugged. “We have to keep you company, but we can give you some space as long as we don't lose you.”

“Sound's good to me!” Applejack said with a smile. “Lead the way, Lyra! Or should I say, Lady Lyra?”

“Lyra is fine.” the unicorn said as she started walking.

“Did you and Twilight have to deal with those two idiots while you were studying?” Rainbow Dash asked.

The guards followed the group out of the palace, sharing small smiles as their guests seemed to forget for the moment the attitude of certain Nobles.

o.O.o

Twilight followed the guard through the palace. Although she knew her way around it perfectly well, she had to maintain a certain protocol while she was here. She sighed. Things were so much easier in Ponyville.

When they finally reached the hall, the guard stepped to the side of the door. “Please, go ahead Lady Twilight.”

The unicorn nodded and walked in. The first person she saw there was Captain Lance. The old unicorn still looked as solid as he had as far as Twilight Sparkle could remember. Although she had not lived all her life in

the palace, she had seen the guards plenty of times during parades in Canterlot, Lance had always been proudly at the front of the guard.

“Twilight Sparkle!” he chuckled as she rushed up to him and nuzzled him. “It has been too long! How are things in Ponyville?”

“They are great!” Twilight said, smiling. “I’m sure you’ve read the reports about the Ursa Minor and such, but I assure you, those are far and in between.”

The old unicorn chuckled. “Well, you can tell me about that later, right now we have a more important matter at hand.”

“What happened?” Twilight asked. “Everypony has been so secretive about it! Even Luna’s letter was very vague.”

“That is because only Captain Lance, Celly and I know what’s going on.” Princess Luna said, as she walked out of a room that Twilight could have sworn was never there. “And we all trust you to use very careful judgment if you tell anypony about this.”

Twilight Sparkle nodded soberly.

“Follow me.” Luna said, as she started walking towards the strange new room.

o.o.o

“Princess!” Twilight ran to cuddle next to her depressed mentor. “What happened?”

The Princess for her part nuzzled against her student’s shoulder. The Alicorn visibly perked up, immediately feeling better, although not by much. “I’m sorry Twilight... I know I should be out there but I couldn’t... not... after seeing this.”

Stirred by that comment, Twilight Sparkle finally turned around and looked at the room herself. The words that she could have said stuck in her throat as her mind quickly connected the dots. “B-but... how is this possible?”

“We don't know.” Luna confessed. “Someone cast a spell so powerful that everyone in the palace forgot about this room, and if anyone even knew about my sisters' filly... they forgot about her too.”

Twilight Sparkle looked at her mentor. She loved Princess Celestia with all her heart, she was in more than one way her mother, since she had spent more time with her than with her real parents. To see her like this, deprived of the happiness that a filly of her own would have brought her... and to make her forget even having had one... it was... horrible. A travesty. “Who would dare do this?” she asked quietly, but the other three in the room could feel the cold anger in her voice. “Who would take...” she couldn't say it.

“Again, we don't know,” Luna said, her own voice angry. “but we intend to find out. Between the three of us we are three of the most knowledgeable ponies in magic. If we study the spells here we should be able to gain some clues.”

“And I will conduct my own investigation.” Lance said from the side. “I only need a time-frame.”

“Twenty years.” Twilight said, drawing the attention of the three ponies. “It should be around twenty years ago. Princess' Celestia's filly should be a young mare about my age by now.”

“Not that I think you could be wrong...” Luna began. “But how can you be so sure?”

Twilight Sparkle walked towards the small bookshelf containing Foal Books. “Here... this rhyme book was first published around twenty years ago. I have a copy myself at home.”

Lance chuckled and Luna smiled. “I am glad I immediately thought of you, Twilight, to help us out.”

“You couldn't have kept me away...” Twilight said with a sad smile of her own. “Not when my beloved mentor needs me.”

Luna sighed. “And speaking of which.” she walked towards the other alicorn. “Celly. You have to get up. You have to bring the sun up today. My

moon has been there far too long. Our subjects and friends need you to be strong. Concentrate... between us we can solve this and find your filly."

Slowly Princess Celestia looked up, first at her sister, standing regally next to her, a warm, comforting smile on her face. Her eyes strayed to the old unicorn, Lance, who nodded at her, his face tired, but understanding. And finally, her eyes sought out Twilight's. There she found strength, in the eyes of the one filly in her many years of life she had considered as close as possible to a daughter. Twilight was there for her too, and she would help her find out what had happened, and where her daughter was.

Closing her eyes she took a deep breath as she deliberately stood up. She was tired from crying and lack of sleep, from the shock of finding out that she had had a daughter at some point in the last twenty years and that she had had her memory erased of the events.

For her sister. For her loyal captain. For her faithful student. For her subjects. For... her daughter, wherever she was... she could not simply stay there and do nothing.

When she opened her eyes, she was ready. "Let's bring out the sun, my dear sister."

Luna beamed a smile and nodded.

"I will stay..." Twilight said, looking around. "I feel the magic in this room... I think I can start making sense of what happened here while you two do what you need to do... and rest."

Both Princesses nodded and walked out of the room, leaving Captain Lance and Twilight Sparkle behind.

"I will leave some guards outside the hall." Captain Lance said, the old unicorn looking around the room one last time. "Is there anything you need?"

Twilight shook her head. "I think I have it covered for now, thank you Captain."

Lance chuckled, drawing her attention. "You have been hanging around the Princesses maybe too much, my dear Twilight. You almost sounded like them."

Twilight blushed. "I'm sorry Captain I..."

The unicorn shook his head. "No. Don't be. I'm glad to have lived to see you become the self assured young mare you are today. I'll take my leave for now, my Lady."

o.O.o

The lights of the city attracted the Guardian to its edge. From the protection of the trees he watched as the ponies in the city looked nervous, casting looks to the night sky. Why was that, he wondered?

Suddenly a murmur drew his attention back to the sky as the night turned to dawn and then midday in mere minutes. What was happening? He hissed as the sunlight burned his sensitive eyes and withdrew deeper into the jungle. He would wait.

As he turned around, he absently used a claw to remove something that was stuck in between his fangs. Finally getting the edge of it, he pulled out the offending item and glared at it, then snorted, throwing the hat of the formerly Great and Powerful Trixie to the jungle floor. He walked deeper still, ignoring Trixie who glared at his receding form.

"I think I will need help." she sighed. She hated asking for help. But there was little else she could do. Concentrating hard, her horn started to glow, and soon a small breeze pushed her hat towards the city. There was only one pony she could think of that would give her the time of day. And if she helped her, the Great and Powerful Trixie was willing to take her off the list of ponies (and creatures) she hated.

Chapter 3

By the time Lyra had gone home and promised to see them the next day, the five ponies had a pretty good idea of the layout of the castle. As they sat down to eat a small lunch in the gardens, courtesy of the Princesses, the guards accompanying them took positions around them, trying not to be too obtrusive to their guests, but still curious about them.

"It was awfully nice of Lyra to show us around." Applejack said.

"Yes! And did you see those amazing grounds?!" Pinkie Pie giggled. "I bet I could throw the bestest party ever for Princess Celestia! That would really make her happy!"

The guards smiled at each other. Given how stressed they all had been a party sounded nice.

"But it has to be big!" Pinkie Pie continued prancing around. "I have to get cupcakes and streamersanddanglersandcakeanddrinksandhotsauceand..." she stopped when she turned and came nuzzle to nuzzle with Fluttershy.

"But... you would have to make sure that the party didn't disturb the animals." The Pegaus said. Although they hadn't been as friendly as she had hoped before, she was not going to hold it against them.

"Yeah yeah, parties are good, but I want to explore! Hey! You know what? This place is old!" Rainbow Dash said.

"Yeah, we know." Applejack deadpanned.

Dash gave her a look. "It has been around from even before Nightmare Moon appeared! That's thousands of years!" she smiled. "I bet there are ghosts here!"

Applejack suddenly grew nervous.

“Oh, Dash, don't be silly.” Rarity laughed. “There are no such things as ghosts! Next thing you'll say is that humans are real.”

“Hey!” Rainbow Dash glared at her. “I never said I believed in humans! I stopped believing in fairy tales like that when I was a little filly!”

“But you believe in ghosts, dear.”

“Hey now, I don't know about humans, but ghosts are as real as this table here.” Applejack broke in, tapping her hoof on the table.

“No they aren't.” Rarity said.

“But humans are.” Pinkie said with a giggle. “I met one just before the story started.”

The other four ponies slowly turned to look at her, while the guards tried valiantly not to stare.

“He was very strange! No hoofs, and they don't have wings!” Pinkie Pie continued, slightly confused. “I always thought they would have wings.”

“Now, Pinkie Pie,” Applejack said after a moment. “Don't go making up stories, okay?”

“But it happened!” Pinkie Pie declared, bouncing around. “When I said ‘hi’ he stared at me, then said something about 'self insertion was a low he was not going to hit' and then...”

“And then?” Rainbow Dash asked, leaning in, interested in the story despite herself.

“He imploded!” Pinkie Pie giggled. “Twice!”

Applejack and Rarity smacked their hooves against their faces and groaned, there was a crash behind them and a helm rolled past them... Rainbow Dash smiled.

“Really?! That's awesome! If I implode I want to do it twice! NO! Thrice!” the pegasus declared. “There's no way I'm losing to a human!”

“Um...” Fluttershy drew their attention. “What is 'self-insertion'?”

“Well... I don't know... but it sure sounds painful.” Applejack said, raising an eyebrow.

“Why are we talking about this?” Rarity asked, giving the others a wary look.

“Oh! Because of the ghosts!” Dash jumped and turned to one of the guards. “Are there any ghosts in the castle?”

While the one that had face-hoofed so hard he had knocked his helm off sheepishly made his way past them to pick it up, the other guards exchanged nervous glances. “Uh... there used to be one in the library tower, but it disappeared a year ago.” one of them ventured.

“It's gone? Aww.” Rainbow Dash sighed, but looked up hopefully. “So... what did that ghost do? Was it scary?”

“Well...” the guard shuffled in place when everypony's attention focused on him. “It was usually late at night... when everything was calm, and even after Lady Twilight had gone to sleep... when we did our rounds... we would hear a voice, but whenever we investigated there was no-one there!”

“I remember that the voice was that of a capable general, commanding his troops.” another guard said. “It freaked us out... we thought there really was a battle happening.”

“Hm... that does sounds suspicious.” Rainbow Dash said. “I wonder what happened to it?”

o.O.o

Snort! “One does not simply walk into Mordor!” Spike bellowed as he rolled out of Twilight's bag. He whizzed when he hit the floor belly first. “Aragorn? Frodo?” He stood up, shaking his head and rubbing the sleep off his eyes. “Uh? What? Where am I?” he looked around, spotting the calendar.

It was the same day as when he and Twilight had gone looking for books about the Elements of Harmony.

“Oh... Celestia... I'm in Twilight's room back in Canterlot... this... this can only mean one thing!” he fell heavily on his rump. “I... must have dreamt the whole thing! We never went to Ponyville!”

He started to despair. “But then... I never met Rainbow Dash! Or Pinkie Pie! Or Fluttershy! Or even Applejack! But most importantly... I never met Rarity!” his little claws made fists as he shook them at the heavens. “Nooooooooooooooooo! They were all figments of my imagination!” he sighed. “Although I must say that my imagination gave Rarity very, *very*, nice flanks.”

Then he groaned. “Why does this always happen to me?”

o.o.o

Rarity shuddered. “Is it getting cold?”

“Not really.” Applejack said, taking another lick of her apple-caramel ice-cream.

Pinkie Pie giggled.

“What?” Rainbow Dash asked, turning her attention to the pink pony.

“Oh, nothing... I just think 'Mordor' is such a silly name!”

“Uh... right. Anyway, aren't there any more haunted places here? This place is so old there should be at least a couple!”

“Well...” one of the guards ventured, but hesitated when another shook his head violently. “... uh... never mind.”

Applejack and Rainbow Dash shared a glance.

o.o.o

“Hmm...” Twilight Sparkle hummed as her horn shone in different shades. “Interesting.” next to her, a quill quickly took notes as she proceeded to cover the room inch by inch.

She stopped when she reached the bookshelf. She felt tears flooding her eyes as she watched the shelves full of foal books, lovingly chosen by her mentor for her daughter, who never had the chance to lay next to her and listen to the kind alicorn read the wondrous stories within.

She sighed. Before the Princesses left, she had felt anger and horror at what had happened. But now... now all she felt was sadness. She had stopped several times as she moved about the room, when her hoof had hit a toy in the floor, or the mobile made with little effigies of ponies, stars, the sun and the moon had chimed when a breeze had swept through the room. Whenever that happened a deep sorrow filled her, and she had caught herself crying more than once.

She had tried to detach herself from it, a little, at least, to be able to do her job... but there was so much love in this one room... she looked in sorrow at the crib with the two dolls in it, a mental image forming of Princess Celestia's kind smile as she leaned in to wish her filly a good night. Or the wooden blocks in the corner, where she could almost hear childish laughter and the gentle and warm chuckles of an amused Princess Celestia.

She took a deep breath and concentrated. She was not going to fail her mentor. Especially after the Princess had gone back to her duties after experiencing something that would have kept most ponies... indisposed... for a few days at least. She had to find out what had happened here.

o.O.o

Luna lay in her bed thinking. She should be asleep, especially if she wanted the night to come in time, but... she sighed. So many things had changed since he had arrived. She knew technology would be much different when she finally emerged from the Moon. Faces had changed, obviously, the forests had changed, even the continents had changed a little bit. Islands that had been there when she had controlled the night so many centuries ago were gone now...

Like Celestia, she had had some temples built in her honor by her devoted subjects as a sign of love and appreciation... most of those were gone, except for a few that had mysteriously been kept clean, although she had been unnerved to find an effigy of Nightmare Moon rather than the Moon or Stars that were traditionally used to represent her.

But none of that was as shocking and saddening as what she had found out today. She sighed. "Today" felt like it had been a whole week of stress.

But... she hadn't really felt the loss of so many things as deeply as today, when she had found out that even her sister had changed. The thought of her sister... *her* sister, Princess Celestia, starting a family? A week ago she would have laughed if someone brought it up as a possibility. There had to be a limit to attachment, after all. They were immortal. Whoever they married, whichever fillies or colts they produced would pass away eventually, while they remained. That didn't mean they had to be aloof, or unkind, or even feel superior -hard lessons that she had to face after the Nightmare Moon debacle- but it meant that if they didn't draw a line, they would be miserable.

But her sister had taken a bold step beyond that line and produced the first filly to be related to them by blood. And then she was taken away, Celestia deprived of even the memory of her filly.

Luna felt bitter tears forming as she considered what it would have been like being an aunt? If she had had more family, someone to keep close and teach about the stars and the moon and those places invisible to normal pony eyes, would she had transformed into a monster? Even as Nightmare Moon, she knew, she would have been touched by the existence of more family. Someone that would not judge her, maybe even love her unconditionally.

Why had this happened? And who had done it?

She sighed and looked out the window at the busy streets, lost in thought.

o.O.o

A filly. She had a filly. She felt so much joy at the thought of that... and then a jolt of pain that she had been taken from her.

And yet, somehow, for some reason she felt that she knew that filly. The sense of loss had been overwhelming, the years and happiness that she had been deprived from sharing with her daughter felt like stab wounds directly in her soul... but when Twilight Sparkle had walked in, she had remembered what it felt to care for a filly like it was her own daughter...

She would find her, and she would apologize for not having been there for her, and more importantly, she would spend every second she could with her, making up for lost time.

But for now... she had to hold court.

As the latest petitioner started speaking, Celestia's mind drifted for a second to her faithful student, wondering what she had discovered so far.

o.O.o

A slightly chewed out blue magician's hat rolled down the street, pushed by a breeze that only seemed to affect it until it bumped to a stop next to the wheels of a blue cart.

The Great and Powerful Trixie panted as she stopped. It had taken considerable concentration to get the hat to her cart, and now, proudly she looked up. "Finally! I would like to rest, but the sooner The Great and Powerful Trixie reaches Ponyville, the better."

With another burst of air, her hat fell into the driver's seat as she made her way to the front to slip inside the harness.

Ducking her head in, she slid forward. When she didn't feel the harness resting on her back, she leaned forward even more, until she had to quickly get her hoofs into position to avoid falling face first onto the road.

Growling she looked back, ready to start swearing when she realized that part of the harness was *inside* her body. She looked at it for a few seconds before she remembered. "Ah... I forgot. I'm a ghost." she sighed.

"Okay Trixie, there's no need to panic." she said after a moment. "Deep breaths, deep breaths. Am I even breathing?"

The Great and Powerful Trixie began to walk in circles around her cart. "Okay, what do I know about ghosts?" she thought for a moment. "Well... ghosts are ethereal. That means they... we... cannot really touch objects normal objects, however, according to Magister Crowley, magical objects can be moved and touched by spirits... that is how fetishes are created. Ohhh... I hate magical theory." Her eyes narrowed. "*She* was always better at it than I was, even if I could levitate stuff first." she shook her head. "But now is not the time..." she looked at her cart, considering.

The old one, which she had left in Ponyville, had been enchanted to produce several magical effects on demand, something she hadn't gotten around to casting on this one for some stupid reason... ah, yes, she had needed ingredients and she hadn't been keen on getting them herself. And her father had only sent enough for buying a new cart. Sure, she had enchanted some items herself, but they were all *inside*.

Sigh.

It was then that she heard the clopping of somepony approaching her cart.

"Now dear, see? This... Great and Powerful Trixie is not in her cart right now. I'm sure we will hear when she starts her show, and I promise you I will bring you over to watch."

It was two unicorns. A mare and her colt. Trixie grimaced and tried to concentrate on what to do, when...

"But mom, why don't we ask her? She's right there." the little colt asked, pointing with a hoof at her.

Trixie blinked. "Huh?"

"Now, Six, don't start this again... there's no-pony there. Really."

"But mooom."

Six? Who named their colt 'Six'?

"Look dear, if you promise not to touch anything, you can stay here and look at the cart. Look. Not touch. I'm sure if the Great and Powerful Trixie

were here she wouldn't appreciate some mischievous colt touching her things, right? We have to take advantage of the sunlight, so I will go to the store over there and get the groceries if you are a good colt and wait for me here. How is that?"

The colt looked at Trixie, doubt filling his eyes, but The Great and Powerful Trixie was already on her knees, hoofs clapped together and nodding desperately for him to agree. "I... guess..." he said.

"Good. I'll be right back."

Six's mother went into the store, leaving him with Trixie, who was giving him a thankful smile. "Thank you! Thank you! You see, I really need your help, if you are willing to do something very, very simple for me?"

Six nodded slowly. "Are you really the Great and Powerful Trixie?"

"Yes, yes I am!" Trixie said, striking a pose. "And I guess you are a fan?"

The colt nodded, shyly.

"Well then, The Great and Powerful Trixie will sign you an autograph if you do that small favor I was talking about. Do you know how to perform the basic spell runes?"

The colt nodded and Trixie had to hold herself from shouting in glee. "Well, I need you to scratch one of the magic runes onto my cart..."

"Uh... but my mom said not to touch it..."

"Silly, that's my cart, right?"

The colt nodded.

"And I'm giving you permission to touch it, right?"

The colt nodded.

"Then, its fine if I let you, right?"

"I... guess." He approached the cart. "Where do you want it?"

"Um... anywhere will be fine." Trixie said, finally noticing the colt's cutie mark. An eye with a small number 6 in the middle. Huh. How odd.

"So, Six..." she started as he carefully scratched the paint on her cart with his glowing horn, drawing a basic magic rune for speed. "What did your mom mean when she said you shouldn't 'start this again'?"

The colt didn't answer immediately, until he was done. The magic in his horn died, and for a moment nothing seemed to happen, then suddenly the cart seemed to glow for the barest of seconds. Trixie nodded happily.

"Well done, Six!"

Six, for his part looked around, then motioned for Trixie to get closer. Curious, she leaned forward.

"Well... I have a problem, and that's why my mom was saying that thing about not doing it again... it hasn't made me very popular with the other ponies." he confided.

Trixie blinked. "Well, what is this problem?"

"I see dead ponies." Six said, eyes very wide. "And they don't know they're dead!"

Trixie snorted. "Well, it's not like it feels much different, you know?"

The colt blinked. "You mean you know? But... aren't you going to stick around and see me through a journey of self-discovery and my purpose in life by helping those lost souls in desperate need to find peace and continue to the next world? Only to leave me sad, bitter and alone once you realize you too are dead?"

Trixie laughed. "Oh, silly colt. The Great and Powerful Trixie has better things to do. Here..." her horn shining, she levitated a magic ink pen from within her cart and proceeded to sign a piece of paper, which she then blew towards him with the same wind spell she had used on her hat. "There you go. Go find more dead ponies, now, ok?"

She tried to pat him in the head, but her hoof went through it in a very disturbing way, so she chuckled nervously and jumped on top of her cart. "Bye-bye now!"

With a sudden lurch the cart rolled forward, leaving a thoroughly confused colt behind.

o.o.o

In a dark room with six slightly glowing circles and one column of light in the middle, several ponies had gathered. Obscured by shadows, the only visible detail was that they were all wearing dark cloaks they nickered and shuffled in place, until one stepped into the light. From within the cloak a female voice emerged.

"Brothers and sisters... both the Princesses are acting strange... they are weak."

There was a moment of animated whispering, but the pony in the middle stamped her hoof on the floor, drawing their attention.

"I have seen signs that the Guardian has awoken. The time to strike approaches swiftly... be vigilant. We will find what makes them weak and we will bring night eternal again to Equestria."

"The Nightmare in the Moon will live again!" the others chanted.

"Not only her, this time." the mare said, the light allowing the others to see a small smile in her muzzle. "This time... both the Sun and Moon will forever bring the night."

Chapter 4

Spike walked morosely through the castle grounds. "Why me? Really? This happens to me all the time!" the baby dragon growled. "I mean, it's weird enough to dream that I am someone else altogether heading armies into battle, but to dream a whole year of experiences in Ponyville only to find out I never visited? That's harsh!" he blinked. "Although I guess that explains why sometimes it felt... episodic."

He waved absent-mindedly at a couple of guards as he passed them, eyes on the floor. "And then to dream of perfection herself, the most beautiful pony to grace Equestria only to have her be a figment of my imagination? That is a cruel, cruel fate!"

He sighed. "Well, at least I still have Twilight... I'd better go find her..." he looked around and hummed. "I wonder where she is? She usually wakes me up before leaving and it's almost the end of the day!" he thought for a second. "I guess I'll try the library."

o.o.o

Princess Celestia glanced at one of the large windows of the court room. Twilight was approaching, and soon, she would be able to meet her aptly named student. She felt a measure of comfort, knowing that one of the most capable ponies she had ever known was trying her best to help her. Comforted... and blessed.

Soon Luna would take over the court duties, which, under her, would last just a few hours before she would be free to join them.

Now, more than ever, she was glad to have her sister back. Not to say that she hadn't been delighted to have her back in the first place but... under the circumstances, having her loving sister at her side gave her much more strength than she had had in centuries.

As a noble rambled about something to do with the state of the Grand Theatre in Canterlot, she had to fight her instinct to hurry the sun down.

She was unable to hide her nervousness completely though, as her front hoof scratched the marble floor impatiently.

The noble stammered. "Ah, your highness if I have offended you..."

Celestia took a deep breath and smiled her kindest of smiles at the pony who had no idea what she was going through at the moment and was taking her time to complain about a structure that was in perfect condition. Clearly it was more important than her filly. Clearly it was more important than her feelings and her life and...

"Not at all, please continue... a thought, crossed my mind at the most inopportune moment."

The noble nodded slowly, reassured by the fake smile she had valiantly brought forth. She felt a pang of regret for a moment, for her selfish thoughts, but how could she simply pretend that nothing was wrong?

It was then that the doors crashed open as Luna, followed by several guards, ran into the room. "Sister! Something horrible has happened!"

o.O.o

"Why did we let them talk us into this?" One guard asked.

"It was because *somepony* decided to spill the story of the crypt." another guard muttered venomously, glaring at the guard that walked at the front of the large group.

Said guard did not look happy at all as he was flanked on both sides by Applejack and Rainbow Dash.

"So this crypt has been here since before Canterlot was built?" Applejack whistled. "Why isn't it part of the tours?"

The guard nodded miserably, stealing a glance back and wincing at the displeased looks his fellow guards were giving him. "The Crypt is mostly unknown to the citizens of Canterlot, and it has been closed for as long as

anyone can remember.” he lowered his voice. “No pony is allowed inside. It is said that those few ponies who went in saw the spirits of those that had passed away there... and that if you are not careful, they will drag your soul screaming into the abyss, leaving behind an empty shell... and sometimes you can still hear their voices whispering to you through the door.”

“A-are you sure this is a good idea?” Rarity stammered, looking around nervously.

“Aw, come on, Rarity!” Rainbow Dash smirked. “You know there is no such thing as ghosts, right? Why are you scared?”

“I- I am not scared, Dash.” Rarity said. “I simply do not want to get my coat dirty in a stinky old crypt!”

“W-we could go someplace else... you know... if you want to, that is... maybe.” Fluttershy suggested.

“Nah.” Rainbow Dash smiled at her friend. “Don't worry, Fluttershy, I'll make sure nothing happens to you.”

Fluttershy lowered her head, looking away as she followed the others. “I don't know if you can...” she whispered.

“Hey! If there are ghosts in there can we invite them over to Ponyville?” Pinkie Pie asked. “Think about it! We could have a party that would never, ever die!”

“Sometimes, Pinkie Pie, you really scare me.” Applejack said.

“Just remember to laugh!” Pinkie Pie replied merrily bouncing around the group as they approached a large pair of copper doors embedded into the mountainside.

“What's that supposed to mean?” one guard asked another, only to be elbowed into silence.

The closer they got the more oppressive the air became until all ponies were walking with lowered heads and quietly, their hooves clopping on the hard stone had become the only sound around.

As the colors of twilight filled the sky above, Pinkie Pie started humming to herself and singing under her breath. *“In the land of twilight, under the moon...”*

Clip clop, clip clop.

“We dance for the idiots...”

Clip clop, clip clop.

“Ring-around-the-roses, jump to the moon”

Clip clop, clip clop.

"We sing with the castanets..."

Due to the silence, her whispered strange song carried on to the ears of everypony, and just as her voice was getting on their nerves, Rarity turned around to growl at Pinkie Pie, opening her mouth to tell her...

“WHAT WAS THAT?!”

[illegible]

Rainbow Dash's shout was followed by a shrill scream that made everypony cringe until Applejack shoved a hoof on Rarity's mouth, shutting her up.

Pushing the hoof out of her face, Rarity glared at the pegasus. "Don't EVER," she gasped "do that again!"

“But I saw somepony!” Dash said, cringing under the disgruntled visage of her friend. “Over there! By the rocks!”

A couple of the guards trotted over to where Rainbow Dash was pointing and looked around, but shook their heads when they found nothing.

“Listen... it's getting a bit late and I don't want to be here at night time.” Applejack said. “So, let's take a look, see if we can hear anything and then we can return to the castle.”

“Aww... scaaaaaared?” Rainbow Dash taunted her.

“Yes.” Fluttershy said.

“No.” Applejack declared. “I just know that Twilight is going to be looking for us, and we cannot talk to her while we are here.”

“Sure.” Rainbow Dash said. “Well, anyway, let's... Pinkie Pie!”

Said pink pony was already at the large gates, looking inside. “Hey everypony! The gates are open!”

At that, the guards tensed and stood around the group protectively. Sensing the change, Applejack carefully looked towards Pinkie Pie. “Pinkie Pie... come over here.”

“Aww... but I can hear a voice!” she said excitedly. “I'll take a look!” she turned words into action and jumped past the gates before anyone could stop her.

“Darn it! Pinkie Pie!” Applejack shouted as the whole group trotted towards the doors. They were ajar, barely enough space for a pony to slide through. The guards immediately pushed the doors open and as the dimming light illuminated the large chamber, they immediately spotted Pinkie Pie, standing still, looking at something just beyond their sight.

“Pinkie Pie?” Rarity asked.

The pink pony slowly turned around. She was, for once, not smiling. In fact, small tears welled in her eyes as she stepped back, letting everyone see what she had found.

Outside, unseen by the ponies as they recoiled in horror a shadowy figure observed, then melted into the mists.

The court had been adjourned immediately.

When only the few guards that had ran into the room were left, Luna spoke. "Sister, Lance has disappeared. This young guard," she motioned with her head to an extremely uncomfortable pony, "went to his quarters to find him, and found the whole place ransacked, whatever Lance was working on had been taken, as evidenced by the empty desk... but, it was clear there had been a fight and... he also found blood in the room. Apparently he had left instructions that if something strange happened we should be informed immediately."

Before Celestia could even speak, the door to the court room slammed open as a pegasus crashed through it and rolled on the floor. Several guards chased after her and as soon as she slid to a stop, surrounded her with their lances at her neck.

"Rainbow Dash!" Celestia exclaimed, motioning for the guards to step back. "What's the meaning of this?!"

"Princess!" Dash looked up in panic. "Princess! Where is Twilight?!"

Princess Celestia felt her blood run cold as she exchanged concerned looks with Luna, and as if to answer her sudden realization, the castle shook with an explosion.

"Go." Luna said. "I'll bring up the moon and join you shortly... there's no need to worry the rest of our subjects even more."

Celestia shot her sister a grateful look then flew out of the room. Rainbow Dash immediately went after her. Her parting words echoing in the hall. "Send paraponies to the Crypt!"

o.O.o

An old pony rocked in her chair watching end of the day pass her by. It had been odd, today. The sun had not come up until mid afternoon, but at least twilight seemed to be on time. She chuckled to herself. It had worried a lot of ponies when the lack of sun extended and extended, but for her, well, it was nice to see some random change for once in her old age.

But some things never changed in the end. Like dawn gave birth to the day, twilight would die to make way for the night.

She heard a squeak. Slowly, she stopped rocking. There it was again. Looking around she spotted a cart on the road. But, it was empty, and nopony was strapped to it. She looked the other way and heard another squeak.

Looking back she stared hard at the cart. Was it closer than before? Her eyes opened wide when the cart seemed to turn her way (giving her an unpleasant feeling that it was looking at her.) It started advancing towards her and she could feel her heart racing. The ponyless cart finally ground to a stop just before the steps to her home.

A small window to the side of the cart opened and powder seemed to float out... before her eyes it ignited into a blaze of fire forming words in the air.

WHICH WAY TO PONYVILLE? The fiery words spelled out.

She felt pain above her left hoof... and everything went black.

“Hey! Granny!”

The old pony opened her eyes and groaned. “W-what...”

“Are you okay? You passed out!” the voice asked.

“I... I'm okay,” she assured the stranger that helped her up. Funny. Her legs didn't hurt so much now. “I just had this strange nightmare of a cart that spoke in fire to me... I thought I was going to have a heart-attack!”

“Y-you did? Ah... hehe.”

The old pony looked at the young unicorn that was helping her up. She had a soft blue coat and a magic wand with pixie dust and a star as a cutie mark. “Yes.. I must have fallen out of my chair!” she chuckled.

“Oh... well.” the unicorn cleared her throat. “I ah... I need to know how to get to Ponyville from here, if you don't mind?”

“Not at all!” the old mare said. “It's west of here, a few hours on the road for a fit young mare like you. Just walk that way and you'll get there just after 8.”

“Well, thank you!” The Great and Powerful Trixie said with a conflicted smile. “I... uh... I should get going... you know, beat the traffic and all...”

“...” the old mare looked around. There was nopony in the area. “... sure.”

“Thanks again!” the unicorn called as she jumped on top of a familiar-looking cart. Her horn started glowing and soon the cart lurched into a fast roll towards the West.

“Young mares these days.” the old mare laughed. She turned around to take a seat again, but somehow her feet got stuck with a weird silvery line. She shouted in surprise as she stumbled and fell forward. Her eyes widened as she realized she was falling towards herself!

“Uh...” the old mare took a gasping breath and shook her head as she opened her eyes. “That was strange...” she looked around the empty town. Everypony else would already be inside. She could smell the food her daughter was making. “Hm...” she carefully lifted herself up, bones hurting. She felt unusually happy to be alive.

“Mom?” a voice called from within the house. “Dinner's ready!”

“I'm coming dear!” she called back.

o.O.o

Twilight. She could see it from the windows in the room in all its glory. The purple colors that allowed daylight to transcend into nighttime. Although she would never consider herself to be as beautiful or as awe-inspiring as her eponym, she could allow herself a little vanity and ego-stroking when she thought about just what her name meant in the grand scope of things.

She shook her head. She couldn't allow herself to be distracted. There was so much to do! And she had discovered so much already! She glanced at the neatly stacked set of papers. She had suspicions already as to what

had happened that night, but still... no who and why or even a how. Even if she could re-construct the whole situation, without those key elements her information would prove interesting... but not that useful.

“Gah. Writing a thesis was easier.” she grumbled. It also didn't help that the atmosphere in the room just got her down. “Well, I think I have done as much as I could here...” she sighed. She heard a thump out in the hall and frowned.

She made her way through the room careful not to disturb anything and looked outside. There was nopony there. As she was about to walk back inside, a creaking sound made her look towards the entrance.

When one of the guards walked in she sighed in relief... which turned to horror when the pony slumped forward and fell, unmoving, on the floor. He was kicked out of the way by a pony in a dark cloak, who dumped the other guard on top of him. From where she was she could not tell if the guards were alive or not, but what she could tell was that the cloaked figure had noticed her.

“How convenient.” the hooded pony said in a disturbingly familiar voice, walking slowly towards Twilight Sparkle after closing the door behind him. “And here I thought we might have to look for you somewhere else.”

His interest seemed piqued by the room she had just walked out of. “And what do we have here?”

“None of your business!” Twilight said, shaking her fear away. “Her horn glowed and a magical barrier appeared at the entrance of the room. The magical shield darkened until nopony could look inside and know what was there.

“That was not a smart move.” the pony said gravely. “I recognize that spell... and we both know that the only way to get that shield down is to have you remove it willingly... or by killing you.”

Twilight sparkle gulped. “T-that's not true, there are other ways.”

“True.” The pony said, stopping a few feet from her. “But I don't have the time to break through it when the easiest and most effective way is to kill you... and since I was going to do that anyway...”

Twilight took two steps back, noticing for the first time the horn poking at the top of the hood. “Y-you are a unicorn!”

“Why, yes. I am.” the unicorn chuckled. “You were always smart, Twilight.”

A chill running down her spine, Twilight took a couple of steps back again, the cloaked pony following her. “Who are you? You sound familiar but... nopony I know would willingly hurt others like you did!”

The pony seemed to falter for a second, but her hopes were dashed when he resumed walking. “I'm sorry, Twilight.”

Twilight Sparkle felt tears forming in her eyes. Why? Who was this pony, this unicorn who sounded familiar? Had some part of her recognized him? Is that why she was crying? Or was it because she was scared?

No... she knew this pony. That's why it hurt. She glanced at him, concentrated on his voice...

“This has to be done... if there was a different way...” he was saying in a disgustingly soothing tone.

Blinking away tears, she gritted her teeth and stopped where she was. The pony obligingly stopped in front of her.

When her horn started flaring with magic, her opponent also activated his, illuminating his face.

By then, she had realized who it was. By then, the sense of betrayal could reach no farther... there were no words to describe what she felt. No words to justify what was happening and who was doing it. There was only one thing she could say before she could unleash her magic to protect not only herself, but her mentor's secret.

“Daddy... *why?*”

Chapter 5

Spike sighed as he left the royal library. No sign of Twilight.

“This is what I am reduced to, an assistant without somepony to assist. What was she thinking going out without me? It's not like she has that many friends... well, unless we count imaginary friends that I dreamed up, that is.” he grumbled, earning a curious glance from a couple of students.

He shook his head. “Really. That mare. I don't know what she would do without me.” he looked down. “Or what I would do without her!” he shook his head. “Come on, Spike. Stop thinking like that. Twilight is not going anywhere, she just forgot to wake you up and got caught studying something. It has happened before.”

He grimaced. Despite everything he was saying he had a bad feeling. As if something was going to happen... and he wasn't going to like it.

“I wonder where she is?” he whispered as he looked out the window, observing the castle around him. It was then that one of the walls exploded and the complete side of the castle he was looking at fell upon itself, leaving several halls and rooms exposed. For a second he thought he saw a cloaked figure peering down at the collapsed wall, but it suddenly vanished.

Worried, and feeling like he had eaten a chunk of ice, he rushed down the stairs. That section of the castle was where Princess Celestia's chambers were.

o.O.o

Luna's mind was reeling. As she concentrated in bringing up the moon, she feared the worst. She had already dispatched a group of medical ponies to the Crypt, as Rainbow Dash had asked. That, the explosion in the castle and the disappearance of Captain Lance all pointed towards an organized

attack of some sort. But... why? And who was behind it? And why... why did this feel familiar? As if she had been through this before?

Was this all related to her discovery of the sealed room? Luna felt cold. If this was all her fault...

The moon rose in the horizon, a pale disk lacking its usual radiance, as it slowly started its trajectory, Luna's magic decorated the sky with most of the usual constellations... it was almost an afterthought... she did not want to be here doing this when her loved ones needed her.

"Are you ready to begin the Night Court, your highness?" the night steward, a friendly mare called Merry Ward asked, unaware of the events that had transpired that night.

Luna gritted her teeth. She had duties, true but... family came first. "I am sorry, Merry, but we have a family emergency right now... I cannot hold court tonight."

Her steward looked worried. "I see... I will make sure that all minor matters are attended to..."

Luna nodded. "Thank you, Merry. I need to go now..."

Merry stepped out of the way as Luna galloped out of the court room. She looked around and sighed. "Well, it's not like we have that many visitors anyway."

o.O.o

The guardian grinned as nighttime finally arrived. Now he could leave. Now he would be able to bring back the Nightmare. Shifting in place, it started to uncoil slowly but stopped when a faint, ghostly light hovered at the entrance to his temple.

Growling he slithered forward until he was glaring at the intruder... an image, sent by magic, of a pony under a cloak.

"Greetings, Guardian." the pony said, kneeling down.

The Guardian did not speak, but smiled, rows and rows of sharp, pointy fangs glistening under the moonlight.

“We are your servants, the Council of Nightmares.” the pony said. “We are the descendants of those that first served you. We have grown powerful in the shadows, hidden, awaiting your return. We have succeeded on weakening the two Princesses... by the time you arrive, their willpower will be gone and they will be ready to accept the Nightmare once again.”

The Guardian laughed, pleased. “Both of them?” he asked.

When the pony nodded, he could feel a shiver of anticipation run down from the base of his neck to the tip of his tail.

“I will be there sssshortly.” the Guardian said.

“We await your glorious return.” the pony said, still kneeling submissively. The vision started dissipating soon after, but the Guardian had already left.

o.O.o

The female pony stood up, a bit shaken. Facing the Guardian was a challenging experience. To think she was the first to do so in a thousand years! Turning around, she faced the other three members of the Council of Nightmares that were in the room with her.

“We shall separate now. The others are doing their jobs and so should we. We will not reconvene until the Guardian arrives to lessen the risk of being recognized. We all know what we have to do. If we do our jobs right and get both princesses...” she shuddered with pleasure.

The three nodded and slowly walked out of the room, leaving her alone. She looked up at the moon. Soon... very soon.

o.O.o A little bit earlier o.O.o

“Daddy... why?”

The male unicorn grimaced. "I'm sorry Twilight, I wish there was another way." His horn's magic suddenly flashed and flames enveloped his daughter.

Or would have, if Twilight had been there. Blinking into existence just behind him, her horn arched down, sending a blade made of purple energy towards him. He managed to roll out of the way.

"You raised me!" she shouted accusingly. "You said you loved me! I love you! Why?!"

Her father slowly moved to the side and she followed him, mimicking his movements. "I did! And I do!" he growled. "But this is bigger than you! Bigger than me! If that... if Celestia hadn't taken you under her wing things would be different!"

Twilight fought the tears in her eyes. She couldn't get distracted. "How would it be different?"

Her father growled. "When you started studying magic... I saw it as a chance... I knew you were smart, brilliant even, although I never knew the sheer power you possessed. I took the chance... I enrolled you in the Canterlot School of Magic... I knew you would meet Celestia, but... I always hoped it would be casual... I was going to get you to help me!"

"Against Celestia?!" Twilight asked, incredulity shining in her eyes. "Why would I do that?!"

"Shut up!" her father shouted. His horn flaring was the only warning she had before she had to run out of the way as one of the columns collapsed where she had been. Why was nopony coming to help?

"It's all her fault!" He shouted. "You would have been a part of the Council of Nightmares by now! But you had to fall in love with her! Not only did you betray me! You betrayed your lineage!"

"My lineage?!" she exclaimed. "Celestia is the kindest and most loving pony I have ever known! And yes, I love my teacher like a second mother. What did you expect? The moment I became her protege you two cut all contact with me!"

Her father seemed to deflate. "I... I'm sorry, Twilight." he said. With his mouth he pulled on a chain until a medallion came out from under the cloak. It was made of silver or platinum, and it had several marks and diagrams etched into it. "This is your heritage. If it were not for Celestia, when you graduated you would have been inducted into the Council of Nightmares."

"Is that where you learned all this battle magic?" Twilight asked, trying to stall for time. Surely somepony would come investigate. "You think it will be enough to defeat me?"

Her father dropped the chain and let the medallion hang around his neck. "That... and you're still young. Powerful, but young."

"What does being young have to do with anything?" Twilight asked, trying to take a step back, but realizing to her horror that her feet would not move.

"Experience is a powerful tool, Twilight." Her father said. "You have enough sheer power to defeat me, true, but you don't know how to use it." a tear fell to the floor. "I'm sorry it has come to this."

She didn't have a chance to dodge the next spell.

The shield protecting the hidden room sputtered and died, but the unicorn did not move. He stared, silent, at Twilight's body. Finally, after a few seconds he dropped the medallion next to her, and nuzzled her neck... he shook his head and looked at her, accusingly. "The day you were born... it was the happiest day of our lives!" he gritted his teeth as Twilight did not answer. "I'm so sorry." he sighed. "Maybe, once the Nightmare has returned..."glanced at the room. "But for that, I need to find out what you were hiding."

He turned around, but a slight sound made him look back, eyes going wide and a barrier spell just beginning to spark into life when everything around him was enveloped in flames.

"I won't let you!" Twilight shouted from her prostrate position, magic snaking out of her as the area shook. He dug his hoofs into the floor, trying to keep the shield up as the flames reached Twilight... how could she still be alive?!

How could she have enough energy to continue when her own spell was eating at her? And then world exploded.

o.o.o

When Celestia, Rainbow Dash and the guards arrived, their eyes immediately fell on the cloaked pony that was staring down at where the wall and several stories of the castle had collapsed.

“STOP THAT PONY!” Celestia shouted, her horn flaring with magic.

Rainbow Dash was already on her way hoofs ready to make her opponent pay. However, her opponent was crafty. The moment that her hoofs would have connected, the pony disappeared.

“Twilight!” Celestia shouted, running into the room. She found it empty, just like she had left it, save for the neat stack of notes her student had left behind.

Celestia stood in the middle of the room, dumbfounded. She started stepping back, away from the notes. “No... no, no, no...”

“Princess?” Rainbow Dash called from outside the room. Her voice was full of fear. Celestia turned around, eyes wide.

“Did you see Twilight?”

Rainbow Dash shook her head and stepped to the side, picking up something. Carefully she laid the cracked unicorn horn on the floor, singed and burnt.

Celestia did not move.

Rainbow Dash gulped, fighting tears in her eyes. “This... this isn't her horn is it?”

Celestia did not answer.

“This isn't... it isn't...” Dash's tone turned accusing. “It's not! It can't be! Twilight wouldn't lose to some random unicorn! She's the Element of

Magic! She has almost as much magic as an alicorn, right?! You must know! You're a goddess! You knew her all her life!"

"Rainbow Dash." Luna's voice broke through her cries.

"W-what?!"

"Please... leave us for a few minutes... wait by the door to the hall... don't allow anypony in." Luna said calmly.

"B-but..." Dash's hoof almost touched the horn. Almost.

"I know." Luna said. "I will cast a spell to find out if it's her horn but... I need to talk to my sister... please."

Dash took a step back. Then two. "O-okay... I'll be... I'll wait outside..."

"Guards, you should leave us two. We'll be fine."

When the last of the guards had left, Luna turned to her sister, who was staring at the horn, a lost and pained look in her eyes.

Luna didn't dare touch the horn. But as magic enveloped it and it glowed as it spiraled up, Celestia's eyes followed it.

"Sister..." Celestia's voice was nothing but a whisper. "Tell me it isn't so..."

Luna closed her eyes. "I'm sorry, sister... I can only feel Twilight's magic alone in this horn."

Celestia felt as if someone had stabbed her on the shoulder and then proceeded to drag the dagger down her chest all the way down to her belly.

"Leave me."

"Sister..." Luna did not like the tone of voice... the desperation she heard under it.

"I. Said. LEAVE ME!" Celestia shouted. An aura of magic flashed around her creating a miniature storm inside the small room.

Seeing Twilight's notes about to fly off, Luna's magic caught them and with a last, fearful look in her sister's direction, she teleported out of the room as the doors slammed shut.

Alone in the room, Celestia picked up the broken horn with her magic, as well as the two dolls. Her aura flared and the room was enveloped in a rosy energy. Through a crack in the door a small fly made its way in, only to be instantly vaporized by Celestia's magic.

The princess lay down on the floor and cried.

o.O.o

Luna appeared just outside the hall, the guards and Rainbow Dash all turned to face her.

"Guards, nopony, absolutely nopony is allowed in there under ANY circumstances. Triple the guard here."

"Princess..." Rainbow Dash hesitantly walked towards her. "was that..."

Luna gritted her teeth, closing her eyes. She couldn't look at Rainbow Dash's face. "The magic on the horn... it belonged to Twilight Sparkle." she forced herself to look up to the horrified face of the pegasus. "I'm sorry... she's..."

"Don't say it!" Rainbow Dash shouted stepping back.

"She's gone, Rainbow Dash."

"No! Don't say that! Twilight Sparkle can't be dead!" Dash shouted.

A gasp made them look to the small purple dragon that had just walked into the hall. "It's not true." he said running to hold Luna's hoofs. "It's not true, right? Y-you're joking."

Luna couldn't even say anything to the baby dragon. She just shook her head and looked away. Without letting go of her, Spike turned to look over his shoulder towards Rainbow Dash. "Dash... it's not true, right? This is a

dream, right? I'm dreaming... just like... like I dreamed about you and... and Rarity and... she's not gone..."

Unable to hear any more, the pegasus took off and blasted out of a window, uncaring of the pieces of glass that cut her skin, flying as fast as she could into the night.

o.O.o

"Will he be okay?" Applejack asked the para pony that had finished up bandaging Captain Lance.

"He will live... for now." the pony said with a sigh. "His wounds were... extensive. It's a miracle he's still alive, much less able to talk to all of you before we arrived."

"I'm worried about Twilight." Fluttershy said.

"I know dear." Rarity said, nodding worriedly. "If what the Captain said is true, she could be in real danger."

"Well, Rainbow Dash is the fastest flier around." Applejack said. "And she went straight to the princesses. I'm sure they'll make sure our Twilight is fine."

Fluttershy looked down at the unconscious unicorn and shivered.

"Whoever did this was certainly trying to kill him." one of the medical ponies said. "As it is we'll have a hard time keeping him alive."

"We know you'll do your best." Rarity said.

"We should probably head back..." Applejack sighed, looking at the guards, who nodded in unison. "Come on, everypony, let's find Twilight."

o.O.o

Big Macintosh silently considered the stage wagon that had just rolled up to him. Clearly, no pony was pulling it. In fact, had he not seen the stage

wagon turn around and move towards him, he would have thought its owner had left it behind.

He recognized the name, obviously. Applejack had had a lot of words to say about Trixie, none of them kind. He had wondered, silently, if she had been *that* bad. She hadn't seemed half bad at all to him.

Now, facing fiery words floating in front of him, he was questioning whether to answer truthfully. Nothing good could come out of dealing with the dead. Or so one of their distant aunts was quoted to have said just before she kicked the bucket.

HOW CLOSE AM I TO PONYVILLE? The words asked.

“That you, Trixie?”

**YES. HOW DID YOU KNOW? CAN YOU SEE ME? HAVE WE MET?
YOU’RE CUTE I THINK I WOULD REMEMBER YOU**

He coughed. “Your name is on the side of the stage wagon. And I remember you from your visit.”

OH

“Can I ask what your business is in Ponyville?” the draft pony asked.

**THE GREAT AND POWERFUL TRIXIE DOES NOT ANSWER TO
ANYPONY**

“That's fair, I reckon. But then you cannot expect somepony to answer either.”

The stage wagon was silent for a few seconds.

I NEED TO SPEAK WITH TWILIGHT SPARKLE

“Ah.” Big Mac considered again what to do. On the one hoof, he hadn't heard anypony say anything good about Trixie since the incident with the Ursa Minor. On the other hoof, he really didn't like leaving a pony in need

without help. And since ghosts were out of his expertise... "I hate to break it to you, Trixie, but Twilight and the others are not around."

WHAT?

"Eeyup. They left for Canterlot this morning. The princesses needed her."

WHY WOULD THEY CALL FOR HER?

Big Mac blinked. "Twilight Sparkle is Celestia's personal apprentice?"

... I WAS UNAWARE OF THAT FACT.

He hadn't expected the ellipses.

I SHALL GO TO CANTERLOT THEN, CAN YOU POINT ME IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION, HANDSOME?

The red-furred stallion felt himself blush. From what he remembered of the one show he had seen, Trixie was not bad looking at all.

"I-it's that way." He stammered through his blush.

THANK YOU

He felt something cold brush against his muzzle and blushed even harder as the stage wagon turned around and left for Canterlot.

Big Mac looked at the receding stage wagon and sighed as he started galloping after it. He just couldn't leave a ghost filly by herself against the unknown.

o.o.o

Rainbow Dash didn't care where she was flying. Luna's words kept echoing in her head. She tried gaining more speed, but she felt really tired. Gritting her teeth she looked up.

"Holy-" she shouted as another pegasus suddenly appeared in front of her.

The pegasus whirled to face her, surprise in her eyes. Both immediately broke off their trajectory, barely missing each other.

“Hey! Watch where you're going! That was dangerous!” The other pegasus shouted.

“Sorry! I... Spitfire?!”

The feiry maned pegasus floated closer to her. “Rainbow Dash? I haven't seen you since the Gala!” The Wonderbolt suddenly noticed how haggard the other pegasus looked. “Are you... okay?”

Being in front of one of her heroes Rainbow Dash did the only thing she could think of. She hugged the surprised pony hard and cried on her shoulder.

Spitfire looked terrified for a second, but then returned the hug, letting the blue pegasus cry.

After a few minutes, Rainbow Dash stopped crying.

“Do you feel better now?” Spitfire asked, kindly, while still holding her. She felt Rainbow Dash nod. “Good, now, where are you staying? Are you by yourself?”

Rainbow Dash pulled back from the embrace. “No... I'm staying in Canterlot Castle... my friends are there... Oh... Celestia...”

“What?”

“Spitfire... I need to talk to them... they'll find out and...”

“Say no more.” Spitfire said. “I don't know what happened, but I'm not letting a friend alone when she needs me.”

“F-friend?” Rainbow Dash asked.

“Sure! We didn't hang out much at the Gala, but I liked you! Now, let's go meet your friends. If whatever happened to you is going to affect them that badly as well, they'll you there.”

Rainbow Dash nodded. "Yeah." she sighed. "Let's go."

Together, the two pegasi flew back to the castle. One of them wondering how she was going to break the news to her friends.

Chapter 6

It was a quiet and subdued group of ponies that sat around a circular table in one of Canterlot's many rooms.

Spitfire placed a comforting hoof on Rainbow Dash's shoulder as Luna softly informed all of them that, in the process of investigating a secret and delicate matter for Princess Celestia, Twilight Sparkle had been attacked by an unknown pony and had died at his or her hoofs in the explosion that had wrecked the walls of the castle.

Pinkie Pie's hair had deflated and her usually bright pink coat had somehow dulled as she looked miserably at the table.

Applejack had closed her eyes tightly and was shaking, her hoofs around her, fighting tears and the bitter words of anger and resentment that she did not want to shout.

Rarity had bowed down her head and tears were dropping unheeded onto the table. She made no attempt to compose herself.

Fluttershy was sniffing, resting her face on her hoofs as her body shook, unlike Applejack, though, it shook out of the strength of her sobs rather than anger. Her hair covered her face from everypony, but it did nothing to hide how devastated she felt.

Rainbow Dash... felt drained. Tired. She had already exploded in anger and had flown out as fast as she could, burning out most of her energy. Had Spitfire not stumbled into her flightpath after practice, she would be all the way to Fillydelphia by now.

The Wonderbolt kept her thoughts to herself, but it was clear from the pitying looks she was giving the others that she had been affected by the story too.

Luna sighed as she finished talking. She knew Dash felt guilty for missing her chance to capture the elusive cloaked pony, but she also felt guilty

herself... she had been the one to suggest bringing Twilight Sparkle to the castle to help. She had been the one to find the damned room in the first place! If only she had been less curious!

“What are we going to do about this then?” Applejack asked after a few minutes of silence.

Luna blinked. “What do you mean?”

“I mean what I just said!” the orange earth pony growled, smashing her hoof on the table. “I’m not just going to walk away and let whoever did that to Twilight go free! And Princess Celestia needs us too!”

“We... we can’t just *sit* here.” Fluttershy said, her timid voice gaining strength. “Twilight Sparkle wouldn’t want that.”

“We need to find out what is happening to Princess Celestia.” Rarity added. “And if we help solve that, we can find out who k- who did that to Twilight.”

Rainbow Dash slowly looked up. “We’ll find the pony who did this... and kill-”

“No, sugarcube.” Applejack interrupted. “As much as I want to do exactly that... it is not the way that any of us should or would act. I’m sure that Twilight wouldn’t want that either.”

Dash fumed and looked away. “We’ll see.”

Luna had closed her eyes and nodded. Extending her senses, she could still feel her sister’s field coating the filly room. “My sister... is still indisposed.” she said worriedly. “I... I’ve never seen her like this.”

“Now wait an apple buckin’ minute.” Applejack said, shooting a glare at Luna. “You never told us what the problem was.”

Luna hesitated. These were Twilight Sparkle’s closest friends, they were the Elements of Harmony, she owed them her life and her freedom. Although she didn’t want anypony else to know about what was really happening... if she could trust anypony... it was them.

She looked at Spitfire for a second, but Rainbow Dash caught her look. “I trust her. If Spitfire wants to help us... she can.” the pegasus said, looking over her shoulder at the Wonderbolt, who gave her a shaky smile and a nod, no doubt wondering what she was getting into.

Luna sighed. Celestia had always had good things to say about the Wonderbolts... still this was getting out of hoof. “Fine. But what I am about to say does not leave this room. No pony else will know of this, as much as I owe you five my life and my freedom, my sister's happiness is my priority. Our enemy is crafty, if they were able to defeat Twilight Sparkle... a feat that I assure you is not easy...”

The six ponies in the room nodded, and with a long sigh, Luna started her story.

o.O.o

Trixie looked askance at the pony trotting next to her. **YOU REALLY DON'T NEED TO TAG ALONG, BIG MACINTOSH** she wrote, her magic forming words with flaming powder.

The red-furred stallion nodded.

THE GREAT AND POWERFUL TRIXIE DOESN'T NEED HELP FROM ANYPONY

A shrug. “Well, I reckon that ponies shouldn't travel alone if they have someone willing to go with them.”

Trixie smiled a bit. He had tactfully not pointed out that they were on their way for her to actually ask for help in the first place. She grimaced. Canterlot was just an hour away... and then her journey would be over. She would be able to start her quest for revenge.

She sighed, looking at Big Mac silently trudging on besides her for no reason other than to help her. When she had been on her one-mare mission to reach Twilight Sparkle, she had been able to ignore feelings and thoughts that she had been trying to put down for a while now. But the slow and steady rhythm of Big Macintosh's walk gave her plenty of time to think.

She had never had true friends. Sure, at Canterlot University she had peers... Twilight Sparkle being one of them, in fact. Although she hadn't known about the purple unicorn's relationship with Celestia, she had always admired her dedication to magic... if nothing else. She had also fancied herself a lot more powerful than Twilight Sparkle, but... well, life had a way of shoving empty boasts down pony throats.

Ever since Twilight had shown her up that fateful night, Trixie had had a hard time getting back up to speed. Her confidence was shaken. Although she had known that her boasts were nothing more than bragging, she had never expected to find anypony who would be able to achieve what she could only *imagine* of doing. It had been humbling, but more importantly... she had lost her mojo that night.

She sighed and looked at her traveling companion. He *was* cute. That's for sure. Maybe, maybe if she hadn't been so blinded by her own light show she might have seen him in the crowd... maybe....

YOU'RE A GOOD PONY, BIG MACINTOSH She wrote morosely. **THANK YOU FOR HELPING A USELESS GHOST LIKE ME**

"Hey now." Big Mac said, shaking his head. "Don't go saying that, Trixie. You are not useless. I don't think there are that many ponies out there that could manage half of what you have done just *today*."

YOU'RE TOO KIND

The carried on in silence for a while, until Trixie felt something.

BIG MAC DON'T ASK WHY JUST JUMP INTO THE WAGON!

The flames were dying just as the wagon's doors closed behind him. Quietly he looked out through a crack. A slithering shadow flashed past them, then stopped, doubling back to hover around the wagon for a moment. He gulped when he heard a hissing sound. Then... it was gone. He could see the stars again through the crack. After a few moments, the doors opened and he stepped out.

"What was that?" he asked, looking at the seat on the wagon, unknowingly looking straight at Trixie.

THE GUARDIAN Anger seeped back into her. **HE ATE ME! AND HE RIPPED MY FACE OFF!**

Big Mac blinked and started to look green.

COME ON, HANDSOME! WE HAVE TO CATCH THAT OVERGROWN SNAKE!

o.O.o

Spike stared at the empty room. A cold breeze made him shudder as he looked around. Had he paid attention earlier he would have noticed the saddle bags and the latest friendship report which Twilight was going to give to Princess Celestia in person.

If he had paid attention earlier he might have been able to be with Twilight and... and...

“Damn it!” he hollered punching the side of the door with his fist. It stung, but he felt good about that. He wanted it to hurt.

He looked up and turned around. There was nopony there.

Was that an echo?

He waited, but he didn't hear anything else.

“Must be my imagination...” he muttered, turning to leave. “I don't have time for this! I'm going to find who killed Twilight and I am going to rip their throats out!” his nostrils let out a whiff of smoke.

o.O.o

Celestia lay alone in the center of the room. Before her were the remains of Twilight Sparkle's horn and the dolls belonging to her daughter.

“In the search for my first child... I got my second daughter killed.” she said, looking tenderly at the horn. “I never told you, Twilight, how much you

meant to me... how much of myself, and especially Luna I saw in you. You were such a beautiful filly, in mind and body... so innocent and brave!"

She sighed. "And now you are gone... and I have to accept that... I will find the ponies behind this... and they will pay. But that will not bring you back. At least I know death is kind... even if he is a bit odd." she chuckled. "But how can I go on right now, my faithful student, when you will not be at my side again? When your reports will not come to me and break the monotony of the court? When the actual joy of you being alive and part of my life... is gone?"

Celestia lowered her head to her hoofs. "And yet, I must. For if not I, who? I only have this night to mourn you, and then, when the time for the sun to rise comes, I will have no choice but to return to my duty and raise it from its slumber. I cannot show this to anyone; I cannot be open, or honest or fragile... even dear Luna needs to see me to be strong for her... I fear I have become spoiled my student... for within the last two decades not only did I get my dear sister back... I had you."

"And you can have her again..." a voice whispered almost in her ear, making it twitch.

"Who are you?!" Celestia asked, she stood and glared around.

"Don't you mean... how?" the voice whispered back.

Celestia clenched her mouth shut as she looked carefully around again. There was no way anypony could have crossed her field... so who...

"Not 'who'" the voice whispered again. *"How. How can I get her back? How can I get my daughter back too?"*

"Show yourself." Celestia growled.

"Turn around... yes... you can see me there, at the edge of your field." the voice directed as she looked at one of the walls. There seemed to be somepony there... she approached carefully until she stood, staring.

"That's not you."

"Yes... *it is.*" the voice said again. And she saw the pony in front of her mouth the words, just as she had mouthed the words she had said earlier.

"You are not me." Celestia insisted, staring hard at the mirror.

"You are drifting from what really matters but if you must know..." Mirror-Celestia replied. *"I am your inner voice, I am the power within yourself able to bring Twilight Sparkle back to life."*

"That can't be done." Celestia replied angrily. "If you were me you would know!"

"I am... and that's how I know it to be possible."

The Princess shook her head... the voice was seductive... if there was a chance...

"There is!" The voice insisted, her thoughts betraying her. *"You know it... as well as you know how much you love that filly... it is not right for her life to be cut so short... not when trying to help you! Had it been under other circumstances... perhaps... but we know, don't we... that it was unfair... that it was uncalled for."* the broken horn, not even half the size of Celestia's own floated in front of the mirror now, spinning lazily.

"Y-yes..." Celestia admitted. "She was so young..." she felt tears and was about to fight them but...

"There is no need to hide your tears from yourself." her mirror image said, Celestia's voice heavy with kindness. *"Who is there to impress? Who is there to see you be a tiny bit sad... fragile? You are alone... not even our dear daughter is here to see help us... our sister has to hold the fort for now until we bring Twilight Sparkle back... she is strong, she can handle it..."*

"But..."

"Twilight Sparkle needs us... she needs us to do what needs to be done... she needs us to use our magic and power to bring her back... for her... we should do it for her..."

"But how?" Celestia finally asked. "How can I bring her back?"

"Find me."

"What?"

"I am within you... I am... a spark... within you... you have never needed me before, because you have not loved so much before."

"Within me?" Celestia closed her eyes and turned her attention into herself. She searched deep. Going deeper than she had ever gone before. Everything was light, like being under direct sunlight. "I can't find you!"

"I am here! You know me! Look beyond!"

Celestia looked. And she looked. And she searched... until she got to the edge of the light, where the shadows of her absolute subconscious were. She stopped. She should be careful, it was easy to forget she was not-

"Princess!" a voice she easily recognized called from within.

"Twilight?!"

"Princess! I'm scared! I can't see anything! There's... something pulling me away!"

"Don't worry, Twilight! I'll..."

"Princess..." Twilight's voice seemed to fade into the distance.

"TWILIGHT!" Celestia shouted, plunging into the darkness. "Where are you?!"

"She's almost gone!" her mirror-voice shouted. *"Release your inner power!"*

And Celestia felt it... a shell of some sort, floating in the darkness. Her horn started to glow as she charged towards it. "Twilight! I'm coming!"

Her horn struck the shell.

o.o.o

“These are Twilight Sparkle's notes on what happened in that room roughly twenty years ago.” Luna said, spreading the pages on the table with her magic.

Her tale had deeply affected the others, but to their credit, they had soldiered on despite everything. It gave her some hope that things might still turn out... okay.

The other ponies leaned in to look.

“Oh...” Fluttershy said.

“Does this come with illustrations?” Rainbow Dash asked.

“My... Twilight was really thorough...” Rarity said. “I barely understand a fifth of what this says.”

Applejack stared at the pages. “I know the words mean something... but I have no idea what '...temporal dilatation of eldritch energies' means and what it has to do with... 'PK variations'?”

“Silly, it's just a theory developed to calculate the dispersion of magical energies through time in direct relation to their original intent and purpose. Easy-peachy!”

Luna spoke into the silence, looking curiously at the gathered ponies as they stared at Pinkie Pie. What was their deal? “Ahem.” she coughed into her hoof, drawing their attention. “Pinkie Pie is right. But there's not much to learn from this first page. It just describes the methodology of her approach.”

“She wrote fifteen pages based on that?” Applejack chuckled sadly. “That's our Twilight.”

“Hm... but it just jumps here... that's weird...” Luna said, then turned the page around. “Oh, silly me. She wrote on *both* sides.”

Fluttershy sniffed miserably. That was their Twilight indeed.

They waited in tense silence as Luna read through the papers, but as soon as she finished, they could tell it was not what she had hoped for.

“What is it?” Rainbow Dash asked.

Luna sighed. “Well, it has a lot of information, but the bottom line is that Twilight found out that on that night there were 5 spells cast... the shield, illusion and disorientation spells were cast to hide the room, all three were completely broken by me and Celestia earlier today. Then... there was the memory spell... Twilight's notes indicate that it was massive... it affected several ponies, not just my sister... she found energy traces for a fifth spell though, although she could not identify it...”

“Aaand that leaves us exactly where we were before.” Applejack sighed. “No offense, but Celestia's filly could be anypony! In this room, other than you Princess, there are six ponies that fall into the age category *alone*... and I know more than thirty others that live in or around Ponyville.”

“Could Princess Celestia's daughter be a unicorn?” Spitfire asked.

“No.” Luna shook her head. “The magic in the pony would be too much for a unicorn... the filly would obviously be an alicorn.”

“Unless that unknown spell turned her into another type of pony?” Rarity ventured. “Perhaps a Unicorn to explain the magic?”

“Or a pegasus to keep the wings?” Fluttershy asked.

“Or even an earth pony to throw whoever force her into giving the filly away off her track?” Applejack added.

Luna looked troubled. “Well... I... there are some spells like that, to be sure, but...”

“Look everypony, this is getting us no-where.” Dash snapped. “Sure, it's interesting that there were five spells, and sure we have to find Princess Celestia's filly... but, that can wait. Somepony is taking advantage of this for some reason and not only almost killed Captain Lance, but really killed Twilight! To find the filly we need to stop them first!”

Luna sighed. "This is true. As much as I want to find the filly... sorting this out takes precedence." she groaned. "I haven't been so frustrated in a thousand years!"

She stopped.

The gathered ponies saw her face go into shocked realization and then horror. "In a thousand years..." she murmured and turned to look at the others, the fear in her eyes making them very nervous.

"Lu-luna..." Applejack stammered, her nervousness making her completely skip the usual honorific. "But... a thousand years ago you..."

"Oh... my." Rarity whispered in horror. "You don't mean..."

Luna nodded. "A thousand years ago... through several incidents that chipped away at my willpower and fed my fears... I released Nightmare Moon into this world."

"But... that was a thousand years ago!" Dash complained. "I can see you're stressed but no-where as much as..." her eyes went almost comically wide as the whole castle started to shake.

"Celestia." Spitfire whispered, her voice echoing in the now quiet room.

Chapter 7

Luna and the others arrived to the entrance to the hall where Celestia had been mourning the loss of her daughter and her student. The four guards left to guard the entrance, a pair of pegasi and a pair of earth ponies had not even known what hit them.

One moment they were turning to face them, the next they were nothing but scorched skeletons crumbling onto the burning hall. Had Luna not sensed the magic buildup, her shield would have not come up in time to protect the remaining Elements of Harmony and the Wonderbolt from sharing the guards' fate.

From the smoldering hall two figures trotted out calmly, drawing gasps from the group. Celestia herself was imposing. Her coat wasn't a simple white... it seemed to be made out of white flames... depending on her movements traces of yellow or orange seemed to flash around her, making it look like the flames were constantly licking her body. Her wings shone with searing light, her mane was the blue-white of a new star, her horn was wickedly sharp... but even then, although she looked mightier and harsher than before, it was her companion that drew the attention of the ponies accompanying Luna.

"T-twilight?" Applejack asked, eyes wide.

Their friend stood next to the Princess... changed. Her light purple coat was now darker by a few shades, her purple mane had darkened to almost black, and the lighter light on it had been replaced by a deep red. Her horn extended from a scar on her forehead, twice as long as before, and sharper. Her hoofs were pitch black, her cutie mark remained almost the same... except that it looked... malevolent. The normally straight edges of

her mark had been replaced by wavy curves that reminded the ponies of blades, her irises were a swirl of red and lavender.

She smiled, tiny fangs making her look even more feral. "That's me alright, Applejack."

"B-but it can't be you..." Rainbow Dash stammered. "You died!"

"I got better." Twilight answered, trotting up to the pegasus and whispering in her ear. "Much, better."

The pegasus shivered as her ear twitched from the feel of her friend's breath on it, as much as the feeling of Twilight's coat against hers.

"Twilight Spark." Celestia said to her, looking down just slightly. **"Don't you have something to tell your friends?"**

"Spark?" Rarity asked. "But..."

"Sparkle was okay," Twilight interrupted. "for a filly... but I am a full grown mare now, as you can see. A better name seemed... appropriate."

Applejack shook her head slowly, tears welling up in her eyes as she stepped up and hugged her friend. "Sugarcube, you can call yourself Twilight Pastel for all I care... It's good to have you back."

She felt Twilight hug her back and she closed her eyes. Her friend was back. Changed, true, but back. It was then that she felt Twilight's tongue on her neck.

Her eyes snapped open and she pulled away, staring in shock at her friend. "Twilight!"

"What?" the librarian asked. "You know you've always wanted that, Applejack... I'm not afraid to go all the way now."

“Twilight.” Celestia's voice was laden with power.

“Yes, Mistress.” Twilight said, her smile disappearing as she faced her friends. Her eyes sparkled with mischief when Applejack wouldn't meet her gaze. “I welcome you all to the new rule of Queen Nightmare Flare. As loyal subjects that you are, you are all welcome to take your rightful places at our side...”

“Nightmare Flare?!” Luna growled. “What type of magic did you delve into sister?” her eyes, which had never drifted from the Princess-now-Queen, settled on Twilight. “Was your student really worth destroying all you have built?”

A blast of energy slammed Luna against the far wall. Nightmare Flare calmly walked up to her. **“Do you even have to ask?”** her voice was cold. **“I lost a filly once, I'm not losing another one!”**

“How many times, sister?” Luna asked, her voice barely a ragged whisper despite her shock at how much her sister had loved Twilight Sparkle. “How many times did we remind each other that death had to remain an absolute, despite our love for our friends and subjects? How many times during centuries... millennia even, did we swallow our tears and thought of those alive first, before our selfishness could corrupt us?”

Nightmare Flare sniffed in contempt. **“You are one to talk, sister. But, I am not corrupt. If I were, would I be offering you your rightful title as Queen of the Night?”**

Luna was taken aback. “What?”

“I don't care for more power, I have all I need, but I do care about balance. Join me. Rule the Night Eternal as I rule the Endless Day. They can exist at the same time. We can be the Goddesses that we

truly are and rule and care for our subjects *personally* without worrying about mindless celestial bodies."

"I..." Luna shook her head. "That is the purpose of our existence! To bring balance to each other, to limit our power to the benefit of those that..."

"Please." Nightmare Flare growled. **"I fed you that crap long enough."** her eyes narrowed. **"I see that I was mistaken... it is not you that I need. I need my real sister. The real Queen of the Night."** she took a menacing step towards Luna, who struggled to get up.

"Y-you don't mean..." the black alicorn gasped.

"Yes." Nightmare Flare grinned. Her horn alight once more. **"I need you, my sister... to be my equal! I need Nightmare Moon!"**

Nightmare Flare's eyes shone with an inner light as her horn's glow increased. Luna gasped as she felt familiar trails of energy course through her body.

"B-but... that's impossible! The Elements of Harmony..."

"Did nothing more than contain your true nature, as I foolishly expected them to, sister." the former Celestia answered. **"I see now the error of my ways, and that you were the wiser of the both of us."**

"No!" Luna struggled, vaguely aware of the remaining Elements raising their voices and attempting to get past Twilight. "You did the right thing! You've been blinded by grief, sister! Don't do this!"

She gasped as the energy tried to force its way through her towards her center. She closed her eyes and braced herself, her soul fighting the enchantment every inch as it made its way inevitably to that... core that she knew shouldn't be there anymore. She couldn't pay attention to the physical world as this battle continued. Her world became bathed in soft moonlight.

An alicorn made of flames was diving down towards the edge of her subconscious and she charged it, batting it away. The flame-mare turned around, charging towards her, horn trailing energy behind it.

They clashed, sending waves of energy flashing around them. Luna struggled with all her considerable might, but her sister's avatar slowly pushed her back into the dark subconscious... and once there... she shuddered.

Inch by inch she was pushed back. For every flare of energy she mustered, her sister would imbue more power into her attack... and Luna was considerably out of shape for a battle like this. She had not recuperated completely from the Elements freeing her of Nightmare Moon.

She had already crossed the threshold into the subconscious, pushed back farther still as the avatar pressed her back and further back in. She could feel the area where the dark 'core' had been so long ago, and to her horror found that it was not completely gone... diminished, yes, but not gone.

"Don't give up!" a blue orb of light shouted with Rainbow Dash's voice. *"You can win, Luna!"* the blue orb settled over her right wing.

"That's right! Don't let the flaming-baddie-Mcmeanniepants win!" Pinkie-Orb said, showering her in pink light.

"Aren't you alicorns supposed to represent all of us? Then you're part Earth Pony too! No self-respecting Earth Pony will be pushed back by a unicorn!" An orange light, strong and vibrant said to her right, with a whispered *"No offense, Rarity."* follow-up.

"None taken dear." A white light orb said to her left. *"We unicorns do have more stylish ways of dealing with ruffians."* the white orb hovered around the avatar for a second before returning to Luna's side. *"But she does have*

a point, Luna. You do represent us all! Even more so than your sister at this point!"

"Um..." a yellow orb of light, at times as big as the others, at times smaller floated up to her left wing. "We are all here for you... if... if you want, that is, Luna."

"W-what happened to 'Princess'?" Luna half joked, almost buckling under the pressure.

"What?!" Rainbow-orb bopped up and down. "After all we went through when we met we should have been speaking on first-name-basis since Everfree Forest!"

"Although it wouldn't have been proper to do so in front of others..." Rarity-orb said.

"So what?" Applejack-orb asked. "If we're her friends we can talk to her however we want!"

"You... think of me as a friend?" Luna asked, touched and honestly flattered.

"Of course we do, sugarcube." Applejack-orb said. "Why do you think we're here right now?"

"But weren't you outside?"

"Um... I guess you could say our thoughts have always been with you? ... maybe? I-if you like, that is... never mind..."

"I'm more confused as to why we can talk this much in the middle of the fight!" Rarity-orb said. "It's not normal!"

“Yes... that is strange.” Luna agreed. Despite the fact that she was still struggling to hold her sister's avatar back, there had been no sudden influx of power to push her back, in fact the avatar seemed to be staring at something.

“That's because talking is a free action!” Pinkie-Orb giggled.

Luna blinked, and for a moment the orbs around her seemed to do the same. “No... it's something else...”

“It's me.” another voice said. Luna's eyes widened comically at the purple orb of light that floated between her and the avatar.

“Twilight Sparkle?!”

o.o.o

The five ponies from Ponyville looked in horror as the twisted Princess Celestia battled Princess Luna. Both alicorns were covered in auras of energy that pressed against each other. Nightmare Flare had a fierce smile as her eyes blazed with energy, her form towering over the cringing Luna, who had closed her eyes and was frowning in deep concentration.

“This is not good.” Applejack muttered.

“We have to stop them!” Rarity said.

“But how?!” Spitfire asked.

“We've done it before!” Rainbow Dash said, turning her eyes towards Twilight and drawing a startled gasp from Spitfire. “We stopped Nightmare Moon once, we can do it again!”

“You stopped Nightmare Moon?!” the Wonderbolt looked incredulously at the other ponies in the room.

“It was supposed to be a secret!” Applejack growled. “But we don't have much of a choice now.” she looked back towards the others. Rarity and Pinkie Pie nodded resolutely. Fluttershy also nodded, although a bit hesitantly. Applejack's eyes slowly turned towards the last Element. “Will you help us, Twilight?”

The unicorn looked thoughtfully from one pony to the next. “No.”

“What?!” Rainbow Dash shouted, flying to stand nose to nose with Twilight Spark. “What do you mean 'no'? You know perfectly well that-”

“That I would still be dead if she hadn't awakened?” Twilight Spark's eyes were stone-cold. The pegasus, suddenly feeling very unsure wanted to look away from her, but she was held fast in place by that stare. “You want me to betray my teacher and mentor?”

“I...” Rainbow Dash faltered.

Suddenly she found herself shoved out of the way. She released a breath she didn't know she had been holding and looked up to see Fluttershy of all ponies returning a Stare at Twilight Spark.

“Don't you DARE use the Stare on your friends! What are you thinking! You know this is wrong Twilight Sparkle! You and I talked once about the power of the Stare!”

Twilight Spark was first surprised, then confused. “We did?”

Fluttershy blinked as she looked deep into the unicorn's eyes. “We did. Don't you remember?”

Twilight Spark stepped back. “I... I...” she looked really confused and for a second... scared. But then anger returned in full. “So what if we talked about it?! I don't care! I will not betray my Queen!”

Her horn fired up and a wave of energy threw all ponies flying. “You will not stop Nightmare Moon from coming back!

“We'll have to stop her too!” Applejack said, jumping to her hoofs quickly.

“But... we won't have all six Elements of Harmony...” Rarity said, as her horn created a shield that blocked the skeleton Twilight had levitated and thrown their way.

“We'll have to try! Maybe we can cleanse Twilight first! It's bound to be easier than cleansing Celestia without the Element of Magic!” the Earth Pony retorted, a golden choker decorated with an apple made out of ruby appearing around her neck. Similar chokers, each matching the cutie marks of the other ponies appeared as they all stood and faced Twilight Spark.

Auras of their respective colors formed around them, their backlash dispersing every spell Twilight threw at them. The panicking unicorn starting to throw bigger objects at them to no avail.

Their auras suddenly extended and enveloped the unicorn, who gasped in pain as the multicolored light destroyed her defenses.

“We're doing it!” Fluttershy cheered as the light formed a familiar rainbow wall around the transformed unicorn.

Suddenly a hoof hit her in the face, sending her sprawling and breaking her concentration. Before the others could react, a back kick almost dropped Rarity right then and there, Pinkie Pie was barely able to dodge a follow up. Their assailant then tackled Rainbow Dash to the floor.

Their attack shattered and Twilight Spark wasted no time in casting a spell that had Applejack, Rarity and Pinkie Pie on their bellies, as if a huge

weight had suddenly dropped on them. Fluttershy looked up from her prone position, head reeling to stare at their attacker.

“S-Spitfire!” Rainbow Dash growled, trying unsuccessfully to raise her head more than enough to turn it towards the other pegasus. “What the hay are you doing!”

The pegasus smiled. “I’m protecting my Queen, of course.” from within her wings she drew out a small silver chain with an amulet on it. “It is the sacred duty of the Council of Nightmares to bring both sisters to their full power.”

“But... it doesn't make sense!” Rainbow Dash said, the hurt and betrayal in her voice obvious to all around.

“Don't worry Dash.” Spitfire said leaning close to the angry pegasus' ear. “You'll understand soon enough.”

Twilight Spark, horn glowing and enlarging her spell to cover Fluttershy, approached Spitfire. “You serve Queen Nightmare Flare then?”

“And Queen Nightmare Moon.” the red-maned pegasus nodded. “With all my being.”

Twilight Spark smiled. “Good. Then...”

“**At last!**” Nightmare Flare's voice was victorious. The five ponies on the floor turned to look in horror as Luna was surrounded by a dark blue energy. The transformed Queen stepped back as her sister, seemingly unconscious, floated up to hover in front of her. Slowly the energy formed a familiar shape.

Fluttershy closed her eyes and whimpered. Rarity and Pinkie Pie shared worried glances.

“Oh no...” Applejack groaned, barely even able to see what was happening past Twilight's hooves.

Rainbow Dash didn't say anything, bitter tears welling in her eyes.

Nightmare Moon slowly stood up as Nightmare Flare stepped back to allow her some space. The dark alicorn opened her eyes and turned them towards the Elements of Harmony.

o.O.o

After an awkward discussion about what had happened to her at the Guardian's maws, Trixie had allowed Big Macintosh to pull her wagon. Although she could have carried on, it was starting to tax her magic, and she had noticed that she had started to lose opacity.

“You rest,” the strong pony had said in a kind but firm tone. “I’m used to pulling, and you’ll need your strength once we reach Canterlot.”

Trixie had nodded with a grateful and shy smile, but upon remembering that he could not see her had sighed and used her flash powder to write:
THANK YOU. I REALLY APPRECIATE YOUR HELP, BIG MACINTOSH.

The stallion blushed, a pleased smile adorning his face as he simply nodded.

The comfortable silence and steadfast companionship had calmed Trixie a bit and she had finally asked herself the question that she had avoided since she had been exposed as a liar by Twilight Sparkle and her friends.

She had blamed the whole thing on her. Even the fact that the Ursa Minor had attacked the town, when it had really been the two colts fans she had egged on about her greatness. And really, what had she done the last few years with her life? She had gone from city to city, town to town antagonizing the locals if they questioned her. Her repertoire was

impressive enough, but she had decided to... embellish it with added bravado and the stories became more extravagant as time went past.

The fact that she could defend herself from and defeat multiple opponents by doing things 'better' than them gave credibility to her claims to more gullible ponies.

But if she was truly honest with herself, she had not really done anything *better* than the other ponies. She had just taken advantage of their exploits which usually left them a bit winded, as would often happen when excitable ponies tried to make a show of their skills.

Had she flown better than that blue pegasus with the ridiculous rainbow hair? No. She had just used her illusion skills to use the rainbow she had created with her skills against her.

Perhaps she could claim that she had done better than the farmer mare with rope-tricks, but again, that would depend on what was being judged. Had she attempted to pull the same trick physically, well, she would have been as effective at that as the Earth Pony would have been at trying her hoof at magic.

And what of the musician in Fillydelphia? Or that gunslinger in Appleloosa?

She sighed. She had done so much to escape from the ghosts of her past. She had ran away from home and dropped out of school to forge her own way; find herself. She had wanted to prove to her father that she was perfectly capable of achieving much in her life, even surpass him, without the comforts of a life where everything was given to her. And in the end she had failed miserably, she had been pathetic enough to ask her father for help not expecting anything but scorn... and the bastard had actually bought her a new stage wagon. There had been a letter too, but it remained unopened.

“Way to leave the ghosts of the past behind, Great and Powerful Trixie.” she muttered.

She looked down at Big Mac, faithfully helping her despite her reputation in Ponyville. She wished she could walk next to him and talk without the impersonal and draining spells to create words of fire. She wished she could just forget about the whole thing and cuddle with him and tell him all of her secrets, good and bad... because she knew he wouldn't hate her or think less of her. Being a ghost sucked. Being a ghost looking back on her life and finding that it was less than adequate sucked a- she felt *something*.

She tried to clear her mind. Underneath her the wagon creaked and the wheels crushed twigs, pebbles scraped under the weight of the wagon. Big Macintosh's steady pace echoed in the empty night. What had she felt?

Her attention turned towards Canterlot. There... no. It wasn't Canterlot exactly... it was under it.

BIG MACINTOSH... PLEASE TURN RIGHT HERE TOWARDS THE PATH.

Big Mac looked at the small path that Trixie had pointed out. It seemed old. And it was clearly not the way to go to get to Canterlot, in fact, from what he could see under the moonlight, it went straight into the cliff under the castle.

Without a word he started down the old path. Trixie probably knew something he didn't.

Trixie smiled. Truly smiled and if the world could have seen her, she wouldn't have cared. Despite all her failings, her attitude problems, her current situation... Big Macintosh's company and -dare she say it?- friendship had made her realize what she had been missing all this time.

It hadn't been staring at her in the face all this time, but it had popped up to pull at her hat and she had ignored it time and again.

But she had found it. And she would never let go.

Chapter 8

"Twilight... you're... helping me? How? Why?" Luna asked, her eyes wide.

"Why wouldn't she?" Rainbow-orb asked. *"After all you're-"*

"Secret!" Pinkie-orb shouted suddenly. *"Secret! Remember! No telling! You pinkie-swore!"*

"But..." Rainbow-orb tried again, only to have Applejack-orb float in front of it.

"No way sugarcube. That's not for us to tell."

"Fine." Rainbow-orb sighed dejectedly. It even dulled a bit.

"As much as I would like to know what you orbs are talking about," Luna growled. "It still doesn't explain how she's here! In the outside world she's completely on the side of Nightmare Flare!"

"Nightmare who?" Applejack-orb asked.

Luna blinked. "Don't you know? Nightmare Flare. My corrupted sister!"

"See! Told you we were always the last to find out stuff in the whole subconscious!" Rainbow-orb floated accusingly in front of Rarity-orb.

"Well." the white orb said after a moment. *"Fine, you were right and I was wrong."*

“Wait, what?” Luna shook her head. “How can you be here and not know? And what do you mean you are always the last to find out what's happening in *my* subconscious?”

“*Um... we... have been here since we healed you...*” Flutter-orb offered.

“*We are parts of the souls of the ponies you know as Rainbow Dash, Applejack, Pinkie Pie, Rarity, Fluttershy and Twilight Sparkle.*” the purple orb explained, still floating in front of Nightmare Flare's avatar. “*We are the wishes of those ponies that you would be healed... we represent their purest feelings and we have been here since the Elements of Harmony defeated Nightmare Moon because they wanted us to be with you.*”

“With me? Why? They didn't know me back then. They barely know me now.” Luna sighed.

“*We know... it takes some time for all the information of your daily activities to reach us... but it does, eventually.*” Twilight-orb said. “*But, for my part... Twilight... she...*”

“*We all saw who you were when we destroyed the shell that kept you trapped.*” Applejack-orb interrupted. “*Deep within each pony that night, was the honest wish that you would know true friendship and love from those around you, that you would be happy to be back with your sister and part of this world again.*”

Luna nodded, tears forming in her eyes, although Applejack-orb's interruption seemed odd to her. She glanced at Twilight-orb, arching an eyebrow.

The purple orb hovered silently, it seemed to be hesitating. Speaking slowly, as if choosing the words carefully it finally said: “*I can tell you this... I am absolutely sure, beyond doubt, that Twilight Sparkle has been waiting for you to get in contact with her ever since she met you.*”

Luna sighed. "I'll never get the chance now..." she sighed "...unless... I fight and win." she looked resolutely at the orbs hovering around her. "It's the only way I'll be able to talk to Twilight..." she glanced with a small smile at the other orbs "And also thank the rest of the Elements of Harmony for their help."

Nightmare Flare's avatar resumed its push into Luna's subconscious, but unlike its initial attack, it seemed to be carefully trying to push Twilight-orb out of the way without hurting it.

Twilight-orb hovered in front of the avatar for a moment longer. "*Do you trust me, Luna?*"

Luna looked at the orb deep in thought, remembering nights when she had stood apparently alone, wondering what to do and whether the world even needed her now... only for a tiny voice in her mind soothing her, telling her that it would be okay, urging her to talk to her sister when she thought things were too complicated.

It had been Twilight-orb... or at least some of it had been there. She was sure of it.

"Yes. I do." Luna said.

"*Then...*" Twilight-orb said, moving out of the avatar's way. "*Let her win.*"

Luna felt tears well up again as she stood defiantly in front of the avatar, the other orbs hovering uncertainly behind her.

"*It will be alright.*" Twilight's voice said.

Closing her eyes shut, Luna stepped aside.

o.O.o

“Sister.” Nightmare Flare greeted the re-awakened Nightmare Moon. Her voice made the ponies cringe. It was harsh, and strong... aggressive. Completely unlike the calm and loving voice they had come to relate to Princess Celestia. It had a slight echo to it, as if there were two voices talking at the same time.

“Thank you for bringing me back, sister.” the dark mare replied, not taking her eyes off the five subdued ponies.

“We should see to our court.” the former Princess Celestia said. **“We need to make everypony aware of the new changes.”**

“Yes... but first I want to take care of these ponies.” Nightmare Moon said, stepping up to the struggling group.

Twilight and Spitfire lowered their heads at her.

“I want to get rid of them now.” Nightmare Moon declared, her horn lighting up.

Nightmare Flare stepped up next to her and sighed. **“Very well sister, it is your revenge after all.”**

“Please, my Queen...” Twilight said. “Can I keep her?” she caressed Applejack's chin with her hoof, earning a glare from the Earth Pony. “And I would like Spitfire to keep Rainbow Dash... we have an... experiment... to perform.”

The pegasus and the unicorn looked at the Queens expectantly.

“Come now, sister, what harm could come from letting them keep two?” Nightmare Flare asked. **“The Elements of Harmony are no more. They cannot act against us, and you still can exact your revenge on the others.”**

Nightmare Moon gritted her teeth, glaring down at the three remaining ponies. **“Fine.”** Her horn started glowing. **“I will make you suffer for what you did to me.”**

The five ponies screamed in terror as dark energy surrounded Rarity, Fluttershy and Pinkie Pie.

“Girls! I just want to say... it was an honor knowing you!” Rarity gasped, then turned a teary eyed look towards Twilight who was watching with a manic smile. “Even you Twilight... before you became this.”

If the unicorn reacted she never got to see it. Black lightning crisscrossed their writhing bodies and they cried out as pain seemed to overwhelm them. They struggled to run when Twilight released her spell, but Nightmare Moon's power was too much for them. With a sudden crack, all three were gone. Only little mounds of ash remained.

“Rarity! Pinkie Pie!” Applejack shouted.

“Fluttershy! No!” Rainbow Dash cried, smashing her hooves on the floor.

All strength seemed to leave their bodies. They slumped there, just staring at the ash.

Nightmare Flare gave Nightmare Moon a hard look but said nothing.

“You can take them away now.” Nightmare Moon said.

Twilight Spark nodded, looking down at the pair. She smirked. “Yeah, these two are not going anywhere on their own.” Her horn stopped glowing as she canceled her spell.

The moment she felt the spell weaken Applejack jumped straight at Nightmare Moon. “You! Luna, how could you?!”

She was suddenly grabbed from the air and flung against the wall. She landed with a thud on the stone floor. "Sorry! Sorry!" Twilight Spark said with an impish smile. "I didn't anticipate that."

Nightmare Flare sniffed. "**Just take them away, Twilight. Spitfire.**"

After all four ponies were gone the sun goddess turned to glare at Nightmare Moon. "**What did you really do with them?**"

Nightmare Moon seemed surprised for a second, but then she laughed. "You are very perceptive sister. I exiled them to my Moon Prison. I simply wanted to see their friends suffer when they thought they had died already."

Nightmare Flare whinnied. "**You are devious sister. Come now, our subjects await.**"

o.O.o

The silence of the night was broken by the crackling and scratching sounds of wooden wheels on hard rock as the blue wagon was pulled along the road that snaked around the cliffs under Canterlot Castle.

Trixie shuddered. Whatever was calling her here was getting closer. She didn't know what her destination was... she had never been anywhere near the base of the mountain before. Ponies usually avoided the cliffs and just climbed the slope leading to Canterlot Castle.

Under the moonlight she could see the rocks older than Canterlot itself jaggedly adorning the face of the mountains. If she looked up and strained her neck, she could make out lights coming from the castle far above, but down here... only the silvery moonlight chased the shadows away.

Big Macintosh slowed down as they reached a cave. Another, smaller pass took off towards the castle above, but that was not what drew their attention.

The cave's entrance had been blocked by large metallic doors... and Trixie could feel that whatever was calling her was behind them.

WE NEED TO GO INSIDE she wrote. I CANNOT OPEN THE DOORS WITH MAGIC

Big Mac nodded. "Don't worry, Trixie." the stallion said, shaking loose from the harness. "I'll take care of it."

With a screeching sound, the doors opened and Trixie's magic pushed the wagon into the cave. As soon as she was inside she jumped to the floor of the cave.

It was huge. Torches lit once they were both inside, a nifty little spell she knew several variations of to use for her shows.

The floor had a room wide circle of runes that contained smaller circles, each with their own runes inscribed on them. Trixie had seen symbols like those before, but she had never bothered to study the ancient languages. It was a shame, she now realized, as despite her usual lack of interest in the academical, she really wanted to know what it said. The chamber was vast, there were six columns all around, also decorated with runes. Entrances to smaller chambers could be seen behind each column.

"Isn't this amazing, Big Macintosh?" she said excitedly running from one side of the room to the other. When he didn't answer she stopped and looked at him. He was just looking in her direction with a stoic expression on his face.

"Oh..." Trixie sighed. "You can't hear me... I forgot... it might be for the best, I wouldn't want to bore you with my whining, and I value your company so much! If we had met when I could still speak to you I would..." she sighed again. Her horn started glowing and magic dust floated out of her wagon.

The words started forming in the air.

“Trixie... I can see you.” Big Macintosh said. “I... can hear you too.”

Trixie stared at the stallion. The dust, forgotten, sprinkled onto the floor unheeded. “Really?” she asked, almost choking when she realized that the red stallion had heard *everything* she had just said.

“Really.” Big Mac smiled at her. At her! He *could* see her!

Tears falling freely, Trixie jumped forward arms open to hug him.

Smiling, Big Macintosh also made a motion to embrace her... only for both of them to gasp as Trixie sailed *right through* him.

Trixie's eyes twitched. “Oh...”

Big Mac's eyes slowly widened at the tirade of insults and swearwords that followed.

“...with a bucketful of nails!” Trixie finished. She stood there breathing hard for a few seconds before glancing at the flabbergasted stallion. She blushed and lowered her head. “I-I'm sorry, Big Macintosh. I just... I thought...”

“It's okay.” the red-furred pony said after a moment. “We all get angry.”

Trixie nodded gratefully at him and both smiled warmly at each other for a couple of minutes. When Trixie realized she had been staring, she immediately looked away, flushing once more. “Ah... yes, The Great and Powerful Trixie is really thankful for your kind help.”

Big Mac chuckled. “My pleasure, Trixie.”

They started looking at the other smaller caves. Each was also intricately engraved, but unlike the entrance cave, they had some sort of shrines made out of stone at the far end.

“Trixie...” Big Mac whispered. “I think there's somepony there.” he said, motioning with his head at one of the smaller caves.

Intrigued, she followed Big Mac to the cave he pointed and carefully looked inside. A unicorn with a blue coat, slightly darker than Trixie's stood gazing quietly at one of the stone shrines.

Neither moved, but the unicorn tensed and turned around. His cutie mark was a waning crescent moon over a larger waxing crescent, his irises were an almost golden hue. His pose was aggressive and Trixie was surprised and immediately touched to see Big Mac step up next to her protectively.

“Who are you two?!” The unicorn demanded. “Leave now.”

“Now wait a minute!” Trixie said, stepping into the room and walking until she was snout to snout with the older unicorn. She pushed him back with her head, glaring. “You do not tell The Great and Powerful Trixie what to do! Who do you think you are?”

The unicorn narrowed his eyes and pushed back, his horn glowing threateningly. “Wanna bet?”

Trixie's own horn lit up. “You don't know who you are messing with!”

“Um...” Big Macintosh's cough made them look his way.

“What is it Big Mac? I'm about to teach this... miscreant... what he gets for threatening us.”

“Well... I just wanted to point out that you are able to touch him.” the stallion said.

“You... I...” Trixie stepped back. Then poked the surprised unicorn on the chest. “Hey! I can touch you!”

“You can touch me?!” the unicorn asked, dropping to his haunches, eyes wide. “But how?”

“Oh, Big Mac! I can touch ponies again!” she shouted with glee, sailing through him as she attempted to tackle him. “Huh?”

“Ah...” the unknown unicorn sighed. “That explains it. You're dead aren't you?”

“Well... you don't need to put it *that* way.” Trixie mumbled. “But, yes, I am a ghost.” she looked up, understanding dawning on her. “So that means that you...”

The unicorn nodded. “Just earlier today.” he looked at a corner of the cavern and they both could see a bundle of dark cloth over something.

“Eww...” Trixie stepped back, then looked at the unicorn “...sorry.”

The unicorn shook his head. “It's okay.” he sighed. “It's... not how I ever pictured I would pass on, you know? I figured by now I would be with my wife but... I can't leave. Not yet.”

“Why?” Trixie asked.

He looked at her, then at Big Macintosh. “I think I recognize you. You sell apples at the farmer's market in Canterlot. You live near Ponyville?”

Big Mac nodded. “I have sold you apples from time to time. I never learned your name.”

“Call me Midnight.” the unicorn smiled sadly. “I'm sorry I threatened you, but I thought you were agents of the Guardian.”

“Never!” Trixie shouted. “The Great and Powerful Trixie will rip his scaly hide from his bones!”

The unicorn blinked. “You’ve met the guardian? I guess that explains why you’re here.”

“So... why are you here?” Big Mac asked, walking to stand next to Trixie.

The unicorn looked uncomfortable for a moment then sighed in resignation “Well, I need help anyway.” he stepped out of the way and motioned for them to follow him up to the shrine.

Both ponies gasped.

“Is that...” Big Macintosh started to say.

The unicorn nodded. “Yes. This has to remain a secret...”

“But-” Trixie started to say, still staring.

“No! Right now there’s nothing we can do.” Midnight insisted.

Big Mac looked at the direction of the unicorn’s body. “I could... help take care of that for you.” he offered.

The unicorn lowered his head. “That... corrupted thing is more dangerous than you think. Leave it alone.”

A little disturbed Trixie looked from the body to the unicorn. “Corrupted? I think you have a lot to explain, Midnight.”

The unicorn nodded silently, looking down at the shrine. “Fine... it all began roughly ten years ago...”

o.O.o

Applejack was lying on the floor in the dark, staring silently at what she could see of the rug under her. How long had she been here? Hours at least... Her mind was blank. Every time she tried to think of what to do, the image of her three friends being reduced to ashes would replay in her mind and she would despair again.

The door opened and Twilight Sparkle... no... Spark... walked in.

Applejack didn't even bother to look up at her.

"Aw, what's wrong with my apple pie?" Twilight asked, walking up to her. "Feeling down?"

"Why do you do this, Twilight? I thought we were friends!" Applejack asked, without even looking up.

"Oh, Applejack. Of course we are friends."

"Then why didn't you help us turn Princess Celestia back to normal?" the farmer pony asked, lifting her head to look at the purple unicorn.

"You have to understand, Applejack. Princess Celestia has been like my mother since I met her." Twilight said, jumping on to her bed. "My dad became really distant when I moved here and my mom passed away shortly after that..." Twilight was silent.

"I didn't know that." Applejack said. "But for the same reason, shouldn't we bring her back to normal? And you too for that matter?"

"Me?" Twilight blinked.

"Twilight!" Applejack finally stood up and held her friend by the shoulders. "You weren't always an evil vampire goth fillyfooler!"

“An evil...” Twilight blinked and stepped up to the mirror. “Oh. Well, I guess I could see why you would call me a goth...”

“And the fangs...”

“Oh, I can't suck anything with them.” Twilight said. “I think they just look cute.” she smiled, fangs showing just slightly as she approached the earth pony.

Applejack gulped as Twilight spark nuzzled her. “Unless you want me to bite?” the unicorn whispered.

“No! No! No!” Applejack growled, pushing the amused unicorn away. “What is wrong with you? Our friends just died! They were killed by Nightmare Moon! She's evil! You've always known that! Why can't you tell the difference now?”

“Oh, Applejack.” Twilight chuckled. “Nightmare Moon is not evil. She's just ruthless. Like all rulers should be. Besides, if Nightmare Flare is my mom, doesn't that make Nightmare Moon my aunt?”

“So a twisted little family is worth the lives of Pinkie Pie, Rarity and Fluttershy?” the farmer countered. “I see you couldn't care less.”

“You seem to be handling it pretty well yourself.” Twilight dryly pointed out.

Applejack looked down. “I'm hurting, Twilight. I'm hurting more than you can imagine... earlier, when we thought we had lost you... Fluttershy just couldn't stop crying, Pinkie Pie wouldn't even smile... and Rarity... she just stared at the table... we were all heartbroken.”

“Oh. Well, this is depressing.” Twilight sighed. Her horn started glowing.

“H-hey!” Applejack shouted as she was levitated off the floor and then pressed against the wall where magical chains wrapped around each of her

hooves holding her aloft once the unicorn had stopped using her magic.
“Twilight! What the hell do you think you are doing! This is not funny!”

Twilight Spark had a small smile as she approached, batting her eyelashes at Applejack. “Aww, let me make you feel better, Applejack.” she said.

“N-no! I’m not into fillies!” the farmer shouted. “And even if I were, I would never like a crazy unicorn that does not care at all for her friends! The *real* Twilight would!” she looked deep into her friend’s eyes. “If you’re there, Twilight, fight! Come back to us!”

The unicorn gasped and stepped back. Her horn started glowing and soon a purple aura formed around her, levitating her as she threw her head back and groaned loudly, her hooves going to her head as if she were in pain.

Applejack watched in shock as Twilight twitched in mid air, then the aura blasted off and the unicorn collapsed on the floor, breathing heavily.

“T-twilight?”

“Oooh...” a whimpering voice came from the unicorn. “A-applejack? What happened? I... feel so... strange...” she stumbled as she tried to get up.

Hope flared inside Applejack. “It’s okay sugarcube! Just be strong! We’ll get out of this mess.”

“Mess?” Twilight looked up, confused. She looked around the room, then noticed Applejack tied to the wall. “Applejack! Who put you there?!”

“Don’t worry about that, Twi!” Applejack was almost crying with happiness. “Just get me down, we need to get Rainbow Dash back and stop Nightmare Moon and Nightmare Flare?”

“Who?” Twilight asked as she made her way up to the farmer and stood unsteadily on her hind legs, leaning heavily against the wall, so that her face was close to Applejack's.

“Get me down, I'll tell you all about it...” Applejack's words were almost a whisper as she stared into Twilight's eyes.

“Applejack...” the unicorn said softly, leaning forward until their faces were almost touching.

“Y-yes?” the farmer asked just as softly, cheeks blushing, she unintentionally leaned forward just a bit, so that their noses finally touched.

Twilight stared at her for a moment before she had to stifle a laugh. She put her hoof on her mouth, but she snorted and fell back laughing.

The farmer looked down at the unicorn rolling on the floor with laughter with confusion. “Twilight?”

“I...” the revived unicorn snorted. “I'm sorry, I'm sorry, that was hilarious!” she laughed for a few more seconds, each of which made the farmer more and more annoyed. “It-it was amazing! Your face... you should have seen your face!”

“Twilight!” Applejack snapped. “Just get me out of here!”

The unicorn stopped for a second, then looked at her seriously before her cheeks puffed up with barely contained laughter. “Oh, Applejack! You... you really bought it! Priceless!”

Comprehension finally dawned on the farmer pony. “Why you!” she started struggling against the chains. “When I get my hooves on you...”

“Oh, don't worry, you will” Twilight Spark smirked. “I expect to have *all* of you on me at some point in the near future.”

The apple farmer growled.

“Now... about getting *my* hooves on somepony...” the unicorn said, still chuckling. “What do you say to getting started?”

Applejack gulped again.

Twilight Spark took a step towards her...

Someone knocked on the door. The unicorn sighed. “Really? Don't ponies have better things to do than bother me right now?”

Her horn glowed and the door opened, revealing two pegasi silhouettes. “Twilight, Nightmare Flare and Nightmare Moon are going to speak to their subjects.” a familiar voice said.

Applejack stared, completely baffled at the pair of ponies.

“And they request your presence there.” Spitfire added. “They can't start without their daughter, right?”

“I suppose.” Twilight sighed. “I was hoping to get some studying done, you know?”

The pegasus with the familiar voice walked into the room and stared at Applejack before turning to elbow Twilight Spark on the shoulder. “Yeah, right. What type of studying were you planning on doing?”

“Oh, you know. Basic anatomy, pleasure/pain thresholds, Pavponian Conditioning.” the unicorn spared a glance at the earth pony. “Oh... do you think I broke her? But I haven't even started!” she said jokingly, eliciting a snort and a laugh from the pegasi.

Applejack realized that her mouth was hanging open and closed it with a snap. But her eyes watered as she forced herself to speak. "Why... what..." she shook her head and looked pleadingly at the pegasus.

"What's up, Applejack? Dragon caught your tongue?" Rainbow Dash asked, her familiar cocky smile unwavering.

Chapter 9

The familiar sound of the royal call woke the ponies that were not already up and about. Roused by the echo of the trumpets, the various citizens of Canterlot gathered under the Royal Balcony where Princess Celestia usually addressed them.

Spike, red-eyed from crying, made his way to the crowd so he could see what was happening. Maybe they had found the bastard that had killed Twilight... he tried to ignore the comments and speculations of the ponies around him as he waited for the Princess to come out.

When a weird-looking Celestia stepped into the balcony a hush fell on the whole gathering. Ponies stared in awe at the majesty and power embodied in her. She looked down at them with cold eyes, and Spike couldn't help but have a bad feeling about this.

“My loyal subjects.” the Princess spoke into the quiet air, her voice reaching the whole assembly without problem. **“Yesterday was a trying day for me and my sister, but as the Goddesses we are, we emerged victorious. I stand before you, changed to reflect who I truly am.”**

Mutters erupted in the crowd below.

“SILENCE!”

Her order was immediately followed. The ponies below cringed in fear as a sudden heat-wave hit them all - a physical manifestation of the goddess' fury. Some cowered while other simply stared in awe.

“You shall all address me by my proper title now: Queen Nightmare Flare!” her wings opened and Spike could fully appreciate the power she exuded as just about everypony bowed down in deference. The power... it

was not her usual warm magic... it was corrupt and felt somewhat familiar to him.

“But I shall not rule alone.” Nightmare Flare declared. She stepped lightly to the side as a very familiar figure stepped up next to her.

Spike would never forget her from the first time he saw her. The blue mane, swaying in the wind deep as the night and glittering with stars; the dark coat, black as her heart; the purple regalia...

“I present to you my true sister... Nightmare Moon!” Nightmare Flare announced.

Immediately several things happened. The crowd screamed and the guards were forced to contain the confused ponies from stampeding away. One of the Guard Pegasi drew a sword and charged towards Nightmare Moon, while another pegasus, this one in Wonderbolt uniform, also burst out of the crowd and charged the balcony.

Their flight was short lived however, as out of nowhere another Wonderbolt tackled the first, throwing him to the hard floor in front of the crowd, who gasped in horror.

The guard was tackled by a flash of rainbow and landed painfully next to the Wonderbolt, a filly pegasus rising to stand over him.

“Rainbow Dash?” Spike whispered in horror as the rainbow-maned pegasus shook her head at the guard.

“Nah-ah!” the weather pony taunted. “Who do you think you are, attacking our Queens?”

“It's that monster!” the guard spat. “Nightmare Moon! She did something to Princess Celestia!”

“Spitfire?!” the gray furred and white maned Wonderbolt groaned, wincing as he got up, he looked back at his left wing. It hung useless on his side. “Oof!”

He crumbled to the side as she kicked him from above, landing heavily on the floor gasping for breath.

Spitfire on the other hoof, landed daintily in front of him.

From the crowds Spike couldn't believe what was happening. “I got to stop this!” He took a couple of steps forward only to be stopped by a hoof. He followed the leg up to see another familiar pony, who was looking hard at the events transpiring in the courtyard.

“You dare attack your Queen?” Nightmare Flare's voice was cold. It drew the attention of everyone back to the two Nightmares. **“It seems a demonstration is in order.”**

Spike's heart skipped when a third pony walked in between the two self-declared Queens.

He watched in trepidation as Twilight Sparkle looked down at the two pegasi. She looked a bit different, but there was no mistaking her. Even some of the noble ponies around him gasped and whispered her name.

“My student and heir.” Nightmare Flare said coldly. **“Give these two...”** she spat out the word **“... rebels... a proper reward.”**

“Yes my Queen.” Twilight said with a very slight bow which had the nobles muttering at how inappropriate it was.

They shut up immediately though as Rainbow Dash and Spitfire quickly flew out of the way and Twilight's horn shone with a dark energy, her smile widening. With a laugh echoed by thunder, a lightning bolt struck the two downed pegasi. For a split-second everyone could see their skeletons. The two thrashed around as electricity circled their bodies for what seemed

minutes but in reality was no more than a couple of seconds. They landed in a heap, smoke coming out of them, but apparently still alive. Another lightning bolt. And another. And another.

Spike couldn't watch. He turned around and buried his tear-covered face on the leg of the pony that had stopped him. He heard two more. Then silence.

After a few seconds Nightmare Flare spoke again. **“Let this be a warning. Whoever dares attempt to attack either me or my sister will suffer a worse fate than these two.”**

The whole crowd was quiet.

“A new reign has begun. That of the Queen Sisters.” Nightmare Moon declared after a moment. **“Night and Day will no longer be.”** Both of the alicorn horns glowed... slowly the sun started moving up its normal cycle, slowly, but still faster than normal. The gathered ponies stared in awe at the blatant display of power.

Soon the sun had reached its midway point just above the castle. There was a murmur as the sun just stopped... and before the horrified looks of everypony, the moon slowly rose, its course taking it towards the sun until it finally covered it, creating an eclipse.

“Rejoice!” Nightmare Flare called out. **“The Age of the Eternal Eclipse has begun!”**

o.O.o

“Hey, come on Big Mac!” Spike whispered angrily. The little dragon had reluctantly followed the draft pony after he had stopped him from charging into the open and confronting Twilight Sparkle. Since then, Big Mac had been quiet despite Spike's constant badgering. “Where are we going? I

need to get to Twilight!" he shuddered. "Did you see what she did?! Something is wrong with her!"

"Eeyup." the draft pony said. "But that don't mean we should just rush in."

The dragon growled. "And what about Rainbow Dash? She was acting weird too! Since when does she take orders or defend Nightmare Moon? And don't forget that Applejack was with them too! What happened to her? Do you think she's okay?"

The red pony stopped cold and looked down at the small dragon.

Spike gulped, but Big Macintosh just sighed. "We can't trust any of them."

"What?!" the dragon could not believe his ears. "But why!?"

"I would like to know that too!" another voice said from above.

The pair jumped when a strong looking pegasus landed in front of them. His green eyes drilled into the pair, his wings opened to block their path.

"Hey!" Spike said suddenly. "I know you! You're Soarin'! Rainbow Dash has told me about you!"

The Wonderbolt nodded, his grim expression not leaving his face. "I need to know why Spitfire did that to Blizzard." he growled. "And why he had to die!"

Big Mac sighed and looked around. "Did anypony follow you?"

The pegasus shook his head.

The draft pony nodded and indicated that they should come with him.

o.o.o

Nightmare Flare, Nightmare Moon, Twilight Spark, Spitfire and Rainbow Dash walked away from the balcony, slowly making their way towards the court.

“Now that that has been dealt with, we will need to ensure we get loyal servants.” Nightmare Flare said.

“Hey! There's no-one more loyal than me!” Rainbow Dash said. “And I'm your servant!”

Nightmare Flare glowered at the pegasus. **“That might be true, but you would do well to learn when and how to talk to your Queen.”**

“I have been thinking about that, sister.” Nightmare Moon said. **“You have Rainbow Dash, Twilight and Spitfire. I would like to recruit a couple of assistants for myself.”**

Nightmare Flare stopped, followed by the whole procession. “Who do you have in mind?”

“The Assassins Guild has always had utmost respect for me. For centuries they have prayed to the Moon for guidance and to the Night for protection. I say it is time I pay them a visit and exact payment for services rendered.”

Nightmare Flare laughed. **“Somepony in particular?”**

“Yes... a pony I have blessed from my distant prison on many an occasion, one of the best... if not the best.” The dark alicorn smiled. **“Silent Jade.”**

It took the other ponies a second to realize that Nightmare Flare's jaw was actually open as she stared at her sister. Realizing her state, the flame alicorn closed her mouth. **“Absolutely not.”**

“Why not?” Twilight asked.

“Because, dear Twilight, Silent Jade once slipped into my sister's room, stole one of her jewels, and left a note detailing how many ways she had found to get into the room and how she could have killed my sister.” Nightmare Moon said.

The white alicorn growled. **“So it’s a she... I'd always wondered. In any case, she called it her '*civic duty*' to let me know in writing how pathetic my security was back then.”** Nightmare Flare growled. **“Even if she couldn’t have killed me, it was... disturbing.”**

“But it is safer now, isn't it?” Nightmare Moon countered.

Her sister grudgingly nodded. **“How do you know she'll accept?”**

The dark alicorn smiled. **“As I said... she owes me a lot of favors. I still have to visit the guild to inform the Guild Master that I am taking her under my service indefinitely.”**

“Go ahead.” Nightmare Flare did not sound happy. **“At least I'll know where the little weasel is now and that she won't be trying anything...”** she glared at her sister with some trepidation. **“She *won't* be trying anything. Right?”**

“Not without Royal Orders, sister.”

“Fine. Go.”

o.O.o

Applejack had her own room in the castle. There was a bowl with fresh fruit, including apples from Sweet Apple Acres, bananas, strange little brown things the servant had identified as Kiwis, and oranges.

The bed was the four times the size of her own, with white linen and fluffy pillows. Her hat lay on it, discarded.

The three windows offered an amazing view of most of Canterlot (it was a corner suite). There was an adjacent room with a marble bath and other amenities.

The stone floor was mostly covered by a circular carpet with the sun embroidered into it. The walls of the room had little nooks for scented candles, and a small lamp stood on top of the bedside table.

While she had always dreamed of being able to afford a suite in an expensive hotel, she held no excitement for her being here. None at all.

One of the windows faced the Plaza of the Sun, where Nightmare Flare had talked to her subjects.

Although she hadn't been able to hear anything, Applejack had stared forlornly at the two Alicorns as they addressed the crowd.

She had witnessed part of the attack. And she had seen what Twilight... sweet, bookish, nerdy, fretful, eager-to-help Twilight... had done.

Her friend was gone. Completely gone. Hay, even Rainbow Dash had somehow succumbed to this... madness.

What was happening to everypony? How long before the whole castle was corrupt? What if even she wasn't immune to it? ... How long before she turned?

She closed her eyes. Would she be just as ruthless? It was wrong... so wrong.

What had happened? It was not normal for Rainbow Dash to defend either Nightmare... or to stand by and allow something like what had happened to take place.

She groaned. What would happen to everyone in Ponyville once word came out? What would Big Macintosh think of her sister's friends helping such monsters?! Would they believe she was on their side?

What would Apple Bloom do? Her blood went cold. What would *Sweetie Bell* do without her sister? Applejack might be able to go back but... Rarity... and Pinkie Pie and Fluttershy...

She gritted her teeth. How in the name of all apples was she going to explain what had happened to Rarity to Sweetie Bell? How could she face her? And Scootaloo, that filly's hopes would be destroyed if she ever found out her heroine, Rainbow Dash, was a Nightmare Moon follower!

As she sank deeper into despair, she heard laughs outside her door.

"I really don't know what they were thinking." Twilight's voice reached her. "Attacking the Queens?" she could imagine the unicorn shaking her head sagely. "Utter folly."

"But did you see us?!" Rainbow Dash's voice asked. "Spitfire was like, blam! And I was like whoosh, kick!"

"It was very impressive, Dash." Twilight admitted. "I would love to continue chatting, but this is my stop, and you know we have a lot to do later today."

"Yeah... hey, before you go, do you know anything about that pony Nightmare Moon mentioned?" Rainbow Dash asked. Applejack growled at how easily the pegasus would talk about their enemy.

"Silent Jade?" Twilight asked. "No... I don't know anything about her, but if she's as good as the Queen makes her sound..."

“Well, it will be interesting having her around, that's for sure.” Spitfire said.
“Anyway, are you sure you don't want any help with Applejack? I might still-”

“No.” Twilight's voice was firm. “She's to remain untouched by anypony but me.”

“If you say so...” Spitfire sounded doubtful. And she should, Applejack decided. There was no way that she was going to fall for Twilight's tricks again.

She heard the ponies say their goodbyes and then the door started opening.

The moment it was open enough, the earth pony charged through... or would have, had Twilight Spark not levitated her off the ground the moment she saw her.

“Trying to escape, my apple pie?” the unicorn asked with a smile.

“Don't call me that! And put me down!”

“Well, somepony's grumpy.” Twilight said, depositing her on the floor after she had closed the door with magic.

“I just saw you kill two innocent ponies!” Applejack shouted.

“Easy! You'll disturb the neighbors!” Twilight hissed, but then looked serious. “They attacked the Queen. That's punishable by death.”

“And you had execute them yourself?” Applejack countered walking away to look out of the window. “How could you, Twilight?”

“I'm sorry.”

The earth pony snorted. "Sure you are."

There was a rustling sound behind her and a sniff. Applejack gritted her teeth. She was not falling for it. Not again.

"I'm sorry, Applejack."

The cowpony remained silent, looking out and listening to Twilight as she sniffed pitifully behind her, wanting, but not daring to turn. Twilight Spark had once deceived her. Fool her once...

"I had to!" Twilight insisted, her hoof touching Applejack's shoulder. "What do you want me to do?!"

"Let me go!" Applejack shouted. She turned around and was startled to see tears streaming down Twilight Spark's face, but she was still angry. "Stop following those... murderers! How can you think I will believe you suddenly developed a conscience? I saw you! You could have stopped after the first lightning bolt! But you did it six times! SIX TIMES!"

Twilight had withdrawn into a small ball as she stared at Applejack. She looked so harmless the apple farmer almost forgot her anger.

"Twilight! There is no excuse for what you did! Snap back to reality!"

"But... I love Nightmare Flare!" Twilight shouted. "She brought me back! She practically raised me before then! She's my family!"

"Your real family is not them! Your real family was Rarity and Fluttershy! Your real family included Pinkie Pie and Princess Celestia! Not Nightmare Flare!" Applejack closed her eyes as she threatened to cry, not wanting to show any weakness to the purple unicorn. "You let them die! And you did something to Rainbow Dash and now she's crazy like you! I HATE YOU! You're heartless!"

She heard galloping and the door smashed closed before she opened her eyes. Twilight was gone. She stared at the door.

“What the hay just happened?” Applejack stared slack-jawed at the door. Had Twilight Spark just ran out because of what she had said? Had she really hurt the unicorn’s feelings that badly?

The door slowly opened and Twilight Spark peeked in with a smile. “Am I forgiven?”

“No! Are you bipolar or something?!”

Twilight frowned. “Well... I am bi...”

“Bi-polar?” Applejack squeaked as Twilight made her way into the room again, closing the door behind her and swaying sensually as she walked towards her.

Twilight smirked. “Not exactly.”

o.o.o

Spitfire traced with her hoof gently on Rainbow Dash's back. The blue coated pegasus was lying on her stomach, apparently distracted.

“Are you okay, Dash?” Spitfire asked as she lay next to the other pegasus, who was busy playing with something in her hooves.

“I don't know.” Rainbow Dash sighed. “I'm... just thinking.”

“About what?”

“My friends.”

“Oh.”

“I've always been loyal, you know?” the blue pegasus sighed, glancing down at the shiny surface of the Council of Nightmares amulet in her hooves. She kept turning it around and around. “For as long as I have memory, I've had this, and I've known my duty... but I never knew it was going to be so hard!”

Spitfire looked away quickly, and Rainbow Dash's eyes followed her reaction, a frown crossing her face.

Letting the amulet fall to hang from its chain, Dash stood up and walked towards the door.

“Where are you going?” Spitfire asked.

“I just need some air... to think. And remember.” the rainbow-maned pegasus said.

“Oh, are you sure I can't help?”

Spitfire dropped her hoof as she watched her open the door, Rainbow Dash looked back at her over her shoulder. “Spitfire... don't you regret what happened to Blizzard?”

The Wonderbolt was silent for a few seconds. “No... he betrayed our Queens.” she said finally.

Rainbow Dash looked away. “I see. I'll be back in a little bit.”

The door closed behind her, leaving Spitfire to stare at it guiltily, her hoof going unconsciously to hold her own amulet.

o.o.o

Rainbow Dash walked silently through the halls of Canterlot Castle. Servants and guards all gave her a wide berth, averting their eyes and trying their best to not draw her attention.

She wasn't used to this. Or was she?

The pegasus shook her head. She had to be, right? The Council prepared everypony in it for this kind of reaction. It was normal that it would happen once their Queens stepped up and the Guardian ruled from the shadows.

She stopped, confused. But wasn't her loyalty to the Nightmares and her friends? Dash groaned. She was developing a headache. Maybe she should go out to fly... maybe do a few practice loops like she had been doing ever since she was a filly. The Wonderbolts wouldn't just choose a simple... but... how had she found the time to practice when she was being taught in secret by the Council?

She started walking again. Slowly, her mind in turmoil.

"No!" she stopped outside Applejack's room when she heard the earth pony's shout.

"Oh, come on, apple pie!" Twilight's voice came out. "You know you'll like it! It's just a feather!"

"I don't care! You are not touching me with that! Especially there!"

There was a crash and the sound of galloping behind the door.

"Hey! Stop that! Look what you've done to my beautiful straps!"

"Twilight! Listen to me, girl! You are not a fillyfooler!"

"How would you know?"

"I-I just know! It's... it's that evil thing that happened to you! You are not yourself!"

Twilight's voice turned slightly deeper. "Is this more like my old self?"

"N-no! I said stay away!"

Blushing Rainbow Dash stared straight ahead and turned slowly around. "Yeah... I should take flight..." she walked away not noticing the minute piece of metal that had fallen to the floor.

o.o.o

Nightmare Moon looked down at the unicorn sitting petulantly before her. **"... and that's how it is. Do you understand?"**

The unicorn nodded.

"Will you join my cause then... Silent Jade?"

The unicorn in front of her started and stared at the alicorn. She hesitated. "I do owe you..." she looked behind her at something hidden in the shadows.

"Trust me." the dark alicorn said. **"Like you did so many times in the past when you prayed to the moon and the stars for inspiration and help in your endeavors."**

"I did not know back then I was praying to you." the unicorn replied glancing at the alicorn with suspicion.

The alicorn smiled. **"Did I ever fail you, though?"**

A bitter smile in return. "No."

“Then trust me again.” Nightmare Moon said.

The unicorn sighed shaking her head. “Fine. But I need to get some things first...”

The dark alicorn nodded. **“Just make sure you are not seen.”**

The assassin barked a laugh.

Chapter 10

“I see you brought friends.” Midnight said when Big Macintosh walked into the main cavern, followed by Spike and Soarin'. “Can they be trusted?”

The draft pony nodded.

Spike stared. “M-Midnight! Sir! What are you doing here?!”

Midnight walked up to both of them and gave them a hard look, ignoring the small dragon for the moment and the bewildered look from Big Mac. “Yes... these two seem clean... what about her?”

The three blinked. “Her?” Soarin' asked, blinking in confusion.

They followed Midnight's eyes to the entrance of the cave, where a mint green unicorn with a viridian mane and a white streak on it meeped at the sudden attention.

“Lyra?!” Big Mac and Spike shouted, looking surprised.

The unicorn turned around to run, but Soarin' was already landing before her. “Sorry, but you are not going anywhere.”

“But... but I...” Lyra stammered, tearing up a bit. “I'm sorry! I was just curious! I saw what happened today and... when I saw Big Mac and Spike, I wanted to ask them what was going on!”

“Bring her in.” Midnight said. “She seems to be clean too. And Big Mac seems to know her.”

“Whatever *that* means.” Soarin' muttered, then turned to the unicorn. “Well, you heard him.”

She meekly went into the cavern with Soarin' while Big Mac took a look outside to ensure they were *really* alone, then closed the doors.

“Well, she's not the only one who wants to know what's happening.” The pegasus said gruffly. “I want an explanation for what happened out there.”

“Did something happen?” a voice asked. The three recent arrivals turned to see another unicorn emerging from another room.

“Trixie?!” Lyra and Spike shouted, looking surprised.

“Do you guys do that a lot?” Midnight asked, eyebrow arched.

The unicorn mare spared them a glance, but trotted up to Big Macintosh, hovering really close to him in an almost intimate manner, which had both the dragon and the musician trading confused glances.

“The Great and Powerful Trixie would like to know how you fared, Big Macintosh.” Trixie said, reverting slightly to her stage persona when she recognized the small dragon.

The draft pony blushed slightly. “I'm fine... but... something horrible has happened.” he looked up at Midnight. “Both Princess Celestia and Princess Luna have been turned into Nightmares... Twilight Sparkle was with them... as well as Spitfire of the Wonderbolts and Rainbow Dash.”

The navy blue unicorn narrowed his eyes. “Then things are worse than I thought. I had hoped the Guardian would not be able to corrupt either sister... whatever happened to Princess Celestia must have taxed her willpower greatly.”

“I don't know about the Princess... or even Rainbow Dash, but I want to know.” Soarin' said. “The Spitfire I know wouldn't have done what she did to Blizzard.”

Midnight sighed. “Well then. Tell me exactly what happened.”

o.o.o

Rainbow Dash flew around Canterlot castle doing loops and twists in the air, barrel rolls, spins and everything short of the Sonic Rainboom.

Each turn, each pull of gravity made her think again and again on what had happened that day.

While performing and Immelpony turn she recalled leaving with Twilight to help Princess Celestia.

Pulling up hard, she let herself go into a Tail Slide... the tour of Canterlot Castle... arguing with Rarity about ghosts... and that brought her too to Pinkie Pie and Fluttershy.

She gritted her teeth at the pang of guilt over the loss of her friends. Why? Why didn't they give up and serve the Nightmare Goddesses as they should have? She hated having to pretend to fight...

She pulled a Cobra maneuver her body shaking as she forced herself up so suddenly. Was that what happened? Was she pretending?

When she had thought Twilight Sparkle was dead... she had wanted to kill those responsible, but... the cloak... hadn't it been a member of the Council of Nightmares that did it?

She scissored through the clouds. She should have been calmer, it was all for the Council... right?

Growling she dove into an inside loop, aiming for a standing eight, her eyes caught some sparkling around her and she dropped out of the loop, for a brief second her medallion floated up to her eyes. It was chipped on many places, the luster almost gone.

Something else caught her attention. Raising from the castle, a chariot pulled by a couple guard pegasi had taken off.

Curious, she forgot about her medallion and flew down to take a closer look.

“Rainbow Dash.” Nightmare Moon said, once she had approached enough to see her. She was riding the chariot with another pony who was dressed in black. **“What brings you here?”**

Easily keeping up with the pegasi, the rainbow-maned pegasus felt a bit weird about talking to her Queen. “I... I just needed time to think.”

The Queen remained quiet for a few seconds of flight, observing the pegasus, who didn't pull away as she didn't want to offend her.

“Join me here.” Nightmare Moon said, making space for the pegasus to land on the chariot.

“Uh... I'd love to your majesty, but are you sure its a good idea? It could throw off the balance of the whole thing.”

Nightmare Moon's horn lit up and an ephemeral aura surrounded the chariot. **“There, if you land now it won't have any repercussions.”** she glanced at the unicorn besides her. Rainbow Dash hesitated for a second, then flew in and landed as gently as she could. The chariot did not shake, even when Nightmare Moon let it go, although the aura surrounding them remained.

The cyan pegasus looked at the aura curiously.

“No pony can hear us talk while that spell is in effect.” Nightmare Moon explained.

Curiosity about the aura sated, Rainbow Dash looked at the other pony, a unicorn, who was looking away at the clouds and the land below. The black clothes she was wearing was made of a strange material that hung tight to her body, it had several pockets within easy reach of her hooves; two strange contraptions were tight around her front legs. A deep purple cloak covered most of her body, but she could make out that she had a white coat under all that black. Her mane was amazing though, it was a deep green and fell around her shoulders. She realized that she was looking at the legendary Silent Jade.

The Queen had been observing the pegasus and noticed the medallion.

“That's an interesting accessory.” she said softly. **“Can you show it to me?”**

Rainbow Dash almost jumped. She had forgotten to hide her medallion! But... wasn't her Queen deserving of her loyalty? She struggled with the conflicting thoughts until, gritting her teeth, she slowly picked it up with a shaking hoof and showed it to the dark alicorn.

“Interesting.” Nightmare Moon said, looking at it. **“Very interesting.”**

Rainbow Dash looked at the medallion as a small crack appeared on it. “W-what's wrong with it? What's wrong with me?”

Nightmare Moon smiled. **“Nothing is wrong with *you*, Rainbow Dash.”**

The pegasus shook her head, trying to clear it. “Something's wrong!” she said in a whisper. “I can feel it! I...”

“It's not you.”

Another crack appeared. Dash looked at her Council medallion with tears in her eyes. “Then why...”

“Remember.” the alicorn said. **“How did you feel when Twilight died? Or Rarity, Fluttershy and Pinkie Pie?”**

A pang. Like a knife being jabbed into her heart.

“How did you feel when you saw Twilight Spark and Nightmare Flare?”

A shiver ran down Rainbow Dash's back. She was sweating and breathing hard.

“What was it like... when Spitfire betrayed you?” Nightmare Moon asked, ignoring the gasping pegasus. Her eyes narrowed. **“How did you feel when Applejack realized... that you betrayed her?”**

Her world froze. She looked down as if she were moving in slow motion. The medallion around her neck crumbled into pieces as if crushed by an unseen force.

In a flash she relived her life... there had been no Council of Nightmares in it until Spitfire had put the medallion around her neck... she had betrayed all she stood for. All her friends stood for. She had been personally responsible for a guard and a Wonderbolt dying unnecessarily.

She felt a large wing settle gently around her and she was carefully pulled towards Nightmare Moon. She feebly tried to pull away, but the alicorn was stronger. She finally gave in to the embrace and cried and cried on Nightmare Moon's shoulder.

It was several minutes before the pegasus felt like herself again. She slowly pulled out of the embrace and stared at the alicorn in confusion. "But how... why?"

The alicorn stared straight ahead. **"It seems that somepony sought to control you with that medallion... it made you loyal to something to the point of betraying your true self."** Nightmare Moon's smile was cold. **"However, the one responsible probably does not understand who you are at all... powerful as the magic of the medallion may have been, it was no match for the Element of Loyalty."** she chuckled. **"They couldn't have chosen more poorly. You would have broken out of it without my help in a couple of hours more at the most."**

"But... why?" the pegasus asked again. "Doesn't this benefit you?"

The Queen looked up at the eclipse. **"That travesty?"** she shook her head.

Rainbow Dash stared, completely baffled. Finally... "You... you're not Nightmare Moon... not the one we fought..."

"No, I am not." The alicorn confirmed.

Anger and tears welled into Rainbow Dash. "Then why did you kill my friends?!"

Nightmare Moon laughed. But it wasn't an evil laugh or a gloating laugh. It was real mirth. **"Rainbow Dash... haven't you figured it out? They're alive!"**

The pegasus was struck silent.

"They cannot be here, of course." Nightmare Moon continued. **"Nightmare Flare knows they live. But they are safe."**

Once again Rainbow Dash cried while the Queen and the Assassin watched.

“Rainbow Dash...” the alicorn said after a moment.

The pegasus looked up.

“I need to know. Do I have your loyalty? Will you swear it to me?”

Rainbow Dash nodded.

“Then I have something very hard to ask of you. But I promise... it will be worth it, in the end.”

o.O.o

“Hey! Scootaloo!” the little pegasus turned towards the voice and waved at Sweetie Bell and Apple Bloom as the two fillies ran up to her.

“What do you think happened?!” Apple Bloom asked. “I’ve never seen the sun do that!”

“Did the pegasi do it?” Sweetie Bell asked.

“No... everyone is completely going nuts over it!” Scootaloo said. They watched as a gray streak flew across the sky.

“What was that?” Apple Bloom wondered.

“Oh... it’s just Ditzy... she’s usually pretty good at delivering the mail before noon and now... well.” Scootaloo looked up. “It’s... something, but it’s definitely in the 'noon' location. It’s got her all strung up about delivery times.”

The three looked at the sky for a few moments. It was Sweetie Bell that noticed the chariot. “Hey!” she said pointing up with a hoof. “It’s Princess Celestia’s chariot! Maybe she’ll tell us what’s happening!”

“Or it could be Applejack and the others!” Apple Bloom said excitedly. “It seems it’s going straight to Ponyville! Let’s go!”

o.O.o

By the time they arrived, word had already spread that the chariot was coming. Nervous ponies all around had gathered, waiting for it to land.

The Mayor was trying to keep calm while several pegasus had passed the word that it was one of the royal sisters, as relayed by Rainbow Dash, who had flown ahead to let her pegasi friends know and to tell them to spread the word and that per the wishes of the royal sister no pony should be in the air until she left.

Now the ponies watched in apprehension as the chariot did one more loop and descended.

“There's Rainbow Dash!” Scootaloo said excitedly, watching her idol fly down next to the chariot. “She's so cool she gets to fly with the princesses!” she gushed, turning to her friends, who were looking at the chariot in horror. She heard the gasps and turned around confused.

It was not Princess Celestia walking out of the chariot.

Suddenly the Eclipse made much more sense. She got a very sick feeling in her stomach as she watched the Nightmare step in front of the ponies, flanked on either side by Rainbow Dash and a strange-looking unicorn.

Her mind flashed to that night when Nightmare Moon had first appeared, hiding under the curtains, trembling at the evil laugh as the alicorn sent Celestia's guards flying in all directions.

The Mayor found herself staring up at the evil alicorn, mouth agape. Nightmare Moon looked down impassively.

Rainbow Dash hesitated for a second before clearing her throat. “All bow in the presence of Queen Nightmare Moon!” she announced.

The ponies of Ponyville turned to look at her in surprise, fear and resentment. But when the alicorn opened her wings majestically, they all bowed their heads.

All but the three Cutie Mark Crusaders, who stared in shock at what was happening.

“Rainbow Dash?” Scootaloo whispered.

“Citizens of Ponyville.” Nightmare Moon spoke up, making everyone cringe. **“You are now ruled by myself and my sister, Nightmare Flare. Your lives will not be affected... much. But as you can tell by now, the Eclipse is not going away. This is your new life, make the most of it.”**

The ponies were confused. Who was Nightmare Flare?

While Nightmare Moon had been talking to the crowd, the two pegasi pulling her chariot had gotten loose and had drawn knives.

Rainbow Dash never knew what exactly made her jump to the side and tackle the guard as he flew past her. It might have been the Mayor's eyes widening, or maybe the flutter of wings, but whatever it was, in an incredible display of skill, she had jumped back, dodging a knife strike, as the pegasus tried to skewer her.

“You'll pay for the death of Swift Mantle!” the guard roared.

Landing on his back, hard, she pushed him down on to the floor, but she didn't have enough momentum to make it count, and the guard was much stronger than her. He pushed her off and struck, again missing her by mere inches as she dove to the side.

“Who?!” Rainbow Dash asked, dodging again.

“My friend! The guard you and Twilight executed!”

The ponies in the crowd shouted and reared back, horrified at what was happening, but unable or unwilling to move. More than a few gasped as they heard the resentful words of the guard.

Flying up fast, with the guard in tow, Rainbow Dash turned left, stealing a glance down. She gasped. Several ponies had flown up behind the guard to follow her, anger in their eyes, and way below Silent Jade was already

fighting several earth ponies. Nightmare Moon had erected a shield around her as unicorns threw objects of all sizes at her.

It seemed there was no way out other than doing something she might regret. She pulled up faster until she had enough of a distance and then, with a graceful curve, she shot down towards them.

Below her, the Cutie Mark Crusaders watched in horrified fascination as Rainbow Dash took off. There were angry mutters from the crowd and then several pegasi shot up after her.

“Go away!” somepony shouted and an apple flew from the crowd only to splatter on a shield in front of Nightmare Moon.

“We won't follow you or Flare!” somepony else shouted. “Go back to where you came from, monster!”

Besides Nightmare Moon, Silent Jade had intercepted the guard that had attacked the Queen, while the other one attacked the alicorn. The guard was strong, but the unicorn was fast. She ducked under a swing then seemed to disappear.

Sweetie Bell watched in horror as the guard collapsed with a groan, then stopped moving altogether as the assassin's hoof fell on the back of his head. “No... nonono...”

Several earth ponies charged at the assassin, who looked at them in dismay then shot a quick dirty look at Nightmare Moon as she dove forward.

The alicorn for her part seemed impassive as she watched the whole thing from within the protection of her forcefield.

She moved to the side as somepony bucked at her, using the momentum of her turn to plant both front hooves on her attacker's ribs. There was a crack and a cry, the brown stallion falling to the floor in pain. She immediately kicked back catching a mare in the chin, dropping her immediately.

“What are we going to do?” Apple Bloom asked, scared as the crowd became more restless.

“I don't know!” a teary eyed Scootaloo answered, her eyes looking up at the aerial battle. On the one hand she was in awe of her idol taking on so many pegasi. She knew Dash could defeat them... but she was working for the enemy. She bit her lower lip, not knowing who she should be supporting.

“They have to stop!” Sweetie Bell whispered staring at the assassin and the villagers attacking her. “She'll kill them!”

When it seemed that everything was about to burst and the ponies would all attack, a huge explosion reverberated. The force of the air pressed the ponies on the ground down, the wind whipping their manes wildly. A rainbow colored blast wave expanded above them and as everypony stared upwards, they could see all of the pegasi that had flown after Rainbow Dash falling towards the ground, unconscious.

The Sonic Rainboom had the effect of making the already excitable ponies panic. The gathering turned into a stampede and the three friends were caught in it.

Scootaloo, Apple Bloom and Sweetie Bell screamed and hugged each other, closing their eyes as everypony around them ignored them in favor of running away.

Something smacked against them, and they went rolling. They could hear all the noise around them as they kept tumbling without any control. They kept screaming knowing that they would be trampled to death.

Eventually all quieted down and they realized that something was covering them. The three looked up in shock.

“W-what...” Scootaloo pushed herself free and rolled on her back to stare at the green maned unicorn that had somehow managed to pick them up and roll with them all the way to the side. Her black clothes were covered in hoofmarks and she wasn't moving much.

“Why did she do that?” Apple Bloom asked, also pulling her self from under the unconscious unicorn.

Sweetie Bell stood up shakily and shook the unicorn with her hoof. "Jade! Wake up! It's not funny!" she had tears in her eyes.

Scootaloo pulled her back. "What the hay are you doing! She's a bad guy!"

"Shut up!" the filly shouted back, pushing her friend away. "You don't know what you're saying!"

"She will be okay."

The three Cutie Mark Crusaders flinched and slowly turned around. Nightmare Moon stood behind them, horn alight with mystical energies. Around them, the pegasi that had charged after Rainbow Dash slowly floated to the ground, unconscious.

The only remaining floating pony was the Mayor, who Nightmare Moon had somehow captured as everypony else ran, and could only stare in horror and amazement at what the two ponies under Nightmare Moon's orders had been able to achieve by themselves.

"Scootaloo! Sweetie Bell! Apple Bloom!" a rainbow suddenly smashed into them, and they found themselves hugged tightly by Rainbow Dash. "Are you okay?! Did anything happen to you?"

"We're fine!" Apple Bloom shouted. "Can't breathe!"

"Let go! I need to check on Jade!" Sweetie Bell said, pulling free of the pegasus.

Scootaloo didn't say anything, but she wouldn't meet Rainbow Dash's eyes. She shook herself free and didn't look up.

The rainbow-maned pegasus sighed and looked away.

Nightmare Moon's horn sparkled with energy and a white aura surrounded the unconscious unicorn.

“Ooh...” Silent Jade moaned. She shook her head carefully and opened her azure eyes. Suddenly she shot up to her feet, looking around in a panic until she saw the three fillies. She sighed in relief.

Nightmare Moon growled. She levitated the trembling mayor towards them and dropped her on the floor. **“Mayor. Be thankful that this... *display* took place when only I was around. My sister would have everypony involved in the attack made an example of.”**

The Mayor cringed, not daring to look up at the imposing alicorn.

“You need to stand up to your position as leader of Ponyville... and make sure this *never* happens again.”

“Y-yes...” the gray pony stuttered.

“Take everypony to the hospital. No pony is dead... this time.”

Nightmare Moon looked down at Rainbow Dash and Silent Jade. **“We are heading back now.”**

The two ponies nodded and followed the Queen as she made her way to the chariot.

“Wait!” Apple Bloom shouted. “Rainbow Dash! What happened to the others?”

The pegasus hesitated, looking back. “Applejack is fine, Apple Bloom. I hope she'll be able to come home soon.”

“What about the others?” Scootaloo suddenly asked in a cold voice. “Why have we only seen you, Rainbow Dash? Applejack might be fine, but what about Fluttershy? Or Pinkie Pie?” her eyes narrowed. “Where are Rarity and Twilight? And why are you working for Nightmare Moon?” the last question had a hint of hurt and betrayal.

Rainbow Dash looked away so they wouldn't see the hurt in her own eyes. “Sorry girls. That's all I can say for now. You should head home.” they started walking again.

“Wait!” Sweetie Bell said, running up to the assassin. “Why are you doing this, Jade?”

The unicorn looked down at her, but shook her head, trotting to catch up with Nightmare Moon and Dash.

Once the three were together, next to the chariot, the alicorn's horn flashed... and they were gone.

o.O.o

Applejack was breathing heavily, a sheen of sweat covered her whole body. After what had happened... the pillows and mattress were never going to be the same.

"F-fine." Twilight Spark panted.

Applejack looked at her but didn't budge.

"I... will admit I am impressed." Twilight said between pants. "I have never seen... an earth pony... do anything like that."

Applejack's eyes narrowed.

"I... will stop my advances for now." Twilight said, sinking to the floor. She glared at Applejack's mattress fortress. "How you did it is beyond me. But it kept me away." she sighed.

"I'm not getting out of here until you're gone, Twilight."

The unicorn drooped a bit. "Why don't you care about me, Applejack?"

The earth pony within the pillow and mattress fortress was silent. Twilight Spark groaned and stood up on shaky legs. Without a word she made for the door.

"I do care, Twilight." Applejack's voice emanated from within the pillows. "You're one of my best friends... but what you are doing is wrong. The way you are trying to do things is wrong. I don't know what happened to you... but you have to know that there's something very strange about you now. You are not the same Twilight I knew. And with everything that has happened... our friends, the pegasi in the balcony... Nightmare Moon,

Nightmare Flare... Twilight... I can't understand how you can be like this. You never were! And suddenly you want to have a relationship with me?"

"I... I was a bookworm!" Twilight said looking at the fortress. "I was too shy to say it before!"

"No Twilight. There's more to it." Applejack sighed audibly. "Please... go and think about it. You can't be all gone. Please."

Twilight took a deep breath and slowly walked out of the room, closing the door behind her.

Applejack watched as a spell made the door glow for a bit. She waited but Twilight did not barge back in.

The Earth Pony collapsed on the mattress, completely exhausted. She closed her eyes and fell asleep.

Chapter 11

The torches around the cavern crackled as Midnight paced back and forth. The others watched him in restless silence.

“This is the result of a plan created by the Guardian more than a thousand years ago.” Midnight began as all the guests in the cavern sat in a circle facing each other. “The Guardian is an entity old as the world.”

He stopped for a moment, surprised, as a shimmering light appeared in the middle of the circle. A creature, reptilian and long like a snake, with four red eyes, forearms and three rows of teeth on its open maw appeared on it. He turned to stare at Trixie, who's horn was glowing as she projected the image. Big Mac, Soarin', Lyra and Spike recoiled in horror from the image.

“Ah.” he said, nodding to her. “I had forgotten you met it.”

Trixie's smile was sad as she nodded while the others stared. Big Mac shuffled a bit closer to her and whispered something to her ear. The showmare's smile lost a bit of her sadness.

Midnight cleared his throat. “Its nature is tied to that of our Princesses, although they are not truly aware that he exists. Legend has it that there were once more Princesses around... true, Luna and Celestia were the greatest, but there were more alicorns than we ever knew, each protecting and affecting Equestria with their power in a different way. Their influence is still felt through terms we still use, like the North Wind, or Spring.” As he described, the scene changed to include a caricature of the princesses, like the drawings you would find in a foal's book. Under them, several other alicorns flew around different colors, from green to rusty red flew around.

“One by one they fell into a madness that empowered them, but made them hate each other. And one by one, they had to be destroyed, until the two sisters were left alone.”

The alicorns in the projection darkened and burned, fading into ashes until only the ones representing Celestia and Luna remained.

“The Guardian did not have much luck with them. It seemed that all the trials and fighting had made them stronger. There was no plague, no torment he could devise that would bring them down.”

Images of towns burning, terrified animals stampeding out of the forests and battles with the background silhouette of a manically laughing Guardian flashed in front of the gathered ponies.

“That... was a bit much with the Guardian laughing like that.” Midnight commented.

“Hey, I’m a showmare and I’m improvising the whole story!” Trixie growled. “Be appropriately amazed and thankful that the skills of The Great and Powerful Trixie are making your otherwise inane storytelling resemble something remotely interesting!”

Midnight coughed. “The Guardian decided to sleep. He would wake up when the Princesses were weak and he could turn them into his unwitting meals for eternity. He called on his most trusted servant, to whom he gave a set of medallions. Each bore his mark, and all had a special power... once worn, they would make themselves part of the victim's life, rearranging their past to convert them into followers of the Guardian. They would form a 'Council of Nightmares', who would go on to exploit the weaknesses of the Princesses and awaken the Guardian.”

A black unicorn (looking suspiciously like Midnight) approached the Guardian and was given a box. It walked around meeting other ponies and giving them little medallions. The Guardian faded into the background until only its eyes remained visible. And slowly, they closed.

“A thousand years ago, one of the council members discovered an advantage that had never occurred to them to exploit: the sisters' love for their ponies. Knowing that Luna felt a little left out because most ponies back then would not spend time looking at her nightscape, they found their way into the court, spreading rumors about how ponies wanted the nights to be shorter, or to disappear completely.”

The scene played into a familiar set of drawings. The story they all knew played before their eyes. Luna looking down after her hard work at preparing the night, only to find the ponies sleeping.

"His agents struck her where she was the most vulnerable: her heart. Had the Guardian attacked her body or her mind, Luna would have remained strong."

The little cloaked ponies appeared around Luna whispering presumably bad things to her, until she became angry.

“And that's how Nightmare Moon came to be.” Spike said in awe. “Princess Celestia fought her and tried to reason with her, but couldn't. In the end she was forced to exile her to the Moon, where she remained for a thousand years.”

“That is correct. It is well known that she escaped with the aid of the stars roughly a year ago, as the legend foretold, but how Luna freed herself from Nightmare Moon remains a mystery.” Midnight said as Trixie's exposition faded away.

“It was Twilight and the others.” Spike said, drawing gasps from the group. “We were told not to share the story but...” the dragon sighed. “Twilight Sparkle, Rarity, Pinkie Pie, Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy are the Elements of Harmony. They fought Nightmare Moon in the old castle in the Everfree Forest and used the Elements to break her free.”

“That explains much.” Midnight was the first to react. He sighed and looked at the others. “It is likely that both Spitfire and Rainbow Dash are being influenced by the Council medallions.”

“But how do you know so much about them, Mr. Midnight?” Lyra asked.

“And how do you and Spike know each other?” Trixie asked.

“What? You don't know?” Spike spoke up before Midnight could say anything. “Midnight is Twilight Sparkle's dad!”

o.o.o

“Shadowbolts?” Spitfire asked Rainbow Dash as the latter nodded tiredly.

“Yeah... I went with Nightmare Moon and Silent Jade to Ponyville, and we worked pretty well together.” the cyan pegasus smiled hesitantly at Spitfire who was looking slightly hurt. “Hey, it's not like we won't be together, right? I'll still be coming back here... it's just that she needs her own squadron and she had made the offer to me a year ago. When she asked again I couldn't refuse, right?”

“Can't she just get some ponies from the guard to do it?”

“They can't be trusted.” Rainbow Dash said slumping on to the bed.

Spitfire's eyes narrowed. “What do you mean?”

Rainbow Dash sighed. “Well, when I went with Nightmare Moon I was just flying with her, you know?”

Spitfire nodded, her eyes urging her to continue.

“But, when we arrived in Ponyville, they attacked me and Nightmare Moon. I had to take care of the guard and...” she hesitated.

“And?”

“... and Silent Jade took care of the one that attacked Nightmare Moon.” Rainbow Dash hastily added. “Anyway! This is the second time that the guards have attacked. We can't trust them...” she looked worriedly at Spitfire. “Don't trust them. They might hurt you.” she said softly.

Spitfire nodded and flopped on the bed, next to Dash. “I haven't seen nor heard anything from the other Wonderbolts... but I doubt they're happy.”

Rainbow Dash nodded tiredly.

“Rainbow?”

“Hmm-hm?”

“Do you think I should have felt different about Blizzard dying?”

Rainbow Dash could barely keep her eyes open and yawned. “I... dunno... tired. You felt... an' all...” another yawn. “... but duty... hard to...” her head slumped down and a loud snore shook her frame.

Spitfire smiled at the pegasus next to her and carefully got out of bed, covering the rainbow-maned mare with the bedsheets.

She stifled a yawn of her own. It had been a really long day. She stretched and walked out the door, closing it carefully behind her. She headed to her own room.

o.O.o

The room was very dark. Suddenly, she heard a switch and a light hit her in the face. Sweetie Bell blinked several times. “Hey!”

“So...” Scootaloo walked around her. “You know one of Nightmare Moon's minions.”

“Min-what?” Apple Bloom asked.

“Huh... I heard my mom call Rainbow Dash that.” Scootaloo confessed, scratching the wooden floor with her hoof. It still hurt to think of her idol.

“Oh.”

“Anyway.” Scootaloo was suddenly in Sweetie Bell's face. “You know this Jade pony! Confess!”

“Uh...” Sweetie Bell looked slightly embarrassed. “Yes. I do. Can I go now? I'm hungry.”

“No!” Scootaloo resumed walking around her. “You have to tell us! Ponies want to know! The questions are endless! Why you know her? Is she family? Is she a long lost friend from the past? Did you defeat her in mortal combat for the fate of Equestria in a secret location? Is she a demon? Ponies are asking, Sweetie Bell, and I am going to get an answer!”

“Scootaloo?” Apple Bloom patted her friends' shoulder.

“What?”

“Uh, I hate to break it to you but so far we and the Mayor are the only ones in Ponyville that know that Sweetie Bell knows Jade and I don't think the Mayor really wants to know how she knows her.” she shuffled nervously. “I think the Mayor is afraid to ask.”

Sweetie Bell for her part looked nervous and sad. “I... I can't tell you two right now...” she looked up, eyes begging. “Just... please believe me that she's a good pony.”

“Then why was she with Nightmare Moon?” Scootaloo asked.

“Maybe... maybe we just don't know enough?” Sweetie Pie said.

“That's true!” Apple Bloom said. “Rainbow Dash is with Nightmare Moon too, and we all know she's a good pony. Remember what Twilight Sparkle told us once? That if we want to know something, we need to do research!”

The three smiled, although Sweetie Bell's was a bit unsure and seemed slightly forced.

“Well, you know what this means!” the pegasus said excitedly. “Cutie Mark Crusader Nightmare Moon Investigators! Yay!”

“But...” Sweetie Bell bit back her words. She also wanted to know what was happening. “Where do we start?”

“There's only one place to find our answers.” Scootaloo said with a serious look. “Canterlot.”

o.O.o

Nightmare Flare stood at the top of the observatory, watching the horizon. She heard the flutter of wings and the sound of displaced air and turned to face her sister, as she landed next to her.

“How was Ponyville, sister?” Nightmare Flare asked.

Nightmare Moon snorted, walking up to stand next to her. **“As expected. They didn't like it one bit that there has been a change in power. They even attacked. Rainbow Dash can be trusted... and Jade's skills and loyalty were never in doubt.”**

“Whatever happens,” Nightmare Flare smirked. **“we will not be pawns.”**

“I have asked Rainbow Dash to become the captain of the Shadowbolts once again.” Nightmare Moon said after a moment. **“She agreed. She'll begin looking for good fliers soon. Sister, I cannot trust the guards.”**

“They believe it was you that corrupted me. Their dedication and loyalty is to be commended, but treason cannot be forgiven.” The Sun Goddess said. **“Choose wisely, sister.”**

“I will.” Nightmare Moon said. **“Do you have a plan?”**

Nightmare Flare nodded and looked at her sister from the corner of her eye. **“There are many questions to be answered yet. But I want to start my own search as soon as possible.”**

“I understand, sister.” Nightmare Moon nodded. **“We will find your daughter.”**

“Did you feel her in Ponyville?”

“No.” Nightmare Moon sighed. **“All of the unicorns attacking me were mediocre in magic. The pegasi chasing after Rainbow Dash showed none of the natural grace needed... and the earth ponies had no magic at all, hidden or otherwise.”**

Nightmare Flare remained impassive. **“So my daughter is not in Ponyville. Very well. I will conduct my own search here in Canterlot.”** she turned around and started trotting away.

Nightmare Moon did not answer. She just looked up at the Eclipse for a long time.

o.O.o

“Wait.” Trixie said looking at Midnight. “You are Twilight Sparkle's father?! Then...” she looked towards one of the side caverns.

“Yes.” Midnight sighed. “That's me inside.”

“But that doesn't make sense.” Lyra said. “You're right here. How can you be there?”

“Well...”

“Oh, just show them!” Trixie said, pushing the older unicorn so hard he stumbled and fell on top of Lyra.

“Eep!” the mint-green unicorn closed her eyes, expecting Twilight's father to crush her under his weight. When nothing happened she opened her eyes again. She slowly turned around to see him standing up while glaring at Trixie.

“Wow!” Spike said. “How did you do that?! You went right through her!”

Soarin' was at a loss for words.

“W-what happened?” Lyra asked, stepping back.

“He went through you.” Trixie said. “Literally.”

Lyra blinked. “But how?”

“Was that a trick, Trixie?” Spike asked eagerly, his earlier grumpiness towards the mare gone in between the impressive magical presentation and the latest 'trick'. “Can you show me how to do it?”

“All you have to do is kick the bucket.” Midnight growled.

“Really? Hmm.” the little dragon looked around. “Are there any buckets around?”

Midnight facehoofed while Trixie suppressed a smile.

“Y-you mean you're...” Lyra stammered, paling.

“Yes.” the elder unicorn nodded.

“But...” Soarin' finally spoke up looking from him to Trixie. “How did she...” his words died as he stared.

Trixie had somehow lifted up from the ground and hovered towards him. She wasn't using magic, since her horn did not glow. Smiling, the showmare approached him until they were face to face. She slowly became translucent and pushed her ethereal hoof through his head. “Boo!”

o.O.o

“And that is why you will never, ever do that again.” Midnight said sternly to a sheepish Trixie while Big Macintosh finished tying Lyra's legs, picked her up and put her down next to an equally gagged, tied, wide-eyed and whimpering Soarin' and Spike.

While Applejack was well-known for her lasso skills, her brother was no slouch. Somepony had to have taught her, after all.

The three struggled to get loose, but Big Mac's knots were too good for that. “Eeyup.” the draft pony sighed. “I hope nopony out there heard the screams, cries for help and the pounding on the door.”

Midnight sighed. “Well, very few ponies ever come down here. We might have gotten lucky.”

“I did not know you could do that, Trixie.” Big Machintosh commented.

“Oh, while you were gone earlier today I started experimenting.” Trixie said.
“Would have been useful to know I could float.”

“It was a risk.” Midnight pointed out. “You didn't know what could have happened to you by doing all of that.”

“The Great and Powerful Trixie fears nothing.”

“That may be.” the male unicorn grumbled. “But I'd rather not loose allies to careless experimenting.”

“Okay, but you still have some explaining to do.” Trixie said, giving him a hard look. “You told me and Big Mac that you had gotten a Council of Nightmares Medallion years ago and had been enchanted by it into servitude for the last ten years until you got into a fight and died.” her eyes narrowed. “You never mentioned you were Twilight's father... why didn't you? Especially with-” she cut herself short, staring at him slack-jawed.

“Trixie?” Big Mac looked at her with a frown.

“You... you killed Twilight!” Trixie shouted, an accusing and shaking hoof pointing at the elder unicorn.

This elicited a series of muffled screams from the bound ponies and dragon.

Midnight looked away in shame. He closed his eyes. “That is the danger of the medallions... they twist your reality and the longer you live in that lie, the more it becomes truth to you.”

He slumped down on the floor. “We found out that Celestia was in a very emotional position, although not why. While Spitfire scouted around, I was to go into the hall and investigate... see if we could find anything to exploit to break her will and let the Nightmare out.” he chuckled. “Imagine my

surprise when out of no-where I see Twilight Sparkle. She obviously knew what was happening, and I needed to know. I was bound by the medallion's magic to kill whoever saw me during a mission for the Guardian and so I had to... I had to kill her."

Big Mac stood next to Trixie who looked completely appalled, silently supportive. She noticed how close he was and smiled shakily in appreciation. The stallion just nodded.

On the floor Spike was giving Midnight a glare that would have set the ghost on fire had it been possible.

"The medallion's history in my mind played very different from the truth." Midnight sighed. "Years ago, I was so proud of Twilight for not only impressing everyone with her power, but also by getting accepted and then selected by Princess Celestia herself to be her personal student." his eyes clouded over as he remembered with a faint smile. "I had never been so proud of anything! I mean, sure, there were plenty of moments when I was proud of my little filly as she grew, but... right then, it was all her. She studied so hard and practiced for hours and hours. And she was finally there! But... it drew attention. The wrong sort of attention."

The gathered ponies exchanged glances. Even the three tied 'guests' had stopped struggling as they listened.

"One night... a pony in a black cloak knocked on the door to our house." Midnight's voice turned strained. "My wife, Star Dancer was asleep... so I went to answer it. When I did... it was a unicorn... her magic threw me back before I could react. I felt the cold metal of the medallion against my chest... I couldn't move... I heard Star Dancer shout my name..." he stopped.

The cavern was completely silent.

Midnight drew a shuddering breath. "I... told Twilight that Star had had an accident..." he gritted his teeth. "T-the medallion made me resent that Twilight turned to Celestia in the sudden absence of her mother... Twilight already greatly admired the Princess but after that... i-in any case, I tried to get her to come back home, but she wouldn't... the plan to use her to get to Celestia as a member of the Council never came to be."

"What happened?" Trixie asked softly, her eyes concentrating on the stone floor.

Midnight sighed. "Last night... I fought her and she fought back, despite having been working for hours on whatever she had been doing, despite the emotional shock... I hated it, but deep inside I was very, very proud of her. She didn't have any experience in combat magic but... she was so resourceful!"

Spike was looking at him with an unreadable expression. The little dragon remembered the wall of the castle exploding. Hearing Princess Luna tell Rainbow Dash that Twilight... his Twilight was gone.

"At the very end, her magic was so strong the medallion cracked. It didn't break its control over me... I don't know if even destroying the thing completely would have done that... but it allowed me a split second to try and teleport the both of us out of there. Needless to say, when I arrived here, I was already dead." the elder unicorn looked sadly at the other room. "And the teleportation did not work as I expected. There was no Twilight with me." he looked down in defeat. "I had failed her again."

Big Mac had been untying the others as they seemed to have calmed down. Spike stood up, his little fist shaking and tears streaming down his face. He glared at the ghost of the elder unicorn. Midnight would not meet his gaze.

"We should show them what's in the other room." Big Mac suggested.

Midnight hesitated, then nodded. The silent group followed the navy-blue unicorn into the other chamber.

Lyra was the first to notice the body. She screeched. "Is that...?!"

"What's left of me." Midnight said. "Yes."

Spike went up to the cloaked remains and gave them a resentful kick. He turned to glare at Midnight. "I know you were not in control... but I hate you."

The unicorn simply nodded.

The group continued around the shrine until they all stood staring.

"W-what?" Soarin' asked in wonder.

"I don't know." Midnight confessed looking at it with no small measure of wonder himself. "But whenever I look at it... I feel hope."

Spike gulped, his eyes bright, reflecting the light that came from... it.

o.O.o

Lyra, Big Macintosh, Soarin' and Spike stood at the entrance to the cave, looking back towards Trixie and Midnight.

"We'll start gathering information, then." Soarin' said.

"Remember not to engage any members of the Council..." Midnight warned. "Although I doubt they'll be too interested in trying to capture anyone. Right now, they think they won."

Lyra nodded nervously. "I'll see if I can get in contact with Applejack and the others."

“And I'll try to find out how much Twilight has really changed.” Spike said.

“The Great and Powerful Trixie commands you to be careful, Big Mac.” the blue unicorn said. “And to come back soon.”

The draft pony smiled. “Eeyup.”

With a last nod, the group walked away after Soarin' and Big Mac closed the doors. They walked in silence for a while, following the road towards Canterlot when Spike just couldn't handle it anymore.

“Okay, so, what is going on between you and Trixie?”

Chapter 12

“Spike!”

The little dragon froze. He hadn't expected to find Twilight Sparkle in her room of all places. Wait. Okay, that had been a silly assumption.

“Uh... hi, Twilight!” he said, forcing a smile and pretending to be cheerful. He took a good look at her and did a double take. He hadn't had a chance to appreciate the changes in her when he was in the courtyard, but now he could really see her up close.

She looked so different.

Her coat was darker, her horn longer, she had a scar, her hair was almost black except for the red streak on it, her eyes had changed a bit... but her voice was the same. And she had fangs. Cool.

He suddenly remembered the sense of loss he had experienced the day before when he had thought her gone forever. Sure, she had changed... who wouldn't, after being killed and resurrected?

Spike found himself hugging the unicorn. “I thought you were gone Twilight!” he wailed, dragon tears dripping to the floor. “I heard what happened, and...”

“I'm okay, Spike.” Twilight said softly. “I wouldn't leave my little brother alone, would I?”

Spike pulled back to look at her. “You have a brother?”

Twilight Spark shook her head and poked his head with her hoof. “You, dimwit.”

“Oh... oh!” Spike smiled.

“Good. Now that you get it, you have to help me with Applejack.”

The dragon blinked. "What?"

"Applejack." Twilight sighed. "I know you've noticed it too!"

"Uh..."

"We were meant for each other, she and I!" Twilight Spark declared. Then she deflated. "But she won't return my love!" she turned to the dragon. "What should I do, Spike?!"

The purple dragon stood gazing into space, a huge blush on his face.

"Spike?" no response. "SPIKE!"

"Huh?! Wha- sorry! Did you just say..."

"Yes. Me and Applejack!" she grinned at him. "Were you thinking dirty thoughts?"

If possible, the blush increased, and he looked down embarrassed. The little dragon surreptitiously checked if he had gotten a nosebleed from the mental images. He had heard that could happen.

"Well, whatever you had in mind, young dragon... is probably going to happen. And more."

Okay. Nosebleed.

o.O.o

Lyra and Bic Macintosh sat on a cafe overlooking the castle, wondering what their next move should be, unaware that their current setting and the nervousness apparent in Lyra had drawn some attention.

"I... have no idea how to do this, Big Mac." Lyra whispered nervously.

"Sure, I can get into the Castle, but I don't know what type of information, if any, I could get!"

She squeaked when the waiter placed a cup of tea in front of her. She grinned sheepishly when said pony looked at her confused. "Sorry, sorry."

For his part, Big Mac snorted. "Keep it simple, you can learn a lot by just listening." The draft pony shrugged.

Lyra stared at him as she slowly stirred her tea. "You make it sound so easy." she trailed off, thinking of all the mystery and spy books she had read as a young filly. She struggled for details. She had read them so long ago, way before she got her cutie mark and started playing the lyre.

She sighed.

She missed playing music and she missed Bon-Bon. She had just come over to visit family and 24 hours later she was part of the rebel alliance against Nightmare Moon, Nightmare Flare, a giant snake called the Guardian for some reason, a crazy resurrected Twilight Sparkle, a Council of Evil and for all she knew, everypony in the Castle.

She took a deep breath, trying to calm herself. Okay, so what *did* she remember from the books? Spies needed to dress well to be able to go into many places... well that wasn't a problem, since she was a minor noble, she was able to go where she needed to go. What else? Spies were always conscious of their surroundings.

She started looking around suspiciously while Big Mac watched, amused.

When she noticed a group of guards walking their way she panicked. "Shit! Guards!" she whispered. She looked around guiltily and wildly trying to figure out what to do. Okay, okay, what did spies in the books? Oh no... they were getting closer! Yes! She remembered now!

Stretching across the table she grabbed Big Mac. "Quick! Kiss me!"

She closed her eyes and pulled herself up to the stallion, kissing him for all she was worth, hoping against hope that the guards would think them a normal couple having tea.

She heard Big Mac's muffled attempts to say something but he hadn't seen the guards! She couldn't let him talk! How to stop him?! Wait... Hmm... apples.

The stallion's eyes went even wider when he felt the tongue. He was so surprised that he even stopped struggling as his brain shut down. He didn't even notice the guards marching calmly next to the cafe, ignoring them and the rest of the ponies in there completely as they carried on with their patrol.

Once they were gone, Lyra finally pushed him back. And started sputtering.

Big Mac just slowly slid down to a sitting position, eyes wide open, jaw hanging.

“Gah!” Lyra coughed. “Gross.” she looked through watery eyes at Big Mac. “No offense, Big Mac but I'm not into stallions.”

The draft pony didn't say anything but his eyes did look at something behind Lyra.

With a feeling of dread, the musician slowly turned around. She gasped in horror when she saw who was behind her.

The area around Bon-Bon seemed to shimmer with angry energy as the pony looked at her fillyfriend with unbridled anger. “Lyraaaa...” the earth pony growled.

“Bon-Bon! I...”

“Nothing!” the earth pony interrupted. “You and I are through! To think that I came all the way here to surprise you because I missed you and I find you...” throwing her hoofs in the air, Lyra's filly turned around and marched out of the cafe.

“Wait! Bon-Bon!” the unicorn shouted, jumping up and running after her.

Big Mac shook his head and settled down to finish his drink. He sure was glad Trixie hadn't seen that.

He stopped. Or had she?

o.O.o

"I'm going out."

Midnight looked up from the runes in the room that he was studying. "Are you sure? I just found this amazing magic equation..."

"The Great and Powerful Trixie is sure." the unicorn said, glaring at him. "I spent all of last night and every time Big Mac went out studying runes with you. And, although I have learned a little bit, the Great and Powerful Trixie has... other things to attend to."

"But..." Midnight motioned with his hoof towards the shrine.

"It's still going to be here when I come back." Trixie said. "Besides, none of the runes actually have anything to do with it!"

"So far!" Midnight said indignantly. "But! Look at all the runes in the room! They're all over the place!"

"And we have eternity to go through them." the mare said venomously. "But we don't for things we have to do *now*." with that said, she turned around and trotted through the metal doors, leaving Midnight by himself.

o.O.o

"Rainbow Dash."

The pegasus rolled in bed with a muffled "leave me alone!"

"Rainbow Dash."

"Wuh?" Rose-colored eyes opened slowly. Her eyes focused bit by bit until she could clearly make out the face of Nightmare Moon.

The alicorn watched as the pegasus suddenly became a blur and followed it with her eyes as Rainbow Dash crashed into the bathtub in the bathroom. The showerhead activated and the pegasus was drenched in seconds.

Nightmare Moon carefully walked to look inside the bathroom as the pegasus gasped.

“Don't do that!” Rainbow Dash exclaimed as she tried to find a way to turn off the shower.

Barely restraining a smile, Nightmare Moon casually flipped a lever and the water stopped.

“Well, Rainbow Dash.” the alicorn said. **“It's good to see you are so excited to start your job as a Shadowbolt.”**

Sitting in the tub, the cyan pegasus just glared at her as her wings and mane dripped water.

“When you are ready, get into your uniform. We are going to visit some friends.”

The pegasus' eyes widened. “Do you mean...?”

Nightmare Moon just smiled and walked out of the room.

o.O.o

The house was not in the richest part of town, but it was still a step above middle class. It was big enough for sections of it to be called 'wings' and for it to have guest rooms (emphasis on the plural) and a front yard, and a back yard with tasteful decorations.

Trixie stood in front of the white gates, looking at a place she had not seen in... what, ten years? Fifteen? She shook her head and looked back towards the castle. She probably had better things to do... she could get into the castle itself and nopony would know... she started to turn but stopped, looking back at the gates with a pained expression.

Sighing she trotted through them and into the house.

“Mooom!”

Trixie stood, paralyzed as a little emerald-green unicorn filly with a lavender mane shouted. She hadn't gotten her cutie mark yet, and couldn't be more than eight years old.

“W-what...” the showmare stammered.

The little unicorn trotted through her and yelled again. “Mooom! Lunch is ready!”

“I'll be right there, dear!” a familiar voice emanated from upstairs. But, there was something strange about how it sounded. It was... strained, somehow, as if the pony answering was having a hard time talking.

Trixie frowned, noticing that the little filly had also caught the weird tone of voice. A door opened and shut upstairs, and a tired-looking, puffy-eyed unicorn wearing a saddle bag slowly made her way down the stairs.

“Mom...” the little filly galloped up to the rusty red unicorn and nuzzled her. “Is everything okay?”

Trixie approached slowly, as her mother shook her head sadly, her salt-and-pepper mane swaying.

The door to the house opened and another unicorn walked in. His coat was white and he had a green mane, with hints of gray in it, his cutie mark was a golden cross with a scalpel across it.

“Daisy Sprout.” the unicorn stallion's smile was shaky. “Let your mother come down the stairs.”

“Dear... I'm sorry, I know you had a lot of appointments today...” the elder mare started to say, but the male unicorn shook his head.

“Don't... your note seemed very urgent.”

The mare nodded, her eyes going hesitantly to Daisy Sprout, who looked at her and her eyes widened. “No! Uh-uh! No way I'm going away for this!”

Trixie smiled. She remembered that look and she had acted the exact same way whenever her parents wanted her out of the room so they could talk about 'adult' stuff.

The old mare sagged as her eyes watered. She sat down on the stairs and held her daughter close, crying.

“W-what is it dear?” her dad asked, slowly making his way up to her.

Without speaking, her horn glowed a little and the saddle bag opened. A piece of fabric covered in stars slowly slid out with the aid of magic, until it was draped on the stairs. It was in a very bad state. Pieces were missing, edges torn as if something had bitten through it. It had dark splashes of red on it.

“What... what is it?” Daisy Sprout asked when the sudden silence hit like a thunderbolt. “Mom? Dad? What is it?”

The male unicorn had sunk to his knees, staring at the torn cloth in horror.

Trixie took a couple of steps towards it, completely baffled. “My... cape...”

o.o.o

It took Rainbow Dash about ten seconds to get ready. She walked out of the room, primed and eager to get things going.

“So, what's the mission, your majesty?”

Nightmare Moon watched servants skitter past them, and guards flinch. “**I will tell you momentarily.**” she said, as they walked towards the courtyard.

“Hey, and where's Jade? Is she coming with us?”

Nightmare Moon shook her head. “**No. She has her own mission to attend to.**”

“Oh.” Rainbow Dash looked away.

It took them a couple of minutes more to get to the courtyard. Nightmare Moon looked around, nodded and with a flare of her horn both she and Rainbow Dash disappeared.

o.O.o

“No...” the little filly said. “No!”

Trixie tore her eyes from the cape to see her parents trying to hold the little filly as she struggled. “Trixie is not gone! She'll come back and show me all her magic tricks!” the tiny unicorn was crying. “She's not gone! She's not gone!” she finally freed herself and ran up the stairs, leaving the two parents and the invisible ghost of her sister behind.

The two unicorns didn't seem to have the energy to follow her. Trixie's father just stared at the torn cape. “How...”

“They don't know.” he mother answered. “They think it might have been an Ursa... an earth pony she had bought a map from got worried when there was no news of her and organized an expedition... they found...” she couldn't finish. “Trixie's saddle bag had some of our letters... they sent the cape.”

Trixie's father gently took the cape with his hoofs. “Oh... my Trixie.” he pulled it to him, his head lowering into the folds of the cape. “My brave little Trixie...”

His body shook as his wife held him also crying, while to the side Trixie herself was getting teary eyed. She walked up to them. “I- I'm here daddy...” she whispered hoarsely. “I'm here... please... don't cry...”

“It's my fault...” the stallion said. “I... should have... I should have stopped her. She was too young..” his voice was so full of guilt it dug at Trixie's heart like a knife.

“You couldn't have...” her mother whispered, rocking them both softly. “You know how she was... how stubborn and proud.”

"I should have been a better father." he whispered. He looked at his wife. "Cinnamon... I should have told her I loved her before she left. I should have told her I loved her every letter I wrote, every exchange we had during the years..." his eyes held so much guilt. "Why didn't I? Why..."

Trixie was crying now. She tried to touch her parents, but her hooves went through them. The joke that she had played on Soarin' didn't seem so funny anymore.

"I'm sure, wherever she is... she knows you love her." her Cinnamon said. "I'm sure she knows we all love her..."

"I do!" Trixie cried. "I do mom! I'm so sorry dad! I'm sorry I never told you!" she closed her eyes. "I'm sorry I ran away! I'm sorry I was such a... such a brat all these years! I'm sorry I never gave you the chance you wanted!"

The pair of unicorns seemed to have calmed down a little bit. Cinnamon was slowly rocking Trixie's father.

"What about Daisy Sprout?" he whispered.

"Let her be for now..." Cinnamon answered. "Let her calm down, and then we'll talk to her."

Her husband nodded, but Trixie was already all the way up the stairs.

o.O.o

The courtroom was made of gray stone and was completely devoid of life. Silence permeated every inch of the room as if nopony had ever set hoof there at all.

A dark cloud suddenly materialized in the center and slowly coalesced into two winged figures.

The smaller stumbled and barely caught herself. "Wow. What a ride."

Rainbow Dash said.

Nightmare Moon smirked. **"Teleporting is always uncomfortable the first time. You'll get used to it."**

The pegasus shrugged. She'd rather not. "So... where are we?"

"My palace for the last thousand years." Nightmare Moon intoned. **"I built it with my magic as I stared at Equestria, just outside my reach."**

"Oh."

"But we are here for a reason." the black alicorn continued. **"Your friends, Rarity, Fluttershy and Pinkie Pie have been my guests in the rooms bellow the surface. They have been asleep ever since I was turned into Nightmare Moon... to protect them from going mad in here. I... we need their help, I have specific missions for them, but we need their trust... and that is why you are here."**

Rainbow Dash suddenly looked nervous. "I guess there's no helping it, huh?"

Nightmare Moon shook her head and the pegasus sighed.

"Okay then. Let's get this show on the run."

o.O.o

Trixie walked past her parents' room and several others until she stood directly across from her old room. In the room across from hers, a little flower-decorated wooden sign said "Daisy's Room" the showmare's own room had a sign with little stars declaring it "Trixie's Room".

She felt ashamed. She had a little sister, and she never heard about it. It probably had been mentioned in one of those letters her parents had sent her that she never opened. And now, her little sister needed her and she couldn't be there for her.

Hay, she didn't even know what Daisy Sprout liked, what her favorite food was, if she loved any stories in particular, or what games she liked to play.

In short, she now stood in front of the door of somepony she should have gotten to know a long time ago, that somehow had really cared for her despite her failings as a sister.

As she was about to step through her sister's door, she realized that while she could hear her crying... it was not coming from Daisy's room. It was coming from her own.

o.O.o

Fluttershy woke up when she felt somepony shaking her shoulder.

“Fluttershy... come on dear, wake up.”

Her eyelids fluttered cutely as she slowly rose. “W-what happened?”

“...”

“Rarity?”

“Sorry dear... I... thought I had to be dreaming at first... but my mind would not conjure up such a dreadful place like this.” she motioned at the gray walls. “Whoever designed this clearly has no idea of how Gothic themes are supposed to work, why, there is absolutely no light to contrast the shadows!”

“Pinkie Pie!” Fluttershy saw the pink earth pony groaning in the corner of the room. She flew up to her friend and helped her up.

“Oooh...” the party pony shook her head. “We're alive!” she started bouncing. “Yay! The big meanie Mclousy Black Snooty failed!”

“I don't like that moniker.”

Rarity's eyes followed an arc over her head as she followed the trajectory of Pinkie Pie as she jumped from fright by the sudden appearance of Nightmare Moon.

She caught the alicorn's eyes and held them for a moment before shuffling self-consciously. She went to join Fluttershy who was trembling in the corner. “Calm down, Fluttershy dear, let's see what this...” Nightmare Moon gave a warning cough. “...Dark Alicorn wants.”

“I want you to join my cause.”

“No way! Nope!” Pinkie Pie said. “You couldn't convince me with all the chocolate in the world, mixed with all the sugar in the world, mixed with all the vanilla in the world, mixed with...”

“I get the idea.” Nightmare Moon growled. **“Which is why I will let somepony else talk you you.”**

“And who might that be?” Rarity asked with a defiant smirk. “A conjured up pony? Or perhaps a...”

“Nah, nothing that fancy...”

Fluttershy gasped and Pinkie Pie stopped bouncing. The three ponies stared as Nightmare Moon lifted her wing, revealing a nervous Rainbow Dash in a uniform they had not seen for a year and hoped to never see again.

“Dashie?” Pinkie Pie squeaked.

o.O.o

The room was mostly how she had left it. The small desk, her few story books, even her bed was made, with the stars and moons-themed sheets on top. However, something was different. In every possible surface of the walls or areas where her old belongings were not taking space, were pictures of her during her shows. Posters, news articles, even a map with little star-shaped pins placed on cities she had visited.

She walked towards the map. It was up to date! There was a little pin in the last city she had visited, where she got the map and...

The sniffing made Trixie turn to the little filly curled up on her bed, holding a little plush doll that looked remarkably like her. She silently sat down next to the filly, her body not even pressing down on the bed.

Somehow her sister had kept track of her, all through the years of not knowing her. She had been a dedicated fan, in secret and never even acknowledged by Trixie... but she had really admired her sister.

Trixie felt like crying more. She looked around the room until her eyes settled on a small box which had some glitter dust and magic glue. She had spent so many hours as a young filly decorating things, making them 'sparkle'. She chuckled. She looked up at the poster right next to the bed. It had been from one of her shows before Ponyville.

An idea formed in her mind.

o.O.o

Lyra had finally cornered Bon-Bon in an alley. The cream-colored mare glared at her 'ex-fillyfriend' "How could you, Lyra?! I thought that you weren't into colts!"

"I'm not! I promise!" Lyra said desperately.

"Right." Bon-Bon huffed. "I saw you look around before you kissed Big Macintosh! You even looked my way and ignored me! What am I? Just a background pony? I can't believe you didn't see me!"

Lyra flinched with each word.

"And don't tell me you aren't into colts! I got a good look at you two going at it! Tongue and everything!"

"No! I had no choice! Besides, Big Macintosh is taken!"

That stopped Bon-Bon. "He is?" her gossip sense started tingling, but then her anger returned. "If he is its even worse! That means you were both cheating!"

"But... Bon-Bon! I had no choice! If the guards had caught us..."

Bon-Bon's eyes narrowed. "What is this about the guards? What type of trouble have you been getting into?"

Lyra looked around wildly. They seemed to be alone. "... got dragged into a rebel alliance to defeat Nightmare Moon and Nightmare Flare..."

Bon-Bon's eyes widened. She hadn't seen what had happened at the courtyard, but it had been the whispered talk of the city. She looked scared.

“Lyra... why... you could be killed!” she whispered.

“I know! That's why I was so nervous! I remembered all those novels I used to read as a filly about spies and complicated plots and then, when I saw the guards I remembered this one scene where...”

She stopped as Bon-Bon dragged her in for a very passionate kiss. She felt herself melt against the earth pony, all worries, all fears dissipating as the familiar embrace of her lover held her.

Suddenly, Bon-Bon let go and Lyra slumped to the floor with an “oof!”

The earth pony looked out the alley to make sure the guards had passed them by and were not returning. “Well... it seems to work.”

Lyra shook her head then looked up at Bon-Bon. “Does this mean I'm forgiven?”

“No.” Cyan eyes glared at her then softened. “But... give me some time... this is a pretty big shock.”

“Oh.”

“Were you eating apples?”

o.O.o

Daisy Sprout looked down at the little doll in her hooves and sniffed. Her big sister was gone. She had wanted so much to meet her! She had even asked her parents many times to take her to one of the shows, but they wouldn't. She wrote and wrote to Trixie, sending her letters and notes along her parent's mail, but for the longest time there was no reply, until one day her mom and dad had read her a letter from Trixie, telling her to study hard and to be a good filly. She was very busy with her trips so she couldn't write much, but she loved her regardless.

That had been three years ago. She was old enough now to recognize the writing in the letter as that of her mother, but, back then, it had meant so much to her that she had started following her sister's career, finding articles praising her, and pictures and even interviews. She had framed them and put them in her sister's room, hoping that one day Trixie would return and make everyone happy.

But now she was gone... Daisy Sprout sighed. Who was she kidding? Trixie probably didn't even know she existed.

A reflection caught her attention and she looked up in wonder as glitter-dust floated out of Trixie's desk.

She was slightly afraid, but the dust spiraled through the air and she had to turn to look at it. The glitter-dust seemed to gather in front of the poster she had bought with her savings. She gasped as small words formed of glitter-dust attached themselves to it. The handwriting was very different from her parents.

"Mom! Dad!" she shouted.

Both unicorns ran into the room at the urgency in their daughter's voice. They stared as the glitter-dust kept writing.

The three unicorns were teary eyed as they read the upper left corner of the poster.

Dear Daisy Sprout,

I love you little sister, be good, be strong, and make me proud. I will always watch over you.

And then, on the lower right corner...

Mom, Dad... I love you both and I know you love me. I'm sorry for being so selfish.

-The Great and Powerful Trixie

As the three unicorns cried together and held each other, they never knew that right behind them a fourth cried alone.

Chapter 13

The Eclipse cast stark shadows and light. A red hue gave the sky an eerie quality that made everypony nervous. Although most ponies could see just fine in the gloomy ambience, the authorities in Canterlot had decided to light the torches in an attempt to cheer up the citizens.

The sound of trumpets in the Canterlot Plaza drew the attention of all ponies around. A tan earth pony with an open scroll as a cutie mark stepped forth between the trumpeteers.

“Hear ye! Hear ye! Her majesty, Queen Nightmare Flare has declared that all mares of ages twenty to twenty two in the city are to assemble at the castle. Compliance is mandatory. Failure to attend will result in immediate action by the guards, followed by arrest and imprisonment. Posters will be put up for your perusal. If you have family members that fall in this category have them go to the castle gates for further instructions. As of now, all mares that belong in the age group please gather 'round here. You will be taken to the castle.”

The pony stepped back and turned around, leaving bewildered ponies in his wake. After a few seconds the crowd became abuzz with concern.

“What do you think that was about?” Bon-Bon asked Lyra as they watched one of the guards put up a poster.

Lyra shook her head. “I don't know... why would the Prin-... I mean, Queen, do that... and only for mares? And for every mare in Canterlot in our age range? That... doesn't make any sense at all! There's at least a couple of thousand mares here who fall in that group!”

“Ladies.” a voice next to them made them jump.

The guard looked impassive as he indicated they should move to the center of the plaza along with the other mares that were being herded by the guards.

Trading nervous glances, the two acquiesced and trotted to join the other mares.

“Maybe I'll be able to find out something useful.” Lyra whispered to herself.

Bon-Bon bit her lower lip and looked at her worriedly. But kept quiet.

o.O.o

“Dashie... how could you?” Pinkie Pie asked.

Rainbow Dash scratched the floor with her hoof, not looking up. Her thoughts were in turmoil, how could she convince them that Nightmare Moon was not the enemy?

“Some Element of Loyalty you are.” Rarity sniffed, looking at her angrily. “First sign of trouble you join 'the winning team' is that it?”

“No!” Rainbow Dash looked up angry, offended and hurt. She locked stares with Rarity. “That's not how it is!”

“But... well, you are dressed as a Shadowbolt...” Fluttershy said. “I mean... last time you almost joined them...”

Rainbow Dash sighed and looked up at Nightmare Moon for help.

The Mare in the Moon simply raised her eyebrow as if saying *'you're kidding, right?'*

“Look, Nightmare Moon is not the bad guy here.” Rainbow Dash started.

“Well, I very much doubt that, dear.” Rarity interrupted ignoring the alicorn's look. “The fact is that we all know her to be evil and to want an eternal night just so that ponies can look at her stars and love her.”

“Oh! Oh! And there's also the evil laugh, dragon eyes, gloomy aura and burning, hate-filled glare she's giving me right now!” Pinkie Pie added.

Rainbow Dash looked up at the black alicorn, who looked back at her. There was something in those eyes, true but... it was not hatred.

The pegasus sighed. "Look, listen to me... things are pretty bad down there..."

"D-down there?" Fluttershy asked. "Where are we? I mean... if you want to tell me, that is okay..."

Rainbow Dash's smile was shaky. "Um... in the Moon?"

"What?!" Pinkie Pie shouted. "We're in the Moon?! That is sooooo awesome! I want to go out!"

"I would not recommend it." Nightmare Moon said. **"There's no air out there. And the temperature changes are extreme. You would die almost immediately. Although it would still be extremely painful."**

That stopped Pinkie Pie's momentum for a bit.

"Rainbow Dash." Rarity looked at the pegasus sternly. "You better cough up an explanation, dear, or you will be in a lot of trouble."

"Fine!" the pegasus sighed. "Look, the fact that you three are alive and relatively free, and that I am not a murdering psychopath is thanks to her! She saved you, and she saved me!"

"What do you mean?" Rarity asked a bit more softly when she saw her friend tremble.

"Spitfire... she gave me this medallion... it made everything twisted in my mind." she looked down. "I... I killed a guard because of it."

The three friends recoiled from her as if she were a poisonous snake.

"Now," Nightmare Moon said. **"That is not fair, Rainbow Dash. You had no control over that, and even when you brought the guard down, you did not know that Twilight was going to execute them under Nightmare Flare's orders."**

“But...” Rainbow Dash's eyes watered. “I... but... I could have stopped it and...”

The three friends watched amazed as Nightmare Moon wrapped the sobbing pegasus with a wing.

“You regretted it immediately. Even with the medallion's influence. And that triggered your Element to set you free.” the alicorn said soothingly.

Rainbow Dash didn't look up, but nodded weakly until she felt another wing drape across her shoulders and the hoofs of her three friends as they hugged her.

“It's okay Dashie.” Pinkie Pie whispered.

“I'm sorry you had to go through that alone, darling.” Rarity said, tears in her eyes.

“We're here for you.” Fluttershy added.

Slowly Nightmare Moon stepped back, leaving the friends together. Her objective was complete. The four elements would stand by her side. That left only the Element of Honesty... and Twilight Spark.

She turned around to give Rainbow Dash and her friends some privacy to talk, but she had taken only two steps when the cyan pegasus' voice floated up to her.

“Please... stay with us, Luna.”

Nightmare Moon didn't look back, although she could feel the eyes of all four mares on her. She remained still for a few seconds longer before turning to face them.

“I'm Nightmare Moon.” she said with a cynical smile. **“I am a dictator, a powerful being that will go to any lengths to achieve her goal. Don't call me Luna.”**

But she stayed as the friends talked and comforted each other. They didn't notice when the alicorn looked up towards Equestria in surprise. A small smile appearing on her face. **"You're welcome, Scootaloo."** she whispered.

o.O.o

"Are you sure this is a good idea, Scootaloo?" Apple Bloom asked for what felt the seventeenth time.

"Yes." the pegasus replied.

"It just looks so weird." Sweetie Belle said, looking up at the red and black sky. "It makes me think that the whole world is like the Everfree forest."

The three friends walked in silence. They had left Ponyville three hours ago. Without their sisters, Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle had had nopony to stop them from gathering their crusader cloaks, some apples and leaving. Scootaloo had found out her mother had been one of the many pegasi chasing after Rainbow Dash, and thus was unconscious in the hospital. The doctor had assured her that her mother was otherwise fine, as were all the pegasi that had the misfortune of encountering a Sonic Rainboom head on.

Scootaloo had found herself in the unusual position of thanking *Nightmare Moon* for catching her mother and saving her from her idol. She looked up at the moon. "Thank you for catching my mom and all the pegasi this morning, Nightmare Moon." she grudgingly acknowledged the the dark deity.

"You're welcome, Scootaloo."

She had the weirdest feeling that the moon had replied to her somehow, but kept it to herself. It probably wouldn't do for the others to know she had prayed to Nightmare Moon of all ponies... and the fact that she was pretty sure she got an answer.

She glanced at Sweetie Belle, who despite trudging along loyally, had a look of worry in her face, her eyebrows locked in a small frown. For the most part of the trip she had been quiet, lost in her thoughts.

And it made Scootaloo wonder... just how the hay did Sweetie Belle know Nightmare Moon's minion? She had to stop interrogating her friend... not that she enjoyed it, Sweetie Belle had seemed to be really suffering through the questions. The unicorn had clearly wanted to tell them, but couldn't. And that just made it worse.

Apple Bloom was clearly worried about her sister and her brother. When she had gone home to gather her things, only Granny Smith and Caramel Apple had been around. She had found out that Big Macintosh had left the night before and had yet to return.

It must be difficult to not know. At least she knew her mom was okay, and that she would wake up soon... but Sweetie Belle and Apple Bloom didn't know where their family was.

She suddenly felt very guilty about interrogating her friend. The little unicorn must be worried sick about her sister too.

She sighed. Why were things getting so complicated?

"Hey! I can see the castle!" said unicorn suddenly piped in.

Scootaloo snapped out of her thoughts and looked up towards the mountainside. Yes, there it was in all its glory, waterfalls and all. Canterlot Castle.

The pegasus smiled, dark thoughts forgotten. "Well done crusaders! We're almost there!"

o.O.o

Applejack's ear twitched. There was a sound... but...

There it was again. A door? Opening?

Her eyes slowly opened and she stared in complete confusion at the mattress and pillows piled around her.

“What...?” memories then started to flood in. Nightmare Moon. Nightmare Flare. Rainbow Dash... Twilight Spark.

She tried to stand up, but her body seemed so heavy! She was probably still tired, even if it was the afternoon if the light from the window was any indication.

She heard a gasp. “W-what happened here?!” a voice she didn't recognize asked. She pushed a pillow aside and stared at the maid that had walked into the room.

The unicorn stared back at her.

“Don't ask, sugarcube.” Applejack finally said. “You really don't want to know.”

“Oh.” the unicorn seemed to think about it. “Lady Applejack...”

The earth pony snorted. “Don't 'Lady' me, please.” she shook her head. “Trust me, there's nothing ‘Lady’-like about me. I'm like you, a hard worker earning an honest living.” she finally felt strong enough to stand up and did so, albeit a bit shakily.

The unicorn smiled. “Miss Apple, Lady Twilight has requested your presence for a late lunch with her and some friends.”

Applejack noticed that the smile slipped when she had said the purple unicorn's name. It was understandable. Then something hit her. “Lunch?” she blinked. “But... isn't it late afternoon?”

The unicorn grimaced and shook her head.

Applejack made her way to the window and looked out. Then she remembered. The gloom came from the eclipse that Nightmare Moon had caused. She sighed. “How long was I asleep?”

The unicorn looked thoughtful. “I believe you last saw Lady Spark around six hours ago.”

“Oh.” no wonder she still felt tired, but now that she was up, she was not falling asleep anytime soon. That's how she worked. She sometimes envied Rainbow Dash for her ability to take naps anytime.

Her thoughts about the pegasus soon turned dark as she remembered their conversation outside the door and her betrayal.

“Lady... I mean, Miss Apple?” the unicorn prodded. She looked down sheepishly. “I... would appreciate it if you would join Lady Twilight... she... was very graphic about what would happen to me if you were late... I didn't understand half the words but it sounded...” she blushed. “Intense.”

Applejack stared at her. “Oh, you poor girl.” she sighed. “Fine! I'll join her. But I need a shower first.”

The maid smiled. “Thank you...”

“No need, sugarcube.” Applejack said, stretching her legs. They felt sore. “I know what it is like to be on the other end of her... creativity.” she shuddered. “I've kept her in line so far, I reckon I can do it again.” she sounded more sure of herself than she actually was.

The unicorn nodded and used her magic to set up the bath for the earth pony. Once it was ready, she excused herself and went off to presumably talk to Twilight Sparkle.

Fortunately she was not disturbed by anypony while she relaxed in the bath. Although her muscles began to relax, her mind was working full-time. She had sealed her fate by promising to go have dinner with Twilight... but maybe, just maybe, the fact that the purple unicorn was willing to let her relax and was being less aggressive was a good sign. Maybe Twilight had stopped to think about what she had told her. Maybe she had regained her senses...

Applejack sighed. Too many 'maybes'.

But Twilight was her friend and... Rainbow Dash was too. And the only way to figure out what happened to them and bring them back to normal would be to be with them and find out.

She eventually (and regretfully) got out of the hot bath and dried herself with the towels that had survived Twilight's blitzkrieg from earlier that day.

When she was ready, she opened the door and looked outside. A guard pony stood impassively waiting for her. He nodded when he saw her. "This way... Miss Apple."

Apparently the unicorn had passed the word. Good. It seemed most ponies here knew that she was not a part of Twilight Spark's entourage, despite the unicorns insistence on being with her.

She followed the guard in silence as they made the way down to the place where she would meet with Twilight. She took advantage to gauge how everypony was taking the whole Nightmare Moon/Flare thing.

Fear. That's what she saw in the ponies eyes around her. Fear. Confusion. They walked like they were stepping on eggshells, but the castle's staff performed their jobs regardless. The guards more tense if even possible. But then again, she had had a chance to meet some of them in a less formal situation, like yesterday.

Had it really only been a day and a half? She shuddered. It felt like a lifetime. The whole situation was overwhelming, to say the least.

Ponies would look at her worriedly, possibly wondering if she, like Twilight and Dash, was an agent of Nightmare Moon or Flare. Some would even risk small encouraging smiles if they somehow recognized her.

But overall, the long walk did nothing to appease her.

When they arrived to their destination, she looked uncomfortably at the double doors. She could hear several voices behind behind them, even laughs. Twilight Spark's unmistakable chuckles prominent among them.

"We're here." The guard said unnecessarily.

Applejack nodded and gulped. When she took a step forward the guard touched her shoulder, making her look at him.

"Good luck." he let her go.

The earth pony nodded and walked into the room.

o.O.o

The first thing that caught her attention was the table. It was full of food and she was noisily reminded by her stomach that she hadn't eaten a bite since the day before.

“Hey! It's Applejack!”

The apple farmer blinked. “Spike?! Weren't you in Ponyville?”

“Nah, Twilight packed me into her saddle bags and forgot I was there. It has happened before.”

Applejack shook her head and looked at the other ponies in the room. Twilight Spark was giving her a very... intense... look. The farmer blushed when the unicorn licked her lips and quickly looked at the other ponies. When she saw Rainbow Dash dressed in a Shadowbolt uniform she felt her heart break.

“A Shadowbolt, Dash?” she whispered.

Rainbow Dash looked at her and something crossed her eyes. For a fleeting moment she seemed... pained. But the look was gone in less than a second, and the pegasus nodded. There was no smile, no boasting or gloating. It was surreal. This... could not be her friend.

“Nightmare Moon asked her to be the Shadowbolt captain and she agreed.” Spitfire said, drawing the farmer's attention to her. The Wonderbolt smiled at the rainbow-maned pegasus and touched her hoof. “We're all proud of her.”

“I bet.” Applejack's reply was dry. Her eyes were drawn to the last pony in the room, who was studiously not looking at her.

Applejack took a step back. Those eyes. That green mane... the uniform with the dagger 'cutie mark' on the flank... “J-Jade?”

All conversation died at the table as the two mares stared at each other. Jade's azure eyes looked down and away quickly, then returned to look straight at Applejack. With a slight inclination of the head she nodded.

"You two know each other?" Rainbow Dash asked.

"Yes." the earth pony confirmed. "Jade saved my life about four years ago. She was on her way somewhere for an important mission, but she heard me calling for help when I was trapped in a collapsed bridge... but, what in the name of all apples are you doing here?" Applejack asked, her tone desperate. "Did they capture you?"

Jade looked down. She sighed and her hoofs came up, doing slow motions accompanied by clops and taps as she used the table and the floor to communicate.

The others were unsure of what to do, since none of them knew any hoof-language. They just traded awkward looks.

"What do you mean you joined Nightmare Moon?!" Applejack growled walking up to the deadly assassin. "You can't!"

Tap-tap, clop -tap, hoof to the chest, clap, swift motion across the neck.

"I know you are an assassin." Applejack said, frowning.

Tap, clop, hoof-movements, clop clop tap, head shake and shrug.

"I expect you to say no! Even if you're an assassin, this is Nightmare Moon we're talking about! She's a ruthless, merciless killer that will betray you at the first chance!"

"Hey! You take that back!" Rainbow Dash cried, standing up. "Nightmare Moon is *nothing* like that!"

"You would say that, traitor." Applejack snapped.

"What did you call me?!" Rainbow Dash growled suddenly in Applejack's face.

"I called you a traitor! That's what ponies like you who betray their friends and everyone that trusts them are called!" Applejack shouted. "I don't know what your problem is, Rainbow Dash, but if you think I can remain friends with murderers and betrayers you have another thing coming!"

The pegasus was about to punch Applejack when she felt Silent Jade touch her shoulder. Looking back at the assassin, she gritted her teeth as the green-maned unicorn shook her head.

"What? Backing down already?" the farmer taunted, bitterness clear in every syllable. "Figures that a good-for-nothing lazy coward like you would be the one to join the pony that killed her best friends!"

The hurt in Rainbow Dash's eyes was almost enough to make her regret her words. But all it took was a look at the uniform the pegasus was wearing for her contempt and hatred to boil again.

She watched as Rainbow Dash turned away from her and walked out of the room, slamming the door behind her.

"Dash!" Spitfire quickly galloped past her, also leaving the room.

"Oh, dear." Twilight Sparkle sighed. "And she didn't even finish her sandwich. Grab a plate, Applejack! Tell us how your day went. Tea?"

"Who did Nightmare Moon kill?" Spike asked, ignoring Twilight and looking at Applejack.

Looking at the baby dragon, the earth pony felt a huge weight on her shoulders as she took a deep breath and told him.

o.O.o

There were probably around five hundred ponies in the room. All mares.

While this might have been paradise for somepony with Lyra's disposition, it actually felt like hell. She was trapped. Not only that, but her grand plan of getting information would not work at all!

They had all been gathered in a large, two leveled room. Above her was an empty balcony, and several columns decorated the room. Although there were at least three doors in the room, all of them were blocked by guards. They had all had to sign documents with their information on them and told that once they were done here, they wouldn't be called for again.

There had been a slight disturbance earlier when a couple of pegasi had been unceremoniously thrown into the room. They had argued with the guards and attempted to get out to no avail. Pegasi guards stood at attention on the balcony, and whenever a pegasus would fly up, they would quickly encourage them down.

All the mares were nervous. Discussions and arguments sprung out constantly.

"Lyra! Lyra!" a voice called making her cringe. She looked towards the approaching unicorn with dread.

"Glitter Horn." she forced a smile.

The other unicorn carefully made her way to Lyra, doing her best to avoid touching any other pony.

"Can you believe it? We have to share a room with this rabble." she sniffed. "Nobles should not mix with..." she glared in contempt at the ponies around her. "... commoners."

Lyra lowered her head. Besides her she could feel Bon-Bon seething in anger. "I don't think this is the time to complain about that, Glitter Horn."

"I suppose you are right." the unicorn sighed. "Nothing to be done." she leaned forward. "Did you see what Twilight Sparkle did this morning?"

Lyra nodded nervously, looking at Bon-Bon.

Glitter Horn arched an eyebrow at the earth pony but decided to ignore her.

"I never thought she had it in her." Glitter Horn frowned. "I had heard of course of those ridiculous claims that she had defeated an Ursa Minor with her magic..."

"It's true..." Bon-Bon interrupted.

"What?"

"I um... we were there." Lyra admitted.

"Oh." Glitter Horn blinked. "Well, regardless of that, I never thought she would punish a pony so... thoroughly." she leaned in. "I heard that they are looking for more rebels."

Lyra and Bon-Bon exchanged glances. The musician was already paranoid, but Bon-Bon looked downright terrified. The unicorn gave her lover a hesitant smile.

"You see those two pegasi over there, with the guards?" Glitter Horn continued, ignorant of the exchange.

The couple looked. The pretentious unicorn was talking about the pegasi pair from earlier. She hadn't noticed that they had an escort.

"They're both Wonderbolts." Glitter Horn said. "Since the other one attacked Nightmare Moon, they have been under suspicion and are all under house arrest."

"Isn't that a bit much?" Lyra whispered, thinking of Soarin' "Just because one of them did that doesn't mean that all of them are like that!"

"Oh, no dear." Glitter Horn shook her head. "They have it easy. If you suspect someone of being a rebel and you don't inform the guard, you can be thrown into the dungeons, along with family and friends." Each word made Bon-Bon cringe.

"If you consort with rebels it stands to reason your closest acquaintances might too. I have heard of entire families being thrown into the dungeon... tortured... even killed."

The earth pony gasped.

Lyra shook her head. "I don't believe it! It's too much! Are you sure you're not exaggerating?"

Glitter Horn shook her head. "I heard it from my daddy who heard it from a friend of a friend of Minty Top, who is dating Sharp Trot, who is in the guard."

Lyra blinked. "Oh."

"Ooh... is that Sparkling Crown? I must talk to her. Ta."

The overwhelmed musician watched the pretentious unicorn walk away, calling at her friend.

She had developed a cold sweat through the whole conversation and couldn't stop scratching the floor nervously.

"Deep breaths. Deep breaths." she intoned to herself. "Everything will be fine. No pony knows." when her heart had stopped beating four times as fast as normal, she finally turned around.

"T-that was pretty crazy, don't you think... Bon-Bon?" she looked around, but her fillyfriend was not there. "Bon-Bon?"

She looked around worriedly. Where had she gone?

"Mares of Canterlot!" a voice from the balcony called, drawing all the attention there, where the herald had stepped up. "I am honored to announce Queen Nightmare Flare!"

Everypony in the room bowed as the dark queen entered the balcony followed by several guards.

"My faithful subjects." the Queen said, looking down at the mares below her. **"Thank you for coming here today. I will not take too much more of your time. Although you don't know the reason you are here today, know that you are providing an important duty. Now, let us begin."**

Her horn started slowly building up energy. With each pulse of magic that made it glow brighter, each unicorn felt their own horn react, each pegasus felt their wings tingle and each earth pony felt their hearts beat harder. After a few seconds the glow diminished and Nightmare Flare shook her head.

“You are free to go.”

There was an audible relieved sigh from the gathered group as the doors started to open, but Lyra noticed that a guard had walked up to the Queen and whispered something to her ear.

“Stop!”

The doors immediately closed and the gathered ponies looked up at the Queen in confusion. **“Something has been brought to my attention.”** Nightmare Flare said, her voice gaining an angry tone. **“A pony here has been conspiring against the unquestionable rule of myself and my sister.”** she said as she approached the edge of the balcony and glared down at the ponies. **“A traitor. A rebel.”** she spat.

Lyra felt two hooves hold her roughly by the shoulders. She looked at the guards on both sides of her in horror. In the periphery of her vision she caught a glance of Glitter Horn melodramatically fainting.

“Apparently today's demonstration was not clear enough.” Nightmare Flare said as her eyes bore into Lyra's. **“However I am not without mercy. If you confess, the names of your fellow rebels I will grant you a pardon, and have you in house arrest until they are detained. This is your one chance, Lyra.”**

Lyra's world was crumbling around her. Why? How? Who could have known? The only other pony that knew was... her eyes scanned the crowd until they settled on Bon-Bon, who was flanked by two guards. The earth pony wouldn't meet her gaze.

The musician unicorn felt her heart crumbling. Tears fell unheeded to the floor as she stared at her lover.

“Well, Lyra?” Nightmare Flare prodded. **“Your answer?”**

She felt cold, she felt like this was happening to somepony else. Her head slowly turned towards the dark monarch.

She couldn't see the Princess Celestia that she knew in there. The Princess that her friends and fellow 'rebels' were trying to bring back.

“Your majesty, I will never betray the rightful rulers of this land.” she finally spoke up, making Nightmare Flare smile and Bon-Bon look up hopefully. “Therefore I will keep quiet so that both, Princess Celestia and Princess Luna can be reinstated.”

Bon-Bon paled and tried to walk to her, opening her mouth to say something, but the guards stopped her.

“Not only that!” Lyra shouted amongst the gasps and murmurs from the crowd. “I can tell you right now, Nightmare Flare, that you will never stop our Rebel Alliance! No matter how much power you have...” she looked towards Bon-Bon, their eyes meeting, all the hurt and fear in her eyes making the earth pony cringe and look down in guilt. “Or how many traitors and betrayers you surround yourself with.”

Bon-Bon tore herself free of the guards and hugged Lyra. “Lyra! Please! Tell them! Please!”

“Why?” Lyra whispered. “Are you part of the council?”

“What council? No...” Bon-Bon whispered back, but then stopped and looked at Lyra in the eyes. “I can't risk my family, Lyra... my sister, my mom and dad... they would have been all captured with me if I hadn't reported you! What about our friends in Ponyville? Do you want them tortured and killed? But you still have a chance! Don't waste your life? What about your dream of performing for the Pr... Queens?”

If anything the answer made it hurt worse. Bon-Bon was not being controlled.

A laugh made their way to them. **“Your family? Your friends?”** Nightmare Flare chuckled. **“You have been listening to gossip, little pony. I am not a monster. If someone is found to be a rebel their family would naturally be asked some questions. But unless they were guilty, they would not be thrown into a dungeon. Much less killed.”**

Bon-Bon's heart almost stopped. All color drained from her face, her hoofs fell to the side, no longer having the strength to keep them up as she realized just what she'd done in the spur of the moment.

Lyra closed her eyes as the guards removed the limp earth pony.

“Very well, Lyra.” Nightmare Flare spoke again. **“You leave me no choice. I will crush your Rebel Alliance. But you will not live to see it.”** she reared her head up. **“You shall be executed tomorrow at dawn.”**

Two guards took hold of Lyra, who did not struggle. With a smirk of satisfaction, Nightmare Flare turned around, but stopped when the unicorn's voice floated up in the completely silent room.

“How?”

The Nightmare frowned. **“How are you going to be executed?”**

“No.” Lyra looked up an unusual smile on her face. “How will you tell the time? You see, there's been a moon stuck in front of the sun at noon-time since... dawn today.”

Nightmare Flare roared as her horn shone with magic. There was a crack as the air was displaced and Lyra was sent flying to crash against the wall. **“Heal her.”** she ordered the guards that had rushed up to the battered and unconscious unicorn. **“It wouldn't do for her not to be at her best for her last day on Equestria.”**

In the corner of the room, watching everything in horror from behind a guard, Bon-Bon sank to her knees, her eyes never straying from Lyra's form as she was picked up and carried out. “What have I done...?”

Chapter 14

The Griffon burst through the clouds in a frantic dive, trying to lose her pursuer. But it was not to be. Her nemesis emerged less than a second afterward and was catching up quickly.

Not to be out done, she banked to the right, then proceeded to gain altitude an angle, aiming for yet another cloud. But this time, she was not going to try to avoid her pursuer.

Gilda landed on the cloud after dropping out of her enemy's sight and prepared to pounce.

When she felt her opponent was close, she threw herself at the pegasus, claws extending, roar leaving her beak... She took a swipe, but the pony dodged, sending a hoof straight into her stomach.

“Oof!” she tried to roll with the punch, but the pegasus was relentless. She pounced, the mare jumped over her and kicked her with her hind legs as she sailed past under her. She snapped her beak, as dangerous a weapon as her claws, but the pony's hoof met her chin, snapping it closed. She hadn't even recuperated from that when the pony twisted in the air and kicked her side, sending her sprawling onto the cloud which held her aloft by a sheer miracle.

She spit a bit of blood and glared at the pony as she landed a few feet away from her. Gilda locked eyes with her. Golden eyes met amber-yellow for a second. Then the mare's left eye started looking up and back while the other stayed firmly in place.

Unable to hold the stare any longer, Gilda relented. “Fine. Give me the stupid letter.”

The gray pegasus with bubbles for cutie mark smiled and gave her an envelope. She nodded and turned to leave.

“Wait!” Gilda said suddenly, still holding the letter in one claw, the other clutching her ribs. “What... how did you learn to fight like that?”

The gray pegasus looked at her (maybe) over her shoulder. "Muffin-Fu."

o.O.o

Nightmare Flare stood in front of the room looking at the preserved objects that had caused her so much grief. It had remained intact through the explosion that had destroyed the wall and killed Twilight, and through her transformation and the revival of her student.

"Sister." Nightmare Moon nodded towards the Queen as she approached.

"She is not here." Nightmare Flare said, still looking into the empty room. **"I gathered all the mares of the appropriate age and tested them with my magic. If any one of them had been an alicorn in hiding that spell would have revealed them."**

Nightmare Moon was silent as she also gazed into the room that had started it all. **"Perhaps the secret is still in this room."**

Nightmare Flare glanced at her sister. **"Perhaps."**

"Have you asked Twilight to take a look at it again? She was close to a breakthrough before she was attacked."

"I have called for her, yes." Nightmare Flare said, her eyes still on her sister. **"And that is another part of this mystery that needs to be solved. Who attacked her? And why?"**

Nightmare Moon was silent as she returned her sister's gaze. **"Whoever it was took advantage of your... emotional state, sister."**

Nightmare Flare turned away. **"I know."** she looked at the destroyed wall. **"Did I tell you we caught a rebel during one of my scans?"**

"I had heard, yes."

"She will be executed." Nightmare Flare said. **"Along with any other rebels we catch. But I have sent for her family to be rounded up too."**

Nightmare Moon remained studiously calm.

“According to her, there definitely are other rebels, and they are organized. There is a chance that they were the ones that attacked Twilight Sparkle in the first place.” the white alicorn said.

“Are you going to interrogate her?” Nightmare Moon asked.

“Of course. That is why I sent for her family to be brought before us.” Flare answered. **“Normally I would have entrusted the interrogation to Twilight... but I must ask you to do it for me, sister. Twilight needs to unravel the spells in the room and help me find my filly.”**

“If they are indeed responsible for all that has happened, these rebels have a lot to answer for, my sister.” Nightmare Moon said, her tone vicious.

Flare smiled at the inflection in her sister's voice. **“I trust that you will extract all information from her.”**

Nightmare Moon was already walking towards the dungeons. **“If they are responsible for hurting you so much, sister... this rebel will regret ever being born.”**

Nightmare Flare smirked. **“Just don't kill her. I changed her execution to tonight, so don't roughen her up to much... and don't tell her.”**

Nightmare Moon just nodded.

o.o.o

“Spike?”

The little dragon stared at the table, gems and rocks forgotten as his mind processed what he had been told. He... couldn't believe it. Even with Midnight's warnings, even with what he had seen in the court yard... there was no way his friends could be gone. It was impossible, wasn't it?

Applejack had tears in her eyes and suddenly he felt himself in a hug, as the farmer held him, crying.

He turned to Twilight, who held his gaze. "Twilight?"

"They attacked the Queens, Spike." the purple unicorn said. "That is high treason."

The little dragon didn't know what to say. He could feel inside of him as if his entire self was crumbling into little pieces.

"But why?!" the little dragon wailed. "N-no more parties with Pinkie Pie... and no more taking care of little animals with Fluttershy..." tears streamed down the little dragon's face.

"I'm afraid so." Twilight Spark nodded.

"And... Twilight, I never got my chance to tell Rarity how I felt!" he wailed. "I will never be able to tell her that I love her! Or how inspiring she is! Or how she was always a vision of beauty in an otherwise gloomy world! I mean, sure, the world is more gloomy now, with the eclipse and all, but... but... and that flank! I'll never see that flank again!" he broke down crying.

Twilight blinked. "Really? You had a crush on Rarity?"

"Oh, come on Twilight! The only pony that didn't seem to know it was Rarity!" Applejack looked at the dragon with pity. Jade hit her chest with a hoof as something had stuck in her throat.

"But... how did Rainbow Dash... and Applejack..." he finally choked out.

"Rainbow Dash... saw the error of her ways." Twilight said. "Spitfire convinced her that it wasn't worth it to try and debunk our beloved Queens... and Applejack... well, the thought probably hasn't crossed her mind, but the only reason she's alive is because I love her."

Spike saw the farmer tense.

"It's better to die on your hoofs than live on your knees at the mercy and whim of a twisted pony like you and your Queens!" Applejack shouted, pushing Spike back.

"Oh, A.J., you say the sweetest things." Twilight giggled as the fuming earth pony approached her, murder in her eyes. "And you're so silly! It's a well established fact that it is better to live on your hooves than die on your knees. Which is what would have happened to you."

"Twilight Sparkle!"

"Spark."

"Shut up! I don't care! Your name doesn't matter! Did you even think about what I said to you earlier? About who you were and what you are now?"

"I did! And I like who I am now." the unicorn smirked as the earth pony moved so close their snouts were almost touching.

"If you did, then you clearly didn't do it enough! I give up on you, Spark. The real Twilight is dead-mff!"

Spike stared as Twilight's forelegs encircled the surprised Applejack's neck, pulling her closer as she kissed her, tongue and all. It was too much. The confusion and shock and hurt from earlier, combined with this sudden turn of events overwhelmed the baby dragon. He fainted with a whimper.

The earth pony for her part seemed to be frozen, she struggled faintly, pushing back at the unicorn, but apparently without sufficient strength. Twilight's right hoof slowly traced a line from Applejack's neck, down her spine to her flank, where she slowly rubbed the farm girl's cutie mark.

The door opened.

"Lady Twilight!" a guard coughed. "Her highness, Queen Flare, needs your presence immediately."

Twilight slowly pulled back from Applejack and stepped back. The farmer, who seemed to have been leaning forward, slowly melted onto the floor, where she stared in a daze at the unicorn.

"The Queen has the worst timing possible." the unicorn pouted. She then perked up. "Oh well, don't worry, A.J., we'll continue later!" she leaned down and playfully kissed the earth pony's forehead before turning around and walking out of the room. "Coming, Spike?"

The dragon groaned as he looked up. "Uh... s-sure, Twilight..." he stumbled out of the door, not really paying attention to where he was going.

Applejack for her part didn't seem to register the fact that the unicorn and the dragon were gone. She sat on the floor, completely spaced out. A cool hoof on her shoulder snapped her out of it.

She started sputtering and shaking her head. Through teary eyes she looked up at the masked face of Silent Jade. The azure eyes betrayed the smile hidden under the mask.

"N-not a word!" Applejack said, still unable to push herself up. "And don't you laugh!" she added when the assassin turned around and brought a hoof to her mouth. Her body shook with mirth.

The door swung open once again and both Applejack and Jade looked up in surprise.

"Jade." Nightmare Moon said. **"I need your help in the dungeon. My sister caught a prisoner that might know how all of this got started."** she looked around. **"Where is Rainbow Dash?"**

"That traitor is gone." Applejack said as she stood up slowly, trying to put the recent experience to the back of her mind. "And if I'm lucky I'm never laying eyes on that pegasus again."

Nightmare Moon observed the earth pony carefully for a few seconds. **"Be careful what you wish for."** she turned to look at Jade. **"She's coming with us, we might be able to get something positive out of all of this."**

Jade nodded and looked at Applejack, who looked back at her then at Nightmare Moon. "Fine. It's not like I have much of a choice."

o.O.o

Trixie hovered dejectedly back to the cavern. She sighed when she noticed Big Macintosh was not around. She walked into the back cave, where she found Midnight gazing at 'it'.

"Found anything interesting?"

Twilight's father jumped. "T-trixie!" he said weakly. "I'm sorry, I didn't hear you... hover in."

The mare sighed and sat down. "It's okay."

Midnight nodded, looking back at 'it'. "I have... I have a theory. With your help, we might be able to find out what it does and harness its power."

Trixie tried to look excited, but the emotional toll from her encounter with her family still hung over her. "Hurray."

"Guys!" Soarin' shouted, running into the cave. "I just heard from Misty! Lyra was captured! She's going to be executed! And I haven't heard from Spike in several hours!"

"Great." Trixie muttered. "We've just started and we're already dropping like flies. At least there won't be a shortage of ghosts."

Midnight remained impassive. "We have to figure out this soon then." he said, looking at 'it'.

"I have to go back for now, they're keeping a very close eye on us Wonderbolts." Soarin' said. "I'll try and come back a little later."

"Go, we don't want to lose anypony else." the male unicorn said.

The Wonderbolt nodded and hurried out.

"I should go and find Big Macintosh!" Trixie said, jumping to her feet.

"No!" Midnight looked at her with steely eyes. "Don't you dare. If something had happened to him Soarin' would have heard about it and I need you here. If my theory is correct we'll be able to strike the Guardian a decisive blow."

Trixie's eyes went to the door and back to the unicorn. Finally she sighed. "Fine."

o.O.o

Big Macintosh stood amongst the crowd in front of the castle. He had heard about Lyra, but for all he could think about, there was nothing he could really do about it right now. Wild plans flew through his head. Could he disrupt the execution without getting both of them killed? Maybe he could sneak inside the castle tonight...

"Her Majesty, Queen Nightmare Flare wishes to announce that tomorrow's execution of the traitorous rebel, Lyra, will take place in three hours at the Canterlot Plaza instead of tomorrow at dawn! Attendance is mandatory!"

"..." Big Macintosh cursed in such a vile way that had he actually done it aloud, he would have probably made several of the surrounding nobles faint and earned himself a very sharp scolding from Granny Smith.

He noticed the crowd moving and followed suit to let a chariot with darkened windows pulled by several guards slowly make its way through. Whispers spread throughout as everypony tried to figure out who was inside it.

When the castle gates opened and Nightmare Moon herself stood awaiting the carriage the crowd gasped. But Big Macintosh was not paying attention to the goddess. His eyes were on the miserable-looking mare wearing a stetson hat... who looked around the crowd and then stared at him.

'Please sis, whatever you do don't...'

"Big Mac!"

o.O.o

Applejack looked at her brother guiltily. "I am sorry Big Mac... I truly am." she looked down as they walked side-by-side with a deadly assassin and Nightmare Moon herself, followed by a small group of scared ponies. A colt, an elder male and a mare. A family.

There was something familiar about them, but neither of the Apples could put a hoof on what it was.

Big Mac sighed. He looked at his sister. She seemed really contrite about getting him dragged into the whole thing. But once she had shouted his name and Nightmare Moon had noted him... if he had ran away it would have been very conspicuous.

At least his little sister seemed to be okay, and she did not *look* like a cultist. "It's okay." he said finally.

"No!" she said. "It isn't! They have a strange way of... changing ponies! They made Rainbow Dash into a murderer! And Twilight..."

Applejack shut up, looking up at Nightmare Moon who seemed to roll her eyes.

The farmer blinked. No. She must have imagined it.

They all proceeded down to the dungeons where they could hear a melody being played.

"Oh no..." the elder mare from the group behind them whispered. "It can't be... not my Lyra!"

"Lyra?!" Applejack looked in horror at the unicorn family. That's why they looked familiar. She turned desperately towards Nightmare Moon. "You can't be serious! Lyra wouldn't do anything like that!"

"Oh. I am." Nightmare Moon said. **"I received a report of her exact indiscretions against us Queens. Her involvement with the Rebel**

Alliance was reported by her lover, Bon-Bon herself. And then she proceeded to make a fool out of my sister in front of witnesses."

"What?" Lyra's mother spoke up again. The guards stared at her and the Nightmare shot her an icy glare. "I'm sorry my Queen..." she said sheepishly. "... there must be a mistake. Bon-Bon is just Lyra's friend... they are not involved in any way other than that..."

Big Mac and Applejack traded looks, Jade shook her head and Nightmare Moon arched an eyebrow. **"It seems your daughter also concealed some secrets from you."** the dark alicorn said finally. **"That's good."**

"W-what do you mean? If she lied to us..." Lyra's father spoke up.

"That means that it is highly improbable that you three are even aware of the Rebel Alliance beyond what we have talked about now." Nightmare Moon interrupted. **"That also means that there is less of a reason for you to be here... or stay here."**

A guard pony stood silent vigil next to the entrance to the dungeons. Nightmare Moon looked at the guards. **"I do not believe it is necessary for them to follow us in during the interrogation."** she said motioning at Lyra's family. **"Wait with them here. They will have a lot to talk about with Lyra in between now and her execution."**

Applejack gave Nightmare Moon a hard look but held her tongue until the door to the dungeons had closed behind them. "They are suffering enough already! Why did you bring that up again?"

The alicorn snorted, not bothering to look back at them as she made her way down spiraling stairs. **"If they have time to argue about their daughter's sexual preference instead of her well-being and impending fate, they need a reminder of what is important and what isn't."**

When they arrived at the bottom of the stairs, the music stopped.

Lyra's cell was not facing the stairs, so she could not see who had arrived, but the sound of hooves on stone had apparently heralded their arrival.

Nightmare Moon looked around at the few interrogators in the room with narrowed eyes. "I have my own specialist with me." she announced. **"I shall only need one of you to remain. You."** she pointed at a seemingly random interrogator, who immediately knelt down.

"At your service, my Queen." the dark furred earth pony said.

Nightmare Moon nodded. **"Everypony else... leave us."**

After much moping, the rest of the interrogators left the room and the group of five moved to stop in front of the cell.

"I will tell you nothing." Lyra said, and Applejack's eyes watered. She had been roughened up.

She had a split lip and several scratches, by the way she moved as she put down her lyre, there were certainly bruises under her coat, if not worse.

"We shall see." Nightmare Moon said calmly.

Smirking, Lyra looked up. Her eyes suddenly widened and she gasped. "Oh no, Big Mac! They caught you too?!"

The interrogator had his sword in his muzzle immediately and Applejack had jumped in between him and her brother, who shot her an annoyed glance as he prepared himself for battle.

"You know I can take care of myself, sis." the draft pony muttered.

"I've no doubt, big brother, but I'll help out, just in case. Wouldn't want another wound stoppin' you from bucking apples this year!" Applejack grinned.

They both knew they wouldn't stand a chance against Nightmare Moon, but they would not go out without a fight.

"Lyra, that mouth of yours is a magnet for trouble." Big Macintosh stated.

"I'm sorry Big Mac!" Lyra said, tears pooling her eyes. "Please don't tell Trixie! She'll kill me after I die!"

“What's this about Trixie? Are we talking about The Great and Powerful Trixie?” Applejack growled. “What does she have to do with all of this?!”

“I...”

“She's Big Mac's undead fillyfriend!”

“Say what?!”

“It's complicated!” Big Mac snorted.

It was then that the laughter stopped the conversation and made the interrogator slowly lower his sword.

Nightmare Moon was laughing. And for all that Applejack could tell it was honest to goodness laughter. Not at all like the malicious cackling the Nightmare had pelted them with when they fought her back in Everfree.

Beside the alicorn, Jade's muzzle was clamped shut even as quivering lips could be seen trembling under her mask.

Nightmare Moon took a deep breath and shook her head. **“Lower the sword, Interrogator.”**

“My... Queen?” he stammered but put away his sword, looking completely confused.

“It's unnecessary.” Nightmare Moon said. Her draconic eyes settled on Big Mac. **“Are you part of the Rebel Alliance?”**

The draft pony hesitated, but slowly nodded.

“Big Mac!” Applejack gasped. “Don't you know what Nightmare Moon and Nightmare Flare do to rebels?!”

“Tell me, you two.” the dark alicorn started pacing in front of the whole group. **“Why are you rebelling against me and my sister?”**

“Because you are not our queens!” Lyra said. “You've been corrupted! Turned into monsters by...” she stopped, looking at Big Mac.

Nightmare Moon smirked. **“I see you know something. Tell me.”** Her voice became cold. **“Who is responsible for turning my sister into Nightmare Flare?”**

The draft pony and the unicorn looked unsure.

“Somepony took advantage of her fears and suffering.” Nightmare Moon said, the edge to her voice drawing shivers from all ponies around her. **“They exploited a weakness, in the vilest way possible... and through that Nightmare Flare was born.”**

She looked at the two rebels. **“My sister is trapped in a shell... she's fighting it and causing Nightmare Flare to make mistakes. But she won't last long. Who is responsible for this?!”**

Lyra looked down. “You wouldn't believe us...”

“The Council of Nightmares.” Big Macintosh said evenly.

“They induce new members by giving them medallions with spells on them.” Lyra said with a shudder. “They change their memories to make them believe they were always part of the council.”

Applejack was stunned. “Then... is that what happened to Rainbow Dash?!”

Nightmare Moon's horn started glowing. With a gasp of surprise the interrogator was floating in front of them. He tried to struggle but was unable to break her hold on him. Slowly a silver chain was revealed as the alicorn's magic pulled out a medallion.

“Like this one, you mean?”

“We've never seen them.” Lyra said, wide eyed. “But... how did you...”

Nightmare Moon smirked. **“Rainbow Dash was breaking out of the hold of the medallion Spitfire gave her before I even talked to her. When she showed me the medallion, I felt something familiar about it. When**

I came down to the dungeon I felt a similar energy coming from this pony.”

The chain with the medallion broke until it was floating in front of the group.

“But... we were told that the only way to break the hold of the medallion was in death!” Lyra said.

“Fools!” the interrogator spat, glaring at all of them. “You cannot stop the Council of the Eclipse! Even in death we remain loyal!”

Nightmare Moon smirked. **“Clearly you think too highly of yourselves. The Element's of Harmony are powerful enough to break the hold of your amulets. And so am I.”**

Having said that, the alicorn threw the amulet to the floor and then, with a powerful kick, smashed it into pieces.

The cultist howled and spasmed in Nightmare Moon's hold, struggling to be free, until with a desperate gasp he fell limp. The alicorn's horn flashed and the interrogator was gone.

“What happened to him?” Applejack asked.

“Do not worry yourself with his fate.” Nightmare Moon said. **“We need to figure out what to do about you.”** she added, looking at Lyra.

“I... can't you let me go free?”

Nightmare Moon sighed. **“I'm afraid not... my sister would act immediately and the consequences would be disastrous.”**

“Oh.”

“Big Mac... are you okay?” Applejack asked her brother who stood staring at the place where the former cultist had been floating.

“Do you reckon...” he started, throat dry. “That what he said was true?”

Applejack frowned. "What?"

"About... their bond not breaking even after death?"

Lyra's eyebrows went up. "You don't mean..."

o.O.o

"Okay, I think I have it down right." Midnight said after studying the runes. "And this is your moment to shine, Trixie."

The depressed mare looked up at him. "What do you mean?"

"A physical being cannot access the power contained within... it." Midnight said, slowly walking to stand next to the mare. "But us ghosts... we can enter it."

Trixie shook her head. "So you're saying that we can both go in there and harness its power?"

Midnight shook his head. "No... one of us will go in and the other will stay behind as an anchor to direct the power. Since I have been studying the runes and have more experience, I will be the anchor, you will have to go in and activate it."

"But how do I do that?"

"It should be intuitive." Midnight said. "Don't worry too much, if it doesn't work the first time, at least we will learn something."

Trixie nodded. "I will give it a try. Anything to stop the Guardian and the Nightmares from affecting more lives!"

Midnight smiled. "Yes. Anything."

"What do I need to do?"

"Just touch it with your horn." Midnight said. "I will chant the spell and keep it active while you are in there."

The showmare nodded. "Let's get started then."

Midnight's smile was wide, his eyes shone with barely controlled excitement. "Yes. Let's."

o.O.o

Bon-Bon looked towards the distance. She could barely see a small cluster of lights where Ponyville was.

The view from the edge of the waterfall was one of the most beautiful landmarks in Equestria. It had inspired songs and poems. Lovers often came here to feel the romantic energy that appeared to radiate from the flora.

This was the first place Lyra had brought her to once she had convinced her to come to Canterlot. It was the first of many visits.

She had played for her here, pouring her heart out for her, letting her know, without a doubt, that she loved her above anything or anypony else.

Bon-Bon had kissed Lyra for what seemed an eternity, with the sunset casting their shadows, intertwined, like the lovers they were into the distance.

It had been the best day of her life. But now, as she looked down the edge, following the waterfall reach its destination far below, her eyes gazed on the ragged rocks where the water crashed.

She should have known that at the end of the beautiful waterfall that was their relationship, she would bring out the rocks and boulders where it would crash, splatter and break.

Lyra would die in a couple of hours. And it was her fault.

Did she have the strength to go and watch? Did she want to torture herself like that?

"Oh, Lyra." she whispered. "I love you. I'm so sorry."

Her eyes settled back on Ponyville. "We won't go back there ever again." she said. "We won't see our friends, or our house..." she choked. "And it's all my fault."

Her head felt light and a small breeze brought some comfort to her. "Perhaps... it was for the best... this world is too harsh for somepony with your kind heart..." she looked up at the eclipse, regretting that the light was not enough to create the rainbows that would normally embellish the waterfalls. "I'm sorry it was me that cut your life short."

She gazed at the scenery in silence.

"I will wait for you... and hope you still love me."

She closed her eyes and stepped forward. The sudden rush of wind flapped her mane wildly around her head. The sounds of the waterfall became nothing but white noise as it mixed with the wind rushing by.

"I hope... I hope you still love me... when we meet again."

Chapter 15

"She will betray you. You know that."

Nightmare Flare glared at the mirror, where her reflection seemed to be sneering at her. *"Twilight? Don't make me laugh."* she thought back at it.

"Not her. Your sister. Nightmare Moon."

The alicorn shook her head, almost amused. *"Nightmare Moon won't. She is loyal to me. More loyal than even Luna was when I was Celestia."*

"And yet, Luna betrayed you a thousand years ago." her image said. *"What is stopping her from doing it again?"*

"We're balanced now. Equals in the sky."

"But she doesn't have her eternal night. All she has done right now is block your sunlight." the mirror whispered. *"Do you really think she is satisfied with just being equals?"*

Nightmare Flare's eyes narrowed. *"She has been diligent about the search for my missing filly. I have seen the anger in her eyes at these rebels threatening me. She has..."*

"Begun to amass her own forces? Restarted the Shadowbolts? What is next? Her own private army?"

"The Shadowbolts are only a few fliers in her service. Hardly a risk against the royal force which is not loyal to her, but to me."

"You shouldn't trust her. And you know it in your heart of hearts. You have seen how she has been acting. She has control of four elements of harmony now that Rainbow Dash has joined her as Captain of the Shadowbolts. Twilight has control of one, but how long will it take for Nightmare Moon to have Applejack join her side?"

“You underestimate me.” Nightmare Flare glared at the mirror. “I know the elements. I created them!”

“When you had more power... when the rest of the gods knew how necessary they were. You might have created them, but the power was not yours alone.”

Nightmare Flare didn't say anything, staring intently at the mirror for a few seconds. *“What do you suggest, then?”*

There was no voice this time. Just a feeling and images as her mind suddenly realized... she smiled. **“Yes. That will do. Even if my sister betrays me...”**

“Mother?” Twilight Spark asked, looking up from her notes. Spike had fallen asleep next to her and continued to snore as she stood up, studies forgotten and walked up to Nightmare Flare. “Did you say something?”

The alicorn smiled kindly at Twilight. **“My dear student... my daughter... I will bring to Equestria something that has not been seen for thousands of years.”**

Twilight nuzzled the Queen, who lowered her head to allow the pony to do so. After a moment she stood normally again. **“Twilight, ask one of the guards to fetch Spitfire. We will need her.”**

o.O.o

“Wow.”

“It's... amazing!”

“So big!”

The three little fillies stared at the city of Canterlot in wonder. After several hours walking they had finally arrived, and despite how tired they were, the sight of the city was enough to give them more than enough energy to be awed.

“W-where do we go from here, Scootaloo?”

“Uh...”

“Why don't we ask?” Apple Bloom said, looking at several ponies around.

“Hey, check this out!” Scootaloo said, looking up at a poster. “It says here that everypony has to gather in about an hour at the plaza and that Nightmare Moon and Rainbow Dash are going to be there!”

“Now that's good luck! We can just go there and meet with them.” Sweetie Belle said.

“But what do we do for an hour?” Scootaloo asked.

“We explore!” Apple Bloom shouted.

“Wait, this says there's going to be a stage!” Sweetie Belle said. “Why don't we just head there now and get good places?”

o.O.o

“Rainbow Dash! Wait!”

The pegasus stopped and looked back. “Spitfire...”

“Don't let Applejack get to you... she doesn't understand...”

“No.” Rainbow Dash snapped. “She doesn't.”

Spitfire stepped back, ears flattening.

The cyan pegasus didn't care. “I've just about had it with everypony thinking I'm a traitor. I'm not!”

“I know, it's just that they...” she glanced around, making sure that nopony was around. “they don't understand our greater mission, they can't, unless they are part of the council.”

Rainbow Dash stopped in her tracks. "Are you saying I should induct Applejack?"

"She won't mind! Once its done she'll be okay with it... and you can have your friend back!"

The rainbow-maned pegasus gritted her teeth. "I will think about it." she answered, facing away from Spitfire. "For now I have to meet with a couple of ponies about the Shadowbolt positions."

"Do you want me to join?"

Dash closed her eyes and lowered her head. "Spitfire... under any other circumstances it would be my pleasure... my honor... hay, I'm not good with words, the truth is I would love to fly with you... but we can't right now. The sisters need a balance. I'm taking care of the Shadowbolts and you..."

"I'm being made Captain of the guard." Spitfire sighed. "I... I know I can't say no... Guardian knows Nightmare Flare would fry me in place. I just wanted to ask if... if you would have considered me."

Rainbow Dash turned around and nuzzled the Wonderbolt. "I'll make sure everything turns out okay."

Spitfire leaned her head on Dash's shoulder and nodded. "You promise?"

Dash closed her eyes and sighed. How much could she take of this? And what exactly did Spitfire feel for her? Was it even real? Her mane fell forward hiding a grimace. Well, she cared enough for the Wonderbolt to set her free... regardless of the consequences.

"I promise. And to make it good I need to go now. But... we'll catch up in a little bit."

Spitfire nodded and watched the other pegasus take flight.

"Captain Spitfire?" an earth pony guard approached her. "I have orders from Queen Nightmare Flare, you are requested in her presence."

Spitfire blinked. "Sure. I will be there at once."

o.o.o

“Halt! The ponies in here are under house arrest by order of the Queen!” A pegasus guard glared at Rainbow Dash.

“Well, I am under orders myself.” she snapped. “I’m Captain Rainbow Dash, of her Majesty Nightmare Moon’s Shadowbolts. And I am here on official business.”

The guards did not look pleased but stepped aside. As she was walking past, one of the guards ‘accidentally’ shoved her. She glared at him, but said nothing as she went into the building.

She soon reached a closed door behind which she could hear voices. Just as she was about to knock however...

“Rainbow Dash.”

“Huh?” she looked around. “Nightmare Moon? Are you in my head?!”

“I need you to give somepony a message.”

Rainbow Dash sighed. “Sure. What is it?”

o.o.o

Conversation ceased the moment there was a knock on the door. After a moment, a cyan-coated pegasus walked into the room. The reactions were immediate.

“What the hay are you doing here?!”

“You have got a nerve to step into this room!”

“Are you here to make fun of us, or take us to be interrogated?”

The sudden onslaught from the Wonderbolts in the room jarred Rainbow Dash. Spending time with Spitfire and hearing her tell stories of the other Wonderbolts had made Dash’s idols seem less perfect. Nonetheless, it

really stung to hear them despise her. Dash steeled herself. If she allowed her feelings to affect her she would break down again.

She looked down then slowly dragged her eyes up to look at Soarin' who was looking at her warily.

"You. Soarin'." she said. "I have a message for you: you're needed in the cave. Midnight is actually evil."

"What does that mean?" Asked a mare with a light tan coat and a blue and mint-green mane, Rainbow recognized her as Misty. She was glaring angrily at the cyan Shadowbolt. "What are you trying to pull?"

"What is she talking about, Soarin'?" another Wonderbolt mare asked. This one was known as Blast, if Rainbow recalled correctly.

"Uh..." Soarin' looked around. "Um..." he dove down on an apple pie that was on a table nearby, sending pieces flying.

"Okay, now I know you have something to hide." Misty said. "Spit it out, buster. Or so help me Celestia..."

"He's a rebel." Rainbow Dash said. "I just found out myself."

The two mares immediately jumped between Dash and Soarin', who was now choking on a piece of pie and staring incredulously at her at the same time.

"You're not taking him!" Blast said. Her mane, so very similar to Spitfire's, fell down around her face and gave her a wild and intense look.

Rainbow Dash rolled her eyes. "I don't care about him being a rebel. I was asked to give him a message and I've done so. It was supposed to be urgent."

"But how am I supposed to get out?" he said. "They got pegasi guards this time. They do look up when standing guard."

"Here." Rainbow Dash tossed him something.

It landed at his hoofs. It was a pin of an equine skull with wings on the sides.

“Congratulations, you're now a Shadowbolt and your loyalty to the Queens is not to be questioned. If the guards have any complaints, they can take it up with Queen Nightmare Moon.”

Soarin' looked at her, then the pin. His eyes narrowed. “I can't trust you. You work for Nightmare Moon and you betrayed your friends.”

Rainbow Dash gritted her teeth. “I was not myself.”

“Ha!” Blast snorted. “Likely story!”

“Shut up!” the cyan pegasus growled. “You have no idea what I had to go through through thanks to Spitfire and her stupid medallion!”

“I don't know what you did to Spitfire but unlike you she would never turn traitor!” Misty said, glaring back at Dash.

“Wait...” Soarin' said. “She... Spitfire gave you the medallion?”

Rainbow Dash nodded, looking pained. “I broke free... and I want to help her, but I need help to do so...”

Soarin' sighed. He really wanted to go back to the cavern and see what this whole deal with Midnight was. “Let me check your wings and uniform.” he finally said.

“What?” Rainbow Dash stepped back. “Why?”

“I need to see if you have any medallions on you. I don't want to leave and find that you hit Misty and Blast with the Council's brainwashing voodoo.”

Dash snorted. “Fine.”

The two other mares looked at each other quizzically, but decided to remain quiet as Soarin' searched Rainbow Dash. She looked very annoyed

as the Wonderbolt ruffled her wings and padded down every last inch of her flightsuit, but allowed him to do it.

“Satisfied?” Rainbow Dash asked blushing.

Soarin' nodded. “How did you free yourself?” he finally asked, looking at her in the eye. “I was told that the only way to break free was to die.”

Rainbow Dash knew why he was asking. “I... have a special skill, very old magic that allowed me to find help.” she confessed. “Finally, Nightmare Moon destroyed the medallion. And I was free.”

“We'll need to talk more.” Soarin' said as he picked up the pin and walked towards the door.

“Soarin'?”

The pegasus stopped, but did not look back.

“I want to free Spitfire too.”

The Wonderbolt nodded and stepped outside.

Rainbow Dash looked at the two mares, who were staring at her in confusion and suspicion.

“What?” Dash asked.

Misty narrowed her eyes. “You... didn't come here just to give that message to Soarin', did you?”

Dash shook her head. “I came to ask you to help me free Spitfire... and Luna and Celestia.”

“How?” Blast asked.

“I want you to join the Shadowbolts.”

o.O.o

Trixie cautiously walked towards 'it'.

In all her years in the road, listening to stories and legends that she could use for her shows, she had never heard of anything like this.

It was pony-sized, at least the very center of it was. It was egg-shaped, but clearly had no physical substance to it, it gave the feeling that it should be translucent, but the light emanating from it wouldn't allow anypony to look inside.

Bands of energy with strange glyphs constantly swirled around it. Some looked like cutie marks; a sun, a moon, stars, wings, others looked like they should be letters of some sort... runes, like the ones in the cavern.

As she approached, they became more focused, while the world around her shifted and seemed to be distorted. She felt like the light was pulling her in. She could hear voices, or rather whispers.

She could not make out words, but they had a certain urgency to them, as if they were warning her of some danger and urging her to turn away, and at the same time pleading for her to continue and at the same time telling her secrets without telling her anything at all.

She found herself talking, or rather whispering back. Pure nonsensical words and babble that felt somehow significant, somehow answering the pleas, retorting to threats and making her fearful.

This was not for mortal eyes, even ghostly eyes. This had been created by forces greater than anypony had a right to witness.

Trixie tried to step back, but she couldn't. Her leg was forced forward. Once. Twice. It felt like her body was being stretched... like her soul was being stretched. Her thoughts became whispers, her vision became a blur of light and unidentifiable shapes, save for the bands of runes and glyphs.

She was... she was...

She felt somepony calling out to her, and realized immediately who it was, the most important pony... but she couldn't stop. "Big Mac... I don't want to leave you..." she managed to gasp.

She was gone.

o.O.o

Midnight watched, enthralled as Trixie took a step towards his objective. The energy tendrils extended and wrapped around the showmare, sparking with energy as her horn started to shine. He held his breath. This was it. Even he hadn't made it *that* far before...

"Trixie!" Big Mac was suddenly charging towards the mare and 'it'.

Midnight jumped in front of the stallion. "Stop you fool! You can't get close to it! You'll be destroyed!"

"What have you done?" the draft pony asked, his voice strained.

"The only way of accessing the power in that was through a soul and she needed an anchor... she went ahead and I stayed behind to..."

"Stop lying."

Midnight froze as he looked past Big Macintosh towards the entrance to the room. There were two more ponies there. A mare he did not recognize bearing some resemblance to the stallion, and a black alicorn.

Nightmare Moon stepped in, stopping right next to Big Mac.

"Y-you brought her here?! Are you crazy? What sort of rebel are you?"

"I said," Nightmare Moon narrowed her eyes. **"Stop lying, Midnight. I know all about the guardian and the purpose of the Council of Nightmares."**

Midnight closed his eyes and looked down. Then he started laughing. "What do you think you know?" he spat, looking up at the alicorn. "What I told these fools? 'Rebels' please. A rag-tag group of ponies with no chance at actually achieving anything significant other than getting killed by their own stupidity."

“Hey! Don't you talk about my brother like that!” Applejack growled, stepping up on Nightmare Moon's left side. She spared a glance at her brother, but noticed that his eyes were set on Trixie, who was slowly walking towards... something made out of light.

She tried being jovial. “Big Mac, your taste in mares...”

“Not now.”

Applejack's mouth clamped shut involuntarily. Her brother had *never* spoken to her like that. The farm pony looked at him and sorted her thoughts. She felt confused, angry and even jealous at the same time. Confused because she could not understand, in all honesty, how those two could have ever developed feelings for each other.

When had that happened? It was clear that her brother held deep feelings for the showmare, but as far as she knew they had never met!

She felt jealous because this was the first time her brother seemed like he loved somepony more than his sisters. It was silly, she knew he would always love her, they were siblings as surely as they were Apple family and it was a completely different kind of affection.

Lastly, she felt angry. Angry at Midnight for tricking Trixie and Big Mac and who knew how many others.

But right now was not the time to ponder. “Trixie!” she shouted. “Stop! Midnight tricked you!”

The unicorn chuckled. “She can't hear you, she's trapped.”

Big Mac suddenly rushed forward, and to Applejack's surprise, went through the unicorn. But just as he was about to reach Trixie, he was enveloped in bluish light and stopped cold.

“Trixie!” he groaned.

“I'm sorry, Big Mac.” Nightmare Moon said. **“But I can feel the power emanating from the *êambro*. If you take one more step forward your body will be destroyed.”**

Midnight laughed. “Indeed!”

Nightmare Moon glared at him. **“You shall pay for what you have done. To Twilight and to Trixie.”** she looked at the paralyzed pony. **“And to Big Mac.”**

“Then why is Trixie able to walk towards it without dying?” Applejack asked.

“Because she's already dead.” Midnight answered. “I would have gone myself, but given what happened to me before, I think I would rather let her try her luck.”

Applejack stared. Trixie was dead? Did Big Mac know this? She glared at Midnight. “What happened to you?”

Midnight snorted. “My body was disintegrated immediately.”

“Big Mac! You get back here right now, mister!” the cowpony shouted at her brother.

“So you decided to use somepony else to see if they would survive it?” Nightmare Moon shook her head slowly. **“That is pathetic.”**

“But effective.” Midnight returned.

“Wait...” a new voice interrupted.

Applejack, Nightmare Moon and Midnight turned to look at the cavern, where Soarin' stood panting, having clearly rushed there. “You lied to us?!” he glared at the unicorn ghost. “And...” he looked at Nightmare Moon. “What is *she* doing here?!”

“Getting rid of the trash.” Nightmare Moon said. Her horn glowing as a sudden force slammed into Midnight, making him stagger.

“H-how...” he coughed. “I’m a ghost!”

“**And I’m a goddess.**” Nightmare Moon smirked, then frowned as she turned towards Trixie, who was almost touching the egg-shaped energy. “**Creating a cambro requires ancient and powerful magic... had we had arrived earlier...**”

“You... cannot, stop me.” Midnight stood up. “I will remain here as long as I am in the service of my master!”

The alicorn's horn shone again and something scraped against the floor. The group turned towards the cloaked body on the floor as a medallion slowly slid out from under it under Nightmare Moon's call. “**Then, by all means, be gone!**”

The medallion shot towards the black alicorn. Midnight tried to catch it, forgetting in his desperation that he was unable to touch it as it flew right through him. Nightmare Moon's hoof caught it in mid-air and she smashed it on the floor of the cavern, breaking it into tiny fragments.

Midnight stood still, his eyes going wide, then locking on to the Goddesses'. They slowly warmed, his body sagged as if a huge weight had been taken off of him.

The unicorn started to fade, wisps of his very being slowly melting into nothing. He looked up and his eyes focused on something beyond their sight. His last words faded into the silence just as the last sliver of him disappeared. “Star Dancer...”

“No! Trixie!” Big Mac called as the unicorn’s horn finally touched the egg-shaped energy.

“Big Mac... I don't want to leave you...” Trixie's voice drifted to them, full of sorrow.

Applejack's eyes were wide as she turned to look at the showmare that by rights she should have hated, but now just couldn't. Before her brother's eyes the unicorn faded away into the light.

A bright flash made most of the ponies present cover their eyes. When it was gone, they stared at the thing, which now truly looked like an egg. It still glowed from within, but now seemed to have a solid feel to it.

Big Mac, released from Nightmare Moon's hold now that the alicorn felt it was safe, slowly stepped up to it and lowered his head to touch it. "Trixie."

Everypony stood there, shocked.

"W-what happened to her?" Applejack asked Nightmare Moon.

The Dark Queen shook her head. **"I do not know. We will have to wait and see."**

"Um, guys? Sorry to interrupt but... didn't Midnight say his body had been disintegrated?" Soarin' ventured.

"Yes?" Applejack nodded.

"Then... if his body was destroyed... who's under that cloak?" he pointed with a hoof towards the body covered by a cloak.

Nightmare Moon's horn shimmered with light once more. The cloak slowly drifted up revealing the body beneath it. **"Oh..."**

"Dear Celestia..." Applejack fell to her knees, she felt short of breath. "I... oh, why..."

Carefully, with the tips of her wings, Nightmare Moon lowered the lifeless eyelids, regret clear in her expression. She had seen so much suffering hitting so close to home... she closed her eyes.

"What did they do to you?" Applejack asked nuzzling the body tenderly. "You didn't deserve this."

"Who was she?" Soarin' asked in a small voice, caught up in the feeling of the moment.

Applejack looked up at him, eyes red and puffy. "One of my best friends."

“My savior.” Nightmare Moon whispered.

“Twilight Sparkle.”

Chapter 16

The dungeon under Canterlot Castle was well maintained. For the most part.

It was not damp and it was free of vermin, it had new doors outside of where the prisoners were (which were a bit rusty), dividing it into subsections. Oddly enough there were small desks and file cabinets against the walls. Now that Lyra had a chance to properly assess them, most of the ponies down here more closely resembled pencil pushers than inquisitors.

In fact, other than the guards who had roughed her up when they brought her here and the one inquisitor that Nightmare Moon had... dismissed... they were all a bunch of shy, polite, and friendly individuals.

They had given her lyre back to play and pass the time. That was before the Queen had come to speak with her. Later on they had allowed Jade to give her a stack of papers after she left to get them under Nightmare Moon's orders without checking them. Not that any of them seemed eager to question the assassin's motives. When she had practiced they had sat down to listen to her play and even gave her a daisy sandwich just before her parents arrived.

She turned a wary eye to her mother.

“Why?”

“What do you mean, why?” Lyra asked her mother. Truth be told she was barely paying attention to the elder mare. Now that she had finished practicing, her mind went back to being preoccupied with the fate of Big Mac, Trixie, Spike and Soarin'. Now that she knew that Nightmare Moon was not a bad pony (a thought that still boggled the mind) and that Applejack was going with them she felt a bit better about their chances. She had a half hour to think about things before her parents had been allowed into the dungeon.

"You know full well what I mean, young mare!" her mother snapped.

Lyra sighed. "Look, the reason I joined the rebels is complicated..."

"That's not what I meant!" her mother shrieked. "How could you, a Noble Unicorn who went to Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns and then on to college here in Canterlot be a..." she struggled with saying the word. "... a fillyfooler!"

Lyra stared at her mother, father and brother. "Is that all you came here to talk about?" she looked pleadingly at her father. "Is this really what is bothering you?" he looked away, and she felt her heart break. Her brother studiously kept his eyes on the floor.

"I'm about to be executed and you tell me that the thing that bothers you the most is that I like mares instead of colts?!" Lyra's voice was almost hysteric.

"I don't want you to die." her brother said softly.

"Paper Craft!" their mother hissed.

"It's true!" he said looking up and flinching a bit, but not backing down. "So what if she likes fillies? I like fillies too!" he smiled uncertainly at Lyra, who was beaming at him.

"It's not as simple as that, dear." her mother said.

"Delivery for the morgue!" a voice shouted, interrupting the conversation.

"It's open." one of the ponies in the dungeon said. "Do you have an ID?"

"Nope." a pair of earth ponies walked into view, a stretcher held between them by harnesses and covered with a thick, gray cloth that covered most of the body under it. "We only got to her this quickly because somepony saw her jump from the cliff over the waterfalls and called the guard."

One of the dungeon administrators shook his head. "What would drive somepony to do that?" he walked around the earth ponies and accidentally bumped one, shifting the stretcher and allowing a hoof to slide out.

Lyra's blood ran cold.

“Well, put her in the morgue, we'll find out who she is and...”

“Wait.” Lyra was aware that her mother had been ranting at her, but she hadn't been paying attention. Everypony stopped talking and looked at her.

The interrogator looked at her. “What is it, lady?” he asked. “We're really busy and...”

“Please... let me see her.”

The earth ponies bringing the stretcher and the interrogator exchanged looks. They really didn't know a the first thing about how to deal with prisoners. There had been no need for the dungeon in over five hundred years. It had really been nothing but a morgue up until Nightmare Flare had requisitioned it back into its former use.

“I don't think...” the earth pony began to say.

“Please! Please!” Lyra said, desperately. “Don't take her away, let me make sure...”

Comprehension and pity dawned in the faces of the earth ponies and the few interrogators around.

Without a word, the pony that had been about to take charge of the body nodded to the earth ponies.

They slowly made their way to Lyra. She barely noticed her mother making a face as she and her father stepped back, not wanting to be close to a dead pony.

“Are you sure, miss?” the front-most Earth pony asked softly. “It's not a pretty sight.”

“I have to make sure...” Lyra said, looking at the hoof. The mint unicorn's horn began to glow and the cloth was lifted slowly. Her breath caught in her throat.

Seeing the look of recognition, the interrogator motioned for the earth ponies to lay the stretcher on the floor in front of the cell.

“Ugh.” her mother muttered. “Please take *that* away.”

“Get out.” Lyra said in a very calm voice. “Now.”

“Don't you talk to me like-” her mother started to say.

“I believe you have overstayed your welcome.” one of the interrogators said firmly. “The prisoner clearly does not want you here and all you are doing is making things worse for her.”

“How dare you...” Lyra's father growled, but the pair of earth ponies, freed from their harnesses stood in front of him.

“As a parent... I am appalled at what I have seen and heard from you two.” the interrogator continued, his voice cold. “Your daughter has clearly lost somepony important to her, and she faces a horrible fate in an hour and you... you question her love life.”

“What gives you the right to question us as...”

“Go away now, or I will call the guards and have them escort you out.” the interrogator snapped.

“I will have your job for this!” Lyra's father threatened.

“Bring it up with the Queen then. I'm sure she would love to hear your complaints.” the interrogator growled.

The unicorn huffed, but turned around and walked away, followed by his wife.

“I'm... I'm so sorry Lyra.” her brother said as he slowly turned around and followed them.

Lyra, for her part, did not acknowledge any of them, her eyes were set on the pony before her. “Bon-Bon.”

"Come on boys." the interrogator said after a moment to take note of the name. "Let's give her some time to grieve."

The ponies slowly left her alone.

She felt... empty. She stared at the body before her, her mind racing but producing nothing in terms of coherent thoughts.

Then she slowly started to feel angry. "Oh, you coward." she hissed at the tear covered face of her former lover. "You coward!" she shouted. "Why?! Why couldn't you have trusted me? Why did you have to spill everything just because a stupid, conceited unicorn decided to share gossip with us?!"

She paced back and forth inside her room, her eyes never leaving Bon-Bon's body. Her glare seemed to intensify every time a tear threatened to come out. "You stupid earth pony! Senseless!" she choked. "You always believed the most idiotic things!" she sniffed. "And when y-you get me in trouble..." she stopped and took a shuddering breath. "Y-you go ahead a-and..." she closed her eyes.

Her body trembled. "You moron! You selfish idiot! The last thing I will remember of you before they kill me is your empty eyes and your crushed body!"

She turned around, facing the wall, but her body kept shuffling nervously, her hoof scratched the floor, her ears twitched until she looked back and turned around again to face the silent body in front of her.

"Damn it, Bon-Bon." she whispered. "Don't you know I love you?" she approached the bars until she pressed against them. "Don't you know that I would have wanted you to live? That I wanted to tell you that I forgave you, that it's normal to be scared even if you kind of jumped the bridle? Don't you know that I needed you here? All I have now is my mom and dad..." she drew a shuddering breath. "At least my brother came or everything would have been awful. But... just... why?"

She slid down to the floor, looking blankly at the dungeon. "I bought you chocolates." she confessed. "I hid them in my room, I wanted to get you a

flower, you know, since you were so nice to me about not getting the Gala gig.”

She looked down, her eyes slowly drifting to the mare lying cold next to her. Hesitantly, she stretched her foreleg out through the bars until her hoof touched Bon-Bon's icy cold one.

Lyra bit her lower lip as she closed her eyes and her body shook, tears forcing their way out.

The dungeons were quiet except for sobs and sniffing until a small chuckle emerged.

It was followed by another and another until Lyra laughed hard at the same time tears streamed down her face.

She kept laughing and laughing, unable to tear her gaze from Bon-Bon, until lack of air finally forced her to stop and take a long breath.

Slowly she picked up the lyre from the floor and started playing. The melody Nightmare Moon had given her was simple but powerful. She knew it had a secret to it, she could feel it from the very beginning, tugging at her magic and at her soul. With little practice she had not been able to do much with it. She didn't know that she had been lacking something. Nor did she know now what Nightmare Moon had planned by her learning it. Now, however, looking at the crushed form of her true love, she played sharply, not taking her eyes off of her... each note drawing power from her magic until...

o.O.o

“You called me, my Queen?” Spitfire asked, walking with her head lowered in submission into the private chambers of Queen Nightmare Flare.

“Indeed.” the Nightmare nodded then paced around the pegasus. **“As you know already, given your skill and loyalty to *me* you are being named Captain of the Queen's Air Force... are you ready to accept the *responsibilities* that come with the rank and position?”**

Spitfire blinked, she suddenly felt nervous. Why did she not like Nightmare Flare's tone? "Y-yes your Majesty. I can only hope to serve you with the best of my abilities."

"That is good to hear." Nightmare Flare said. **"Be aware that there might be traitors amongst those closest to us."** Spitfire cranked an eyebrow at that, but the alicorn did not elaborate. **"For now, step into the circle there."**

Spitfire noticed that there was a large magical-looking diagram on the floor of the room. It consisted of a large circle, where she was supposed to stand, and four smaller ones each pointing towards a cardinal point. Twilight Sparkle was finishing up drawing symbols on the outside of the circle while consulting a diagram floating next to her.

"Uh... your majesty?"

"I understand you are nervous, but you *do* trust me and owe me allegiance, don't you?"

Spitfire forced a smile. "Of... of course." she nervously moved towards the circle.

"Watch it!" Twilight Sparkle warned. "If you scratch one of those with your hoofs you could implode! Twice!"

Spitfire gingerly lifted her hoof. "I uh... I..."

"Oh, don't worry your pretty head over it." Twilight smiled. "Just fly on to the center of the circle."

Feeling even more nervous, Spitfire did as she was told.

"I have decided that if you are going to be the Captain, you should have Lieutenants to help you." Nightmare Flare said. **"So I will bring back four of my most trusted to serve under you."**

"Y-you honor me, your majesty."

Nightmare Flare smirked. **"I do, indeed. But first..."** her horn glowed softly and Spitfire felt something shift in place.

“No!”

She was about to reach up to grab the medallion that Nightmare Flare had levitated away from her, but her body was suddenly encased in energy, preventing her from moving. She turned to look desperately at Twilight Spark, who's horn was also alight. The unicorn smiled sweetly and shook her head slowly.

“This is interesting.” Nightmare Flare said as the medallion rotated in place in front of her. **“It is tied to your soul. I can see the silver thread that goes from it to you. It is also ancient... and made with the essence that I need for this spell to work.”** she looked at Spitfire with cold eyes. **“It also has a compulsion spell in it, making you devoted to its cause... but that will change soon.”**

She levitated the medallion and put it down a few feet away from Spitfire, in a smaller circle with lots of runes around it.

Spitfire tried to struggle, but Twilight's magic was too strong.

“Let us begin.” the alicorn declared as her horn flared with energy.

When the first pulse of energy reached the medallion Spitfire began screaming.

“Oh, don't worry!” Twilight Spark shouted over the screams. “It'll take less than an hour!”

Hidden behind a curtain, Spike looked in horror at the writhing former Wonderbolt as bubbles of energy seethed and popped in the smaller circles.

Behind him, the queen's crown jewels seemed to glitter as they reflected the light from the massive energies being released.

o.O.o

Azure eyes slowly filled with horror as the green surface of the gem-made mirror Silent Jade held showed her what was happening in Nightmare Flare's room.

She blinked and dove to the side, barely able to dodge a lightning bolt striking the spot where she had been sitting. She whirled around, facing an elder male unicorn with a cream coat dressed in white and red robes.

"Scrying inside the Castle, dear?" the unicorn asked. "Did you think we would not detect that?"

Jade narrowed her eyes. With swift motions she conveyed her message.

"Oh, I know who you are." he said. "But I am under the orders of a higher being and I have been told to get rid of the vermin that have endeared themselves to the Queens."

Jade's horn glowed as she levitated several objects and threw them at the mage, who simply let them bounce on his shield. "Is that and scrying the best magic you can perform?" he chuckled. "This will be easy. For a mage like myself, third in the order of Celestia, you are no challenge!" Jade lowered herself a little, obviously ready to tackle him.

In a flash, she was before him. But the unicorn teleported just as quickly...

He reappeared screaming behind her. Through teary, wide eyes he stared in horror at his front hooves, severed by Jade's hidden blade at the elbow.

"It's true you might be better with magic than me, many ponies are. But few are better at fighting." The assassin turned to face him, her horn glowing. His robes took a life of their own, stitches undoing, cloth rearranging until he was completely mummified in the expensive materials, unable to move or even scream anymore.

With a slight look of disgust, Jade levitated the severed limbs and wrapped them in extra cloth, before making her way to the barely struggling mage.

She concentrated and slowly a Council of Nightmares medallion could be seen between the folds of cloth. Frowning she slid it back under the folds.

"You might not see it that way, but I'm really doing you a favor." She whispered to the mummified pony's ear, ignoring the muffled screams. "I hope you find freedom."

Pulling his head back, her knife traced a deadly arc on his neck. The cloth absorbed the blood as she carefully lowered him down to the floor.

Looking around, she quickly dragged the body to a safer location. She had to run. She had to warn Nightmare Moon of what her sister was doing.

o.O.o

"So... you know what that thing is?" Soarin' asked after a few minutes of silence had passed.

They had covered Twilight's body with the cloak again, and the pegasus and the alicorn had stepped away to let the siblings deal with their loss. Applejack had gone to sit next to Big Macintosh and had cuddled up to her brother, who provided a shoulder to cry on as he stared dismally at the egg-shaped cambro.

Nightmare Moon herself looked somewhat depressed as well, something which Soarin' had some difficulty understanding. As far as he knew, Princess Luna had not had many friends and had kept mostly to herself and her sister since she had come back a year ago.

It was odd to see her so distraught over the death of a pony she couldn't have known that well. He sighed. Then again, Luna's life was such a mystery that she could have been dating him for all he knew.

"I do." the alicorn said, looking towards Big Mac and the 'egg'. **"The cambro is an ancient artifact constructed out of pure magic. It is designed to only allow certain individuals to touch it, or if not completely specific ponies, then it will allow individuals that conform to certain standards."**

"So anypony could touch it?" Soarin' asked. "Or just ghosts? Or just unicorns?"

Nightmare Moon nodded. **“This one might allow only unicorns to touch it, but the standard was not met by Midnight, which resulted in his body being destroyed. Trixie did conform to it, so she was allowed in.”** Nightmare Moon glanced at the dormant artifact. **“Normally a great sacrifice is needed to create something like this, not necessarily a life, but something extremely important. One or more ponies might be involved in its creation... the more ponies involved, the more powerful it is. I... have never heard of one with this much power. I only got a glimpse of it before it retracted into its form, the rune shields around it would have been able to tell me what it was. But they are gone now.”**

“Will Trixie be okay?” Soarin' asked, looking at Big Mac. He had known them for a little while, but he had liked them both, even after Trixie had scared the living daylights out of him with her hoof-through-the-head stunt. They made the cutest unlikely couple in his opinion.

“I don't know.” Nightmare Moon sighed. **“Trixie was absorbed by one of the most powerful artifacts in Equestrian history, excluding of course the Elements of Harmony and a couple of other... items. I am not aware of how far her skills in magic went. If they are not strong enough, then she only has her will power to keep herself 'alive' or as alive as a ghost can be.”**

“Well, she seemed to be studying the runes around here, that counts for something, right?” Soarin' said. “She had to know pretty decent magic for that right?”

“I'm afraid reading runes doesn't automatically grant you the ability to use them.” Nightmare Moon said. **“Magic is complex. As far as I know from reports, Trixie specialized in illusions and magic strictly related to show business. Twilight Sparkle might have been able to do something with it, she was an exceptional mage. She sought to truly understand magic, and not only did she have an amazing amount of power, she had incredible skill with it, so much so that Luna asked her to help Celestia. ”**

“You mean *you* asked her.” the pegasus pointed out.

Nightmare Moon glared at him. **“We are different ponies.”**

“Right.” the Wonderbolt cringed under the glare. “I um... I saw the egg thingie before it changed...”

“Do you remember anything interesting about it?”

“Well, other than bands of energy with some cutie marks and other symbols on them...”

“... Did you say 'Cutie Marks'?”

o.O.o

Misty and Blast flew freely over Canterlot for the first time since Blizzard had attacked Nightmare Moon. Their new Captain, Rainbow Dash, motioned for them to land in the Shadowbolt Barracks.

“I need to meet somepony.” Rainbow Dash informed them. “There's somepony down there that will tell you more of what's happening.”

The pair shared a look, and then nodded at her, following her instructions and banking down in perfect sync, making the cyan pegasus sigh wistfully. If only things had been different.

As she sped away, the pair made it to the barracks where the imposing figure of a fully-suited Shadowbolt looked at them.

“Um... hi.” Misty said.

The Shadowbolt cringed. “Hi... uh, follow me... I mean... if that's okay with you... that is...”

Blast resisted the urge to hug the Shadowbolt. “Sure! Come on, Misty. My name is Bolt, by the way.”

“Um... I'm... Fluttershy...” the pegasus leading them said. “Please sit down, I have some tea... If you want? You don't have to.”

“Are you *really* a Shadow-oof!” Misty glared at Blast, who had elbowed her.

“We'd love some tea.”

“Oh! Good!” the Shadowbolt smiled as she set down a three cups, one in front of the sulking Misty, the other in front of the bemused Blast and the last one for herself.

Fluttershy then proceeded to serve them their tea and offered them a tray with pastries. “Welcome to the Shadowbolts.” she said.

Misty slurped her tea, her eyes opening wide. “Wow. This is good!”

“I'm glad you liked it!” Fluttershy smiled, her voice gaining confidence. “It's my own brew. I grew the spices myself!”

“It is very soothing.” Blast agreed. “May I have a muffin?”

“Oh, please do.” Fluttershy offered the plate to Misty after Blast had taken one chocolate covered muffin for herself. “Would you like one too, Misty?”

The former Wonderbolt glared at the Muffins. The eclipse cast shadows and red light all around Equestria, both Princess Celestia and Princess Luna had been turned into evil versions of themselves. She knew there was a mysterious cult working behind the scenes, Soarin' had joined the Rebel Alliance, one of their own was dead and everypony was mandated to attend an execution in an hour.

The guards hated the Shadowbolts. Over a short space of time, ponies had come to fear anypony related to the army, the Queens or even the weather teams.

Their lives in show business were probably over and they had been inducted into the Shadowbolts and had sworn allegiance to freaking Nightmare Moon based upon flimsy evidence presented by a former fanfilly, who was their new captain.

And here, in Shadowbolt HQ, they were being offered tea and muffins by a superior officer who had the meekest voice and the most inoffensive attitude of anypony she had ever met.

“Sure. I'll take one.” Misty sighed.

o.O.o

The Mayor looked at the ponies that had gathered for her last-minute town meeting. Most pegasi, including the guards, still looked shaken from their ordeal from several hours earlier when they had faced Rainbow Dash. Many of them had admitted that they had severely underestimated the young pegasus. They had seen the Sonic Rainboom as something pretty, but not particularly useful for anything other than entertainment... they had never experienced the extreme speed needed for it, or the effects of the aftershock when Dash managed to pull it off.

Still, thanks to Nightmare Moon, they had suffered no losses and little worse than headaches. A fact that the Mayor had kept quiet about. The earth ponies that had fought Jade sported bruises, bandages and in the case of the guard, casts. The unicorn had not been kind to them.

Everypony else had ran off in a panic after Dash had knocked out all her attackers and the feeling of shame at their cowardly act made them look guiltily at the ones that had suffered while fighting.

The Mayor herself had been preparing to bolt, and she would have, had Nightmare Moon not stopped her forcefully. It brought her shame, but she couldn't bring herself to think she could have done something against those three. She was nothing more than an elder earth pony, after all. But she had felt even worse when she realized that they had almost trampled to death three fillies.

She sighed. It was time to speak. She brought her hoof down on the wooden floor to draw attention to herself.

Conversation slowly died as they all turned to face her.

"Now, I know you are all wondering why I called you here." the Mayor said. "Needless to say, it has been a very stressful couple of days. But we need to decide what to do about our current situation."

"We need to fight Nightmare Moon!" a pony shouted from the crowds drawing several mumbles of agreement.

The Mayor bit her lip. Then sighed again, resigned. "I don't think she's the problem."

This drew gasps from the crowd, including incredulous stares from the guards and pegasi.

Undeterred, the light coated pony looked at them. "The reason all the pegasi are alive right now, is that Nightmare Moon caught you before you hit the ground. At the speed and height you were falling from... it would have been disastrous."

Ponies started to argue amongst themselves and it took several clops on the floor before the attention went back to her.

"I hate to admit it, but Nightmare Moon behaved better than could be expected. We are the ones who attacked her." the Mayor said, her eyes meeting with several ponies. "I don't like it. I remember what Nightmare Moon did a year ago, but this time... she, and for that matter Rainbow Dash and Jade, did not do anything other than defend themselves."

"She's evil!"

"Rainbow Dash is a traitor!"

"The unicorn broke my left arm!"

"The unicorn," the Mayor interrupted another shout. "actually dove in to save the Cutie Mark Crusaders from being crushed to death when most of the ponies here in this very hall *stampeded* away from Nightmare Moon."

A brown female pegasus spoke up. "Is Scootaloo okay?" she asked.

"She was fine. She's probably at the Apple Farm right now." The Mayor said. "But that's not the point... the point is that Nightmare Moon, as bad as she was before, Rainbow Dash and the unicorn, Jade, did not act like villains. And since she is now apparently the Queen, along with somepony called Nightmare Flare we need to decide now how we are going to deal with Canterlot. Are we going to submit or fight? But whatever we decide, we have to remember that things might not be as black and white as we once thought."

At that moment the doors to the hall were pushed open, revealing two ponies covered in dark cloaks.

Nervously, the ponies of Ponyville stepped back allowing the pair to walk calmly up to the Mayor.

"I think I can help with that!" the foremost pony said.

Her voice made Mr. and Mrs. Cake jump. "Pinkie Pie?!"

"Surprise!" the hyperactive mare shouted, drawing back her hood and revealing her pink, fluffy hair in all its glory, followed by two balloons and streamers. "So, I think we were all talking about Black Snooty!?"

"Beware, Little Pony, that you do not offend, that who's image you are trying to mend." the other cloaked pony said, pushing back the hood to reveal the black and white stripes of a zebra.

"Oh, don't be silly-willy, Zecora! Black Snooty and I go waaay back, well, a year, but that's longer than most ponies here."

"B-but, I thought you were in Canterlot?" Mr. Cake asked.

"And now I'm here!" Pinkie Pie shouted with glee, bouncing around Mr. Cake. "Isn't it amazing?! I was sent to the moon! And then I got sent to the Everfree Forest! And then I met Zecora and I explained everything to her and..."

"Perhaps it's time, to explain things further, as I can see on some ponies here; they have the eyes for murder." Zecora said grimly, looking steadily at one of the guards until he looked down, unable to hold her gaze.

"Right!" Pinkie Pie said, jumping up to stand next to the Mayor. "Okay! Listen up everypony, Princess Celestia and Princess Luna need us! And to help them we have a plan!"

When some ponies started muttering between themselves, Zecora jumped onto the podium and brought her hoofs down hard, drawing everypony's attention.

*“Listen well, ponies! Listen well!
What the Element of Laughter has to say!
We all need to trust and work and anger quell,
Unless we want this eclipse to stay.”*

The murmurs died completely as the reluctant ponies relented and listened to the pair.

o.o.o

Rainbow Dash stood at the top of one of the tallest peaks around Canterlot. Down below, she could see the castle and the city, in the distance, she could make out Ponyville and further away Manehatan's lights were bright enough to be visible even with the weird lighting from the eclipse.

Down in Canterlot, Fluttershy would be talking to Misty and Blast, Nightmare Moon would be plotting something, Applejack would still be hating her, Twilight would be pulling some sort of crazy stunt to get under the farmer's tail and Lyra would be dealing with her execution...

In Ponyville, Pinkie Pie should be about to carefully contact ponies that would be sympathetic to their cause, and as far as she knew, Rarity would be doing the same with the Diamond Dogs.

She did wonder what was the point. From her exposure to the Council of Nightmares Medallion, she knew that the Guardian would be aware of their actions by now and planning to destroy them. He could manipulate Nightmare Flare and possibly even Nightmare Moon. They were up against ancient beings of unimaginable power. No single pony, or even an army could stand against Celestia if the Princess had decided to use her full powers. Nightmare Flare would most likely be less forgiving, and if Nightmare Moon was not able to stop her.

She sighed.

"What's the problem, Dash?" a voice asked from behind her. "You seem down. Nice uniform, by the way."

The pegasus smiled as she turned around to face Gilda. "I thought you wouldn't make it."

The griffin snorted. "After Kung-Fu Pony gave me the blasted letter I couldn't avoid reading it." she was silent for a moment. "You really mean what you wrote?" she asked, rubbing her elbow with a claw as she looked down uncertainly.

Rainbow Dash nodded. "I... I've been taking a lot of hits recently, Gilda." she sighed, sitting down on the mountaintop. "Just about everypony thinks I've gone evil because I'm on Nightmare Moon's side."

"Yeah." Gilda looked at Dash with a strained smile. "About that..."

The rainbow-maned pegasus groaned. "Not you too!"

"You have to admit it is weirder than you hanging out with those dorks."

Rainbow Dash glared at her and the griffin smiled sheepishly. "Okay, sorry."

The pegasus sighed. "What I wrote is true, Gilda. I do feel that I let you go too easily, I was not a good friend in that sense... you acted like an asshole, there's no denying that, but I just let you go and didn't even try to talk things over until now."

"Dashie, you know that you are the only pegasus I respect. The only *pony* I respect." Gilda said walking up to sit down next to her. "It's very rare for a griffon to befriend a pony of any kind. You remember how the flight camp was set out, it was two camps, one for pegasi, one for griffons. We don't exactly get along. You and I wouldn't even tolerate each other if we weren't forced to go to camp."

Rainbow Dash nodded, looking at Gilda steadily.

The griffon coughed. "I had a hard time accepting that I was supposed to share my sky with pegasi. When I met you, I thought I understood why it

could be... we were the coolest pair in all of the camp! But... the other pegasi are not like you."

"The other griffons are not like you either."

"Of course not," Gilda smirked. "I'm the best!"

Rainbow Dash chuckled.

"Anyway, when I met your other friends... well, they were just not cool enough for my Dashie." Gilda confessed. "I was jealous... I *am* jealous of them. They have you all the time, and when I was visiting they still wanted you to hang out with them." she started to scratch the soft ground with a claw. "And when the whole party with the practical jokes happened... I know I had been cruel and petty, I'm too proud to deny the fact that I was doing wrong but... I just felt betrayed when I found out you had planned the jokes."

"I didn't know you would be the victim of all of them." Rainbow Dash said softly.

"I brought it upon myself." the griffon said. "I don't hate your friends... I think the pink one was actually growing on me for a while, but I... it's really hard for me to make pony friends... it's not personal."

"I'm sorry I let you go just like that, Gilda." Rainbow Dash sighed. "I knew it wouldn't be easy for you to adapt to them, they all live on the ground, even the other pegasus." she chuckled. "And I think our friendship is worth more than a single fight. Actually, I know it is. One hundred percent sure of it. I should have sought you out..."

"... I should have come back."

They stopped and chuckled together.

They remained in comfortable silence, past grievances forgiven, until Gilda looked back to the pegasus. "Dashie... your letter... it felt like you wanted to say goodbye."

Rainbow Dash looked down towards the castle. "I am."

Gilda's eyes widened. "What?! Why?"

Dash sighed. "There's too much going on, there's a storm coming... I don't know if my wings will pull me through." the pegasus bowed her head.

"Gilda... you have been my friend for a long time, I love you like a sister. I couldn't ask for a more loyal and strong willed friend. I would never consider any wingpony over my one griffon."

"Dashie..." Gilda whispered, moved to tears.

"This is the side I so wanted my friends to see! The Gilda that was there for me when I thought I couldn't handle the camp, the Gilda that challenged me every day to be a better flier, the Gilda that would be there for *her* friends. A confident smirk, caring eyes..." Rainbow Dash whispered fervently as she hugged her friend. "I couldn't let things end up like that between us!"

Gilda couldn't understand why her friend felt her world was about to end. "Why is this... do you need help?"

Rainbow Dash looked deep into her friends' eyes. "Don't... please, just say you forgive me for letting you just go and not trying to sort things out between us until now... I know I asked you to come all the way here just to basically send you back home, but I needed to say this. Face to face."

Gilda smiled. "Only if you forgive me for acting like a total bitch around your friends, Dash."

Rainbow Dash's lips quivered as she held her friend close, not noticing as she did that the griffon's smile faded to be replaced by a resolute look.

Chapter 17

Applejack stared at the cloak-covered body. Suddenly all that she had gone through with Twilight Spark became a joke. That... creature was not her friend. It never had been. Twilight never harbored lustful feelings for her. She had never seen Applejack as anything but her friend. And that is exactly how Applejack wanted to remember the studious unicorn.

The fact that a twisted, fraudulent and lustful *thing* was prancing around with Twilight's face was unforgivable.

The fact that that fiend had used her friend's face to try and lure her into bed was inexcusable.

The fact that that monster had forced her into a kiss... and that *she* had kissed back... was really confusing.

But one thing was for sure, regardless of the things that it had done, her unicorn friend was pure and innocent... and it was something that made her feel much better about the conflicting emotions inside of her. There was a tiny voice inside of her, sounding much like her deceased friend, that told her that she had been right, that her honest feelings for Twilight Sparkle were as strong and clear as ever.

Even if Spark was another story.

She shook her head. The conflicting emotions when it came to the Twilight-clone were getting too distracting for the normally grounded earth pony. Glancing around the room, she took note of Soarin', talking to Nightmare Moon, and further back, her brother standing guard over the artifact that had absorbed Trixie.

Forgetting for a moment about her own problems, she considered her brother and the now-gone ghost. What *had* happened there? Big Mac had been to that mockery of a show Trixie had put up in Ponyville so long ago. She remembered how she had ranted and raved about the showmare.

Applejack recalled vividly how he had supported her when she explained how much she hated Trixie and how bad she had felt at being humiliated in front of everypony.

Since then, Trixie had somehow died and came back as a ghost. She had then met her brother, and in the span of time it took for them to meet and arrive in Canterlot, both ponies had developed feelings for each other. Big Macintosh seemed truly devastated by the loss of Trixie, so Applejack had no doubt whatsoever about his interest in the late showmare.

The feeling seemed to be mutual since Trixie's last words had been directed at her brother. The longing and helplessness behind it also showed that even in her last moments, her thoughts had been for Big Macintosh.

Applejack sighed. She didn't like Trixie, but her brother was a good judge of character, and she had never had any reason to doubt him. If his gut feeling was that the showmare was the right mare for him... then there was probably more to Trixie than she had seen or thought.

But thinking about Trixie made her realize how little things made sense now. Applejack groaned and fought the urge to bump her head on the granite wall. One of the reasons she loved her life as a farmer was that things made sense. Everything was straightforward. If you plant a tree in good soil and care for it, it grows strong. It then gives fruit, and you reap the benefits of your hard work.

Granted, sometimes her life made her feel like she was pulling a train uphill, by herself. However, apples might come out bad, or pests might attack. Perhaps the trees would get sick. For the most part, if you were careful, worked hard, followed the steps, and kept honest, good things happened.

That made sense. Love... love did not. Especially when there was a certain crazy pony-creature claiming to love *her*.

Applejack sighed and sat next to her brother. The least she could do was be there for him.

o.O.o

"I think we're lost," Sweetie Belle said to aloud to nopony in particular. She then turned to Scootaloo. "I think we're lost, Scootaloo."

"I heard you the first time," the pegasus growled, looking around at all the big houses. "If I could fly..." she sighed.

"How did we get lost again?" Apple Bloom asked.

"I have absolutely no idea," Sweetie Belle said. "We followed the instructions from that colt with the yellow and black bandanna Scootaloo was talking with to the letter."

The three looked around and sighed. "Okay, I say we ask someone more reliable than a pony with a huge backpack," Sweetie Belle suggested.

"Fine, fine," Scootaloo growled. "Hey, I see a few guards over there! They definitely know the city, right? And they should be reliable."

"They should," Sweetie Belle agreed.

"Let's do it!"

As the three Crusaders made their way down the street, the guards would stop on each house, talk to briefly to the ponies there and sent them on their way somewhere.

"Ah wonder what's goin' on." Apple Bloom said looking at the group of guards as they talked to yet another pony outside their home.

"Do you think it has something to do with the show at the plaza?" Sweetie Belle looked at all the ponies that would immediately leave after talking with the guards.

"Probably! It's got to be something awesome if they're having the guards remind everypony about it!" Scootaloo said, a big smile spreading on her face.

The three finally reached the guards just as a family of three unicorns walked out of their home to meet them.

The unicorns didn't look very happy- in fact, they all seemed tired, and the young unicorn- who had to be about their own age- looked like she had been crying. She was clinging tight to a familiar-looking piece of cloth.

"... and it is by order of the Queens that all citizens, without exemption, are to go to the plaza today."

"I understand, but please, we have just heard horrible news," the male unicorn pleaded to the guard. "We just lost one of our own, we want time to mourn..."

The guard actually looked uncomfortable. "I *am* sorry sir, but it is a direct order and... well, the Queen was *very*... clear about what would happen to those that fail to obey it."

The unicorn sighed. "Fine then, we'll go to the plaza..."

"Oh, you're going to the plaza!?" Sweetie Belle exclaimed as the three Crusaders reached the guards, she then tried to do her best impersonation of her elder sister. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but we were also hoping to get there, but we were wondering if you gentlecolts could tell us how to do so."

Scootaloo leaned towards Apple Bloom. "Is it me or does she sound like Rarity?"

"She does." the filly whispered back staring at the unicorn.

"We'll take you there," the unicorn mare said, giving a sad look to her daughter and the three fillies. "Where are your parents? You shouldn't go alone to something like this."

The three Crusaders suddenly looked nervous. "Um... well, our sisters are goin' to be there..." Apple Bloom said. "Applejack was at the castle not too long ago..."

"And Rainbow Dash will definitely be there!" Scootaloo said excitedly, not noticing the looks the guards exchanged. "She's not my sister, exactly, but

we go back.”

“My sister Rarity should be there, as well as our friends Twilight, Fluttershy, and Pinkie Pie,” Sweetie Belle finished.

“Did you say Rainbow Dash and Twilight Sparkle are your acquaintances?” the guard asked.

When the three fillies nodded, the guard gave them a hard look. “How do you know them?”

“We live with them in Ponyville!” Apple Bloom explained.

“I know Applejack,” one of the guards in the back said. “That little one speaks with the same weird accent. And she does kind of look like her.”

“It ain’t weird!” Apple Bloom complained.

“Not to mention the pegasus is like a miniature Rainbow Dash except for the coat color. Even her mane is done in the same style. Are you sure they are not related?” another said.

“Fine then,” the lead guard said, looking back to the unicorn mare that was now looking a bit conflicted at having offered to help. “My Lady, would you mind watching over these three while they’re at the plaza? They seem to have come all the way from Ponyville by themselves...”

Scootaloo, Sweetie Belle and Apple Bloom gasped. “H-how did you know?!” the pegasus asked.

The guard ignored them. “... and are related and acquainted to some very important ponies. Including our Queen's second in command.”

The way that the guard had asked was more of an order than a question, and so Cinnamon had no choice but to acquiesce with a hesitant nod of her head.

“Good,” the lead guard said. “One of my guards will escort you to make sure you are close to the stage.”

The adults looked completely sick when they heard that, but the Crusaders

jumped around happily.

“Did you hear that, y'all?! Front row seats!” Apple Bloom gushed.

“I knew Rainbow Dash would pull through!”

Sweetie Belle poked Scootaloo on the side. “Hey, I thought you were angry at her for what she did at Ponyville!”

Scootaloo turned around. “Oh yeah? Well, what about Silent Jade? Do you want to talk about her?”

“Girls!” Apple Bloom shouted. “Calm down! We shouldn't keep these nice ponies waiting.”

The other two lowered their heads. “Sorry.”

The guards, who looked bewildered by the casual tossing of names related to really dangerous ponies, just nodded as they returned to normal.

One of the guards started guiding the three unicorns and the three crusaders.

Scootaloo kept staring at the cloth wrapped around the young filly's neck. “Where have I seen that...” Her eyes opened wide. “Trixie!”

The three unicorns immediately stopped and the guard leading them carried on walking for a few feet before realizing they had stayed behind.

“What about her?” Apple Bloom asked.

“Look at that cape! Isn't it just like the one Trixie had? I remember Twilight taking it and a hat back to her with Ditzy's help!”

“Y-you knew Trixie?” the little unicorn asked.

“Can we get going?” the guard interrupted. “I'm sure you can talk on the way.”

The group started walking again, but this time the unicorn family kept pace

with the three crusaders.

“Well... we didn't really get to talk to her, though Snails and Snips talked to her a lot,” Apple Bloom said after a moment.

“Yeah, but her show was pretty cool,” Scootaloo said. “Until she started making fun of our friends.”

“She wouldn't do that!” Daisy Sprout said. “Sis wasn't a bad pony!”

This time it was the Cutie Mark Crusaders that stopped short.

“Move!” The guard shouted back.

The three stumbled to catch up.

“She did!” Scootaloo insisted. “She turned Dash's rainbow into a twister!”

“And she tied up my sister with magic to prove she was better!” Apple Bloom added.

“And she turned my sister's hair into a rats' nest!” Sweetie Belle sighed. “It took her months to get over it.”

“... It was pretty funny though. Ah've never seen my sister tied up like that! She's gone done it to me a couple of times before, but since that happened...”

“Apple Bloom!” Sweetie Belle gasped.

“Oh, come on!” the earth pony filly rolled her eyes. “Why, Ah remember you mentioning rats all the time to your sister whenever you got annoyed with her. Didn't you even leave one of Opalescence toys in her bed because she grounded you?”

“T-that's just a rumor! She was never able to prove it was me!” the unicorn looked away from her friend, blushing.

“I remember that after she put the Ursa Minor to sleep, Twilight was trying to find Trixie all over the place,” Scootaloo said after a moment. “If it wasn't

for Ditzzy, I don't know if she ever would have.”

“Hey, didn't Twilight leave Ponyville to go talk to her?” Apple Bloom asked. “Ah remember my sister was very grumpy that whole week. She said it was a waste of time.”

“Why?” Cinnamon asked, looking at them with a serious expression. “Why was Twilight Sparkle looking for my daughter?”

Scotaloo and Apple Bloom shrugged and turned to look at their unicorn friend.

“Weeeell...” Sweetie Belle looked at the ponies around her and blushed. “I wasn't supposed to be awake, but one night I heard Twilight tell Rarity that she had been very impressed with Trixie's control over magic. She said that Trixie wasn't as powerful as she was, and that she probably knew less spells, but that she more than made up for it with inge... inge...”

“Ingenuity?” Cinnamon asked.

“That!” Sweetie Belle said. “And when Trixie ran away, she had left behind a lot of her stuff, including her books and esseis, so Twilight tried to find her to give it to her, and also to talk about magic.”

Cinnamon closed her eyes and leaned against her husband, while Daisy Sprout sighed.

“Sis...”

“Are you really Trixie's sister?” Apple Bloom asked softly, having noticed how depressed the other filly had gotten ever since the showmare had been brought up.

“Did she give you her cape?” Scotaloo asked, trying to get the unicorn to speak to them.

They didn't see the two elder unicorns cringe, but Daisy Bloom had a small sad smile. “I think she would have, someday.”

The three Crusaders looked at each other. The family's sadness and the

way that they kept talking about Trixie as if she was gone finally settled in.

“Um... do you want me to tell you about her show?” Scootaloo asked.

Daisy Sprout blinked tears away and nodded, smiling at the three crusaders as they took turns describing the tricks that The Great and Powerful Trixie had pulled in front of the crowd at Ponyville.

o.O.o

Nightmare Moon was deep in thought after Soarin' had finished describing the cambro before it had collapsed into itself.

She started pacing, looking around the room. The runes had absolutely nothing to do with the egg-shaped cambro. They were responsible for everypony being able to actually see and hear ghosts.

Her brow furrowed. *Ghosts. The Guardian. Cults. Nightmares. The cambro. Twilight's body... Twilight Spark. Trixie.*

There had to be a connection to all of this. She looked at the body on the floor, this time analytically. Her eyes roamed to the cambro, she recalled Midnight's words about his body being disintegrated just by touching it.

It was powerful enough to destroy the ghost too, she knew. And he had known it, so he had sent Trixie to it just to see what would happen.

The cambro... *why was it so powerful? What sacrifice had been demanded to create it? Why create it in the first place? And who had created it? And what about the cutie marks described on it?*

Slow realization seeped into her mind. Her eyes widened as she looked towards the artifact. *Could it be that...*

“Nightmare Moon!” a voice shouted as somepony ran into the cavern.

The inspiration disappeared like a bubble bursting and the alicorn swore silently, turning to face Silent Jade as she ran into the smaller chamber and straight to her, panting slightly. Clearly the years of inaction had affected

the assassin a bit.

“What is it?” The Nightmare’s frown hadn’t disappeared, although the focus of it was now the green-maned unicorn.

“Nightmare Flare... she-”

“Hey!” Applejack had gotten up and trotted up to them, peering at Jade closely. “You can talk?!”

“A-Applejack!” Jade stepped back. “You’re... still here...”

“You’re losing your edge, Jade,” Nightmare Moon smirked, earning a glare from the unicorn.

Applejack frowned. “Wait... Ah recognize that voice-” Her eyes widened and she opened her mouth to speak again, but her words stuck there as she felt cold metal pressing against her throat.

“Applejack!” Big Macintosh jumped up and approached the pair nervously, watching the blade the assassin had pulled out of no-where press against his sister’s neck.

Soarin’ didn’t look happy, the last thing he wanted to do was to get into a fight right now, but he decided to side with Big Mac on this one, flanking the assassin.

“Really, Jade,” Nightmare Moon frowned at the impromptu stand-off. **“Is that necessary?”**

Jade gritted her teeth, her body trembled, but the hoof with the hidden razor-sharp blade being pressed against Applejack’s neck never wavered. The farmer was frozen in place, her eyes wide, staring in horror at the unicorn.

“You cannot reveal my identity!” Jade cried, her eyes never leaving the earth pony’s. “I can’t allow it! Too much rides on it! You have no idea just how bad it could get! Don’t ever say my name while I’m Jade! Do you understand?! I need you to promise, Applejack! And you too, Big Macintosh! This is no joke!”

Applejack nodded very, very carefully, feeling cold sweat roll down her back. "A... Ah Pinkie Swear..."

Silent Jade glanced at Big Mac, who looked a bit doubtful, but also nodded. Sighing, she let her hoof fall, the blade retracting into its hidden chamber.

Nightmare Moon lowered her head to eye-level with the unicorn, her glare making Jade almost step back. **"You and I will have a talk after all of this is done, and you *will* tell me why that was necessary."**

The assassin hesitated, but nodded.

The alicorn held her eyes for a few more moments before pulling back. **"What is it that you needed to tell me so bad you blew your cover?"**

Jade cringed. "It's your sister... she knows about the medallions, she caught Spitfire in a spell and... she was turning her into something!"

"What?!" Soarin' shouted, stepping in front of the assassin and ignoring Nightmare Moon. "What do you mean 'turning her into something'?!" He stared into the assassin's eyes. "What happened to her?"

"Flare put her in a circle with runes inscribed around it, she used the medallion to siphon power into it... I saw four smaller circles that had some sort of energy in them... I was interrupted and didn't see more... they don't trust us anymore, and it seems some of the guard are in the know... it took me the better part of an hour to get here without killing anypony else."

Applejack stepped back. "You... killed somepony?"

Jade nodded, either not noticing the farmer's disturbed look or not caring. "I was caught scrying by a member of the cult."

Nightmare Moon slowly raised a hoof and massaged her temple, eyes closed. **"Anypony important?"**

"He said he was third in the Order of Celestia."

"You killed Sharp Glimmer."

“Was that his name?” Jade shrugged. “I hid his body, I doubt they'll find him anytime soon.”

Through the discussion, Applejack had become paler and paler until she had to sit down, still staring silently at the unicorn as if she had grown two heads.

“Yes, that was his name,” Nightmare Moon said testily. “And the fact that he is one of the three most talented unicorns in Celestia's order...”

“Talented?” Jade huffed. “Please. I know of *plenty* unicorns with more talent.”

“Fine.” The alicorn rolled her eyes. **“They will still notice him missing.”**

Jade's ears twitched. “Did anypony else hear that?”

The others shook their heads, confused.

“Hear what?” Soarin' asked.

“It... sounds like crunching?” Jade inclined her head. They remained silent for a moment. “I guess it's gone.”

“Excuse me?” Soarin' raised a hoof. “Spitfire? Circles?”

“I'm afraid I don't know what she's up to... circles and runes can do a lot... but if she's changing Spitfire and using the medallion...”

A sharp crack made them all blink. They slowly turned around to find that the *chambre* was shaking; it's shape contorting and trying to expand. Little rivulets of dark purple energy whirled and snapped around it as the group carefully stepped away from it.

o.O.o

Trixie woke up. Everything around her was light. There were no walls, no

ceiling or floor. For a moment she panicked. How had The Great and Powerful... slowly memories came back to her and she winced. "Ouch."

Her voice had a weird quality to it. It seemed distant, and at the same time was followed by an echo. It was... kind of ghostly.

Another voice seemed to float towards her. "... why..."

The voice was distant. But it seemed so much more real than her own, that Trixie immediately set off towards it. The voice... no, voices were clearer now, and the light seemed to dim somewhat, creating a feeling that she was walking into a room of some sort.

"... dangerous. We don't know exactly who they are, but my research points to their existence hailing from over a thousand years ago." A strong looking unicorn in golden armor said.

Trixie carefully stepped into the room and everything came to be into sharp focus. It was... a nursery?

Trixie looked at the three ponies in the room. The soldier that had spoken was talking to Princess Celestia, who stood next to a crib. The last one was a unicorn in expensive-looking robes decorated with magic symbols and runes.

"But why would they want to harm my filly?" Celestia asked.

Trixie stared at the Princess, completely ignoring the answer the unicorn gave. *A filly? The Princess had a filly?!*

This, she had to see.

Since they seemed to be unaware of her presence, Trixie made her way next to the crib and peeked inside.

She had never seen an alicorn filly before. She smiled at how cute it looked. *Would her own look like a unicorn or more like Big Mac?* She blinked and shook her head. *The Great and Powerful Trixie was **not** going to think about that right now.*

She looked at the filly instead. Little wings tucked close to her body, the cutest little horn poking out from under her growing mane. She was... she... looked really familiar. The purple coat. The darker shade of purple on her mane... the violet eyes...

"But... how can we protect her then?" Princess Celestia's voice seemed louder than before, and Trixie realized that the alicorn had turned to face the crib again and was effectively right next to her.

"If I might suggest something..." the robed unicorn in the room said, taking a hesitant step forward. "Twilight is too young to defend herself, maybe if we sealed some of her power... turn her into an earth pony, a unicorn, or a pegasus... she could still live in the Castle, but nopony would recognize her as your daughter. She would grow up learning the ways of the court and by the time she's old enough to receive her full power, and she would not be defenseless."

"That seems complicated," the soldier unicorn said, then turned to Celestia. "My Princess, let me hunt down those miscreants..."

"With all due respect, Lord Lance," the robed unicorn interrupted, "we know that they have infiltrated the Castle, we cannot really trust anypony outside this room."

"I imagine that you wouldn't suggest something like you did without already having a plan?" Celestia asked.

The robed unicorn nodded. "I have done some research into the çambro spell."

"I am familiar with it." Celestia said evenly. "I fail to see how it would help in this situation, unless you want to capture my filly in time."

"The spell can be adapted to contain the excess power and other traits that we would want to remove from the filly." He hesitated. "I think Lord Lance is right in that we have to find the Assassins Guild. I don't know why they have kept up with the attempts on your life but where they failed at killing you, they might just manage it with an innocent filly."

"It is probably because not many ponies have even caught a glimpse of her

in the last eleven months,” the soldier said. “They sensed a weakness... my guards-”

“...Are really not a match to the Assassins,” the robed unicorn interrupted. “I know they are trustworthy for the most part, Lord Lance, but let's face it, the last time an Assassin made it into the Castle they were not of much use. Had you not been guarding the Princess yourself...”

The guard snorted and scratched the floor with his hoof, but didn't deny anything.

“What kind of life can I give to my own daughter by having her hide who she is?” Celestia asked.

It was then that a scuffle was heard outside, the door was kicked in and two ponies in cloaks rushed into the room.

Trixie unconsciously moved in front of the crib in tandem with Celestia as one of the assassins jumped towards Lance. The other one attacked the robed unicorn, but was stopped by a shield spell, followed by a small ball of energy that sent the pony flying out of the room.

The showmare had never seen somepony cast magic so powerful, so effectively and quickly before. Trixie had been so distracted by the casting prowess of the wizard unicorn that she didn't look at Lance until she heard a sickening crack.

She looked at the soldier as he let the dead assassin slide to the floor.

“Eldritch,” Princess Celestia said, looking at the robed unicorn. “Can the câmbro be a short-time measure? If we hide my daughter with ponies we can trust until we have dealt with the Assassin's Guild... can we dispel it and return her to normal?”

“That should not be a problem, Princess,” Eldritch said. “In fact, if all involved give a little power to the spell, the câmbro will use the energy as the sacrifice needed for it. When your daughter returns to normal, she'll have bit more magic than she would have otherwise, but she should be fine.”

Celestia looked at the bodies of the two guards and the assassins. “Do it.”

Trixie blinked as everything changed around her, she felt herself being pulled forward.

She was in another room... no! She recognized this place immediately. It was the cave where all the runes were! It looked exactly the same as when she had entered it.

The Princess and the two unicorns, Lance and Eldritch were there again, but they had been joined by two more. Trixie gasped when she recognized a much younger Midnight standing next to a mare with stars for a cutie mark. *That must be Star Dancer.* She thought.

The sleeping form of Twilight was wrapped and resting safely in Celestia's levitation spell.

"I have cast the most powerful illusion and disorientation spells I could on Twilight's room as you requested, Eldritch. No pony alive, other than I, should be able to even detect your shielding spell." Celestia said, looking sadly at her filly.

The robed unicorn nodded. "I have already tied the cambro's energy signature to return to the room, where it will be safe until we dispell it and return the power to your daughter- unless entry is forced, in which case it will come back here immediately."

Lance spoke up. "Are you absolutely sure that it will?"

"Yes." Eldritch nodded as he walked around the room. "Our memories of the event should also return immediately."

"For all of us?" Midnight asked.

"Yes, for all of us. Although in your case more work is needed." Eldritch said. "We will need fake memories for you two... we trust you, but you have to be absolutely convinced that Twilight is yours."

The two unicorns looked slightly uncomfortable, but nodded, regardless.

"You have to understand that our enemy is very resourceful. We don't know

how far their influence goes, so after you two have your new memories, you will be transported back home. It was a happy coincidence that the both of you were gone for roughly a year for your research, so there will be less questions asked,” Lance elaborated.

“I understand, uncle,” Midnight nodded.

“Are you sure you are okay with this, your majesty?” Star Dancer asked after a second, looking at the alicorn with pity. “This seems dangerous.”

Trixie had to agree. While Eldritch certainly seemed to know what he was doing, the whole thing was probably more complicated than it should be. Were the Assassins so feared and resourceful that they merited actions such as this to protect a single filly?

Celestia looked at the filly, her eyes shimmering with tears. “For now... I know it is a lot to ask of you all of you, but... I have to do everything in my power to protect my filly.” she hesitated. “If anything went wrong... please take care of my Twilight.” She kissed the sleeping alicorn's forehead and then slowly drifted the bundle up to Star Dancer, who carefully levitated her with her own spell. She looked into the bundle, just as Twilight stirred and opened her big violet eyes.

The unicorn almost melted then and there. “It will be my honor to watch over her for you, Princess,” she whispered.

“We shall start now... I have devised a rune matrix that, once started, will conclude the whole spell, finishing by teleporting all of you back to your rooms,” Eldritch said. The other unicorns and the alicorn stepped back as the robed wizard started intoning a spell.

Before Trixie's eyes, Twilight began to glow. Her wings seemed to shrink until they were completely gone, turned into magic energy. It was then pulled together and a small ball of light formed.

Soon, tendrils of magic whipped about it, looking like long blank scrolls that contorted and swam in the air, the ball of light pulsed with every snap or twist of the tendrils, the magic seemed to want to eat everything around it.

Eldritch's horn was glowing with an almost blinding white light as energy

seeped out of it forming floating runes in the air.

A rune flew over each unicorn and the one alicorn.

Celestia closed her eyes and let her magic flow as the rune over her flashed and died. The symbol representing the sun, an exact duplicate of her cutie mark appeared on the blank tendrils. It was soon followed by five more. One was the moon, a copy of Luna's cutie mark, the other four Trixie recognized as representing the four seasons.

The Princess slumped down, spent, although her horn still shone with magic, she looked confused at Luna's cutie mark appearing on the blank tendrils alongside hers.

Each unicorn's horn glowed in turn after hers, Midnight's cutie mark appeared next, followed by Star Dancer's and Lance's.

Trixie noticed that the runes on the walls had started glowing softly as this all happened. Then... she felt a tug on her magic. And to her bewildered eyes a soft cloud of magic floated from her horn to add her own cutie mark to the tendrils!

"Where did that come from?!" Celestia asked, worried. "We need to stop this, Eldritch!"

"I don't know!" the mage shouted, confused. "It seems there's another unicorn here! The spell... it can't be stopped now! It's still draining our magic!"

"But that can't be!" Celestia shouted as energy began to whiplash around them creating a hum. "There should be nopony here! We all checked!"

"An assassin?!" Lance guessed over the sound.

"I... I think... I see somepony there!" Star Dancer shouted her own horn still glowing, pointing a hoof in Trixie's direction. They all turned to look at her.

"I can't stop!" the showmare shouted, although she did not know if they could hear her. The magic seeping out of her horn seemed to increase.

“She's destroying the matrix! I don't know what's going to happen!”

“Don't you dare risk my filly's life!” Celestia shouted, standing up.

“The Great...” she gasped. “...and Powerful Trixie...” the unicorn groaned as the magic was soaked out of her. “...would never... hurt... TWILIGHT!” she shouted back.

Celestia seemed taken aback, but a sudden shockwave of magic knocked them all down.

“The spell matrix is out of control!” Eldritch said as an angry red lightning bolt made purely of magic hit Lance square in the chest. The whole room shuddered and the air turned heavy as the magic enveloped him.

The soldier shouted in pain as a cloud of... something seeped out of his head and was absorbed by the sphere, which immediately doubled in size. The tendrils whipped with amazing force as if the memories had fed them somehow. The unicorn did not even hit the floor before he was suddenly not there.

“Lance!” Celestia shouted.

“Uncle!” Midnight tried to move towards where the soldier had been standing, but like the others, he was held in place by the indescribable force the magical artifact was exerting on the room.

“The spell is still working!” Eldritch shouted, as wind seemed to pick up from nowhere. His robes billowed all around him and he had to raise his voice to make sure everypony could hear. “His memories of Twilight were erased! He was then teleported away!”

Twin bolts of lightning crackled through the air and struck Midnight and Star Dancer. Celestia cried out as the spell holding Twilight failed, expecting the filly to hit the floor. A light blue aura immediately caught the bundled-up filly, holding her in place next to the unicorns.

The Princess looked gratefully at Trixie, who was slowly becoming more and more solid, it almost seemed that as the magic was drained from her form, the bursts of energy would feed into her body. “Who are you, Trixie?”

she asked as the memories of both unicorns drifted out of them and through the magic storm into the câmbro, which again doubled in size.

"I'm... a friend of Twilight!" Trixie groaned as she tried to hold the filly in place as her magic was being drained and could feel her body being assaulted by energy from all around her. "I... I just never appreciated what she did for me, or realized it... until now!"

The pair of unicorns suddenly disappeared, followed by the little bundle containing Twilight. Trixie gasped as the magical energy she had used to hold the filly in place was absorbed into the storm.

"Y-you..." Eldritch groaned as another lightning bolt hit Celestia, making the Princess cry out as a considerably bigger cloud of memories was taken out forcefully by the grasping-like tendrils of lightning and drained into the câmbro. "Y-you're from the future?!"

"Yes!" Trixie shouted as the Princess was teleported away. "I found this câmbro alongside Midnight! I came into it to find out more about it!"

"How far?!"

"About twenty years, I think!"

"You have to get out of here now!" Eldritch shouted. "You could be completely destroyed!"

"I have been trying!" Trixie retorted, annoyed.

The energy seemed to gather once more, and this time the lightning bolt flew straight towards her. She panicked and struggled against the unbending magical force that held her in place.

Eldritch's body just seemed to appear before her. He was hit by the bolt and screamed as his memories were ripped out of his mind, he struggled against it as words poured out of his mouth. "T-this is the last one... I... won't make it, but the spell should be finished..." He opened his eyes and looked at her. "Will Twilight be safe all these years?"

The showmare nodded, her eyes wouldn't leave the unicorn that had just

sacrificed his life for hers.

Eldritch shook his head and smiled, raising his voice even more as the whole room seemed to hum with energy. "Your horn isn't glowing! It seems I broke the cambro's hold on you! Run now!"

Trixie turned and ran. The room started to fade behind her when she heard an explosion. Magic itself rained around her as she was picked up from the non-floor and flung out into the light.

o.O.o

The cambro exploded.

Big Macintosh' eyes widened as Trixie was hurled out of the magical artifact in an impressive wave of multi-colored energy. The Showmare flew through the air and slammed into the draft pony with enough force to knock them both down, where they lay in a confused heap.

The energy whirled around the cavern before blasting towards Twilight Sparkle's body.

Everypony stared as the cloak was burned in the magical vortex, the body was lifted into the air revealing the gruesome injuries Twilight had suffered.

Jade stifled a gasp when she saw the unicorn floating limply in the air. Twilight's horn had been ripped off her forehead, where the wound had bled all over her face and revealed little pieces of bone. Her left front leg was twisted in a way that made it obvious it had broken in several parts. The whole left side of her body was burnt; the coat was charred black and revealed the burnt skin under it. Her once carefully kept mane was almost missing completely, also burnt by the magical fires of her encounter with the late Midnight. Her cutie mark had faded completely.

Slowly, as the magic seeped into her, the wounds reacted. The exposed skin lost its burnt look, going raw red and slowly turning a healthy pink as the coat seemed to extend over it, the burnt parts fading into the magical whirlpool of energy. Her leg stretched into a proper position, the blood slowly faded from her face as the bone seemed to shift and mend as a

layer of skin covered it followed by purple fur. Her mane grew again, settling into the familiar style Twilight Sparkle favored.

The body was slowly spinning in place, held aloft by the sheer amount of magic acting on it. Twilight shuddered and drew a raspy gasp as she took in air. She groaned as her body twitched and slowly shook her head. There remained no sign of her injuries.

The fading magic slowly lowered her down until she stood, shaking, in front of the awestruck ponies around her. The last of the magic snaking to her flank, where her cutie-mark reappeared with a flash.

“Ooooh...” she moaned, slowly opening her eyes and carefully looking around. “Dad?! Why did...” Her head snapped up, eyes wide as she looked around. “W-what... where am I?” when she saw Nightmare Moon staring at her with a small smile, her jaw dropped and she started stammering. “Wha... when... how...”

“TWILIGHT!” Applejack shouted. She ran around Nightmare Moon and picked up her friend in a crushing hug. “Twilight! You're alive!” she exclaimed, teary eyed. “Ah can't tell you how glad I am to see ya! Ah thought you were gone forever!”

“Apple... jack... can't... breathe!” Twilight gasped. The crying farmer immediately lowered her down, but just as she thought she would release her, Applejack closed her eyes and kissed her.

Twilight stopped breathing and her eyes widened to the size of dinner plates as her friend actually tried to slip her tongue into her mouth.

Suddenly, Applejack's eyes snapped open and she pulled back in a panic, letting go of Twilight, who landed on her flanks, staring into space.

“Ah'm... Ah am so sorry sugarcube!” the farmer stammered, wiping away a tear. “Ah'm just mighty glad you came back, is all.”

Twilight managed a weak smile. “Uh-huh...” Her brain finally seemed to kick in as she jumped up. “What was *that*?!”

The tan pony would look her in the eye, so Twilight looked around, hoping

to get an explanation from the other ponies in the room. Her eyes settled on Nightmare Moon immediately and she felt her jaw fall slack.

The dark alicorn raised an eyebrow and Twilight would have asked something had Trixie not coughed and struggled to get up.

“Trixie?!” Twilight blinked. “What are you doing here?”

The showmare shook her head, but then looked down at Big Macintosh. Without stopping to think, she took his hoof in both of hers and helped him up.

It was when both of them stood firmer that she blinked and stared at her hoofs holding the draft pony's. “B-big Mac... I can... I can touch you...” she whispered.

Big Mac for his part was completely paralyzed. He looked down, wondering if he had died and his body had remained on the floor, but everything seemed to be in order. “Eeyup.”

“Big Mac! I can touch you!” Trixie shouted as she jumped and hugged the red stallion's neck, the showmare then promptly pulled him into a very deep kiss, shocking more than one of the assembled ponies. Unlike Twilight, Big Mac immediately reciprocated. He held Trixie tenderly against him for what seemed like an eternity. When the two finally pulled apart, the draft pony chuckled and wrapped a foreleg around Trixie's waist. “You sure can,” he said.

Twilight shook her head again and stepped back. “Okay, *what* is going on?!” she looked around. “Where are we?” her eyes roamed towards the stallion and the showmare nuzzling. “Why is Trixie here, acting like she's Big Macintosh's fillyfriend? Why did she kiss him? Why did he kiss her?! WHY DID APPLEJACK KISS ME?!” she pointed at Soarin' and Jade, her voice gaining a slightly hysteric tone. “WHO ARE THOSE TWO PONIES?” she kept walking backwards, eyes wild, until her back hit the wall. “AND MOST IMPORTANT OF ALL, WHY IS *NIGHTMARE MOON* HERE?!”

The pegasus right next to Nightmare Moon raised his hoof. “Uh, Miss Sparkle? I have a question first, if you don't mind?”

“WHAT IS IT?”

“Weren't you supposed to be a unicorn?”

Twilight blinked. “What do you mean? Of course I'm a...” she stopped. She couldn't feel her magic! She brought up a hoof to her forehead... “My... my horn...”

She brought herself to eye-level with Nightmare Moon. “You! You must be behind this! Where is my horn? What happened to my magic?!”

Nightmare Moon sighed. **“Why do I feel like I have been explaining myself every time I meet somepony in the last two days?”** she looked down to Jade when the assassin poked her in the arm.

Clop-tap, tap-tap, clop, hoof pointing at her, then hoofs smashing against each other, clop, clop, scratch, forelegs opened wide. The unicorn had then proceeded to hoof-talk to the alicorn, seemingly taking a degree of glee as the fearsome Nightmare blushed, growled and looked scandalized.

Applejack snickered despite herself as Nightmare Moon glared at the unicorn. **“Thank ye, *Jade*, for pointin' that out.”**

Twilight was about to speak when she noticed that she was hovering. She felt her stomach go cold as she slowly looked over her shoulder at the pair of flapping wings on her back.

“Oh, horse-apples.”

o.O.o

In Queen Nightmare Flare's chambers five creatures knelt before the Queen and her faithful student.

The one at the front slowly stood up. “We are ready for the execution, my Queen.” She was almost as tall as the Queen, her wingspan was just as wide. Her draconian tail swished lazily behind her, her powerful claws clicked on the hard stone floor. Two pairs of wings- one draconian, one feathered- shifted slightly. Golden-red eyes regarded the alicorn and the

purple unicorn with devotion.

“Good.” Nightmare Flare grinned. **“And the members of this cult you were part of?”**

“They will be rounded up and executed too.”

Nightmare Flare laughed. **“Well said, my dear. I am debating whether to let you keep your old name, or give you another one.”**

“Your wishes are my wishes, My Queen.”

“Oh, I like her attitude.” Twilight Spark smiled and trotted up to the half-reptilian pony. She nuzzled her. “Can I keep her while she's not in service? Applejack and I could have soooo much fun with her.”

“We shall see, Twilight,” the alicorn said. **“Although I believe she has her eyes set on Rainbow Dash.”**

“Ooh... just imaging it is giving me shivers,” the unicorn said, giving Spitfire a lustful look. “So, a new name?”

Nightmare Flare shook her head. **“No... I think Spitfire is oddly appropriate. Especially now, wouldn't you agree, Captain?”**

Spitfire's smile revealed a row of pointy teeth and a small spurt of flame.

“Sound the trumpets!” Nightmare Flare ordered as she slowly walked towards the door. **“It's time to show all my subjects what happens when they make fun of their Queen!”**

Chapter 18

Fluttershy was worried. Rainbow Dash had eventually joined them after finishing whatever business she had, but the wild pegasus had seemed completely subdued. There had been no banter, no bragging of any sort.

The cyan pegasus had simply joined them, eaten a muffin and basically stared into the sky with a look of hopelessness. Her eyes, usually focused on her next objective, be it a new trick or dominating a competition, now reflected worries and thoughts flying in her mind one after the other.

But the worst thing was that Rainbow Dash seemed to be calm. As if she had accepted her fate and was simply just waiting for it to happen. It was almost as though her will had been ground into dust by the wheels of fate.

The pink-maned pegasus bit her lip. It was clear to her that the Element of Loyalty knew a lot more about what was happening than she had told them. It made her wonder, just a bit where the loyalty lay... and if it was earned.

Rainbow Dash looked down at the city below from the vantage point at Shadowbolt HQ. Having taken over the old, abandoned barracks of the Pegasi Guards in the sheer cliff rising behind Canterlot Castle, they could survey the vast expanse of Equestria from the several ledges accessible only to winged creatures.

The dark sky and the blood-red light from the eclipse made the city look eerie... the streetlamps were all on, and she could see thousands of ponies slowly making their way towards the plaza, filling the side streets and avenues like a multicolored river. Behind her, Misty, Blast and Fluttershy, all dressed up in Shadowbolt uniforms, also looked at the crowds gathering in the plaza.

"It's disgusting," Misty said, her eyelids low. "I wonder what Nightmare Flare intends to achieve by gathering everypony in Canterlot for a public execution. It's barbaric!"

"S-she's not going to go through with it, is she?" Fluttershy asked, cringing at the thought. "Because Lyra's a good pony... and it would make Bon-Bon very sad... it would make me sad too... I mean... everypony, really..."

"I'm sure Nightmare Moon has a plan." Rainbow Dash smiled with more conviction than she actually had.

"She'd better." Blast said. "And you'd better have a backup, Captain." the former Wonderbolt looked at her former fan with steel in her eyes, clearly not impressed by Rainbow Dash's faith in the evil alicorn of legend.

Rainbow Dash lowered her head. "If... if Nightmare Moon doesn't stop it... I'll get Lyra... you girls will have to come at me with everything you've got."

Misty regarded the rainbow-maned pegasus. "Everything we've got might be a bit much for you to survive, Captain."

"I know."

"But... Rainbow Dash... if you do that, it won't be just Misty and Blast chasing you..."

The cyan pegasus whirled around, facing the other three ponies. "I know! But I just can't let her die like that! It's wrong!"

She was surprised to see the two former Wonderbolts smiling warmly at her.

"Don't worry, Captain," Blast said. "We'll cover you."

Dash blinked. "Wait... what?"

"You didn't think we'd let you take all the glory, did you?" Misty added. "Besides, if you weren't willing to do that, then you wouldn't be Wonderbolt material."

The pegasus bit back a laugh. "Now I know you're pulling my tail." she turned her back to the three and looked down towards the city again. "I don't know how far dreams can take anypony... but I do know where mine are going to end."

The three Shadowbolts behind her traded worried looks.

“Is there anything you want to tell us?” Misty prodded.

Rainbow Dash was quiet for the longest time, until the echoes of the trumpets reached their ears. “I think I know what Nightmare Moon is planning... and it really scares me, because I know what we're up against, and it might be the only way to save Equestria.” She looked back over her shoulder. “Well, everypony! You heard the trumpets! Time to join the crowds! Soarin' and Spitfire will be waiting for us!”

Before they could argue, Rainbow Dash had taken flight and was circling over them, waiting for the three to join her.

Unable to shake the chill on their backs from Rainbow Dash's words, the three pegasi jumped up to join her, the last one's worried eyes not leaving the brash pegasus for a second.

The group of pegasi pulled into the air, circling high above the city. Down below, the thousands of ponies congregating in the plaza looked like mere ants. They were moving around and pressing together to better see the gallows or the two wooden balconies that had been installed for both the Queens. In the case of civilian pegasi, flying up to land on top of buildings, one even landed on top of the Celestia statue in the middle of the large fountain that adorned the plaza.

All of it was an amazing sight under the eclipsed sun, and had their thoughts not been as dark as the shadow cast by the moon, the Shadowbolts would have enjoyed the sight.

o.O.o

Twilight Sparkle was in a strange situation.

Several things had happened, in what *seemed* to her, the blink of an eye. As she faced Nightmare Moon in a body that was... abnormal... her mind raced through possibilities, scenarios and the nagging thought that she was forgetting something very important.

She took a deep breath. "I'll approach this like research. Nice, methodical, understandable research..." she mumbled to herself.

Okay, fact check.

Nightmare Moon was here. That meant that Luna had fallen again to her darker alter-ego.

She was missing her horn. And had gained wings. That meant she had no magic but was possibly capable of evasive maneuvers. It had to be the result of some sort of spell being cast on her while she was unconscious, meaning that it also had to be reversible.

Even if these wings somehow felt just right.

Trixie was also here and she was acting very affectionately to Big Macintosh, who was also here... for some reason. The blue showmare was eyeing Twilight and Nightmare Moon with a strange frown, meaning that she was either confused or knew something they didn't. But finding out what that was could take time... which she did not have.

Next fact.

There was another pegasus there. He looked familiar. But he wasn't from Ponyville. Had she met him in a social gathering of some sort? That could only be The Gala since she had avoided anything social like the plague before going to Ponyville. *Wonderbolt?* Possibly... she seemed to recall Rainbow Dash talking to a similar pony at the Gala. He was at ease next to Nightmare Moon, though. Was he a Shadowbolt now? Her eyes narrowed.

Then there was Applejack.

She seemed okay, well, except for the kiss. *She really did taste like apples.* Wow. Twilight had wondered what it would be like to kiss Big Mac, and that was exactly what she had thought it would taste like. Apples. And hay in his case, since he was *always* chewing on it. But that was in for two reasons: First, Big Mac was taken. By *Trixie*. Lucky mare.

Second, Applejack was standing next to Nightmare Moon as comfortably as if she were standing next to Rarity.

That meant that she was on Nightmare Moon's side. But no, that wasn't right... Maybe she was under a spell? And why was Applejack blushing? *Oh no.* Had Twilight been staring too long at her friend? What should she do? Should she talk to Applejack? No. She was still analyzing the situation. That called for a more subtle approach.

Twilight moved her head in the direction of the strangely dressed unicorn, and then slowly tore her gaze from the Apple Farmer.

This unicorn was definitely comfortable with Nightmare Moon. Enough to make jabs at her through hoof-language. She was dressed in a tight-fitting black uniform with a jade dagger cutie-mark on her flank. She had azure eyes and again, jade-green hair. It could be safely surmised that she was some sort of pony hit-mare for Nightmare Moon. She couldn't be trusted. And why was she teary-eyed?

There was the nagging feeling that she was forgetting something. What was she doing before she woke up here?

Of course! Celestia's filly was missing! Oh, no. Was it Nightmare Moon's doing? Was that why she was here? But... that was impossible! Nightmare Moon had been trapped in the Moon at the time! Why, she had established that the spells cast in the room were no older than twenty years and had been about to tell Princess Celestia when her dad had...

Oh... no. What had her father done? Where was he?

"Ah think we broke her." Applejack said, watching as Twilight's eyes roamed from pony to pony, settled on her for an uncomfortable amount of time, then turned to Jade, then just lost focus completely. There was a small twitch on Twilight's left eye.

"That is entirely possible." Nightmare Moon nodded curtly, she then turned towards the blue showmare.

"Trixie. What did you see inside the cambro?"

Trixie looked from Twilight, to Nightmare Moon, then back to the purple, eye-twitching, hyperventilating pegasus. “Trixie is not entirely sure if she should tell a legendary dark alicorn what she saw inside the cambro.”

Nightmare Moon narrowed her eyes and scratched the floor with her hoof. **“We don't have time for that now. At any moment my sister is going to call everypony for Lyra's execution! I need to know if my theory is correct... is Twilight Sparkle Celestia's filly?”**

“Tah...” was the only sound that escaped Twilight's mouth as her brain registered what the dark alicorn had just said.

Trixie gulped and shook loose of Big Macintosh's comforting grasp. “The Great and Powerful Trixie will not let you harm Princess Twilight.” She said, stepping shakily between the Nightmare and the purple pegasus. “Sh-she promised Princess Celestia.”

The room was silent as the obscenely powerful alicorn stared at the gifted showmare. The silence was broken by Twilight passing out and collapsing on the floor with all the grace of a sack of potatoes.

“Solar-flaring orgasms of Celestia!” Nightmare Moon growled, making everypony in the cavern, including the comatose unicorn, twitch. **“That's it! I've had it!”** she glared at Twilight and materialized a large sphere of water right over Twilight Sparkle.

The former unicorn screeched when it was dumped on top of her with perhaps more violence than was probably necessary. She was immediately wrapped in magic and dragged forward until she was staring Nightmare Moon in the eyes, still dripping and shivering.

“I'll make this short because I have several matters of grave importance to attend to and I will not waste my time on this!”

She growled at the cowering Twilight. **“So listen up! Celestia had a filly. That filly was you.”**

Twilight blinked. “But how is that possible?! My parents raised me! They even told me about how mom got pregnant during a research trip and...”

She was interrupted by the Nightmare stamping her hoof on the stone floor. **“Trixie knows what happened and she WILL explain it or she WILL be sent to the Moon!”** the alicorn growled, narrowing her eyes at the showmare, who gulped.

“Your adoptive father, Midnight, was corrupted by a magical medallion several years ago... the medallion was created by a being called the Guardian.” Nightmare Moon actually looked pained for a moment, she closed her eyes for a second before regarding Twilight. **“Midnight was compelled by the medallion to do anything to forward the Guardian’s cause... including killing you.”**

Twilight looked around at the gathered ponies. With the exception of Soarin’ who barely knew her, all of her friends and even the unknown unicorn with the green mane looked pained at the thought.

“Celestia broke and transformed into a Nightmare called Flare.” Nightmare Moon continued in a quieter voice. **“She then forced Luna into becoming me.”**

The alicorn fell silent as the dark thoughts replayed in her mind’s eye, giving Twilight a moment to absorb what had been said.

“She created another Twilight using your horn.” Nightmare Moon said, finally looking up. **“She’s, for lack of a better term, a nymphomaniac fillyfooler with a taste for apples.”** The alicorn shrugged and glanced at Applejack who had started blushing the moment Twilight Spark was brought into the conversation.

Twilight Sparkle just looked from one to the other... was Nightmare Moon implying what she thought she was implying? The alicorn’s next words cleared her doubts.

“She named this new unicorn ‘Twilight Spark’, and she has been chasing Applejack’s flank for the last few days... I don’t dare to imagine what’s happened between those two, but from what I hear, they have been extremely rough on the mattresses... and the room in general.” Applejack’s cheeks were burning red as Twilight, Soarin’, Trixie and her brother turned to stare at her.

Nightmare Moon nodded and sighed. **“Their... exchanges have been the talk of the castle since they began, the staff has reported crashing furniture, screams and galloping inside the rooms as well as... moaning sounds of some sort.”**

Applejack had pulled her hat down as far as it would go and could only be heard muttering: “Ah swear nothin’ happened! Ah swear! Ah’m gonna kill Spark, ya hear!?”

Nightmare Moon ignored her. **“Trixie died at some point, when, I am not sure.”**

“It is truly a sad story,” Trixie said. “The Great and Powerful Trixie will be glad to amaze you with her perilous journey of self-discovery, romance and misfortune.”

“Not now, dear.” Nightmare Moon said, patting the showmare in the head and earning a glare. **“We really don’t have the time. Also, speaking in the third pony about yourself is generally not a good sign. Try and drop this distasteful habit, would you?”**

Trixie groaned angrily and scratched at the floor as Nightmare Moon turned her back on her. Twilight did not know whether to be amused or scared by the familiarity with which the dark alicorn was speaking to everypony in the room.

“While being nothing but a ghost, Trixie somehow made it to Canterlot with Big Macintosh,” Nightmare Moon continued. **“She was tricked by Midnight to go into the cambro, which I believe contained the details of why you ended up as a simple -but very powerful- unicorn.”**

“I... I’m not that powerful!” Twilight complained. “I’m only learning and...” she stopped mid sentence when the other ponies in the room groaned and, in some cases, rolled their eyes.

“You’re being a might too humble, sugarcube.” Applejack said. “Remember when you levitated the Ursa Minor out of Ponyville?”

“But that was...”

“While you were creating music, and *a*lso levitating a water tower and milking a bunch of cows to get milk to make it go to sleep?” Trixie added.

Soarin’ stared.

“Not to mention that my sister told me of the stunt you pulled while you were still a very young filly. You turned your adoptive parents into plants while levitating the instructors and casting a giant growth spell on your baby dragon?”

“Fine!” Twilight moaned. “Fine! I get it!”

Nightmare Moon chuckled and shook her head. Her smile disappeared as she sighed. **“Your adoptive father is gone now. He died shortly after fighting you and I was able to break the spell that tied him to this world... he seemed to regain his senses when that happened... he can’t be blamed too harshly for things beyond his control.”**

Twilight nodded and looked down sadly, eyes brimming with tears. Her father was gone. He might not be her biological parent, but he had raised her like his own for her whole infancy until she had attended school. She still loved him and her mother. She always would. Twilight looked up at her friends and at the alicorn and wondered if she would ever have time to grieve.

Would she ever get the chance to sit down and think of all the happy memories she had shared with her father? Even if at the end he had been corrupted... when they had lived together he had loved her as his daughter and she had loved him as only a filly can love her father. She could only hope, that once everything was over, she would have a quiet time to herself.

“I have named Rainbow Dash the captain of my Shadowbolts.”

Twilight’s head snapped up in surprise.

“Rarity, Fluttershy and Pinkie Pie are also performing missions for me.” The alicorn said, dead serious. As hard as it was to imagine her friends working for Nightmare Moon of all ponies, Twilight knew that she

was telling the truth. **“Now,”** the dark alicorn’s eyes turned towards the blue unicorn, who had cringed to the point of not being able to look up. **“Trixie. You are going to tell us what you saw, do I make myself clear?”**

Trixie cringed once more, then felt somepony stand next to her. She looked up into Big Macintosh's eyes as the stallion nodded encouragingly.

“Trixie... was sent to the past and witnessed how Princess Twilight's wings were enchanted away from her body, as well as most of her power, to protect her from an Assassins’ Guild.”

Silent Jade's eyes went wide and she looked up to Nightmare Moon, shaking her head at the showmare’s implication.

The Nightmare nodded in understanding, concentrating on the blue unicorn’s words.

“The spell was more powerful than they thought. Trixie...” the magician looked at the alicorn and coughed as she corrected herself. “... I was somehow brought back to life by it, and then I was sent back here.”

“The magic of the cambro then returned to Twilight's body, reviving her since it was made of her life essence and magic, which were trapped in there. There was enough power in this room and the cambro to also bring you back to life... However, since Twilight’s horn had been broken off during her battle, all she got was extra magic and her wings back.” Nightmare Moon surmised. She then turned to face Twilight. **“My dear niece, I have good news and bad news. Which would you like to hear first?”**

Twilight shook her head. She was Celestia's filly? Her eyes teared up, she was Celestia's filly! She had been living with her real mother all those years and she had not known it! Neither of them had!

She would always love her adoptive parents... but... she had felt for a long time now a deeper connection to Celestia throughout the years, and if she was honest with herself, she had seen the Princess as a mother figure for a very long time now.

She forced herself back to the moment when she heard Nightmare Moon cough impatiently. "I... good news first?"

"Very well." Nightmare Moon nodded. **"The good news is that your mother will be able to remember everything once we return her to normal. At this point in time she is so paranoid about memory spells and illusion magic that she's no-doubt cast a spell to protect her from interference. We just need to break through. Once that happens, we need to get your horn back and you should be able to do take it back and be a whole alicorn again. And I have a plan for that already in motion."**

Twilight nodded numbly. Why was Nightmare Moon helping her?! "And... the bad news?"

"You are full of more magic than ever ever before... enough for an alicorn twice your age even, and you have no way to control, curve or contain it."

Soarin' watched nervously as Jade, Trixie and Twilight gasped in comprehension. "Uh... what does that mean, for us non-magically versed ponies?"

"It means that if we don't get the horn back soon..."

"I'll explode..." Twilight groaned.

"But... if she needs the horn... how is she gettin' it?" Applejack asked, scratching the ground nervously. "Twilight Spark is not just goin' to just give it to her."

"Of course not." Nightmare Moon said. **"For Twilight Sparkle to live..."** She narrowed her eyes and her tone became grave. **"Twilight Spark has to die."**

o.O.o

"That's not much of a stage..." Scootaloo said, looking up at the gallows. "I don't think there's space for that many ponies... okay, maybe four or five, but what's with the ropes?"

Sweetie Belle looked nervous. "This... this is not a show, is it?" she looked up at Cinnamon, who kept her eyes ahead. The mare sighed, closed her eyes and shook her head. "But... but..." the young unicorn's eyes teared up. "This is not... who would do something like this!?"

Apple Bloom and Scootaloo looked at each other before standing close to their friend. "What's wrong, Sweetie Belle?" the earth pony asked.

To the side, Daisy Sprout looked in confusion from them to her parents. "Mom? Dad? What's happening?"

The pony guard who had led them to the front of the crowd grimaced, but stayed put. Although he technically was supposed to return to his unit, the commander had given him the Look. The Look meant that it was to his discretion to decide when to leave. Seeing these fillies slowly realizing that something was wrong... he couldn't simply leave. He'd stay, and then help the two adult unicorns guide the four fillies out of the plaza.

"Mom?" Daisy Sprout insisted.

"Darling... I-"

Whatever the mare was about to say was interrupted by the sounds of trumpets.

o.o.o

The crowd gasped as the gates to the castle opened in the distance and a procession started marching down with the bright-white form of Nightmare Flare at the head.

Each one of the alicorn's steps was marked by a searing flame that left a trail of hoof marks on the stone she walked upon. Her platinum regalia looked blood-red from the light of the eclipse, contrasting sharply with the white-hot of her flaming coat. The helm and spikes gave her a terrifying air of aggressiveness, and more than one pony trembled from her sheer presence.

To her right, Twilight Sparkle marched, a proud smile on her face, eyes shining with magical energy. Flanking the pair were five creatures. They were a twisted mockery of equine anatomy, something straight out of nightmares... the strongest looking one, with a bright orange mane had four wings, two bat-like and two feathered pegasus wings. From its chin down, scales protected the neck and belly going back to the end of a very dragon-like tail with small spikes at the tip. Its forelegs ended in sharp claws, but her back legs remained equine in nature, with almost normal but deeply black hoofs. Its shoulders and the rest of her body were still covered in bright yellow fur. The creature's face remained like that of a pony, but closer in shape to that of Celestia, its eyes were an ember red, glowing with intensity, and the closest ponies could see that beneath its smile lay serrated teeth.

The other creatures looked like living shadows of the first one. Lacking colors and almost leaving no trail behind them other than shivering ponies, the creatures stared ahead; featureless and eyeless faces scanning the crowd from time to time, as if they expected the ponies in the crowd to attack at any moment.

Nightmare Flare and Twilight reached the plaza, the guards had little trouble pushing the few stragglers the shadow creatures had not scared away. The pair climbed up stairs to stand proudly in a balcony to the right of the gallows.

The alicorn turned to look at the other balcony across from her own. Dark blue mist, glistening with starlight, formed a whirlpool on top of it and two ponies stepped out. In the middle, Nightmare Moon stood proudly, bowing her head in acknowledgment to her sister. Jade stood to the dark queen's right, the assassin staring dispassionately at the gallows.

A sudden tremor in the air made the gathered ponies look up. The crowd gasped as three pegasi in dark uniforms split the air above them as they passed overhead. The middle one leaving a rainbow behind as the other two left trails of dark smoke that crackled with lightning. The pegasi pulled up and another one seemed to emerge out of the air and performed a spiral of lightning and smoke around the trails left behind the other three and falling in line besides the leader.

The group split into two pairs, the middle ponies, consisting of the leader with the rainbow trail and the late arrival sped up while the other two banked to the side. Each started to spiral down towards the plaza, joined in their slow descent by two more pegasi.

The four alighted on each side of Nightmare Moon's balcony just as the two leaders left behind descended, one to land facing the crowd at ground level, the other to land at Nightmare Moon's left, to the sound of awed ponies thoroughly impressed by the theatrics.

o.O.o

“That's Rainbow Dash!” Apple Bloom said, staring at the mare that now stood next to Nightmare Moon. The rainbow-maned pegasus was shooting a curious glance down at one of the pegasi on ground level.

“Amazing...” Scootaloo whispered. “Did you see those moves?! All of them are pros! I would recognize those three at the center anywhere! I bet that's Soarin' in the middle, and Misty and Blast!”

“But who are the other two?” Sweetie Belle asked blinking. “Is that... next to Blast... is that... Fluttershy?!”

The three looked at the slightly cringing Shadowbolt standing slightly behind Blast and casting worried looks around. It was when the unidentified Shadowbolt met their gaze, and they saw her gasp that they had their answer.

“Since when is she a member of the Wonderbolts?!” Scootaloo asked, awed.

“Ah don't know if they are Wonderbolts right now, Scootaloo,” Apple Bloom said. “Ah thought the uniforms were different.”

“They're called the ‘Shadowbolts’ now,” The guard who had remained with them said, startling them and the three unicorns that had been quietly listening in to the Crusader's conversation. “They are Nightmare Moon's elite fliers.”

“But... this is so wrong!” Scootaloo finally said. “Why are Rainbow Dash, Fluttershy and the Wonderbolts working for Nightmare Moon?! It doesn't make any sense!”

“There are a lot of things that have gone wrong in the last couple of days.” The guard whispered gently. “I would have never thought either of them would serve the evil Nightmare Moon...”

A murmur from the crowds made them pause as they turned towards Nightmare Flare, who was watching in interest as an orange mare walked slowly up the balcony to stand next to Twilight Sparkle, who grinned widely and nuzzled said mare, who proceeded to blush heavily.

“I-is that...” Sweetie Belle stammered.

“My sister?!” Apple Bloom's eyes were the size of dinner-plates as she watched her older sister nuzzle the dangerous unicorn before bowing submissively to Nightmare Flare, who smirked and nodded.

“Maybe she cast a spell on them!” Apple Bloom said suddenly. “It's the only way this could be happening! My sister is no traitor!”

“Yeah! Rainbow Dash would never follow Nightmare Moon!”

“Neither would Fluttershy,” Sweetie Belle added firmly.

“There ain't no spell on them,” a voice said from behind them. “But, ah can tell you this; things are not what they seem.”

The three unicorns and the guard watched in trepidation as the three little ponies blanched and turned around to look up at the cloaked pony that stood next to the group. They couldn't see his face but a piece of hay stuck out of the hood bobbing up and down as if the stallion was chewing on it.

“Now,” he continued. “Ah reckon ah should be asking what you three are doin' here in this plaza *so far away from home*, but ah also reckon ah will not like the answer either way.”

“Now, see here...” Cinnamon said, stepping before the stallion. “I don't know who you think you are but I am currently in charge of these three fillies and...”

The stallion looked down at her and smiled. “Ah appreciate the sentiment, ma'am, but as Apple Bloom's brother, ah reckon ah can put my two bits into the conversation.”

Cinnamon blinked. “Oh.”

“Now,” Big Macintosh said, looking at the group, including the guard. “This is very important. When things start happening, you, all of you, have to run away. That includes you Mr. and Mrs. Tricks and little Daisy Sprout too. Ah promised that ah would do what ah could to warn y'all, and ah see that y'all have some protection.” he looked at the guard, who nodded. “Ah can't tell you what is goin' to happen. But it will not be pretty. So y'all make sure they get out of here safe, y'hear?”

The guard gulped at the look the big stallion gave him, but his eyes narrowed in determination and he nodded firmly.

Big Mac smiled and gave the guard a friendly punch on the shoulder. “Thank y'all. What is your name, soldier?”

“Ebon Rain, sir.”

“Y'all take care of yourself too, Rain.” Big Mac said, turning around and mixing into the crowd. Soon there was no sign of him.

The group stared into the crowd until Daisy Sprout blinked. “Wait... how did he know my name?!”

o.O.o

Nightmare Flare spoke, her voice boomed over the plaza, silencing all the ponies that were gathered there.

“Ponies of Canterlot.” she started, her eyes sweeping the crowd drawing all attention towards her. **“We will correct once and for all the mistakes made by certain foalish ponies by punishing those responsible. With**

this example, we want to make it perfectly clear where we all stand. We sisters as your rulers, and all of you, as our dear and LOYAL subjects. To this end, we have the unfortunate but necessary duty to see through the punishment of those that have mocked our status and rightful place. Those who would conspire against us.” she turned towards the castle and her horn flared.

The gates opened once more and a group of ponies emerged from the Castle. Six guards in total, three on each side of a lone mint-green unicorn held by two chains attached to a metal band around her neck. The ponies in the crowd were silent as the procession made its way down towards the gallows.

Apple Bloom stared in horror. “Is that... Lyra?”

“Yes.” Ebon Rain nodded. “Apparently she joined a rebellion against the Queens.”

“But... Lyra's not...” Scootaloo looked at the guard in confusion. “She's just a musician! What did she do wrong?”

“She challenged the Queen.” the unicorn guard sighed. “Then she made fun of her. Queen Nightmare Flare does not take kindly to those that mock her.”

They watched in silence as Lyra was led up the stairs by a guard until she stood in the center of the gallows.

“Lyra.” Nightmare Flare's voice was smooth. **“Your crimes are as follow: sedition, mocking authority, conspiracy against the Queens, and protecting wanted individuals. You know your crimes. Will you repent, now?”**

Lyra sighed. “Your majesties.” she said clearly, looking first at Nightmare Flare, then towards Nightmare Moon. “I have offended you and worked against you... my punishment is therefore just... I... I wish...”

Nightmare Flare shot her sister a slightly smug look, before concentrating again on the unicorn. **“Do tell me, dear Lyra, what is it that you wish?”**

“I have always wished to perform for you and for your sister... at least once.” Lyra said slowly. “If it pleases you, my Queens, I would fulfill that wish as my last act.”

Again the solar alicorn turned to look at her sister, this time arching an eyebrow. From across the plaza Nightmare Moon stared at the unicorn before looking at Nightmare Flare. The black alicorn shook her head ever so slightly.

Nightmare Flare smirked. **“Very well. But you shall not be alone on stage.”**

Her horn shimmered as her magic coursed through it and a cracked and charred medallion floated next to her. The crowd stood there, confused, until two screams tore through it. A unicorn and an earth pony were pulled into the air by two similar, but complete medallions.

“Ah.” Nightmare Flare grinned. **“There you are.”**

“I recognize them...” Twilight Sparkle whispered to Applejack. “The Earth Pony is Golden Pot-belly, he’s a known merchant with strong ties with several ponies in the court. The other is Flying Staff, one of the teachers at the academy.”

The two were levitated, struggling, onto the gallows where they were promptly bound by the guards and put to each side of Lyra, nooses tight around their necks.

The mint-green unicorn didn't spare them a glance as her harp was given to her by one guard. Nightmare Flare grinned and nodded.

Lyra [played](#), one hoof holding her harp as the other strummed the strings with amazing skill, her horn flickering to aid with magic the creation of the music. Her melody was sad. It was slow and contemplative, yet... some of the undertones of it felt angry if the listener paid attention. Slowly, it enveloped the whole crowd, shushing the mutterings and whispers as the nostalgic tones touched something deep inside everypony.

The melancholic music wound its way into every spectator, and Lyra's horn started to glow brighter. Few ponies caught the tears in her eyes when she

closed them and gave herself to the music, letting each movement and feel of the strings bare her soul to the crows, and more importantly, the Queen. With each note her horn's light increased, and each pony surrendered to her melody.

In her balcony, Nightmare Flare stood stock still, eyes wide as she was unable to tear her eyes from the playing unicorn. Slowly tears welled in her eyes until they began running freely down her face. **“T-this melody... how...”**

Twilight Spark shook her head. There was something wrong happening, she could feel it... the magic in everypony was resonating with the music... how had Lyra... she groaned and shook her head again, focusing. “Spitfire!” she growled finally as the music faded a bit. Nightmare Flare was still paralyzed in place. “Lyra cast a spell of some sort on our Queen! Stop her!”

The Captain of the Guard was immediately in the air, her flight taking her straight at the unicorn, but just as she was about plunge her claws into the unicorn, a pair of black blurs collided with her, sending all three crashing onto the plaza.

The crowd panicked and backed up screaming, allowing Twilight Spark to stare in surprise at Spitfire's antagonists... “Rainbow Dash?!” she shouted. “What? Why?!”

“And what am I?” Soarin' grumbled at being ignored. “Soggy hay?”

Twilight Spark flinched when she heard something behind her. She shot a quick glance that revealed that Nightmare Flare's regalia had cracked in several places, her helm-like crown had even started falling apart.

“I have to... oof!” she never completed her thoughts as a green-maned unicorn in black clothes rammed onto her side, sending her over the side of the balcony to land painfully on the plaza below. She looked up in confusion as Jade jumped over the balcony railing to land next to her, with the purple-winged Shadowbolt landing hesitantly next to her.

The four shadows swiftly created a perimeter around Nightmare Flare, who groaned and stepped back as more of her armor slowly broke off.

“N-nightmare Moon has betrayed us!” Twilight Spark shouted as she stood up, horn flashing. “Royal Escort! Do your jobs and take them down!”

The four shadows jumped into the air, a pair flying towards Nightmare Moon, one rushing to help Spitfire while another rushed Jade and the pegasus.

Before the shadow aiding Twilight Spark got too far, it was interrupted by two lassos that slipped neatly around its neck, stopping it short when they tightened. The twisted unicorn felt her stomach grow cold as she followed the lasso that had come from the balcony.

“Applejack?” she whispered.

The apple farmer looked down at her with a mixture of emotions, but she did not let go of the rope.

The shadow chimera thrashed around, pulling both Applejack and Big Macintosh a few inches forward, but neither brother nor sister gave any sign of slackening their hold.

Tearing her eyes away from Twilight Spark, the farm mare jumped from the balcony to land on top of the chimera, which started bucking and twisting, trying to shake off the pony on its back.

Twilight Spark clenched her teeth and turned to face Jade and the unknown, purple-winged pegasus. “I don't know what inspired you to attack us, but you'll regret it!”

Her horn started glowing, but before she could cast anything she was forced to jump back to avoid Jade's blade.

The pegasus hovered uncertainly, and Spark thanked Nightmare Flare that it was hesitating so much. She just needed to concentrate on the assassin.

o.o.o

Twilight Sparkle watched the green-maned unicorn fight her double and tried to think of ways to help. She didn't know this body well... she had an

instinctual grasp of flying, but... it wasn't as though she could perform any tricks, much less fight! Without her horn she was pretty much useless!

Not that Jade actually needed help. It was almost awe inspiring how fluid the unicorn's motions were. Whenever Spark would charge a spell, the white unicorn would already be within striking distance, and would break the purple unicorn's concentration. Minor spells were easier to cast, but also easier to dodge. It was obvious Twilight Spark was getting frustrated, but she was taking hits that Twilight was sure she would have never been able to. What had Nightmare Flare created?

Speaking of whom... Twilight looked up at the balcony to find that the right half Nightmare Flare's armor had broken off, and the fur under it looked... normal. The subtle white of Celestia's fur.

Seeing that Jade and Twilight Spark were busy with each other, the purple pegasus flew up to the balcony.

o.O.o

“S-Spitfire?!” Rainbow Dash stammered as she finally got a good look at the chimera.

“Rainbow Dash...” the creature chuckled. “Didn’t I tell you you didn’t need to be so rough with me” she licked her lips with a pronged tongue, making the rainbow-maned pegasus shiver. The Chimera turned to look at the other pegasus. “And Soarin’... my, that Shadowbolt uniform suits you well.”

“What happened to you?” the male pegasus asked. “We heard that Nightmare Flare cast a spell on you but-”

“The Queen showed me where my loyalty should lie and gave me power to back it up.” the former pegasus grinned. “I will take care of Lyra and then we three can talk.”

“No can do.” Rainbow Dash said, stepping in front of the gallows. “If you want Lyra, you have to go through me first!”

“And me.” Soarin' added, stepping next to Rainbow Dash. “This is not good, Spitfire. This is not you, look at what happened! You're not even a pony now!”

Spitfire's eyes narrowed. “The Queen warned me that there would be traitors even amongst my loved ones...” she grimaced showing rows of pointy teeth. “I will perform my duties!”

With an angry, draconic roar that no equine could possibly produce, the chimera launched herself into the air, pursued immediately by the two Shadowbolts.

o.O.o

“Stay back, Fluttershy!” Misty shouted as she and Blast jumped into the air to engage the chimera flying their way. “We'll handle this one!”

Fluttershy nodded, but her eyes went back to the three... no four fillies that were huddled under two adult unicorns and a unicorn guard, who had cast a shield over them as he looked around. She looked back towards the other Shadowbolts as they each tackled the chimera from different angles.

Above, on the balcony, Nightmare Moon jumped into the air, clashing with her own attacker, leaving her alone while everypony fought.

Gathering her courage, she galloped to the unicorn group.

“Fluttershy!” Sweetie Belle looked at the pegasus with horror. “What's happening?”

“Oh my...” the cream-colored pegasus shook her head. “You shouldn't be here... none of you. It's very dangerous!”

Nearby, a pony scrambled to get out of the way before a shadow chimera crashed down onto him, the beast thrashing about and injuring several other ponies with its flailing limbs as it tried to right itself. It started to get up, only to be violently pushed back onto a building by the combined strength of Blast and Misty as they landed with all the momentum they had accumulated on the shadow creature.

“You think?!” the guard growled as the fillies and two parents stared in horror at the mangled corpse next to them. “We need to get out of here! But there's no place safe to run with all the ponies around!”

Fluttershy looked around wildly. “There! Under the balcony! It should provide some protection!”

The guard nodded, following the crusaders. He stopped when he noticed the Shadowbolt was not following them. “What about you?”

Fluttershy looked at the battle raging around them, then at the ponies moaning in pain at her hoofs. “I'm staying here... somepony needs to start helping the injured.”

Ebon Rain was speechless. He and the rest of the guards had simply believed that the group of fillies had turned evil along with the Princesses and Sparkle, but this was clearly not the case. Fluttershy was clearly scared, but willing to help, and if the Shadowbolts were trying to help... he looked up at Nightmare Moon. Maybe not all was lost.

“Fluttershy!” he called as she stepped forward. When she looked at him he smiled. “You're a captain! Order the other soldiers to help you! They're just standing there doing nothing!” he turned around and ushered his charges as the pegasus galloped towards the other guards. All they needed was somepony with authority, and Fluttershy was that pony.

o.O.o

While its brethren fought their enemies, the last of the shadow chimeras circled above. It followed the different fights in its corrupted mind, trying to decide who to attack. The ponies running in the plaza were not a target... it was then that it sensed the music.

As Lyra's melody unfolded, the music and magic sought Nightmare Flare as moths seek out a flame. The Sun Queen let out a pained gasp of horror as pieces of her armor cracked and flaked off, powerful spasms shaking her body as the spell continued to fulfil its objective.

Flying up high and doing a stall turn, the chimera shot down towards the gallows.

o.O.o

Trixie watched anxiously as Applejack and Big Macintosh took turns bucking the shadow chimera, each attacking when it was distracted by the other, keeping it from retaliating with their ropes. Her instructions were to remain hidden and help whichever group needed her the most. So far things seemed to be working for them, but how long was that going to last?

Trixie's attention was split, between the Shadowbolts, the Apples, Jade, Twilight's unexpected flight towards Nightmare Flare, and the safety of her family and those with them. A guard had guided them under the balcony where Nightmare Moon had originally stood. The black alicorn had taken flight and was easily tossing the chimera that attacked her around like a rag-doll, keeping her eyes on Flare and Twilight.

A shout drew her attention up towards the Shadowbolts. The Shadow chimera had batted one out of the way with its wings, and taken advantage of the other's distraction to slam its hoofs with incredible force on the pegasus' side. The red and yellow-maned shadowbolt flew through the air almost too fast to follow and crashed through one of the columns holding Nightmare Moon's balcony steady, smashing into the guard watching over her family. The unicorn guardsman had been preoccupied, concentrating his magic to divert fleeing ponies and potential threats, he had no chance to dodge or brace himself. Both ponies slammed against the brick wall of the building.

The wooden structure groaned and half of it fell, several planks burying Trixie's parents and making the four fillies scream as the rest of it tilted down. Without any of the adult unicorns to help them they would be crushed to death!

Immediately Trixie's horn shone with magic, levitating the structure just as it was about to crush all of them. She grunted under the effort, but was confident that she could hold it in place long enough for-

The crash almost made her lose her concentration, the balcony falling freely a few inches before she caught it again.

She turned to look at the chimera that had descended onto the gallows and had smashed the levers keeping the trapdoors under Lyra and the other two ponies closed. Neighing in a way that almost sounded like laughter, the shadow then pushed off to attack Nightmare Moon.

Her horn flashed a second time and she managed to catch all three in her levitation spell. Amazingly Lyra still played, her eyes focused on Nightmare Flare.

Trixie strained. She was no Twilight Sparkle, she couldn't hold all of it! Slowly, and guiltily, she felt her control slip as she pushed energy into those that she cared for. The magic surrounding Golden Pot-belly failed and she could hear his neck snap from the fall and sudden jolt. The unicorn struggled harder, panicking and making the showmare's job even more difficult.

Sweat ran down her forehead as she tried to intensify her control, but eventually the unicorn followed the fate of the earth pony. His neck didn't quite break immediately, and she watched in horror, unable to help, as he gasped for air, kicking and jerking until finally, with a shudder his body stopped moving. Only Lyra was left. Her music drifted in the wind, soothing, melancholic, sad... the mint-green unicorn turned to look at Trixie, who fell to one knee.

"Lyra!" Trixie called, grunting with the effort. "Stop playing! Save yourself!"

Lyra smiled softly and shook her head. "Let me go, Trixie... with the last of my magic I will complete the spell."

"But... you'll die!"

The musician chuckled. "I'm already dead, Trixie," she said softly, eyes half lidded as a single tear slipped down her cheek. "Please... save those fillies. Forget about me. You can't keep up the levitation for both of us."

Trixie's eyes teared up. She didn't want to fail. She didn't want to see her new friends die. She had only known Lyra for a few hours while they plotted with Midnight, but Trixie had felt close to everypony in that group.

Slowly her control went away. She could feel both Lyra and the balcony tremble. "Lyra..."

The musician unicorn closed her eyes.

The magic gave one last desperate pull, then faded.

And suddenly she was falling.

The harp hit the floor, shattering into three pieces, magic flashing out.

On the balcony, Nightmare Flare collapsed with a cry of pain, an extremely worried Twilight Sparkle shouting for the Princess under the Nightmare.

o.O.o

"Hey, where are we going?" Bon-Bon asked Lyra, looking down at the dress her fillyfriend had asked her to wear.

"It's an amazing place! There's nothing like it in Ponyville." the unicorn replied, a smile brightening her face. "You'll love it!"

Bon-Bon nodded as they walked. "So... about this 'place'... what are we doing there? Having dinner? Meeting friends?"

Lyra chuckled and kissed the earth pony on the cheek, earning a goofy grin. "Silly. This is just you and me tonight. So no, none of those."

"But then... what are we doing?" Bon-Bon asked as they turned a corner. She stared at the building. "Oh..."

"That's right!" Lyra said, grabbing her hoof. "We're dancing!"

Chapter 19

Nightmare Moon watched as the procession made its way down from the castle, waiting until her sister had assumed her seat before signaling Rainbow Dash and the others that it was time to begin.

Allowing her sister, despite the sun goddess' claim of equality between the sisters, to be seated first gave the impression of deference and slight submission. However, the impressive display of aerobatics from the Shadowbolts would make it look like she was being her usual overly theatrical self. Both actions would be appreciated by the older sister, showing Nightmare Moon to be one with respect for her elder, while not being too shy as to not grab all the attention she could.

In short, a give and take which her sister would find amusing and slightly comforting. As long as Nightmare Moon fit into Flare's expectations, she would be less suspicious.

The black alicorn forced herself to be impassive as the Solar Nightmare spoke to the crowds and then called for Lyra to be brought to the gallows.

The black alicorn had had little knowledge of the musician besides what she had glimpsed from their brief encounter, and some would call the Nightmare a fool for entrusting somepony so easily with a task of such importance. But within Lyra's eyes she had seen an honest mare with more than enough willpower to pull it off -even if the unicorn was easily distracted by her belief in the way things ought to be.

Giving her the means to stop Nightmare Flare and further Nightmare Moon's plans was risky to say the least, but she had faith in the unicorn. There was a chance Lyra didn't have the magical fortitude to pull off the spell, as it involved tremendous emotional stress, and if the little unicorn failed... well, even then she had a back-up plan. For now, she had her own part to play. Hopefully the musician had mastered the melody thoroughly, or there would be no stopping Flare from hanging the unicorn.

When Lyra asked for permission to play for the Queens, the black alicorn advised caution with a short shake of her head, earning a smile from her overconfident sister.

The black alicorn wasn't surprised by her sister's confidence. She was, however, when Flare made the task easier as she dragged forward two members of the council of Nightmares from the crowd to be hanged alongside Lyra.

Nightmare Moon hid a smile. Celly had always been one for shifting the playing field to her advantage.

When Lyra started playing, the black alicorn immediately knew that her faith in the musician had been rewarded. Already from the first few notes she could see Nightmare Flare reacting.

It wasn't long before Twilight Spark noticed something was wrong and ordered their bodyguards to attack. Moon frowned as everypony exploded into action around her; Rainbow Dash and Soarin' rushing to meet Spitfire, Jade and Twilight Sparkle heading straight for Twilight Spark; Misty and Blast clashing almost immediately with one of the shadow creatures in the air, while Applejack and Big Macintosh intercepted another.

Lyra's melody was as strong as she had hoped it would be -the alicorn spared a moment to look down at the mint-green unicorn. She could feel so much pain, so much anguish coming from her... The Nightmare felt a sudden pang of regret from what she was putting the musician through... But the plan was working, and that's what really mattered.

On the other balcony, Nightmare Moon could see Flare paralyzed by a melody the Sun Queen hadn't heard for more than a thousand years. The music pried open her mind's eye, revealing to her memories of happier times even as the spell woven into the notes created a crack in Nightmare Flare's defenses. The music would have to continue as long as possible for it to complete its task.

But her own task beckoned. Taking flight so she could see her objective more clearly, Nightmare Moon extended her magical senses to encompass herself and her sister. She knew her task would not be easy. She began weaving magic around her sister's aura first, probing and enveloping it with

her own in a way that she would have never tried under other circumstances; it was an incredibly intimate and possibly uncomfortable thing to do to a magic user.

Nightmare Moon watched carefully as Nightmare Flare remained static, eyes filling with recognition as memories began to surface.

Soon sister, you will be free. What will you think then? How will you deal with what I had to after returning from being a Nightmare the very first time? The black alicorn's eyes darkened at the sight of her sister trembling. *The worst is yet to come, Celly. You will have to face your decisions. You will have to deal with the responsibility of having let the Nightmare loose... just like I do, every day and every night.*

Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed one of the shadow monsters flying her way. Nightmare Moon gritted her teeth angrily. Under normal circumstances she could take care of the creature easily, but this task required the utmost care and attention. Without taking her eyes off of Nightmare Flare, she telekinetically grabbed a hold of the shadow chimera and held it writhing in place. It would not do for her to lose her concentration over so trivial a creature.

o.o.o

Nightmare Flare grinned. Lyra hadn't even batted an eye when she had ordered two more ponies to the noose. She nodded at the musician, and with the briefest of acknowledgments, the unicorn started strumming her lyre.

The melody started slow, almost hesitant... but as the notes reached her, it awakened something deep in Nightmare Flare's heart... nostalgia. **"T-this melody... how..."** she stammered. *Stop! Stop it!* She thought furiously, feeling her defenses fall as the melody continued.

The unicorn did not stop playing and the white alicorn felt her body sway slightly to the music. *This is... the 'Requiem of the North'... how did she...* realization struck her. *Nightmare Moon...* it had to be her... *she betrayed me!* Despite her best efforts, the Solar Nightmare felt herself being pulled into her memories...

Celestia stood by herself in the room that once had belonged to her daughter. Despite the presence of a crib, books, a small table and toys, the room felt completely empty. The lack of life in it making the absence of her loved ones all the more pronounced as she stared at the horn on the floor. Twilight's horn was slightly burnt at the tip, the bottom part cracked and splintered.

"Oh, Twilight..." she sighed. "In the search for my first child... I got my second daughter killed." she said, looking tenderly at the horn. "I never told you, Twilight, how much you meant to me... how much of myself, and especially Luna I saw in you. You were such a beautiful filly, in mind and body... so innocent, but still so brave!"

She had raised the purple unicorn as her own from the moment she had taken her in as a personal protégé. Twilight's education in the arcane arts was but one of the many skills and knowledge that the Princess had imparted on her.

She had taught the unicorn how to behave in court, how to approach nobles and common citizens alike. Under the alicorn's watchful eyes, the studious Twilight had grown into a fine mare. True, the purple unicorn had been a bit withdrawn, but she had finally made friends.

It had been Twilight, with just a bit of encouragement, who had gathered the Bearers of the Elements and brought back her sister, Luna.

"I owe you so much, my Twilight..." the Princess whispered. "And now you are gone... and I have to accept that... I will find the ponies behind this... and they will pay." She stared at the empty room for a moment before sighing in resignation. "But that will not bring you back. At least I know death is kind... even if he is a bit odd." she chuckled. "But how can I go on right now, my faithful student, when you will not be at my side again? When your reports will not come to me and break the monotony of the court? When the actual joy of you being alive and part of my life... is gone?"

Celestia lowered her head to her hoofs. "And yet, I must. For if not I, who? I only have this night to mourn you, and then, when the time for the sun to rise comes, I will have no choice but to return to my duty and raise it from its slumber. I cannot show this to anyone; I cannot be open, or honest or fragile... even dear Luna needs to see me be strong for her sake... I fear I

have become spoiled my student... for within the last two decades not only did I get my dear sister back... I had you."

"And you can have her again..." a voice whispered almost in her ear, making it twitch.

"Who's there?!" Celestia asked, she quickly stood up and glared around the room, searching for the origin of the voice.

"Don't you mean... how?" the voice whispered back.

Celestia clenched her mouth shut as she looked carefully around again. There was no way anypony could have crossed her field... so who...

"Not 'who'" the voice whispered again. ***"How. How can I get her back? How can I get my daughter back?"***

"Show yourself," Celestia growled.

"Turn around... yes... you can see me there..." the voice directed as she looked at one of the walls. There seemed to be somepony there... she approached carefully until she stood, staring.

"That's not you."

"Yes... it is." the voice said again. And she saw the pony in front of her mouth the words, just as she had mouthed the words she had said earlier.

"You are not me." Celestia insisted, staring hard at the mirror.

"You are drifting from what really matters but if you must know..." her image replied. ***"I am your inner voice, I am the power within yourself able to bring Twilight Sparkle back to life."***

"That can't be done." Celestia replied angrily. "If you were me you would know!"

"I am... and that's how I know it to be possible."

The Princess shook her head... the voice was seductive... Could it be as her mirror image had suggested? If there was a chance to bring Twilight back...

"There is!" The voice insisted, her thoughts betraying her. **"You know it... just as well as you know your love for that filly... it is not right for her life to be cut so short... not when she was just trying to help you! We know, don't we... that it was unfair... that it was uncalled for."** the broken horn, not even half the size of Celestia's own floated in front of the mirror now, spinning lazily, held by an unseen force.

"Y-yes..." Celestia admitted. "She was so young..." she felt tears and was about to fight them but...

"There is no need to hide your tears from yourself," her mirror image said, her voice heavy with kindness. **"Who is there to impress? Who is there to see you be a tiny bit sad... fragile? You are alone... not even our dear daughter is here to see us... our sister has to hold the fort for now until we bring Twilight Sparkle back... she is strong; she can handle it..."**

"But..."

"Twilight Sparkle needs us... she needs us to do what needs to be done... she needs us to use our magic and power to bring her back... for her... we should do it for her..."

"But how?" Celestia finally asked. "How can I bring her back?"

"Find me."

"What?" the alicorn blinked. "Where can I find you?"

"I am within you... I am... a spark... within you... you have never needed me before, because you have not loved so much before."

"Within me?" Celestia closed her eyes and turned her attentions inward. She searched deep. Going deeper than she had ever gone before. Everything was light, like being under direct sunlight. "I can't find you!"

“I am here...” the voice whispered “You already know me... Look beyond.”

The alicorn's gaze returned to the horn as her thoughts raced in her mind. Was Twilight's life worth it?

Yes, she had decided, there was no doubt about that. Every thought of her deceased pupil brought pain to her heart. She might not have brought her into this world, but Celestia and Twilight were as close as any family... what type of pony would she have to be to let the little unicorn come to harm?

Nothing since losing Luna had made her feel so powerless and trapped by rules set down by herself. She had let so many others die, she had selflessly fought to keep a balance in the world, to keep Equestria safe at an incredible personal cost.

Each death of a loved one chipped away at her soul and sapped her determination over thousands of years of meeting and allowing ponies into her life. Her subjects expected her to be above such little things as feelings. She was immortal and wise and powerful after all, surely she would get over it.

True, she was immortal, and it was true that the average life-span of a pony went so quickly... but she lived with them, every day and night...

Her subjects... her friends, lovers, students, colleagues... they all left their mark and she enjoyed every second of their lives and grieved for each death.

And out of all of them, a single and most studious unicorn shone like a beacon of happiness in her life; a unicorn she had feared she would lose eventually... but not without a fight. It could be called selfishness, but she didn't care.

Celestia looked. And she looked. And she searched... until she got to the edge of the light, where the shadows at the absolute edge of her subconscious were. She stopped. She should be careful, it was easy to forget she was not-

“Princess!” a voice she easily recognized called from within.

“Twilight?!”

“Princess! I'm scared! I can't see anything! There's... something pulling me away!”

“Don't worry, Twilight! I'll...”

“Princess...” Twilight's voice seemed to fade into the distance.

“TWILIGHT!” Celestia shouted, plunging into the darkness. “Where are you?!”

“She's almost gone!”** her mirror-voice shouted. **“Release your inner power!”

And Celestia felt it... a shell of some sort, floating in the darkness. Her horn started to glow as she charged towards it. “Twilight! I'm coming!”

She knew this was a bad idea but... she would kill to protect Twilight. She admitted to herself. She never wanted to live through the death somepony she loved so much. She would betray herself and cause untold levels of destruction only if it would bring her beloved student back. She would hurt whoever stepped in her way and Twilight's return.

Because she was tired of losing those she loved so much.

Because she was tired of being selfless to the point losing herself.

Her horn struck the shell. It didn't budge, her own mind and subconscious fighting against her.

*There were very few things she would **not** do for Twilight Sparkle.*

She would make things right... she would get back both her daughters...

The alicorn reared back and struck the shell again. This time it cracked and magic and power poured out in a torrent that threw her out of her mindscape and into reality.

*Princess Celestia snapped out of her meditation and glared at the horn. **"How dare anypony hurt Twilight?! What type of monster would murder such a sweet unicorn? They should be punished..."***

Something inside her stirred, her body shook with adrenaline and energy. Slowly, tendrils of power began to wrap around her, solidifying into armor.

Something inside her pulsed with energy and Celestia gasped with the thrill of magic unlike anything she had ever felt before...

***"I am ready to come out to the world... to teach my enemies to never threaten my loved ones..."** She shook her head. Twilight came first.*

The severed horn was enveloped in energy. It levitated until it floated at eye-level. "Twilight..." Celestia whispered as her magic turned the horn around and used it to carve a deep gash into the alicorn's shoulder, allowing blood to flow and cover it.

The magic coursing through her body immediately healed it, not even allowing her to register pain.

The blood-covered horn lit up, the residual magic inside of it giving off sparks of light in tandem with Celestia's heartbeat.

The Princess concentrated. She needed all her precious memories of Twilight.

She remembered the unicorn's early childhood, where she would be pushy and unintentionally rough when she wanted something, especially any of the books she loved.

She remembered the little filly playing with Spike, tossing pillows around and chasing him in her room until the whole place was wrecked.

*She remembered the lessons in magic she had taught Twilight... her darker inner-self conjuring the lectures on combat magic to the forefront. Celestia tried to put it into perspective... she had warned Twilight to be very selective on using them... **"But not anymore. I won't lose her again."***

As she succumbed to her darker self, Celestia found herself struggling to bring positive memories to the fore of her mind.

Slowly the ghostly silhouette of a unicorn formed from the severed horn.

“Her new body needs to be stronger... able to withstand attacks that would leave any other pony crippled.” The alicorn groaned, fighting to make sense of what she should do and what her inner self was saying.

The mane formed, falling around the horn in Twilight’s usual mane-style...
“Her horn should be longer, deadlier. She should be able to skewer an enemy.”

*While reinforcing the muscles, the Nightmare grinned. “****Twilight will never lose again. She will never leave me.****”*

Celestia continued watching in silence as the process continued...

The coat became visible, darker than she remembered. She frowned. “Am, I doing something wrong?”

“No.” She told herself. ***“It is not wrong... she's darker, yes, but that will give enemies pause... she is taller and stronger... much more powerful than before.”***

The cutie-mark slowly came into view on her flank, the straight lines of the stars twisted almost to look like wavy blades.

“That's not right...” Celestia said, confusion showing in her now dragon-like eyes. “It looks strange...”

“Her magic is stronger.” she reasoned. ***“It's natural for a cutie-mark to change a bit to reflect that.”***

When she opened her eyes, lavender and red irises regarded Nightmare Flare as the alicorn’s regalia molded around her new form. Celestia smiled at the sight of a breathing, living Twilight.

“Welcome back, my daughter.” the Nightmare said as the last vestiges of the old Celestia faded into her subconscious.

The newly-resurrected unicorn nuzzled the alicorn. "It's good to be back, mother."

She snapped back to the present, thankful for the short reprieve from her memories. The music continued unrelenting, however, still holding her enthralled.

The melody, a requiem from thousands of years ago, was being played along with one of the most potent memory spells in history. With enough time it would destroy any shield, any mental protection at the whim of the unicorn player. She had thought it lost to time.

But now she was under siege from it.

Unable to stop listening, she felt her mental defenses buckling under the power of the melody. Each note drove into her mind like a red-hot spike. Through the haze of pain, vague images and sounds forced their way through... a wave of foreign memories that somehow felt like her own.

"Is this necessary?"

A tiny filly alicorn cuddled up in bed next to her. She felt tired, so tired... but proud. And strong.

Scenes flashed by until she was looking at a mage... she knew this unicorn. Eldritch... he had disappeared twenty years ago without explanation.

"I have devised a rune matrix that, once started, will conclude the whole spell, finishing by teleporting all of you back to your rooms..." he was saying.

Another flash, red-hot pain in her mind.

Whistling winds, cracking thunder, an unknown unicorn suddenly appearing in the runic room.

Midnight and Star Dancer bowed before her.

"Do we have to forget?"

Filly Twilight blinking in the light, muttering her first word.

“Please take care of my daughter...”

Her first word had been...

It had been... Mommy.

A battle raged around her, but the nightmare could see only the memories as they relentlessly buffeted her mind. And as the last note of Lyra's melody pierced her psyche, destroying all remnants of her defenses, the memories tearing into her very soul, Celestia was ripped free from her slumber and Nightmare Flare collapsed, her last conscious thought on how unlikely it was that she heard Twilight's voice.....calling for Celestia.

o.O.o

After Ebon Rain, the Cutie Mark Crusaders and the three unicorns with them made it to the relative protection under of the balcony, Fluttershy realized she didn't know where to look, or where to go.

The moment she had turned around to look at the crowd, she had been overwhelmed by the sheer amount of ponies around her. Surprisingly, although a few groups had started running about in a panic, most of the ponies stood nervously in place.

Even after one of the shadow chimeras had crashed to the plaza ground, killing a pony and injuring many others, the majority remained in place, watching in confusion and fear as if they could not believe what was happening right in front of them.

The pegasus stepped gingerly into the area where the fight had been brought to ground level.

There were dozens of wounded all around her... and where the shadow creature had landed on top of a pony... her whole body shook, her first instinct was to run, but the pegasus was rooted to the spot... Fluttershy could do nothing but stare. She had never seen something like this, or even

imagined it could happen! She was used to treating small wounds on animals... not... not the carnage in front of her!

Fluttershy started to hyperventilate. She had no experience in- the sound of splintering wood brought her back to reality.

The pegasus then heard Lyra's melody over the chaos of screaming ponies and everything looking bleak... if the mint-colored unicorn could continue her fight with a noose around her neck and being in the center of all the chaos, Fluttershy could do no less.

The pink-maned pegasus muttered a quick prayer to Princess Celestia, which she stopped with a fearful glance at Nightmare Flare, and instead decided to go with a quieter one to Nightmare Moon. She quickly galloped towards the perimeter of guards.

"E-excuse me, sir..." Fluttershy asked one of the guards urgently. "We... we h-have to... organize a-and help evacuate and... take care of... the injured... if you want... that is..."

The guards either couldn't hear her or pretended she wasn't there. Fluttershy bit her lower lip. There was another crack, and she looked up in horror as the balcony almost collapsed on top of the Crusaders and another filly! Where was the guard? And the filly's parents?

A soft blue glow enveloped the balcony. Letting out the breath she had been holding, Fluttershy turned her eyes towards the crowd, where a light blue unicorn poured her magic out.

The cream-colored pegasus' eyes widened as she recognized the unicorn. She looked back to the Crusaders and suddenly it clicked in her mind that the little filly standing with the three friends was wearing Trixie's cape. She looked back at the showmare. Trixie had *a sister*?

The sheer scale of what was happening threatened to make her faint. Whole families were here under Nightmare Flare's orders. Fillies even younger than the Crusaders, older brothers, sisters, parents... all of them scared and unable to act as monsters fought all around them.

Her train of thought was derailed when a chimera suddenly landed on the gallows platform with a screeching neigh that sent shivers down the pegasus' back.

Its claws smashing the mechanism that kept the trapdoors under the ponies closed, causing them to open with a snap before launching itself into the air.

She closed her eyes, not wanting to see... but when Lyra's music continued playing, they snapped open and she stared at the sight of Trixie levitating both the balcony and the ponies.

Fluttershy sighed in relief. Confident that Trixie had everything under control, she took a deep breath.

A cry from the showmare made her open her eyes in horror, just in time to see the showmare's control slip and one of the ponies fall, breaking its neck with an audible snap at the jerk of the noose.

"Somepony... please..." the shy pegasus looked around, tears welling up. "Please help her! She can't do it alone!"

But her voice went ignored amidst the screams.

The chaos escalated as ponies previously paralyzed by fear realized what was happening, as if the sound of the neck breaking had been a bucket-full of cold water dumped on them.

But instead of helping, Canterlot's citizens simply ran away, knocking each other down as they scampered for a way out, only to find all the streets so packed by other ponies that they were unable to get out.

The pegasi civilians had already fled, except for the few that were rooted to the spot, whether out of curiosity or panic she couldn't know, but they were not helping either.

Several ponies had been trampled, here and there moans came from the few fallen ponies that still moved.

She turned to look at the guards again, this time however she was getting angry. "WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?!" she snapped at a unicorn

guard, staring at him in the eye. She shifted so she could see the other guards, who now were all looking at her, slightly intimidated.

The unicorn and earth pony guards gave her wide-eyed stares. “W-we were ordered to not interfere whatever happened!” one of them stammered.

The yellow pegasus flinched as she heard another rope snap in the air and Trixie's cry behind her. The second pony had died at the gallows, and Trixie... poor Trixie was doing her best to hold her concentration. She could see her talking to Lyra... there was a desperate glint to the showmare's eyes.

Fluttershy stared incredulously from one to the next. “B-but... who would give such an order?!”

As if finally recognizing the fact that she was a Shadowbolt Captain, the guards were quick to answer. “We're under orders of Nightmare Flare herself!” one replied.

A shiver ran down Fluttershy's back... she turned to look at Trixie as the unicorn fell to her knees due to the stress. And then...

“Lyra!” Fluttershy gasped as the aura that held Lyra flickered and died away. She watched as the unicorn dropped, the rope growing taut around her neck. The sickening crack made her shudder as the unicorn's hooves shook and bobbed above the ground for a moment. And then... she simply hung there, very still... very quiet. The tears still warm on her face as her body swayed in front of the crowd of motionless ponies.

“Lyra! No!” a new voice shouted, Fluttershy opened her eyes to see three unicorns running against the crowd towards the gallows. Lyra's family. It was impossible to not recognize the resemblance. The cream-colored pegasus never knew the musician had a younger brother.

Something inside her snapped.

She turned towards the guards, her eyes blazing with barely restrained fury. “Who do you think you are?!” she growled at one unicorn guard, who stepped back from her. “You dare call yourselves ‘guards’ while you stand here doing **nothing**?!” She looked at the others. “Do you think that

following the orders of Nightmare Flare is the same as orders from Celestia?!"

"You **will** act now! You **will** help clear the rubble and get those fillies from under the balcony before Trixie's levitation spell fails! **And you will do it now!**" She shouted.

The guards in front of her immediately ran to the balcony, but those that hadn't received the stare hesitated.

"What are you waiting for!? I gave you an order!" Fluttershy roared, her face contorted in anger. **"I don't care who ordered you to do what before! Your duty is to Equestria!"**

The guards nodded, all terrified right down to the last pony.

"You four!" she pointed. "Tell the others, we need to clear the plaza **now!** There's too many ponies here that will get injured!" She turned to another group. "You go help those wounded ponies! And the rest of you, find doctors, nurses, anypony willing and able to help!"

"YES, MA'AM!" came the resounding reply.

o.O.o

The fillies looked in horror at the planks that had fallen on top of Daisy Sprout's parents.

"M-mom! Dad!" Trixie's sister cried, trying to move the planks. "Are you okay?"

She couldn't lose them! Not now! Not after losing her sister! She sobbed as she tried to push the planks away.

Suddenly there were other small hoofs helping her. The three Crusader joined her desperate efforts to find the buried ponies.

"Don't worry, Daisy Sprout..." Scootaloo said as the first plank hit the floor. "You're not alone. We'll get them out in ten seconds flat."

Apple Bloom looked up at the balcony, a little nervous. "I wonder what's keeping it up? That thing looks really heavy!"

Sweetie Belle's eyes roamed the plaza until they settled on a cloaked unicorn. She was on her knees, crying, but her horn shone the same bright blue as the magical aura that surrounded the balcony. She couldn't see why the unicorn was crying, but she knew enough about magic to know that if the unicorn got too distracted, she would lose control of her spell and the balcony would crush them all.

"Help!" she shouted. "Miss! You have to concentrate!" drawing the attention of the other three fillies.

The balcony groaned, as the the mare turned to look at them.

Daisy Sprout stared, her heart beating hard in her chest, her eyes watering even more. "I... TRIXIE!" she wailed "Trixie! Sis! Mom and Dad are hurt! Please!"

The mare's eyes opened wide as she looked their way and noticed what was happening. Slowly standing up, her horn flaring, Trixie concentrated on the balcony.

The structure groaned as the magic tore at the balcony. The fillies looked up nervously as gravel from the wall it had been attached to rained around them.

Another pull and a crack as the wooden stairs leading up to the balcony splintered and broke. The fillies crouched low as the balcony was suddenly ripped from the wall.

Trixie shouted as she threw the remains of the structure into the air, catching one of the chimeras attacking Nightmare Moon with it.

The shadow creature did not even know what hit it as Trixie's magic slammed the balcony with tremendous force into the fountain, completely destroying the statue of Celestia that used to sit there.

The broken pipes began to spew water into the air, high above the buildings, and the wind spread it, creating a misty haze.

The chimera did not rise again.

“Daisy Sprout!” Trixie shouted, running towards them just as a group of guards arrived and fervently started digging their parents out.

“T-Trixie...” Daisy Sprout stammered, not believing her eyes. “Y-you... you're alive...” tears started flowing freely as the showmare slid into a stop just in front of her.

Trixie was breathing heavily, tears drying in her face as she took stock of her little sister. “I... are you okay? Did anything fall on you? I'm sorry I wasn't able to get rid of it quicker... I-I tried to help...” her lips trembled. “I couldn't save...”

She was stopped from talking when Daisy Sprout launched herself and tackled the older unicorn in a hug. “Trixie!” she cried, sobbing as her older sister stopped stammering and, with a gentle smile, closed her eyes and hugged her sister back.

“They're okay!” a guard said, helping Cinnamon and her husband up.

Cinnamon immediately looked for her daughter, and found her crying and hugging an unknown pony. “Daisy!”

The little filly gasped and turned around, the amount of tears doubling as she stared. “Mom! Dad! You're okay!” she let go of Trixie and ran to hug them too.

Both unicorns smiled and wrapped their daughter in a hug.

“Aww...” both Sweetie Belle and Apple Bloom sighed at the scene while Scootaloo hid a smile.

Trixie slowly stood up, drawing the attention of the two adults. Cinnamon choked, looking at her in confusion as her dad slowly disentangled himself from the hug and walked up to her.

“Trixie?”

The magician scratched the floor with her hoof. "Dad... I..."

She never finished talking as she suddenly found herself being held close by her father. Soon, Cinnamon and Daisy Sprout were hugging her as well.

"We thought you were dead!" he whispered, nuzzling his daughter. "We heard bad news and..."

Their reunion was cut by a cough from one of the guards. "Excuse me... you're Doctor Golden Cross, correct?"

When Trixie's dad nodded, the guard sighed. "Sir, under orders from a Shadowbolt captain, all doctors and nurses in the area are to help those in need."

Golden Cross blinked. "O-of course! What was I thinking?" he turned back to his family. "We have a lot to talk about, but..."

Trixie smiled, putting a hoof on his mouth. "...but we have duties to perform." she finished for him. "We all do; go help them, dad."

As she turned to trot towards the battle, Daisy Sprout jumped forward. "Trixie! Wait!"

The showmare looked down at her sister. "What is it, Daisy Sprout?"

"You'll need this!" the little unicorn said, using her mouth to undo the clasp on the cape.

Trixie levitated it and threw off her cloak. The cape was a bit torn from the Guardian's attack, but it was otherwise unharmed. "Thanks," she smiled as the cape attached around her neck. The blue unicorn smiled for a second. Then she looked towards the gallows and her smile dropped. "I have to go... be careful..." she looked at all of them over her shoulder. "But fear not, The Great and Powerful Trixie is here!"

With that, she shot off towards the fray.

"Wow." Scootaloo said after a second. "Your sister is awesome!"

“I know!” Daisy Sprout smiled.

o.O.o

Lyra's melody ended abruptly, and it was all Nightmare Moon could do to slam more force into her spell, keeping the memories flowing and hoping that it had been enough to snap her sister back from the Nightmare. She had located what she was looking for, and now she had to find all the little traces that connected her and her sister to the Guardian.

She still needed more time!

Nightmare Moon glanced down at the gallows and her magic almost failed her when she saw Lyra. Struggling to keep her emotions in check, she returned to her work, knowing that she had one more death to add to her long list of failures.

At least Lyra's spell completed its purpose. She thought guiltily. Nightmare Flare has passed out, she has no way to stop the memories from reaching her. I'm sorry Lyra...

It was then that the other shadow chimera attacked. She had less than a second to move, and she banked to the side, then flew up and back, keeping her slim hold of the Guardian's tendrils in check.

“Where's everypony?!” she growled as she allowed her mind to scan for her allies. There was too much going on and everypony was doing their job... sadly that wasn't enough.

Using her telekinetic hold on the first shadow chimera, she proceeded to use it to bat the second one away whenever it came too close.

It would have almost been amusing if it were not keeping her from finding the last tendril!

Her anger rose as the chimeras struggled to get to her. *As if you two could ever do something to me.* She glared in their direction for a second before snapping her attention back to Nightmare Flare. *I can't let them distract me! I'm almost done!*

It was then that she felt a tremendous pulse of magic and suddenly her balcony sailed in front of her and took down one of the chimeras.

Her mouth slid open and her eyes widened. “**What the hay...**” she shook her head and felt the magic start to slip through her control. Nightmare Moon immediately tightened her grip on the tendrils. That distraction had almost cost her everything. Her eyes narrowed. Just a few more...

o.O.o

Rainbow Dash was batted away by Spitfire. The cyan pegasus tumbled through the air, trying to regain her senses. The chimera was strong... really strong.

Soarin' took advantage of his former teammate's distraction and dove down, slamming his fore hooves with as much strength as he could muster into the middle of the dragon-pony abomination's back, eliciting a pained growl. Her draconic tail snaked up faster than lightning, cutting painfully into his arm. Soarin' gulped. He had almost been completely impaled by Spitfire.

The pegasus bit back a scream, instead opting to fly back and get some breathing room between the chimera and himself as Spitfire turned to glare in his direction.

“Well Soarin’, it seems all those apple pies finally caught up to you, they're slowing you down!” she spat, the hatred in her eyes felt completely surreal to her old wingmate.

“Spitfire! This isn't you!” he shouted, spying a recuperated Rainbow Dash gaining on their position. “I don't know what Nightmare Flare did to you, but- whoa!” he yelled out, fast enough to duck a burst of flame that passed over his head, but not fast enough to dodge the tail that rammed hard into his abdomen, sending him spiraling down towards the plaza.

“Don't insult the Que- Oof!”

Rainbow Dash's momentum-fueled charge culminated in a straight punch to the chimera's stomach, forcing all the air out of her lungs in a pained wheeze. “We're taking down Nightmare Flare, and then we're getting you

back to normal!” the chromatic pegasus shouted, spinning in place and landing a hard kick to Spitfire's ribs.

Gasping for breath, the former Wonderbolt's eyes glowed red in anger. She grabbed Rainbow Dash by the throat before the cyan flier knew what was happening. “I'll rip your wings off and let you suffer for a while until you come whimpering for me to take you back!”

Dash struggled, but could not break free. “W-what is it about Nightmare Flare and turning ponies into perverts?” she gasped, feeling the claws around her neck begin to draw blood.

“Maybe I should get rid of your voice too!” Spitfire snarled. “I think I'll like you better as a mute!”

A roar, similar to that of a lion, split the air. Surprised, the chimera released the pegasus.

Rainbow Dash felt her heart give a lurch.

Something crashed on top of the abomination, slashing with wicked claws as sharp as the dragon-pony's, putting a sharp beak to good use as the chimera fought frantically to turn around and retaliate in some way.

Both the chimera and her assailant plummeted down towards the city.

“Whoa... is that...?” Soarin' gasped, flying up to Rainbow Dash.

“Gilda!” the cyan pegasus shouted, diving after them.

“A Gilda? I thought it was a griffon! I'm pretty sure it's a griffon!” the stallion shouted, following Rainbow Dash down.

“That's her name, feather-brain!” shouted an angry Dash. “We need to catch up to them! She shouldn't be here!”

“Oh... you know her!” Soarin' nodded in understanding.

Rainbow just rolled her eyes. “Just help her!”

o.O.o

"Paper Craft, you come back here now!" he heard his mother shout as his parents chased after him. But he couldn't... he wouldn't! Eventually his gallops brought him up to the gallows where he slowed down until he stopped under the slightly swaying body of his sister.

He couldn't bring himself to look up at her, and instead his gaze settled on the pieces of broken lyre that lay at his hoofs. He remembered how, several years ago during Lyra's tenth birthday, somepony had given it to her. She had searched for a card inside the box, but never found out who had given it to her.

Her parents hadn't been happy about it. They had raged in private about how inconsiderate Lyra's friends were. They had discouraged her interest in music from an early age, unwilling to support her passion and trying to get her interested in other more socially acceptable endeavors, like accounting or law.

The lyre was a direct insult to them, or so they thought. They didn't destroy it though, since several of their friends were important ponies in their own right, and the musical instrument was exquisite, hoofcrafted with inlaid designs of gold leaf. No, they didn't like it, but they would never throw something so expensive away.

Paper Craft still felt proud that he had managed to sneak that present past his parents. Even broken, he could tell the loving care with which she had treated the instrument. The inlays were clean, the paint immaculate. After all this time, he was sure that she would have had to take it to be fixed at least a couple of times.

He sniffed, watching his tears fall between the broken pieces. He had loved staying awake at night to hear his sister practice, and had missed her dearly when she had announced, to their parents' anger, that she would be moving to Ponyville to join the town's small orchestra.

He smiled a bit. He, of all his family, should have known that there was more to it than simple rebellion against their parents. He had never understood it fully until earlier that day when the body of the mare had been brought to the dungeons.

His heart had never ached as badly as when his sister had broken down and cried in the Castle's dungeon. While his parents had huffed and marched themselves out, he had stayed behind, sitting on the cold stone stairs, listening to his sister cry at the loss of her lover. He had gritted his teeth and closed his eyes when she had broken down and started laughing for no reason. He had been about to walk back in and offer whatever support he could... but then she started playing. And he couldn't intrude.

"Paper Craft." His father's voice reached him. "There's nothing to see here, son. Let's go."

"She's here," the colt said, finally looking up at the body suspended above him. His tears flowed more freely now as he stood up on his hind legs to hug hers. He buried his face in the soft coat and cried.

"She's dead, and good riddance to her."

His mother's words made his blood run cold. He choked up and the tears died. He had misheard... he must have heard wrong...

"She was always a failure," his mother continued, refusing to look up at the body. "Playing with that stupid musical instrument, wasting *our* money studying music and accomplishing nothing but playing in a small town just so she could be with that disgusting Earth Pony. Figures she would be a fillyfooler on top of it all!"

"Come now, dear," his father said, "Let's not talk about things gone wrong. Paper Craft, let's go; we need to leave before something bad happens!"

"Before something bad happens?" the younger unicorn whispered. He slowly turned around to face his parents. "Fillyfooler? Failure? That is my sister you are talking about! Your daughter! You raised her! She was beautiful!" he broke down crying and stepped back, shaking his head violently when his father approached. "You're monsters!" he shouted, looking at both of them. His father's face a cold mask, his mother's adorned with a sneer of distaste as she looked up at the body hanging from the noose. "How can you be so cold and cruel?! Don't you feel anything? Don't you feel any regrets? We'll never talk to her again! She's gone!"

“Paper Craft...” his father started.

“Don't!” he shouted. “Don't you dare talk to me! Don't you dare come any closer!”

His father ignored him, trying to put a comforting hoof on his son's shoulder, he didn't watch where he was going and stepped on one of the lyre pieces by accident.

Paper Craft saw red. With angry roar, his horn blazed into life, ripping flyers and posters from the nearby walls. They glowed with arcane light as they swirled into a whirlwind around his father. The older unicorn gasped as he was suddenly surrounded. He cried out in pain as small cuts began to appear on his clothes and flesh as the confused unicorn tried to backpedal away from his son.

“Son, stop that this instant!” his mother shouted, only for a piece of paper to wrap tightly around her mouth.

“Shut up! I am not your son!” Paper Craft shouted. “I don't know who you are, but monsters like you could never be my parents!”

“Son! Listen to your mother!” his father shouted, unable to concentrate on his magic to break free from the vortex. “This is not helping any!”

“I don't want to help!” he snapped, his eyes glaring from one parent to the other. “Leave us alone! You have been nothing but unfeeling, hateful and petty jail keepers for me and Lyra!” he shook his head and scratched the floor, breathing heavily and ignoring the hurt in his parents' eyes. “At least she was strong enough and had the common sense to escape from you!”

“And see where it landed her!” his mother spat back, having used her magic to rip the paper away from her mouth. “Hanging from the gallows after wasting her life and her last moments playing her stupid music!”

“Excuse me?” another voice asked, filled with venom.

The three unicorns turned to face a blue unicorn with a purple hat and cape decorated with stars. “Did you just say that Lyra's melody -the melody that just now brought down Nightmare Flare- was... stupid?” the mare asked,

tears welling up as her eyes flared in anger. "Did you just imply that your own daughter's heroic sacrifice was *stupid*?"

"What business is it of yours?" Lyra's mother asked, looking down her nose at Trixie. "Wait, I recognize you. You're Cinnamon's daughter, aren't you? Just another useless dropout who went to waste their life seeking fame."

She was suddenly thrown back to land painfully on the wet floor, covering her coat in blood, grime and pieces of pony. Unable to fight the bile rising in her throat, she violently vomited, glaring at the meddlesome showmare as she stood up slowly. "How dare you?"

"Who do you think you are?" Paper Craft's father finally managed to blast the vortex surrounding him. "I will have you arrested for this!"

"By whom?" Trixie laughed at them, walking to stand beside Paper Craft. "In case you haven't noticed, we're in the middle of a crisis."

Lyra's parents stood their ground, horns shimmering with magic.

Trixie narrowed her eyes. "Do you really want to test my patience?" Her magic aura slowly grew around her, easily outshining the glow of their horns.

The stallion took an involuntary step back, intimidated by her display. "P-Paper Craft... come on. Leave these two alone."

"No." the colt said, his eyes furious. "I'll never go back to you."

"Paper Craft..." his mother tried again.

"The young unicorn spoke his mind." Trixie growled. "Leave, before I forget what Lyra would have wanted and I reduce your bodies to ashes, then have them baked into a Diamond Dog piss-pot."

With a silent look, his parents turned around and trotted away.

A soft blue aura enveloped the late unicorn's body as Trixie's magic slowly undid the noose.

When it was done, she slowly levitated the body down, next to Paper Craft. "Can you levitate her?" she asked softly as she placed the pieces of the lyre on top of Lyra's body, using her discarded cloak to cover and wrap the body.

The young colt nodded. "I think so," he said, fighting the tears that threatened to flow again.

"Good," the showmare sighed. "Take her over there, to where those fillies are. I don't want anything to happen to her..." she choked. "She's a hero, Paper Craft. You should be proud."

The colt's magic was already coating his sister's body. "Oh... I am." he said with a small smile. "I've always been proud of her."

Trixie watched the young unicorn float Lyra's body along as he went towards her mother and cursed her lack of strength.

She sighed. This battle was costing everypony much more than she had ever- her thoughts were interrupted by a screech-like sound of a shadow-chimera. She looked up and her eyes widened.

The showmare scrambled out of the way, horn lighting up with magic to create a shimmering shield around her as the gallows exploded behind her.

o.O.o

Applejack was sent flying by a stray kick from the shadow chimera she and Big Macintosh were fighting. She landed painfully, but rolled with the momentum until she finally slid to a stop. The rope she had held so tightly to whipped around as her brother jumped back and circled the dangerous shadow-creature as it tried to keep both ponies in sight.

The chimera pulled back, making the stallion brace himself and pull back as well... only for the creature to pounce on him.

The rope went slack so suddenly that Big Mac lost his balance. The chimera was on him immediately, landing on top of him so forcefully that the stallion smacked his head on the floor.

"Big Mac!" Applejack shouted in a panic, charging towards him.

The red-coated pony desperately dodged the clawed talon as it ripped into the stone next to his head, leaving deep gashes on the floor. He kicked as hard as he could, but the creature ignored the pain, still trying to claw the stallion to death.

The chimera opened its maw, black fangs clear even under the perpetual gloom of the eclipse and dove down to clamp about his neck.

Applejack dove in, her legs already kicking out for all she was worth at the creature's exposed side.

The kick made it roll to the side and off the stallion, who stood up a bit shaky. The chimera had managed to draw blood. A small rivulet started flowing down his neck from several small cuts.

"Are you okay, Big Mac?" Applejack asked, looking at him worriedly and wondering if the creature's bite was poisonous.

The stallion nodded, his eyes carefully watching the creature as it jumped to its feet with an almost feline grace. The two ropes trailed behind it as it started circling them. "We need to get rid of it quickly," he whispered and winced, feeling the sting of the bite wounds around his neck.

His sister nodded and glanced at the balcony for a split second. "Ah have an idea," she said. "But ah'm gonna need your help... it's a bit risky."

Big Macintosh nodded. "Just tell me what to do, sis."

"We need to get the ropes," she said, her eyes following the creature.

"Then ah need you to distract it long enough for me to throw the end of my rope through one of those spaces on the balcony... then, when ah pull it back, you grab your rope and pull down, throwin' all your weight on it. We'll break its neck."

The stallion nodded again. He started moving to his left, while Applejack moved to the right, effectively stopping the creature in its tracks as it watched both of them warily.

Big Mac made the first move.

Feigning a charge at the monster, the stallion changed his course at the last second, forcing the shadow chimera to whirl around to keep him in sight, leaving the ropes unattended.

Applejack immediately shot forth, picking up the end of the rope and preparing to throw it at the balcony, cursing herself for not thinking of this earlier, when she had been up there earlier.

She was about to proceed with her plan when a sickening crack and Big Macintosh's shout stopped her cold. She looked back towards her brother, only to find lying in a pool of blood at the feet of the shadow chimera.

With a desperate shout, she yanked the rope, pulling the creature a couple of feet away from him, trying to see if he was moving or still breathing.

The creature, however, had other plans.

With a mighty pounce, it landed on the preoccupied apple farmer, knocking the air out of her, and almost knocking her out. She choked and coughed as the chimera pressed its weight down on her chest... the light blurred in her vision, distorting the sight of the fanged maw as it lowered towards her.

o.O.o

Twilight Spark was getting frustrated. Jade was too good to fall for simple tricks and too fast to catch with her most powerful spells.

They had been trading blows since the attack on Nightmare Flare commenced but neither had gained a clear advantage, even if she had been on the receiving end of most of Jade's attacks while the white unicorn had dodged just about everything.

She was just lucky that she had been able to keep vital areas out of the reach of the assassin's blade or the battle would have been over by now. Had Nightmare Flare not given her more strength, endurance and power than even Spitfire had received, she didn't think she would have lasted more than a minute.

Which made her hate the assassin more. The green-maned pony moved with a grace and intent that were enviable. The white unicorn's attacks were precise, where her own were powerful but unfocused.

She growled as Jade nimbly twirled in place, dodging a magic missile. "Those are always supposed to hit!" she accused.

The assassin took advantage of her distraction to buck her in the jaw, sending her stumbling back. Shaking her head she opened her eyes in time to see her opponent charging at her.

"Enough!" she shouted, expelling a shell of magic around her, and sending the assassin reeling. "I'll kill you, you cheap excuse for a unicorn!"

Jade was already on her hooves, but the assassin had landed far enough that she wouldn't be able to close the distance between them in time.

It was then that Spark heard Applejack shout.

The purple unicorn's head snapped to the side, quickly spotting the shadow chimera as it stood on top of the apple farmer, claw raised and ready to deal the killing blow. Big Mac was either unconscious or dead several feet away from them, and there was no pony around to help Applejack.

Without a second thought, the spell that had been intended for Jade slammed into the creature, throwing it off of Applejack, and enveloping it in flames.

"Don't you dare touch her!" Spark shouted, galloping towards the monster as her dark-purple aura formed into five energy blades that shot towards the chimera.

The blades cut into the creature, eliciting a pained roar as it stumbled back with each strike. Its wings were sheared off by a pair of energy blades, one leg was almost completely cut off, the last blade bit into its neck, parting it with ease.

The shadow chimera collapsed, its head rolling away from the body, but Twilight Spark only had eyes for Applejack, who was looking at her in pain

and confusion. She slowed down until she was a few feet away from the apple farmer.

“A-are you okay, Applejack?” she asked, her eyes scanning the other mare's body and taking note of all the small cuts.

The orange-coated earth pony stared at her for a few seconds, then struggled to sit up. She looked over her shoulder and noticed that Big Macintosh was slowly getting to his hoofs. He seemed okay, if a little dazed. She released the breath she didn't know she had been holding and turned to look back at the unicorn that had caused her so much grief and worry and confusion. She smiled a little. “Ah am... thank you, Twilight Spark.”

The purple unicorn's heart fluttered. “I... s-sure, anytime Applejack!” she coughed, trying to compose herself. It wouldn't do for the apple farmer to see her as anything but the strong mare she was. “A-anyway! I couldn't let my pet get hurt! What kind of lover would I be?” she asked with a smirk, still a bit shaken by the thought of losing the mare and ignoring Applejack's wince at the term. She decided to just tease the farmer. “We still have a lot of stuff to do in be-”

She saw Applejack's eyes widen as the apple farmer looked at something behind her.

The world whirled around in a blur as she turned around to see Jade descending on her, forehoof with its blade poised for a deadly strike.

Suddenly, she felt something hit her hard, the world spinning about her once more as she saw blood fan out over her.

o.O.o

Gilda fought furiously, claws digging into the chimera's soft underbelly, tearing off scales as her target roared in pain.

Spitfire snarled angrily, as she shook off the pain to dig her claws into the griffon's shoulders, holding her in place while the former pony opened her mouth and flames started to accumulate.

Seeing this, the griffon thrashed about, ignoring the pain as the claws ripped into her shoulders. With a desperate swipe of her hind legs straight at Spitfire's face, she was able to force the chimera's head to the side the moment it released a blast of flame that seemed as though it could have melted her face around her beak.

Both fighters flew apart from each other, bloodied and breathing hard.

"Not bad..." Gilda smirked, forcing her claws to stay put and not rub her painfully throbbing shoulders.

Spitfire growled. "You're interrupting a private dispute, pigeon! I'll give you this one chance to leave."

Gilda growled back. "That's not happening. You're not cool enough to dance with me, much less Rainbow Dash. But at least I can whip your sorry flank out of the sky and save us all the trouble of looking at your scaly mug."

"That's it!" Spitfire roared, flames surging around her body. "Foal's gloves are off! I'm going to wipe that smirk off your beak and then remove it from your carcass!"

The griffon gulped as she rolled out of a fire-blast that sailed past her. "You'll have to catch me first, scaly-flank!" she shouted back.

"Die!" the chimera shouted as she charged towards Gilda, who did the smart thing and turned tail, banking up and trying to put some distance between them.

She had to concentrate and evade several fireballs that tore right past her as she dashed from side to side, trying her best not to be immolated.

A black blur zoomed down past Gilda, leaving a rainbow trail. As the griffon snapped her head around, she saw Rainbow Dash plant a solid hoof into/onto the chimera's face, throwing the beast off-course.

Quickly taking advantage of the shift in battle, Gilda did a backwards loop to gather speed before sweeping down towards her friend.

Another dark blur, this one trailing a dark cloud with small lightning-bolts slammed into the side of the chimera, cracking at least one of its ribs as the creature tried to fry Dash's coat with its flames.

“Snap out of it, Spitfire!” Soarin' shouted before wincing as the chimera sliced his foreleg with her sharp wings in a fluid motion.

“How about I snap your neck instead?!” his former partner growled.

“How about you shut the hay up?” Rainbow Dash retorted with a buck right to the chimera's stomach, where Gilda had clawed her.

The chimera roared in pain before smashing Rainbow in the snout with a vicious blow from her tail, sending the pegasus reeling backwards. At the same time, one of Spitfire's talons grabbed Soarin's head, another ripping through his uniform, leaving bloody gashes across his flank.

Gilda's eagle-like cry split the air as she sped past the chimera, and catching the creature's throat in her arm, forcing her to release Soarin', who carefully retreated while still facing the pair to quickly scan his injury. Although painful, it seemed the damage was more superficial than he had originally thought. “That will sting for a while...” he wheezed.

Rainbow Dash shot past him, anger in her eyes, blood flowing from her nose. She gritted her teeth as she rammed the chimera in the shoulder with all her strength and momentum, hearing a sickening crack and the anguished cry of Spitfire a split-second later.

The Wonderbolt-turned-monster started glowing and her three opponents suddenly found themselves dodging for dear life as trails of fire sliced through the air.

Rainbow Dash cried in pain as she was hit by one on her hind leg while dodging another pair. She quickly patted the fire out, but the damage was already done, her melted uniform burned into her flesh, much of the cyan fur burnt away.

She bit her lower lip to stop from crying out as the pain blurred her vision.

“Watch out!” Gilda shouted, her claw grabbing Dash by the hoof and yanking her out of the way as another barrage of flames shot past her previous location.

“T-thanks...” the chromatic pegasus panted, nodding thankfully at the griffon.

“What are we going to do now, Cap’n?” Soarin' asked, flying up to the pair as they warily watched as Spitfire turned to look at them with hatred.

Gilda arched an eyebrow at the title, but Rainbow Dash just shook her head. “I don't know... we've tried reasoning with her, but she's too much under Nightmare Flare's influence to care!”

“I say we just beat her up.” Gilda growled. “You can talk to her later!”

“Hey! That's my partner you're talking about!” Soarin' growled back.

“In case you haven't noticed, she's trying to fry us into snacks!” Gilda snapped back.

“Uh... guys?” Rainbow Dash flew in between them. “What’s she doing?”

The griffon and the blue-maned pegasus turned to look at the chimera.

The air around Spitfire seemed to shimmer as small flames licked her body. Slowly a golden-red aura formed around her.

“I don't like the look of that.” Gilda gasped, eyes widening.

The aura slowly expanded until the chimera had a sphere of the golden-red aura expanding a couple of feet in all directions until it shimmered in a protective bubble with Spitfire in the middle. Then it burst into flames and started spinning in place like a miniature sun.

“I *really* don't like the look of that.” Soarin' seconded.

“Scatter!” Rainbow Dash shouted as she shot up into the air, while Soarin' took left and Gilda right, barely in time to avoid being rammed by the sphere, which turned around and started chasing the griffon.

“Why me?!” Gilda shouted, looking back over her shoulder and snarling in annoyance.

“Because you're the slowest, idiot!” Spitfire laughed from somewhere within her sphere.

The griffon narrowed her eyes at the insults, but concentrated on putting some distance between them.

High above them, Rainbow Dash watched in horror as her friend was about to be fried alive. “Oh no, you don't!” she shouted, diving towards them with all the speed she could muster.

Soarin' watched in awe as the air seemed to bend around Rainbow Dash. The last time he'd been around and that had happened he had been unconscious and falling to his death. But he had heard the description from other pegasi that had witnessed it.

The atmospheric pressure around her made the chromatic pegasus grit her teeth. Her leg hurt horrendously; her wings strained under the pressure and stress from the battle.

The wind buffeted against her mane, and just as she felt she couldn't go on, the cyan pegasus was in that split-second moment that made the Sonic Rainboom so much more than a simple stunt.

Everything around her came into sharp focus, doubts left her, pain faded away. This was her moment.

The cone of sonic resistance broke less than a second after, shooting her like a rainbow bullet that slammed through the exterior of Spitfire's flame sphere without a pause, and the Sonic Rainboom destroyed the fiery shield, which disintegrated as the pegasus tore out again, this time heading up. Spitfire was thrown down, completely knocked out even before she crashed into one of the buildings in the plaza.

Gilda stared in awe as Rainbow Dash shot up for a few miles before suddenly stopping and falling. It wasn't until her friend's unconscious form plummeted past her that she reacted and dove to catch her friend.

She easily caught up with the pegasus and, matching her speed, was able to break her fall. She held her friend against her chest, looking towards the expanding rainbow ring far above them.

“What was that?” she finally asked.

“The Sonic Rainboom.” Soarin' whispered as he hovered over the pair. “I didn't get to see it until now... it's amazing.”

Gilda nodded mutely as they slowly made their way down towards the plaza. Soarin' suddenly drew a sharp breath and without explanation, launched himself towards the gallows.

Gilda followed him slowly, arms wrapped protectively around her unconscious friend.

o.O.o

“Applejack!” two voices shouted in unison as the orange earth pony fell to her side, a nasty cut on her shoulder bleeding heavily.

“You idiot!” Jade shouted.

Turning angrily towards the assassin, Twilight Sparkle's eyes shone white with barely restrained power. “You talk!” she said angrily, then growled. “You hurt Applejack!”

The earth pony coughed. “Girls...”

“You're one to talk!” Jade snapped back at Spark, knowing that it was too late to pretend to be a mute again. “You've been torturing her since you got your dirty hoofs on her! You're nothing but a mistake at the cost of the life of a dear friend!” her horn glowed with a blue aura and she shifted her position to strike. “You've gotten away so far, but this time I will make sure you die!”

Twilight Sparkle was taken aback by the anger in Jade's eyes, even as the hurtful words dug at her, she smirked, doing her best to ignore them. “And what is she to you?” she taunted. “You met her once a few years ago. You

have no relation to her. I have fought hydras and dragons and even Nightmare Moon by her side!”

“Dang it, Ah'm talking to you!” Applejack growled from the floor, painfully raising her head to glare at the pair. She was ignored.

“You are not Twilight Sparkle!” Jade roared. “You were created to think you were, but you are nothing but an imitation! An equusculus!” the assassin started pacing. “Nothing else!”

Twilight Spark bit her lip and her eyes flashed with hurt and anger. “That's not true! I am Twilight Sparkle! I just changed my name! I have my memories-”

Jade snorted. “Really? If you are the real Twilight Sparkle, tell me, what were you doing just before you left Ponyville?”

“I...” Twilight's horn stopped glowing as her eyes widened. Her mind raced as she tried to remember. Had she been racing? Got fifth place? No... that was in Fall... “I am Twilight Sparkle!” she cried, stepping back. *Why can't I remember?* she thought furiously. *It's all a jumble of images...* Another memory surfaced, she was at the Ponyville Library, but the perspective was wrong. She looked down at the six ponies around her as she spoke. Applejack, Rarity, Pinkie Pie, Fluttershy, Rainbow Dash and... *me?*

“Girls!” Applejack called again, but to her frustration the pair of unicorns was too involved in their argument.

“No.” Jade's cloth mask covered her face, but Spark could see the vicious smile reflecting in her eyes as the assassin pointed towards the balcony. “Twilight is up there, setting Celestia free. Which is *exactly* what the real Twilight Sparkle would be doing”

Despite herself, despite knowing that it was an awfully stupid thing to do, Twilight Spark turned her head up and looked.

The pegasus pony that had been with Jade when the fight began was now standing next to the collapsed queen. She had taken off her mask, revealing her face.

"N-no..." Twilight Spark whispered in horror, her conviction fading at the sight of the purple pegasus.

"Do you see it now, monster?" Jade met Twilight Sparks' eyes as the unicorn faced the assassin with a slightly panicked look.

"The real Twilight would never kill anypony." The assassin accused.

"But... they attacked the Queens!" Spark blurted out, shaking her head. *I had to do it! she thought. Or did I? Couldn't I have just paralyzed them like I did with the Bearers of the Elements of Harmony?* Another part of her mind argued. *The **real** Twilight Sparkle never killed... even if you can't remember it, you know its true.*

"The real Twilight would not try to force Applejack to love her." Jade growled, her eyes hard as steel as she looked down at the slightly cringing purple unicorn.

"I didn't force her! I didn't!" Spark cried as one by one tears started to run down her cheek. "I was just... I just wanted her to see how much I need her!"

Applejack sighed and looked down.

For a second, the assassin seemed taken aback by her opponent's outburst, but she quickly shook her head. "The real Twilight wouldn't have let Princess Celestia turn into monster like Nightmare Flare!"

Twilight Spark fell on her rump. What little of her magic that was still active slowly faded, leaving the dark-purple unicorn staring blankly at the floor.

I'm a lie? Her heart seemed to skip painfully. *Am I just a construct? A- an equusculus, an imitation...* she looked back towards the balcony. "But... she's not even a unicorn..." she whispered futilely.

Even as she voiced her complains, Spark could feel her magic skip whenever she thought of the other Twilight. She could feel herself drawn to her, not as a lover like she fancied herself with Applejack, but as a part of the whole.

*I **know** the truth now. I... was my love of Applejack even real? Could a creature like me even feel?*

Her blood felt like ice as her thoughts took that turn. *How could Applejack ever love me back, when I am nothing?*

Jade approached the immobile purple unicorn, her eyes hard.

"I... I'm real." Spark whispered, making the assassin stop for a second. "I feel... I fear and I hurt... I can't be a lie..."

"Don't you dare... *Jade*." Applejack said, struggling to get up, but her foreleg was too damaged for her to put any pressure on it.

Twilight Spark flinched and looked up at the apple farmer, confusion in her eyes. *Does she care?*

"You can't stop me now, Applejack." Jade said gently. "I don't know what she did to you, and I don't know why you saved her... don't you remember what happens if she stays alive? *What will happen to Twilight?*"

Spark's eyes went from one pony to the other. *What are they talking about? Am I doing something to Twilight just by being here?*

The earth pony winced and looked down, her eyes then rose to meet the purple unicorn's. "Ah... ah just don't want her to die..." she said, not breaking eye contact. "She had no choice in how she was made..."

The assassin stopped just in front of Spark, never taking her eyes off of the whimpering purple unicorn.

"She..." the apple farmer sighed. "She never did anything to me other than tease me, Jade." she looked at the purple unicorn. "Ah know she's not a good pony, ah know that she has ah know she's done things that nopony can forgive... but... look at *who* made her... and *why*."

"She was made for all the wrong reasons," Jade stated.

"No!" Applejack struggled again before sighing and leaning on her elbow. "Jade... she was made out of love... from a mother to her daughter."

Jade closed her eyes. "Be that as it may... even if the reasons behind her creation are as noble as you say... the fact is, Applejack, that Spark was created by the same magic that turned the Princess into a Nightmare. She cannot be allowed to live.."

"Ah... ah used to think the same thing about Nightmare Moon." Applejack pleaded. "Ah know wanting her to live doesn't make sense to you, Jade, but... Ah... Ah can't bring myself to let you kill her... she is a part of Twilight Sparkle!"

Jade's blue eyes opened slowly. "Only the horn. And not for long." She closed the gap between her and the purple unicorn.

Twilight Spark looked up at Jade. Slowly, tears started flowing down her cheeks as she gazed into the eyes of her executioner, before she turned to expose her neck. Her eyes went to meet Applejack's. "I'm sorry." she said. "I love you." she closed her eyes.

Applejack averted her eyes.

Jade raised her blade, muscles tensing to make it as quick as possible. The blade was poised to kill... the assassin narrowed her eyes... and hesitated.

Then she stepped back, wide-eyed as everything around them began to shake violently.

o.O.o

"Over here!" somepony shouted.

Slowly she started hearing more voices. Voices and the sound of stone being shifted around, or perhaps the sounds of hooves scraping against stone. She tried to take a deep breath, but something was pressing down on her, barely allowing the air to go through. Her memory was hazy. How had she ended up here? The mental image of a strange shadow monster came to her and she remembered.

"Damn." she coughed. "That thing packs a punch!"

Somehow, she didn't feel too worried, although being upside down and having several parts of her body immobilized by heavy things put her in a weird position. Her left shoulder was propped on something hard, but not stone. Wood? She thought she had seen a wooden beam... she shifted as the sounds outside continued.

There was something soft under her. She coughed and felt liquid slide down her muzzle. That... was not good. She tried to move more, but then she felt pain from her chest. Something... her hoof felt it's way around until it bumped into that something. It felt...

Her thoughts were interrupted as the heavy weight on top of her shifted, then slowly started levitating.

"I see somepony! She's alive!" a unicorn shouted. "You're going to be okay... don't... oh, Celestia... Ebon Rain..."

"That's not my..." she started to say, but then followed his eyes down. A mangled body lay under her. The legs were twisted into unnatural positions, one was almost completely severed. His neck had obviously been broken due to his horn getting stuck in her abdomen. She gritted her teeth as she looked at how bad the wound was. It was a belly-wound and the horn had probably ripped her stomach. "Great..." she coughed blood as she took stock of her other wounds. "Punctured lung. And... several broken ribs." she winced as she forced her wings to move. "Wings... survived... somehow..."

"I... w-we can... if we move quickly..." the guard stammered, staring at her.

Behind the unicorn, the pegasus could still see three shadow creatures and her fellow Wonderbolts-turned-Shadowbolts fighting it out. "No." With the slab off, she forced herself up. The horn slid out of her painfully and with a disgusting squelching sound, her right hind leg almost gave under her weight.

"N-no?" the guard repeated.

She shook her head, barely able to concentrate. "No... there's no time..." Misty was up there, alone with that thing. She couldn't leave her teammate to deal with that by herself while she was being pampered over.

The guard stepped back, aghast, as she stumbled out of the remains of the wall she had crashed into, dripping blood.

She heard several gasps from around her as several ponies, including a small group of fillies, stared at her. "Hey." she greeted them all. "Don't worry about me, I'm-" she coughed and swayed before forcing her legs to keep her upright. "I'm just passing through."

"You... you're Blast!" one of the fillies, a pegasus, gasped.

"Hey..." she blinked, head feeling light. "A... a fan... how charming! Nice to meet you, little filly!" she knew what was happening. "I wish I... *cough* could s-stay and chat but..." she looked up. "My captain... and my friends need me."

The little pegasus' eyes welled with tears, but she nodded. "Rainbow Dash told me once that friends are the most important ponies in life."

Blast smiled. "They're up there with family." she carefully raised a hoof up and slid her goggles off, throwing them to the filly. "Here... we Wonder-" she stopped and chuckled. "*Shadowbolts* are like family. I always knew Dash would make it to the team..." her voice faded and she stood there for a few seconds, until she snapped back to reality. "Keep those..."

"Scootaloo."

"Nice name." she chuckled, then indicated the goggles with her snout. "Hold onto those, kid. Hope they bring you luck like they did for me." She looked up at the battles in the sky and her wings spread open. She took a galloping start, gritting her teeth and doing her best to ignore the stabbing pain as each step caused her wounds to worsen. The pegasus jumped into the air, flapping her wings wildly as she felt her body almost give up on her.

Misty blinked back tears of frustration, anger and sadness as she dodged the shadow chimera once again. The creature had batted Blast with such force that it was doubtful the pegasus was still alive. She had seen her partner crash with incredible force onto the side of the building that had, at one point, had Nightmare Moon's balcony attached to its side. Her partner had smashed through a support beam and been buried in rubble. There was no way she had survived.

After that, with nopony to help her, she had been able to do little but avoid being shredded to pieces by claws sneaking in a kick or two, which didn't seem to do much against the creature. Already her uniform had suffered very close encounters with those shadowy appendages, and she sported a few jagged cuts herself.

She was also getting tired, very tired. She knew that it was the emotional drag as much as the physical exertion... but her movements still slowed down considerably.

The shadow-chimera snapped at her and she executed a roll to avoid getting caught in its maw. The creature turned and followed her as she desperately tried to put some distance between them. But the monster was a fast flier, possibly even faster than her, despite its bigger size.

The Shadowbolt could almost feel the creature's jaws snap just behind her hoofs when a black blur slammed into its side, making it lose control as the new arrival held onto its wing tightly.

"Blast!" Misty shouted, recognizing her partner. "You're alive!"

"Misty! Grab its other wing and follow my lead!" Blast shouted back, holding as tightly as she could to the wing.

Nodding, Misty did a quick loop around the creature as it flailed around, looking for an opening. When she saw it, she immediately dove in, grabbing the other wing tight.

The monster, with its wings pinned down and deprived of any other means to keep flying, started falling, but Blast started flapping her wings and angling the chimera.

Misty caught on and followed her lead. Between the two pegasi, the acceleration increased considerably, and soon the three were hurtling towards the gallows.

“We'll have to let go at the last second!” Misty shouted over the whipping wind. “This thing is pretty strong! It might be able to pull out of the dive otherwise!” she concentrated as the ground approached. “We only have one chance!” The ground rose to meet them and when she sensed that there was almost no time left she looked at her partner. “Now, Blast! Let go!”

She gave the monster's wing a sharp twist for good measure before letting go.

It was only then that she saw the blood on her friend's uniform.

Only then did she realize that Blast had not spoken back to her at all during their descent.

Only then did she see the sickly smile as her partner mouthed a goodbye.

“Blast!” Misty's scream mixed with the panicked roar of the shadow-creature's realization of its inevitable death. “Blast!” she screamed again as she dove in a futile attempt to catch up to them.

The chimera and Blast's impact blew apart the gallows, sending pieces of wood flying everywhere, and causing what remained of the structure to collapse on itself. Misty pulled up hard as debris filled the air, hooves skidding as they met stone before she tumbled head over tail and skidded to stop. She looked up from the ground, tears in her eyes as she stared at the wreckage.

“Misty! What happened?!” Soarin's voice reached her, making her look up to see him, approaching. He was splattered with blood and she could see several nasty cuts on what was visible of his coat beneath his shredded uniform.

Behind him, flying a bit slower, was a griffon carrying the limp form of Rainbow Dash.

She looked back at the wreckage as her team-mate landed. "It's..." she sobbed as she buried her face in his shoulder. "It's Blast..." Misty whispered sadly. "She took the shadow creature with her..."

The male Shadowbolt looked at the remains of the gallows for a second before closing his eyes and nuzzling the sobbing pegasus.

Gilda landed next to them and carefully laid down Rainbow Dash next to them.

o.O.o

The last tendril of the Guardian's attached to Nightmare Flare magic fell into Moon's grasp and the Nightmare grinned. *I have them all!*

With her search over and the delicate work done, it was simple to divert a fraction of her concentration and effortlessly snap the shadow chimera's neck with a focused burst of magic.

Letting the creature fall harmlessly to the ground, she then looked around. There were no more of the creatures to be found and it seemed that even Spitfire had been taken care of.

"Perfect." her head turned towards the balcony where Twilight Sparkle was standing guard over Nightmare Flare. **"Let's draw out the last enemy."**

Nightmare Moon twisted the tendrils of energy together into a single tout strand. She shaped her magic into a long, razor-edged sword, and, with a single swipe, the Guardian's link to her and her sister was broken.

The Nightmare took a sharp breath as she felt the stolen power returning to her; it was as though an enormous weight she had been unaware of had been lifted from her back. Nightmare Moon could see her sister, with the last bits of the armor falling off stir, opening her eyes to stare at Twilight. She looked better already, and if the magic had returned to Celly as it had returned to her, she would be up and about shortly.

Nightmare Moon sighed as things quieted down. Here and there guards ran around under Fluttershy's orders helping injured ponies and finding

more dead than they would have wanted. A few ponies that had been hiding from the moment the fight had started, slowly made their way out into the open. The Moon Queen shook her head sadly at the toll their battle had exacted on the citizens of Canterlot.

The plaza was almost completely destroyed. The building that had originally held her balcony was missing its entire western wall; the fountain was completely crushed with water still shooting out at an angle; the gallows had been decimated; the floor of the plaza was splattered with blood, and seeing unmoving ponies of all kinds just lying there tore at her conscience.

Her gaze turned to the destroyed gallows, where the remaining Shadowbolts and a griffon were approached by Trixie. Looking towards the balcony, she was glad to see that Scootaloo and her friends were okay.

Over at Flare's Balcony, Celestia was struggling to get up with the aid of Pegasus-Twilight. Moon sighed again as she noticed Jade moving in to eliminate Twilight Spark. It was then that the whole plaza under her started shaking.

High above them, the Sun and the Moon broke their static watch and very slowly started drifting apart.

The few ponies that remained in the plaza began to shout in panic as the tremor worsened. *Something* was making its way from the eastern side of the city. The ground shook more violently, and she could see buildings crumbling while the road cracked and split open as *it* made its way towards them.

Everypony looked at each other nervously in the sudden silence.

The ground exploded on one side of the street, sending up a cloud of dust, followed by another explosion on the other side of the plaza. Ponies screamed in confusion as everything at street level cracked and buckled as the fast-moving shape of a huge creature rounded around the area bringing down damaged buildings and forcing the fleeing ponies to run back to the center of the destroyed plaza.

A few of the lanterns adorning the buildings broke, and soon several of the collapsed structures showed tell-tale signs of an imminent fire.

An angry roar rose out of the dust clouds as the shaking suddenly stopped. Ponies shouted and looked around wildly as the area went quiet again. The few pegasi that remained hovered hesitantly over the settling dust.

A hissing sound made everypony freeze in place as the ground rumbled with the movements of the titanic creature that slowly snaked around them. Here and there ponies could see large scales moving through the smoke and dust.

Nightmare Moon floated back as coils and coils of the serpent-like body of the Guardian slowly revealed themselves towering over the buildings around them, until the creature, unlike anything anypony had ever seen, except for Trixie, rose high above them.

The Guardian's several red eyes glowed with power as he glared at all of them. ***You dare!*** it roared in their minds as well as in a completely alien language that rumbled like thunder all around them. ***I have let you all crawl over my world for thousands of years, and now you refuse my due! I will rid this world of all of you and feast on your life energy. I will eat your souls and torture them for eternity.***

With a wave of a scale-covered arm, the dead shadow chimeras were pulled up from where they lay. Some of them were missing entire parts of their bodies, but that didn't stop the guardian as the remains started convulsing and their forms were reshaped.

Nightmare Moon gasped as the shadowy forms became clearer until she could see the familiar faces and shapes. Her heart lurched at the painful memories of having to destroy those familiar beings so long ago.

Trixie, Big Mac and Soarin' stared, Midnight's words returning to them. *"Legend has it that there were once more Princesses around... true, Luna and Celestia were the greatest, but there were more alicorns protecting Equestria with their power than we remember. Their influence is still felt through terms we still use, like the North Wind, or Spring."*

The last of the shadows faded away, leaving behind four alicorns, all shorter than the Nightmare or Princess Celestia, their coats somehow dulled and muted in color.

The newly arrived alicorns looked around in confusion until one of them settled her eyes on Nightmare Moon.

“Luna...” Winter whispered.

Chapter 20

“Princess!” Twilight Sparkle nudged her mother's cheek with her muzzle.
“Please wake up... please... please mom...”

The anger seared as it left her body and the one voice in the world -no- in the *universe* that mattered called for her once more.

Slowly her eyes opened, magenta eyes focusing on the violet eyes of her long lost daughter. The world seemed to stop. Her daughter. Twilight Sparkle... all this time she had been with her, feeling guilty of wishing Twilight was hers, that this wonderful filly could be her own flesh and blood, and not just her beloved student... slowly tears streamed out of her eyes.

All this time she could have called her 'daughter.' All this time she could have been the mother she had always felt she was and never fear to be crossing the invisible line between students and mentors when it came to affection; for it was different to treat a pony as if they were your child... and treating that pony as you would treat your real child. She would have spoiled her so much.

Twilight's eyes were also brimming with tears as she looked at her mentor and mother. “Prin-” she shook her head and said more firmly, “Mom. Welcome... welcome back.”

“Oh, Twilight...” with her forelegs, Celestia pulled the unicorn into an embrace. Then she noticed something worrying. “W-what... what happened to your horn?”

Twilight chuckled weakly. “Um... I... got resurrected and it wasn't part of my body anymore...”

Celestia's eyes were wide. “The cambro had enough energy to bring you back, but not completely... Oh, Twilight... I'm so sorry, the whole thing was unnecessary but... I didn't know back then that we could bring down the assassin's guild...”

“There's so much that we need to talk about...” Twilight agreed, smiling softly as she held her mother close. “About the assassins, about you and me...” she sighed. “There's so much I don't understand... how did the cambro work? Why could it bring me and Trixie back?”

“Trixie?” Celestia blinked. “Clearly I also need to find out about a great many things.”

“About my horn...” Twilight ventured uneasily. “I know that Twilight Spark has it.”

Celestia cringed. “I'm so sorry, Twilight... when I thought I had lost you... I- I couldn't carry on. Even if I had forgotten you were my biological daughter... I couldn't think of you as anything other than that. From the little filly unicorn that I took under my wing, to the proud...” she smiled, “pegasus that you have become...”

Twilight chuckled as she buried her face in her mother's flowing mane.

“I always thought of you as my daughter... I just wish I had known.”

“I always thought of you as a mother,” Twilight stated. “And now, it's true... and I was blessed with three parents instead of two...” She frowned. “Which reminds me... about that--”

A crash and a roar interrupted their conversation. The whole area around them started shaking as they looked around wildly.

“Twilight!” Celestia slowly stood, stumbling a bit with the shaking beneath her hooves. “What's happening?!”

Suddenly they could hear it in their minds.

You dare! A completely alien language that rumbled like thunder all around them said, and somehow they understood. ***I have let you pathetic beings all crawl over my world for thousands of years, and now you refuse my due! I will rid this world of all of you and feast on your life energy. I will eat your souls and torture them for eternity.***

"It's the Guardian!" Twilight gasped.

"The what?"

"The Guardian! Nightmare Moon explained it to me... he's the one responsible for turning alicorns into Nightmares! He somehow feeds off of them! She was hoping that, by releasing you from Nightmare Flare, he would show up!"

"Nightmare..." Celestia shook her head. The memories of her time as Nightmare Flare were fogged... still there but she had to struggle to remember. "Ugh... now I know how Luna felt..." her eyes widened. "Oh... oh no- Twilight... I... Lyra!"

Twilight closed her eyes and lowered her head.

"Twilight, I let one of my guards get killed! I-"

"Mom..."

The word broke the Princess from her guilty ramblings.

"Mom... there's nothing we can do about it right now other than finish this."

Celestia nodded, taking a deep breath. "I have been acting like a victim too much for my liking..." she said soberly. "Regardless of my feelings I must be strong... I must save Luna from the Nightmare... then, then I'll... I'll deal with what I have done."

Twilight nodded. "We should join the others."

"Yes. Let's go."

o.O.o

Most of the ponies that remained in the plaza had frozen in place. They had been helping, looking for family members, looking for friends or simply bemoaning the horror of what had transpired in Canterlot. Now, as the beast approached, they froze in fear, a few screaming out here or there,

while the more cowardly and able ponies had abandoned the rest to their fate.

The four alicorns observed their surroundings with interest. Clearly they had never seen the city before.

One of them, Winter, watched as Nightmare Moon drifted down and landed in the street a few feet in front of her, while several other ponies gathered around the black alicorn. The action seemed to snap the frozen crowds out of their stupor and soon the plaza was a cacophony of confused shouts and screams from panicked ponies trying to flee the area.

However this was nothing more than white noise now, all but lost in the background as the fighters stared at the new arrivals.

Winter narrowed her eyes as she took in Nightmare Moon's form, then at the black alicorn's cutie mark. "You... you are not Luna. Who are you?"

"Nightmare Moon." The black alicorn smirked with a slight nod, **"It has been close to two thousand years since you four were destroyed. The world has changed a great deal."**

Another alicorn, with a green mane, yellow coat and a single, white daffodil cutie-mark gasped. "Two thousand years?"

A rusty-red alicorn with a large brown leaf for a cutie-mark glanced around the semi-destroyed plaza. "It has changed indeed. Structures such as these did not exist when we ruled the four stations."

"We have missed so much," the last alicorn, cyan-blue with a thundercloud cutie-mark lamented. She looked at the others. "It was several centuries at least when I saw you last, Winter."

The white coated alicorn with the electric-blue mane and ice-crystal cutie-mark arched an eyebrow.

"Moon?" Soarin' asked after a moment, "Are those alicorns for real?"

The Nightmare sighed, **"Yes."**

“Well, the Great and Powerful Trixie is at least grateful that you have a plan,” Trixie said, her customary ileism covering up her shock. “Because trying to win this fight without one would be a bad idea.”

Nightmare Moon fell silent for an uncomfortable amount of time.

As the immediacy of her previous comment faded, Trixie coughed. “You *do* have a plan, right?”

The black alicorn's shoulders slumped. “**No. I really did not expect this to happen.**”

“N-Nightmare Moon!” a voice yelled out, all the ponies turning to look at Celestia as she slowly made her way towards them with Twilight Sparkle supporting her. The Sun Princess's majesty was severely diminished by her heavy limp and her mane being dull and still.

Behind her, Jade helped Big Mac limp toward them, while Twilight Spark levitated Applejack.

Cinnamon, Daisy Sprout, Fluttershy, Golden Cross, Paper Craft and the Cutie-Mark Crusaders also approached them from the other side, abandoning the relative safety of distance in favor of being closer to family.

Nightmare Moon shook her head dismissively. “**Now is not the time to argue, dear sister,**” she said, glancing up at the Guardian, who watched silently, all sixteen eyes shining malevolently, “**We have bigger issues to deal with.**”

Celestia's eyes were hard. “My sister-”

“**Is fine.**” Nightmare Moon interrupted as she looked at the two Twilights before settling her gaze on the purple pegasus. “**I see you haven't been able to get your horn back yet, my niece.**”

Twilight shook her head while Spark took a nervous step back.

“Celestia... you've changed.” Summer said, looking at the Princess in awe. “I'm sorry I didn't get to stay longer and-”

She was interrupted as the air around them thickened with energy. Everypony gasped, all ponies save Celestia and Nightmare Moon falling to their knees as if the weight of the world was slowly crushing them.

“What are you doing?!” Spring demanded, as she and her sisters looked in anger at the Guardian.

The voice of the Guardian echoed in their minds. ***We don't need distractions, and this respite has lasted long enough.***

“**Celestia!**” Nightmare Moon shouted, horn already aglow as energy gathered around her.

The Princess of the Sun was equally fast; as the pressure around them exploded, a shimmering dome of white light and darkness formed around the group of ponies.

Outside the protective dome, all sounds died immediately.

It took several seconds for the Princesses to decide it was safe to lower the dome. The group stared in horror at what awaited them behind the dissipating spell that had protected them.

The guards who had been helping the injured stood frozen in place, along with the ponies they had been trying to help and even the few remaining ponies trying to flee the plaza, all of them turned to stone.

The whole city had dulled, taking a grayish hue under the dome, and there was an unsettling feeling of something lurking just outside their perception.

“W-what’s happened to them?” Misty stammered out.

“Are... they just frozen? Like when a basilisk or a cockatrice stares at you?” Fluttershy asked fearfully.

“They...” Celestia choked.

Nightmare Moon growled. “**They're dead.**” She whipped around to glare at the Guardian as the behemoth hissed in mirth. “**You killed them!**”

Why, my little Nightmare, the Guardian chuckled, his words a hissing threat. ***You seem to have developed a soft spot for these useless beings.***

“Silence!” the black alicorn barked, drawing a disbelieving stare from Celestia. **“I’ll tear you to pieces!”**

“You won’t be alone!” Trixie proclaimed, standing next to the Nightmare, albeit looking more than a bit nervous. “Trixie shall lend you her magic!”

“And you have us,” Soarin’ added, as Misty and even Gilda, who had been checking up on Rainbow Dash, nodded their assent.

“And me as well,” Jade said marching forward, her eyes assessing the four alicorns and the Guardian. Her voice drew a gasp from several of the ponies, who turned to stare at the assassin as though she had grown another head.

“J-Jade!” Sweetie Belle gasped, “You talked! But-”

“Don’t forget me,” Twilight Spark interrupted, not looking at them, preferring to center her attention on the Guardian. “I have a good deal of pent-up aggression to rid myself of.”

“And you have me as well, Nightmare Moon,” Celestia finally said, walking up to stand next to the Nightmare, the sun princess’s mane already returning to gently waving glory. She stood strong and firm as she glared at the Guardian. “There *is* much to discuss between us, but there are more dire circumstances to deal with right now.”

Nightmare Moon smiled at her sister and eyed the behemoth before them.

“We’re all with you, Moon,” Jade added.

The monstrous snake-like being hissed and its eyes glowed brighter.

The four alicorns that had risen from the ashes of the Guardian’s shadow chimera howled in pain as their bodies were wracked by a malevolent energy. Slowly their legs elongated, their faces shifted becoming slightly

longer and their eyes turned reptilian as the rest of their bodies grew to a stature similar to that of Celestia and Nightmare Moon.

We will see how far you get! the Guardian hissed angrily. With a wave of one of his several arms, the ponies were blasted by an invisible force as Celestia and Nightmare Moon, struggled in the powerful telekinetic grasp of the creature's powerful magic, while the rest of the group were violently flung away from the plaza in all directions.

Go! Kill them! the snake-like monster ordered the four new Nightmares, who shot up into the air and flew in different directions.

“Let us go, reptile!” Nightmare Moon ordered.

“Guardian, stop this now or we shall put a stop to you!” Celestia’s voice joined her sister’s.

The Guardian's monstrous form rumbled with confident laughter, its silent amusement sending a chill down the alicorn’s backs.

o.O.o

Gilda glared at the dome of gray energy that covered all of Canterlot and then sighed as her eyes drifted down to the cyan pegasus beside her. She had managed to fight the force of the Guardian’s throw and had quickly caught the unconscious pegasus, flying down into the city to hide and recuperate inside one of the evacuated buildings.

They had ended up in, from what Gilda could tell, some sort of office building. Wooden desks sat buried with papers emblazoned with various company logos. She had dragged Dash into a large office on ground level with a large window that overlooked the street. The air was thick with dust, as if the building had been abandoned for several years, despite the fact that it would have been only mere hours since everypony had left.

The Guardian's magic was strange... it left her feathers tingling and her muscles tense. There was a pervading sense of wrongness in the air. It was only the sight of the pony beside her that kept Gilda from giving in to the urge to fly away.

“Really, Dash, you get me in the worst kinds of trouble,” the griffon chuckled, her claw carefully brushing aside the chromatic mane so that she could look at the pegasus' face, “I haven't seen you passed out like this since we went bar hopping after Junior Fliers. That was so cool!” she laughed quietly. Her chuckles slowly died until all was quiet again. “Why did you tell me to go away, Dash?” She sighed. “You could have asked me for help... I've learned a lot since I got kicked out of Ponyville. Don't get me wrong, I'm still too cool for your lame-o pony friends though.” She glanced down at the calmly breathing pegasus and sighed deeply.

She looked out of the window to the streets outside. Everything seemed duller, as if the life had literally been sucked out of everything, even the paint of the buildings. Trees that had been green that morning looked a muted brown, colorful banners and textiles looked like they had hung for years, bleaching in the sun.

“Haven't ever seen anything like this before...” she spotted a couple of statue ponies that had been running away from the Guardian, frozen permanently in the middle of the otherwise untouched streets of Canterlot. Gilda shook her head. “So. Completely. Messed up.”

As her eyes strayed upwards towards the distant rooftops, she froze. Fall was flying low, searching the streets carefully. Gilda carefully slid back further into the office, just in case, and watched from the shadows as the alicorn flew past.

After a few tense moments of eerie silence, she risked another look. No sign of the rusty-red alicorn. She sighed.

“You know Dash... I would really like to start over again. What we talked about earlier... it got to me in a big way. So much that I couldn't just leave you. I had to help.” She lay down next to the pegasus. “Dash... thank you for saving me and forgiving me... I was a wreck after I left Ponyville... it took me months to realize why I was acting like that, and then even longer to come to grips with it and the fact that you were now out of reach.” She smiled and chuckled a bit. “That all changed with that crazy Kung-fu pegasus bringing that letter. She still had to beat me up to make me take it but... Dash... I-”

Gilda stopped and looked down at the still unconscious pegasus.

"I..." She slowly lowered her head until she was able to nuzzle the pegasus sadly. "I wish I was cool enough to say it," she finally said, sliding down to simply lie there.

o.O.o

The air rushing around her, Trixie was trying with all her might to hold on to her beloved hat as her cape whipped about in the wind. She could see the ground rapidly approaching. She wasn't going to merely hit it.

No. First she was going to smash into the side of a building, then her broken body would tumble down to the street below... or perhaps she would hit it hard enough that her corpse would slide down, and leave a bloody smear down the building. Either way, she had to figure a way to quickly change her fate and fast.

Complicating matters was the fact that she wasn't alone, and the earth pony's screams were distracting her.

Applejack was falling along with to her, screaming her lungs out as she kicked her hooves wildly.

She couldn't blame the Earth Pony. After all, she seldom had her hooves off the ground herself. However...

"Applejack!"

"Oh, Hoorseaappleeees! Celestia dang it!"

"APPLEJACK!"

The apple farmer looked over at her, eyes wild with fear.

"We'll be fine! The Great and Powerful Trixie won't let anything happen to either of us!"

The earth pony managed to grab hold of Trixie and shook her wildly. "In case ya haven't noticed, WE'RE ABOUT TO CRASH!"

Trixie groaned and pointed towards her horn.

The orange-coated mare simply blinked at her. "Oh."

Blue energy gathered around her horn and suddenly, a dense mattress appeared on the wall of the building. Both mares crashed onto it with an "oof!" but the force of the impact decreased considerably. It was still painful and disorienting as they bounced off of it, but Trixie quickly spotted something else to use. Another flash and a stray cart in the street turned into a mattress right under them as they landed on top of it in a heap.

"A m-mattress...? Why a mattress..." Applejack groaned.

The blue unicorn simply shrugged. "They're comfy."

Slowly the pair crawled off the mattress and stared around them. The architecture of Canterlot proper was very different from that of the castle.

Celestia's home was, and had always been, designed to reflect the magic and might of the alicorn-goddess: spires, careful curves, perfect white walls... the almost random coloration of the turrets.

The city, on the other hoof, was a mixture of styles, the many decades it had taken to build it having brought with them ponies of varied architectural visions. Although none of the buildings could be mistaken for quaint, and the structures were mostly masonry, several sections of the city itself were defined by the buildings in them.

"What in tarnation..." Applejack growled as she stared up at the buildings.

Trixie looked around. The tall buildings, the ornaments and stonework, the complex designs, arches... "I see that neo-gothic is not your style."

"Neo-what-ic?" the apple farmer asked. "That why all these buildin's here look so creepy?"

Trixie merely huffed in response, taken aback by the farm pony's apparent ignorance. "Just look at the play of light and shadow, the intricate stonework, the magnificent gargoyles! Look at how the buildings seem to

reach for the heavens as if trying to grasp Celestia's sun itself! How can you possibly call such masterworks 'creepy?'"

Applejack gave the magician a deadpan look as Trixie panted from her outburst. "Ah think ya just answered yer question, sugarcube."

Trixie looked away, mumbling something rather crude under her breath.

"Well, we should git goin'..." Applejack said, stretching her legs with a slight grimace. "Ah think Ah saw somepony fallin' a few blocks from here on the way down." She pointed towards the east.

"Sure." Trixie sighed. She started walking, but stopped when she heard a pained moan and a muffled thump. She looked back and her eyes widened. "Applejack!" She ran towards the orange mare, leaning down to take a look at her. *Damn it! I can't let Macintosh's sister die!*

She noticed the deep gash on the orange mare's shoulder and grimaced. "How could Trixie have missed that?!"

"Ah... ah don't know, sugarcube." Applejack chuckled. "But, if it makes you feel any better, Ah forgot 'bout it mahself. Spark healed it a bit 'fore we all went flying."

"How could you forget about something like *that!*?" Trixie asked, horrified, looking around. "Trixie thinks that the landing probably reopened the wound."

"Whatcha lookin' 'round fer?" Applejack asked slowly, feeling suddenly tired.

"Something to bandage you with!" Trixie answered.

"Can't you magic up something?"

"It's not that simple," the showmare sighed, "I can transform small objects with my magic, but after a while they will become what they were originally. Look." She pointed to where the mattress had turned back into a cart with a puff of blue magic. "I can perhaps heal you partially with magic, but I'm afraid healing spells are hardly my speciality." Trixie's horn glowed and

blue pinpricks of magic flashed on Applejack's cut. The blood flow slowed down until the injury had completely stopped bleeding. However, unlike Spark's hornwork, the wound was still open.

"You could go root around in one of them buildings and-"

"No." Trixie shook her head as she sat down next to the apple farmer. "One of those alicorns is probably going to come for us, or the Guardian will, or something else." She shuddered at the thought. "I can't leave you alone like this and I don't think using my magic to move you around will help much while I search."

Applejack smiled and closed her eyes , swaying a bit. "Ah don' know, sugarcube. If y'all don' get a bandage..." A ripping sound made her open her eyes.

The farm mare stared as blue magic ripped two long, wide strips of fabric from the bottom of Trixie's cape, then ripped them again so that she had four long strips of the blue fabric.

Carefully, the unicorn levitated Applejack just off the ground and then started bandaging her shoulder. The farmer couldn't stop staring as the soft blue material firmly wrapped her wound until it had been bandaged completely.

"T-Trixie." She looked from her shoulder to the unicorn. "You... yer cape..."

The considerably shorter cape barely even covered her flank anymore, but the unicorn shook her head.

"It's fine."

"But..."

"Here. Let me help you up."

The orange mare kept silent as Trixie accepted some of her weight. They started walking slowly towards the east again, Applejack favoring her healthy foreleg and only using the injured one to keep balance.

"Thank you Trixie," the apple farmer said after a moment. "Ah honestly can't say ah ever thought you would do anythin' like this."

The unicorn chuckled. "The Great and Powerful Trixie you once knew would have never done this." She looked down at the street, a bit sadly. "The Great and Powerful Trixie was a bit of an idiot. But... I'm just Trixie right now... nothing Great and Powerful about me at the moment."

"Ah don't think-"

"I know how I treated you and the others," Trixie interrupted, "And you weren't the first. Or the last. After Ponyville, I kept doing it. I thought I had to, even more so than before. When I did it to you and your friends, I did it as 'part of the show.' I never stopped to think how I might have been hurting ponies doing it. After the Ursa Minor, it was to prove to anypony that I could best them in anything, and if I could, then I probably could do all I bragged about."

"Why... what made you change?" Applejack asked softly, noticing the pained look in the showmare's eyes.

"Twilight Sparkle," Trixie said. "At first," she added quickly when Applejack raised her eyebrow, "Just a little. She found me a few months after Ponyville. I was about to try and challenge her to combat, but... she brought my cape and hat, my notes and my books with her. She said she had read some of them..." She smiled softly.

"That's our Twilight, alright." Applejack chuckled.

"She seemed to be impressed with my magical technique... I couldn't stay angry at her... at least not to her face. We talked for a long time. We parted on... favorable terms... Although I still saw her as my rival." She sighed. "When I found the Guardian, I thought it could make me more powerful than ever... that I could go back to Ponyville and... I don't know, challenge Twilight to a friendly match or something."

"And how would you go about doing that?" Applejack asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Oh, I'm sure we would have found a way.” Trixie said after a moment. “I mean, there are formal challenges for titles and such. We could have devised a series of complicated tests of skill to find out which of us is the most talented and powerful only to eventually realize that we are almost equal in power.”

The apple farmer laughed. “Sugarcube, you really think you could have matched Twilight test for test and even win?”

“Of course not.” Trixie snorted. “I would have won some and lost some!”

Applejack chuckled and shook her head.

“W-well, and, that was before Trixie knew that Princess Twilight was an alicorn!” the showmare added defensively.

“Besides,” she said, her tone more somber, “the Guardian killed me.” Trixie shook her head as she thought back to it. “Funny how that monster was more helpful to me than anypony ever was. I knew the only pony that could help me was Twilight. So I got a kid to etch a small rune on my wagon and used my magic to get to Ponyville.”

She nudged Applejack, who had slowed down, and they started walking again. “Why do you say that the Guardian did you a favor?” the farmer asked after a moment of silence.

“Trixie... I was alone. I had no pony to show off to, no pony to talk to. I only had time to think as I made my way and...” she looked down, a rosy tinge on her cheeks, “that’s when I met Big Macintosh.”

“Ah was wonderin' how that happened,” Applejack said.

“Big Mac was very helpful... just by being there... he was all that Trixie was not,” the showmare continued. “He was kind. He was humble. He listened. He offered to help without expecting any recompense.”

Applejack smiled as the unicorn talked about her brother.

"I had never met anypony like him. Under other circumstances, I might have thought he was simple... but he's considerate and careful. He never rushed and..." Trixie coughed, "he's pretty nice to look at."

"Whoa there, Sally!" Applejack said, giving the unicorn a glare in mock anger. "That's mah brother yer talkin' 'bout!"

"He's amazing," Trixie replied with a smirk, which melted into a warm smile as her eyes looked at something beyond Applejack. "And I never want to be away from him. Ever." she looked away. "Thanks to him I was able to make it this far without despairing. I was able to face my family... and discover how much I had missed by being an obnoxious brat."

The apple farmer took a deep breath. She had seen how much her brother cared for Trixie... and this... this mare standing in front of her was not the unicorn whom she had honestly hated. This Trixie was... likable. Genuine. And, if Applejack was any judge of character, being completely honest.

"Ah can tell mah brother loves you, Trixie," she said eventually, "For the life of me, ah couldn't figure out why... 'Til now." She leaned a bit more against the unicorn, in a more sisterly fashion than like a wounded passenger. "Ah can't rightly say that I think things will work out or that we'll even survive this... but fer now, and as long as ya don't raise yer hoof or magic against mah kin... ah welcome you to th' Apple family."

Trixie stopped and stared at the orange mare, eyes shining hopefully, and, yet, part of her was a bit reserved, looking at the apple farmer to see if this was any sort of joke.

Applejack smiled through the scrutiny and had to hold back her own tears when the showmare choked on a laugh, her eyes becoming watery. "Thank you, Applejack."

"Call me AJ, sugarcube. All my friends do." The orange-coated mare smiled. "Now, come on. We need to find the others."

They walked in silence for a time, eyes searching for any clue as to the whereabouts of their friends. Trixie noticed that the apple farmer had a distant look in her eyes.

“Something bothering you... AJ?”

The orange mare started, then looked at the blue unicorn. “Ah...” she sighed, “Ah'm just comin' to grips with everythin' that's been happening.”

“You mean the Guardian?”

“Everythin'!” Applejack exclaimed. “The Guardian ah can deal with. It's just a Big Nasty, but we've taken down nasties before. He just a mite bigger than the usual...” The earth pony shook her head. “No, it's *everythin' else* that's botherin' me. Twilight died an' came back t' life... an' now she's Princess Celestia's daughter!” She chuckled. “Ah always did think that that mare was actin' like a filly tryin' to impress her mama every time she panicked 'bout the Princess visitin' or when she was late with a report.” She shook her head. “It's a bit much tah take... one of mah closest friends was forced away from her mother an', when they were together, neither of them *knew...*”

Trixie was silent for a moment. “I saw what happened... how much Celestia hated doing what she had to to protect Twilight,” she sighed. “I never really understood the value of family until... well, until I died. Before that it was all about myself, my dreams, how far I would get doing what I wanted. I left my parents behind after a nasty fight with my dad... I just concentrated on being ‘The Great and Powerful Trixie.’” She sighed. “I never imagined the pain my family went through after I left, or how worried they were for me...” Her eyes teared up a bit. “I never knew until they could no longer see me, or touch me, or hear me, that I had a sister, and that I was her hero.” She sighed. “It is ironic that the worst had to happen for me to be the happiest I have ever been in my life.” Her eyes sought out Applejack's. “I know that Twilight must be hurting horribly from her parents' death. And she must be confused and scared regarding what will happen to her now... but I can hope that she will get some respite with the good things that have come out of this.”

Applejack smiled sadly and nodded. “Ah hear ya.” She looked up and her eyes widened in fear. “Sugarcube, we have to hide! It's one of ‘em alicorns!”

Trixie blinked and looked around wildly. “There!” She pointed to an open doorway. “Hurry!”

Both mares galloped as quickly as they could, the earth pony wincing every time her forehoof contacted the stone of the street as pain shot through her bandaged shoulder. They dove through the doorway just as the alicorn turned their way. The pair did their best to hide under a large dinner table, barely registering that they had run into a restaurant. They didn't even dare to breathe, looking at the doorway and expecting to see a resurrected goddess step into the building, hunting after them. After a tense moment with nothing happening, they exhaled in relief.

That is, until the wall was blown apart, revealing amongst the falling debris the form of an amber red alicorn, eyes glowing with malice.

A vicious and twisted smile spread across Fall's face as she looked at the two ponies.

"You two are so dead."

o.o.o

Gilda shifted uncomfortably on the floor, keeping an eye on the still unconscious pegasus. Rainbow Dash was showing no sign of recovery and it was starting to worry the griffon.

"Just how long are you going to be out, Dash?" she asked after several minutes of waiting. "Don't quit on me now, you dork! It's the worst possible time!"

She sighed, looking out the window at the desolate streets. At least there had been no sign of the alicorn for a little while now.

She glanced down at the pegasus. "So..." she looked away. "What you told me earlier... sisters, huh?" A self-deprecating chuckle escaped her beak. "When you told me that... it was weird. I felt kinda happy, but it also..." The griffon flexed her talons idly, still not looking down at the pegasus. "I thought it was obvious... and I thought... maybe..." Gilda shook her head. "Not that it's bad, being your sister. Or rather being thought of as your sister..." she smiled. "You would have made an awesome griffon, Dash. It would have been easier for us to be sisters then. Clan sisters, at least... It's

still possible, to be blood sisters. You've certainly proved yourself a true warrior today..." She shook her head.

When she heard the explosion and felt the ground trembling slightly, Gilda jumped to her feet. She watched the windows shake as a shiver ran down her back.

"Guess the party's started," she said, looking out at the city. She could see a cloud of dust rising from the west. "It's pretty close."

A shuffling behind her made her turn around. Golden eyes met rose-colored eyes as Rainbow Dash looked up at her silently.

"Dash!" Gilda quickly made her way back to the pegasus. "You're okay!" She hugged the filly tightly. "Don't ever scare me like that again!"

"Hey, Gilda..." Rainbow Dash grinned. "I'm just glad I managed to save your hide."

The griffon snorted. "I could have handled it myself."

"Yeah, right." Dash chuckled.

"I'm... I'm just glad you're alive." Gilda said nonchalantly, her eyes betraying her worry.

"Hey, I'm okay..." the pegasus said, weakly punching Gilda's arm with her hoof. "I just can't get up. Or fly... or laugh... probably."

Gilda blinked. "How do you know you can't laugh?"

"I just have a feeling that'd really hurt... feels like somepony stuck a lamppost through my chest," the pegasus confessed.

There was a moment of silence as both stared at each other. Then both started talking at the same time.

"Gilda, I-"

"Dash-"

There was an awkward pause. The griffon motioned for the pegasus to speak first.

“You first.”

As Rainbow Dash was about to speak, another explosion shook the windows. “The hay was that?!” the pegasus squeaked.

“Damn! Forgot about that,” Gilda muttered. “Dash, when we those shadow monsters and brought down Nightmare Flare, this huge thing called the Guardian appeared and sent everyone flying in different directions. I think that's some of your friends fighting the alicorns right now!”

“Wait, they’re fighting the princesses now?”

“No! The Guardian made four alicorns!”

“He did?! He can do that?!”

“Yeah!” the griffon said. “Listen, I managed to hide us earlier, but I think they are hunting us now!”

“We gotta go help them!” Rainbow Dash yelled out as she struggled to to her hooves, legs trembling as she hobbled a step before subsequently collapsing back down to the floor. “Damn it!”

“Dash...” Gilda placed a talon on the pegasus back, keeping her from getting up again. “You rest. I'll help your friends.”

“No way! They need me!” Rainbow Dash said, struggling against the weight of Gilda’s talon.

“Dash, I will make sure they are okay, you can’t even lift my claw.” Gilda shook her head. “Please, trust me.”

The rose-colored eyes met Gilda’s golden ones and slowly gratitude settled in. “Thank you...”

"You just wait here while I go save your lame-o pony friends from certain doom," she quipped, "You ain't gonna do me any good rushing it and getting yourself hurt more."

Rainbow Dash chuckled weakly. "I'll be there in ten seconds flat. Just you wait."

"I'll be counting," the griffon replied, smiling as she made her way to the door.

"Gilda..."

"Yeah?"

Rainbow looked at the griffon in the eye. "... know that a 'sister' isn't exactly what you wanted..."

"Dash-"

"No," the pegasus interrupted. "Let me finish, Gilda. I... I was awake for a while... I heard what you said."

"Oh..." The griffon looked down at the floor.

"I feel like an idiot for not noticing..." Dash sighed. "And I regret now that we never talked about it... I... just lost somepony recently. So I dunno if I feel differently about you, knowing how you feel about me... but I'd like to maybe find out."

The griffon's eyes widened. "Do you mean..."

"I mean you'd better stay in one piece until I get there. Then we can figure all this out," Rainbow Dash said tiredly. "I can't promise anything, but... I think we have a lot to talk about."

Gilda's eyes slowly warmed as she nodded. "Fine. I'll see you soon then. Don't leave me hangin'!"

"Hey!" Dash shouted as Gilda jumped into the air. "That's my line!"

o.O.o

Scotaloo flapped her tiny wings as hard as she could. She had managed to grab onto Sweetie Belle, who had grabbed onto Apple Bloom, who had grabbed onto Daisy Sprout. She had then tried to keep them aloft, but the combined weight was far too much for her still developing wings; she could hardly manage to keep herself afloat, much less the combined weight of four fillies.

Glose by, she could see Misty struggling to right herself as she tumbled through the air. The force of the throw had slowly receded and both pegasi had been able to at least think coherently enough to attempt rescuing the others.

Below them she could see a street lined with stores and cafes. It promised to be a very painful landing..

Scotaloo suddenly found herself on Misty's back as the pegasus flew under her taking the weight of the other fillies off her, before passing under the other crusaders and Daisy Sprout, catching them all on her back. The others were still too scared to do or say anything, but Scotaloo's gaze quickly turned to Jade and Cinnamon.

Jade's horn lit up and several decorative banners, table cloths and tarps were ripped from their homes, stretching in front of her and Cinnamon, each absorbing some of the momentum as the pair hit one after the other, ripping through the fabric until both landed heavily, alive and uninjured, on the street.

"That was some quick thinking!" Misty shouted as she landed next to the recuperating unicorns before letting the fillies slide off her back to stand on their own hooves.

"Mom!" Daisy Sprout shouted, running into Cinnamon's waiting embrace.

"Jade!" Sweetie was soon to follow, tackling the assassin to the ground.

Misty blinked, while Scotaloo and Apple Bloom stood next to her. "She knows the assassin?"

“Assassin?!” Cinnamon squeaked in horror, flipping around her embrace to stand protectively in front of Daisy Sprout.

“I think we do too...” the younger pegasus frowned, looking at the white unicorn with an inquisitive stare. “I know her voice from somewhere.”

Apple Bloom nodded. “Yeah, me too!”

Jade looked at both of them, her blue eyes measuring. “I'd rather you not say anything until this is all over.”

“What’s the plan, Jade?” Misty asked after a moment.

“I don’t know,” the unicorn replied, looking around at the stores. “I can get us back to the plaza but...” she paused to look at the fillies and at the trembling Cinnamon, “I’m not sure that’s the safest place for all of you to be.”

“My husband is there...” Cinnamon said, her voice a bit shaky. “I don’t think I could stay behind.”

“And we came all the way here to find you and the others!” Scootaloo added.

“Ah can’t stay here!” Apple Bloom exclaimed nervously, “Ah need to know find out where mah sister and brother are!”

“You might not get that chance,” a voice said, drawing the groups attention to the air, where a white alicorn, covered in a frosty sheen, hovered silently, looking down at them. “If you have something to say, it might be best if you do it now, while you can.”

A collective shiver ran down the spines of all present.

Winter's eyes never wavered, her tone never turned angry. She seemed, if anything, indifferent towards them. But there was something about the intensity of her gaze that put everypony on edge.

“Come to do the Guardian’s bidding?” Jade asked, eyebrow arching.

"I am here of my own accord, I assure you," the alicorn replied. "As for the Guardian... our interests happened to coincide in this instance."

"It's not as if he couldn't erase you at a moments notice," Misty quipped from where she stood next to Cinnamon, Scootaloo, Apple Bloom and Daisy Sprout, the flier placing herself between the alicorn and the rest.

Winter leveled a look at her. "It doesn't matter as long as I am free to do what I want."

"Sweetie, go stand with Cinnamon and the others," Jade said, taking a couple of steps forward. She was soon joined by Misty, who stood at attention next to her. The assassin didn't look at the pegasus, keeping her eyes focused on the alicorn before them. "Are you in fighting condition?"

"I'm well enough," the pegasus replied eyeing the alicorn angrily. "I have a lot of frustrations to work out anyways... besides, can't just let you go it alone."

The unicorn nodded, her eyes not leaving the alicorn as she slowly landed a few feet in front of them. The tension grew as the pair faced Winter.

"There are ways to kill an alicorn," Jade whispered to Misty, who looked at her with a bit of trepidation. "But none of them are easy or even a guarantee... let's hope some of my tricks work."

"Things have changed indeed, if a pegasus and a unicorn think they can stand up to my power all alone," the alicorn noted. "If you lay down and surrender, I will quickly freeze you to death; it will be a most beautiful end."

"Oh, please, like we would simply give up! We're Wonder-" Misty coughed, looking down at the uniform then at the unicorn. "I mean, I'm a Shadowbolt and she's an assassin, we don't give up!"

Winter narrowed her eyes. "Shadowbolt? Never heard of them."

"Ever hear of the Wonderbolts?" Misty ventured.

"Were they around over two thousand years ago?" the alicorn asked.

“Uh... no, I don’t think so...” the pegasus shifted. “I- I think we started roughly five hundred years ago?”

“Well then, I wasn’t around, was I?” Winter tilted her head, ice-blue mane leaving a trail of snow behind. “Why would I know of some relatively new group of pegasi?”

“Oh, um... sorry?” Misty shifted uncomfortably.

“Don’t be.” the alicorn assured her. “I was deep in slumber inside an infinite void where there was no heat, no sound or light... it was bliss.”

“Aha.” Misty slowly turned to look at the assassin with a worried expression. “Jade,” she whispered. “She’s buckin’ crazy! She’s freaking me out!”

“I know,” the unicorn whispered back.

“I grow tired of this,” the alicorn stretched her wings and looked down at them. “If you truly are to fight me we should get it out of the way,” Winter said.

“Don’t let her cast anything too powerful,” Jade instructed in a whisper. “If she gathers power interrupt her, no matter what. Smaller spells we can dodge. We’re both fast enough.”

“Got it,” the pegasus whispered back.

The pair exploded into action, Misty taking to the air as Jade launched herself with incredible speed at the alicorn, her hidden blade springing from its sheath as she stabbed at the powerful creature's chest.

Winter did not move, but as soon as Jade was within striking distance, the unicorn felt a blast of cold smash against her. Gritting her teeth, she ignored the sudden pain in her muscles and lunged forth, until her blade clashed with an invisible shield. When frost started to immediately creep up her blade, Jade kicked back off the shield, rolling away and gasping for air, looking in horror from the sphere of almost invisible ice that encased the alicorn to the frozen blade on her hoof. It had been close.

Her eyes went to the pegasus as Misty performed a fiery stunt overhead, dragging flames behind her as she struck the shield herself. The pegasus screamed as her forehooves were suddenly encased in ice-crystals; it was only Jade's quick thinking that saved her, as she was grabbed by the unicorns magic and yanked away before the frost could reach her muscles.

Winter did not move to counter, she just looked at them. "Are you ready to surrender? You have no chance of defeating me."

Jade gritted her teeth under her mask. "Her shield is too strong for me to breach on my own..." she muttered under her breath. "Misty, I have an idea..."

Winter watched silently as the two ponies whispered to each other. Her eyes turned to the other unicorn and the four fillies with her. "Will you surrender now and depart painlessly?" she asked of the group.

"You leave them alone!" Cinnamon shouted, stepping forward to shield the fillies. "We've done nothing to you!"

The alicorn ignored her, igniting her horn as she formed a large icicle just above her floating form before flinging the icy spire at the mare. Cinnamon's eyes widened as the ice speared towards them at an incredible speed. She barely managed to shout in horror before the spear smashed into a shield spell right in front of them.

"How?" Winter blinked, feeling like she had missed something. A sudden widening of the eyes of her targets alerted her to an impending attack.

With a flash, several icy spears shot towards Jade who weaved through them, easily pulling her hoof back, the metal of the blade flashing as the unicorn stabbed forth.

Again the tip barely got to within few inches away from the alicorn before it suddenly stopped as it encountered the shield. The tip sunk into it, but both mares knew that Jade did not have the strength to push it through

That was when the Pegasus flew into them, tackling the unicorn forward. The blade broke through as the unexpected force broke the alicorn's concentration and the blade connected, although at an awkward angle, the

sharp tip tracing a bright red arc over Winter's chest as the white alicorn staggered back in surprise.

Winter's eyes flashed as her face contorted in anger. "How dare you touch a goddess?!"

With a sudden burst of power both, Jade and Misty were in the telekinetic clutch of the now enraged alicorn. With an angry shout, Winter threw Jade aside, flinging her straight at a jewelry store. The unicorn smashed through a window and into several counters inside, smashing into them painfully as the glass cut into her flank. She crashed against the far wall of the store, where another, larger counter collapsed on top of her.

The alicorn then turned towards Misty and with a flash of her horn started using her to bat objects out of the street. Trash cans, tables, windows, the pegasus was used to break anything that would break, to smash anything that could be smashed with her body. Winter laughed malevolently at the random destruction and the cries of pain from the pegasus.

Misty felt bones snap and as her jaw smashed against something and she could feel it break; darkness swam before her eyes as Winter continued to pummel her against any surface that looked solid enough, but every time she faded out, a jolt would wake her up to the pain.

"Oh, you are not escaping this particular experience, little pegasus," Winter growled, "I'm still punishing you."

As if to prove her point, she slammed the pegasus hard against a wall, holding her there and putting more and more pressure on her.

"You made a mistake, challenging me," Winter said, her eyes fixated on the former Wonderbolt. "Had you accepted your fate, you would have been resting now instead of suffering."

Shaking her head, she flung the pegasus like rag doll towards the remaining ponies, Misty's body flopping limply as it rolled to a stop at Cinnamon's feet, the unicorn mare recoiling in horror.

"And now..." the corrupted alicorn grinned, "To finish this task..." her head lowered as her eyes took in each of them. "This brings back memories..."

during the cold nights of winter, I would entice young fillies and colts to seek adventure... they would walk through the snow as I slowly made the world around them colder and colder until they would close their eyes..." Winter chuckled. "A slow and painless death that will be denied to you, but I will make sure you beautiful creatures never decay..."

o.O.o

Trixie and Applejack rounded another corner at a mad gallop, the showmare losing her balance in the sharp turn and smashing painfully into a wall before forcing herself to catch up with the injured apple farmer.

A second later the same corner exploded into pieces, courtesy of a magical blast of energy from a madly cackling red alicorn.

"Come on! Come on!" Fall shouted after them. "Why the panic? Why run? You know there's no way of saving your sorry asses other than fighting!"

"Trixie loathes the way the obnoxious alicorn speaks," the showmare muttered through clenched teeth as she followed Applejack around another building and into an alley.

"Never mind her!" the earth pony gasped as each time her hoof struck the ground, burning pinpricks of pain shooting all through her body. "Jus' focus on running!"

It was then that the wall to their right exploded out as the aforementioned alicorn burst through it just in front of them.

"Peek-a-booo! I see you!" she laughed gleefully as the two mares stumbled in surprise and fell face first to the ground. "BwhaHAHA!" Fall cheerfully shook out her mane, scattering bits of rock and debris all around her. "Fantastic! You two are my bitches now!"

"What is she talking about?" Trixie growled. "We are ponies, not dogs!"

"Or wolves!" Applejack added.

"Trixie hates wolves!" the showmare said looking truly offended, narrowing her eyes at Fall. "Are you calling The Great and Powerful Trixie a wolf?"

Fall had stopped laughing and simply stared at them, dumbfounded. "Insults must have changed a lot since I was last here..." she murmured. "Well, no matter! You're my bitches now, because I say so!"

"No. Trixie refuses to be a dog or wolf or anything canine," Trixie declared, her hoof striking the ground in anger. "And Trixie is also tired of running away from the obnoxious alicorn!"

"Oh?" Fall's grin grew. "And whatcha gonna do about it... *bitch*?"

Trixie opened her mouth to answer when a gargoyle statue twice the size of a pony crushed the alicorn.

"Wow." Applejack coughed as she slowly and painfully stood up. "Ah didn't know you had it in you, sugarcube."

"Trixie... didn't..." she looked up as a griffon swooped down from the tall building where other gargoyles decorated the rooftop.

"Ah, I do so love Gothic architecture." Gilda said as she landed next to the two ponies. "Awesome places to perch."

"You... You're Gilda!" Applejack's eyes were wide. "Ah, saw you earlier, but I couldn't believe mah eyes!"

"That's right!" the griffon smirked. "And you owe me your ass."

Applejack blinked. "No, I don't. He only works at the farm on Tuesdays, and I don't really own him..."

"I'm not talking about your bucking donkey!" Gilda smacked her face in frustration. "You know what, never mind. Let's get the hay out of here. You ponies have been too sheltered your whole lives."

The two mares nodded. "Where are we going?" Trixie asked.

"To meet with Rainbow Dash, she's-"

Her words were drowned by the floor exploding around her. With a painful shriek, she was slammed and held by invisible bonds against a wall.

Laughter filled the air as the dust settled and they could all see Fall floating over a hole in the ground. Her coat was ruffled, she had several scratches, a cut on her face and blood poured out of the corner of her mouth.

“That was a nasty surprise.” she growled. “But now it's payback time, pussy cat.” Whatever was holding her in place pushed Gilda through the wall as Fall smirked.

Gilda glared at her as she slowly stood up from the debris. “Bring it on, bitch!”

“But she ain't a-”

“Shut up!” Both Gilda and Fall shouted, glaring at Applejack before turning their attention back to each other. With a leonine roar, the griffon slammed into the alicorn, both of them crashing painfully against the wall across the street.

“Time to teach you a lesson, pussy cat!” Fall shouted, as her hoof sent Gilda tumbling back. “And before you die you will have it memorized! You. Do Not. Mess. With. Fall!”

Gilda's claws raked the alicorn's shoulder, forcing her equine opponent back a bit. “Two words, you pest: breath mints!”

“Trixie feels dirty just listening to those two,” the showmare confessed to the apple farmer as they watched the pair trade blows and insults.

They winced as Gilda was sent sprawling into the street. The red alicorn strode past them without even looking at them. “Have you memorized it yet?! You. Do Not. Mess. With. Fall!”

Gilda coughed up blood. The alicorn was hardly pulling her punches and in this fight, she knew this was a fight she couldn't win by simply punching back harder. Not that she actually could anyways.

Fall smirked as Gilda moved the fight into the air, her own wings batting down to send her up after the griffon.

“Trixie, we have to help her!” Applejack said worriedly. “She's tough, but she ain't gonna last long against an alicorn!”

“Trixie knows!” the blue unicorn retorted, then took a deep breath. “Let me think...” Her eyes moved around the streets, searching for an idea or an inspiration. Finally they settled on something laying atop an abandoned food cart. “I... might have a plan.”

Above them, Gilda was desperately in need of a plan.

Although she was one of the best fliers around, griffon or pony, she was no match for the alicorn, who could simply stop the griffon in the middle of any maneuver, be she upright or upside down, and levitate there only to grab the griffon in a telekinetic hold for some punishment. Which is what the alicorn did.

“Going somewhere?” Fall asked, grinning like a mad mare as Gilda struggled to free herself. “Have you learned your lesson yet? You. Do Not. Mess. With. Fall!”

Each word was punctuated by a hoof slamming into Gilda's forelegs, torso and shoulders, pain shooting from each cruel blow. She could feel how each of her bones were about to snap with each hit and realized that the alicorn was pulling her punches, after all.

Finally, she broke the hold, just as Fall's latest hit smashed into the back of her skull, and spiraled down, exhausted, to land in the middle of the street as the red alicorn looked upon her with a large smirk on her face.

Gilda spat blood and gingerly touched the many places in her body where the alicorn's hoofs had impacted. “Damn it all...”

“Gilda!” Applejack called, running towards her with Trixie close behind. “We have a plan!”

“About bucking time...” The griffon shook her head as her vision grayed out for just a second, but she shook it off.

Applejack looked at her worriedly. "Hold on, sugarcube, if this works you can rest all you want..." she gave Gilda an apple. "All you have to do, is force her to eat this."

The griffon shook her head dazedly and stared at the apple. "I- she must've hit my head harder than I thought... I could swear you just told me to feed her an apple."

"That's the plan..." Applejack said, a half-smile, half-wince adorning her muzzle. "Trust me. If you can do it, it'll work."

"But you have to do it soon," Trixie said. "Or-"

"Enough talking, you idiots!" Falls voice echoed in the street as suddenly in the middle of them a sphere of light materialized.

Trixie's eyes widened. "Everypony, run!"

Gilda reacted immediately, picking a pony in each arm as her wings propelled them out of the way just in time as the light exploded, pushing them all further into the air before they landed heavily on the ground .

Trixie and Gilda looked at Applejack as the earth pony shouted in pain. Her shoulder wound had finally opened again and her leg hung uselessly at her side. She struggled, but couldn't get up at all.

"Are you coming up, kitty?" Fall taunted. "Or do I have to go get you?"

Gilda clutched the apple in her claws, eyes focusing and doing her best to ignore the pounding in her head. "Are you sure this will work?" she asked Trixie.

The mare nodded.

"Good. If... if I don't make it and you do... tell Dash I'm sorry I broke my promise," Gilda said as she jumped into the air once more. "I'm coming for you, you useless bag of manure!"

The alicorn grinned. "Give me your best shot!"

Gilda's first swipe was viscous, her second less so. The alicorn didn't even bat her wings, she simply dodged out of the way each time the griffon tried to land a hit, until with a sigh, Fall took hold of Gilda's body with her magic.

"I'm getting tired of this, canary." she said with a small frown. "It was fun while you were okay enough to put up more of a fight but now..." Fall grinned as her magic broke one of Gilda's hind legs with a dull crack. The griffon howled in pain, barely able to hold on to the apple as the alicorn chuckled. "Now it's time to finish this shit so I can maim those two mares down there sufficiently before killing them. That was always the difference between Celestia and I!" she cried jovially, enjoying the pain she was causing as she snapped every bone in Gilda's tail. "She was always a defender of life! Me? I don't give a damn!"

Gilda took an instinctual swipe at Fall's eyes, actually managing to scratch her face and forcing her head to the side. The red alicorn's eyes focused angrily on the griffon.

"Bad move, bitch!"

The alicorn's horn was glowing with angry red magic. Fall slammed the semi-conscious Gilda against a wall and dragged her along it with her magic, leaving a bloody smear behind her. The crazed nightmare laughed as she used her bloodied opponent to paint a red line across the entirety the wall. Finally, she levitated the Griffon up to eye level.

"You really should learn the difference between a fight you might win and a fight you can never even hope to put up," the alicorn remarked as she floated the both of them higher up into the air. She leaned in until her muzzle was almost touching Gilda's beak. "It would have made your short life much simpler. Do you want me to repeat the lesson that you should have learned or did you memorize it already?" She forced Gilda's look at her. "Well?!"

It was then that Gilda slammed her claw into the alicorn's mouth, ramming the apple down Fall's throat and leaving the Nightmare choking to death. "Yeah, yeah, same thing you've been blabbering about." Gilda managed to growl, spitting more blood. She smiled at the alicorn. "But, you know what? I don't give a damn!" she shouted in the alicorn's face.

The alicorn struggled to get it out. *What?! An apple... what the fuh-*"

She exploded from the inside.

Gilda watched in awe as she fell alongside alicorn chunks and the gargoyle statue that used to be the apple to the streets far bellow. "Cool..."

Her eyes closed and she felt everything go dark, missing the light blue aura that wrapped around her.

o.O.o

Cinnamon gulped and stepped in front of the fillies as they huddled together fearfully, watching as Winter conjured a frigid wind to sweep all around them. The unicorn gritted her teeth as she looked from the fallen form of Misty, to the the broken window where the assassin had been thrown through. There didn't seem to be any way to escape, and rescue was unlikely.

She turned to face the alicorn, a resolute look in her face. She would do what she could to protect them.

"Girls..." she said softly, but loud enough to ensure they would hear. "When me and Winter start fighting, you have to run away, okay?"

"Mom..." Daisy Sprout looked fearfully from the alicorn to her mother.

Winter took a menacing step forward, but then stopped, startled, as a line of red appeared on her cheek, blood beginning to drip from the paper thin cut.

She snapped around, having to dodge an almost invisible projectile that had been heading for her eye. The object instead cut off a section of her mane, the clean cut lock floating to the ground.

Her eyes flashed back to look at the store into which she had thrown Jade, from where another miniature missile shot out.

This time the alicorn was ready, and the small object found a shield in its way... which didn't stop it. Winter staggered back as her leg bled. "That's impossible!"

"No, it isn't," a voice emerged from the destroyed shop, followed soon by a figure. "Shields are designed to stop many things, but there is a trick around them... Assassins have grown clever and bold over the years. I'm certain Celestia and Luna would know of this loophole... but you... you were not around to learn of it."

Apple Bloom gasped. "Is that..." She stopped, gasping as she and the others watched as hundreds of gems seemed to levitate out of the store and chain together, snapping and crisscrossing around the unicorn as she stepped out from the broken window.

The assassin's black outfit was tattered, her fur matted with blood; her knife holster had been torn cleanly from her foreleg and the left half her mask was missing, the rest dangling loosely beside her chin.

"Sis..." Sweetie whispered.

"If you think fancy gem tricks will be enough to defeat me, you'll find you're sorely mistaken," Winter warned, although her voice trembled.

"Oh," Rarity smiled, moving her green-dyed mane away from her face with a hoof, "These are not tricks... there are many ways to kill an alicorn, just not many ponies who know how. And you are a lot less experienced in fighting assassins than Celestia or Luna, not to mention weaker than either..."

Like a real whip, the gems snapped out, arching in a glittering curve of death as they cut through Winter's shield like butter, slicing into the alicorn's side. She tried to jump out of the way, but one of her hoofs was stuck in a crack on the floor. A tingling sensation on the back of her neck made her shudder as she pulled herself free.

She jumped to the side as the left gem-whip snapped the area where she had just been, cracking the floor with the force behind it.

Her wings batted down, trying to lift her up. However, Rarity's right whip lashed out, wrapping painfully around the alicorn's left wing, digging into it as the left whip smacked her on the back and withers, leaving bloody trails where they struck.

The alicorn blasted Rarity back with cold air, which sealed the ground around the fashionista in ice. The assassin would have surely frozen to death if somepony's warming spell not saved her.

"What?!" Winter was about to turn around to search for the unicorn responsible for foiling her, when one of the whips wrapped tight around her neck, digging into her coat and muscle with a sharp pull from Rarity's magic.

A blast of power sent the gems flying, only to come back together at the white unicorn's call. Winter jumped, and as she fell back, conjured a miniature blizzard which whipped around Rarity, the sleet and winds both cutting her and breaking her concentration.

Winter again had the feeling that something was not right, but she ignored it, concentrating on the deadly unicorn before her. Angrily stomping a hoof on the ground, she sent a freezing wave of water and ice towards the assassin.

Instead of retreating, as her numerous opponents in the past had, the white unicorn galloped towards the ice and jumped up at the last second, letting the icy water pass bellow her, freezing everything. Landing on the ice with more grace than the alicorn expected, the assassin slid forward towards her, both whips lashing out in complicated patterns.

"How are you able to do that?" the alicorn demanded.

Rarity smirked as one of her whips drew blood on the furious alicorn with a painful sounding snap. "We've been wrapping up winter without you for many generations! It's practically a celebration these days!"

Winter recoiled, the words stinging her pride. "You believe you can wrap up MY winter? You foal!" The alicorn jumped into the air, barely avoiding Rarity's whips as they smashed into the ground where she had been standing seconds ago. "Don't you dare make little of me!"

A cold blizzard smashed around Rarity, pushing her back. Although the assassin could feel somepony's magic trying to keep her warm, she couldn't stop shuddering as the winds pressed her back.

"I am Winter, I revel in the freezing air devoid of warmth!" the alicorn shouted in anger. "I will seep it out of your body until even the marrow in your bones is completely frozen!"

And, for the first time, Rarity truly believed it. Her concentration broke as she sought to warm herself with her magic. The gems clattered to the ice-covered floor as the assassin found her attempts to keep herself from freezing almost completely useless.

Nightmare Winter grinned manically, her calm facade completely gone. "Feel the cold sap away your will to live! Die knowing the folly it is to challenge a goddess!"

Rarity gasped, falling to her knees, her breath clearly visible as it was swept away by the freezing wind.

She could hear Sweetie and the others shouting her name in horror, but there was little she could do... her eyes felt heavy...

Winter started laughing as she saw the assassin start to give up. "Die you little upstart! I'll-"

She was interrupted as something slammed into her back, and smashed her into the ground, face first, horn scraping painfully on the concrete at the side of the street, even chipping a bit. Batting the weight off of her with her wing, she turned around, spitting out a tooth to look at her attacker.

"Impossible!" she shouted as her eyes grew wide.

Misty panted painfully, her body covered in blood and bruises, but very much still alive and standing if only barely.

"I broke each of your bones!" the alicorn struggled to get up. "How did you?!" her eyes darted to the small group of fillies and the one adult unicorn. "You!? But how?"

She felt a shiver as she saw the eyes of the ponies widen in surprise and horror, most of the group turned away in anticipation. Winter snapped her head around at that, just in time to see Rarity's hoof, enveloped in a glowing, gem-made dagger, plunge into her chest and through her heart.

Rarity stared into Winter's eyes as the shock and anger slowly faded, leaving behind sad ice-blue eyes.

"Thank you..." Winter whispered to the unicorn as polluted energy seemed to evaporate around her and her body returned to its original shape. "It- it's good to see you little ponies have come so far without us..." she coughed and looked at the assassin with hard eyes. "Bring that bastard down..."

Rarity nodded slowly. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be... my time has been done for a while... finish it." Winter closed her eyes as her horn flashed.

The assassin hesitated before closing her eyes. Her horn lit anew with magic as the gems embedded inside the alicorn tore through her in all directions. What was left of Winter's body fell to the floor before Rarity's hoofs.

Misty's breathing slowed as Cinnamon ran up to her, alight as she cast a simple healing spell.

Rarity sighed, her hoof going into a small pocket in her uniform that had somehow survived Winter's attacks. Pulling out a small purple sphere, her horn lit up with magic. The sphere glowed in time with the magic, and slowly began changing color into jade-green, while Rarity's hair shifted back her usual purple hue. As she dismissed the spell that kept her hair green, she slumped down, with a sigh.

She was suddenly mobbed by Sweetie, Scootaloo and Apple Bloom. The latter two were crying in both horror and relief.

"Sis! Are you okay?!" she heard Sweetie ask as she hugged the fillies back.

“For now, Sweetie... we’re okay,” she whispered, closing her eyes as the fillies cried into her coat and mane. Something cold landed on her nose and she opened her eyes. Small specks of white fluffy snow fell all around them as the remains of Winter slowly dispersed into the wind.

“That... that was horrible...” Scootaloo said, barely able to stop shaking.
“And... gory...”

“How did you do that?!” Sweetie asked in awe. “I didn’t think anything could break an alicorn shield!”

Rarity gave her sister and odd look. “If you infuse the gems with an air-vacuum spell, it activates on touching the shield and sucks the magic into the gem... in other words, you send it through the shield, but you are not breaking it, really.”

“Did mah sister know who you were all this time?” Apple Bloom asked.

“Not until very recently,” the unicorn chuckled as she stood and looked at Misty, who was struggling to also stand. Cinnamon and Daisy Sprout were helping the pegasus as best they could, but the injuries were still fresh and the pegasus could hardly keep her balance.

“We have to go back... the others might be fighting these monsters too... and the Princesses will be fighting the Guardian,” the fashion designer/assassin said after giving them a moment to collect themselves.

The former Wonderbolt nodded, her legs shaky, but her eyes steady. Cinnamon however, looked a bit dubious. “But what about...” she motioned towards the fillies.

Rarity cringed, but sighed. “They have to come with us... at least to the plaza... while we were in the air I managed to look around a little, everything here is surrounded by the Guardian’s magic... I doubt they could make it out even if they reached the edge.”

“But...” Cinnamon shifted uncomfortably; she was a mother, not a warrior.
“The Guardian...”

"I know," Rarity sighed. "I don't want to bring them but... can't you feel it? Whatever the Guardian did to Canterlot, it wasn't just to make it look abandoned and decrepit. There's something lurking here... it feels as if the city itself is waiting to pounce on us." She closed her eyes and took a deep breath before looking back at the worried mother. "Cinnamon, I'd rather Sweetie and the others were near us just in case."

The worried mare looked down at her daughter.

"Mom... Trixie will be there," Daisy Sprout said. "She'll protect us."

Releasing a long breath, Cinnamon nodded slowly, with a tiny smile. "Let's go find your sister."

Rarity nodded. "This way, we'll cut through Old Town."

o.O.o

Rainbow Dash slowly stood up. Her whole body ached, and she couldn't help but wonder if she had broken anything.

Taking a deep breath, the cyan pegasus slowly walked towards the door. Although she needed the rest, the urgency of her friend's need and the fact that the silence was starting to freak her out, were good enough excuses to get her going. Each step, although painful, was in itself a relief. She could still walk and as soon as she got out of the building she would feel much better. She looked back at the desks. The shadows stretched away from them, in the same position they had been before, however... she couldn't shake the feeling that they were somehow creeping up on her.

She nudged the double glass doors open with her head and sighed. The street was a bit better than the inside of the building but not by much. The shadows still made her feel leery and the air seemed thick with anticipation. For what, she could not tell, but it made her feathers fluff-nervously.

"Careful, careful..."

The voices startled her. Rainbow Dash quickly turned around, immediately recognizing Applejack's voice. The sight that greeted her was unexpected.

Trixie was pulling a cart down the street, inside it, Applejack was focused on holding something with her hooves.

“Careful, Trixie! She ain’t doing so well!”

“Trixie- I know!” the showmare replied. “I’m trying to keep it steady but it is a cobblestone street! It is bumpy by definition!” The unicorn looked up and locked eyes with Rainbow Dash. “We’ve found her!”

“Really?” Applejack looked up at Rainbow Dash. The earth pony felt a rush of joy to see her friend alive.

“Applejack!” the cyan pegasus started walking slowly towards them. “I’m glad to see you... I thought... Gilda went out to find you and-”

“She’s here, Dash...” Applejack interrupted, the thought of the griffon stealing the smile from her face.

Rainbow Dash felt her blood run cold at Applejacks suddenly somber look. Almost forgetting just how much her body hurt, she galloped to the cart, running around it until she could see inside.

“Oh, Nightmare Moon help us...” Dash whispered in horror.

“Sh- shouldn’t that be, ‘Ce-Celestia’ help us?” Gilda hacked up blood, but somehow managed to smile.

“Gilda... what the hay did you *do*?!” the pegasus asked, carefully nuzzling the griffon.

“Ouch...”

Rainbow Dash immediately stopped nuzzling her. “Sorry...”

“Dash I-” Gilda coughed again, spitting more blood. “I- I’m glad that I got to see you once again...” she trailed off, her breathing sharp for a few seconds as she seemed to stare past the pegasus. With a slow shake of her head, she focused back on Rainbow Dash. “Dashie I... would be honored if you would... if you would...”

“Anything, Gilda...” The cyan mare carefully took Applejack’s place as the earth pony and the unicorn stepped away to give the pair room.

“... Dashie...” Gilda’s talon slowly came up until she was holding the pegasus’ front hoof.

Rainbow bit back a sob. The strain was evident in her friend’s body, she could barely feel any strength in the deadly talons. She was losing her.

“Dashie...” Gilda repeated softly, her eyes warming as she looked up at the pegasus. “You’re beautiful... I- I want you to be my sister... that’s all we can be now, so close... now that I’m leaving you...”

“N-no!” the pegasus couldn’t hold back the tears this time. “I just got you back! It’s not fair!” she stopped when she noticed the griffon had closed her eyes. “Gilda! GILDA!”

Very slowly, weakly, the eyes slid open, only half focusing on Rainbow Dash. “... Geez, Dashie... you- you don’t have to be... so loud...”

“I’m sorry...” Dash slowly held the griffon tighter, but Gilda did not protest.

“Wha... was I sayin’?” Gilda asked, her head slowly leaned to the side, resting on Rainbow Dash’s chest.

“Y-you wanted m-me to be... your sister-” the pegasus managed to choke out.

“B-blood sisters.” Gilda said with a minuscule nod and a decisive smile. “I’ve plenty... of... of blood, y’see...”

Rainbow gritted her teeth as her friends’ words slurred. “I- yes... I can’t wait to see how the other one ended up...” the pegasus forced out the joke, knowing the griffon would appreciate it.

She wasn’t disappointed. “H-hah... yesh- yeah... well y’vta pick up her... pieces y’see she... exploded...”

Dash simply closed her eyes and nodded.

“Dashie...”

“Yes?”

“Do you love me?”

“Yes.”

“Be my sister then...”

“... it will be my honor.”

From a few feet away, Applejack and Trixie watched as Rainbow Dash used the Shadowbolt pin to slash her front leg and pressed it against an open wound in Gilda’s chest. The words they whispered were too quiet for them to hear, but they could see Rainbow Dash listening carefully and nodding from time to time, answering two times, always staring directly into the griffon’s eyes. Finally, she separated the open wounds and gathered her broken sister into her arms. It took them a moment to realize that only Rainbow Dash was moving at all, her body shaking violently.

They walked up to them until they stood silently behind the pair. Rainbow Dash leaned against the side of the cart, eyes closed tight, teeth clenched as her hooves held Gilda’s body against her; the griffon’s head resting back on the pegasus’ shoulder.

They didn’t say anything; they just let Rainbow Dash cry.