

New Dawn of the Old Night

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Chapter 1

Twilight Sparkle was puzzled.

It wasn't a feeling she liked. Confusion? That was a feeling that came naturally in the study of the mostly unknown. Frustration? Yeah, the hard work needed in crafting spells can all be for naught if there's but one mistake in the working. Just plain lack of knowledge? Easily rectified with the right textbook. But puzzlement? All that meant was that, even with the vast amounts of knowledge contained in Twilight's library and, to an extent, in her own brain, she still couldn't figure out exactly what it was sitting in a dusty pile on her desk.

It's just...puzzling, thought Twilight, and then scowled angrily for just repeating to herself the very feeling she was trying to get rid of.

On top of Twilight's desk, there was a pile of soot. At least, that's what she had thought at first. Rarity had burst in to the library not thirty minutes ago with a bagful of it, ranting and raving about a magical substance she had found in the caves during her latest hunt for gems. It looked like soot, it felt like soot, it smelled like soot, and Twilight had made a point to try and tell Rarity that it was probably just soot, but of course, Rarity's train of thought couldn't be broken by anything.

"It was so weird Twilight! I'd found a great vein of purple gems that would've just looked FABULOUS with this dress I'm designing for next year's Grand Galloping Gala! I was thinking some purple with gold trim, and I'd just got my shipment of trim in from that pony with the weird eyes, I don't know her name but she's been DREADFULLY helpful with my supplies getting here right on time...oh dear, I'm blathering on like an old mare aren't I? So yes, I see this BEAUTIFUL vein of purple gems and of course I just had to have them. So I ask Spike, he was with me at the time because he's a DARLING like that, to help me dig them out of the rock and, of course, Spike being the cheeky little dragon he is, he helps himself to a few of them, my gosh Twilight, he wolfed them down so quickly the poor thing almost choked! He coughed up half the gems he'd tried to swallow and sent licks of fire everywhere, and I felt one of them singe my tail! I was getting all ready to shout at the little brat, and what do I see when I turn around? The cave wall had set on fire! A tiny lick of flame had caused a fire which lit up quite a bit of the cavern, and there was no wood or torches to be seen! IT was HORRIBLE, Twilight, I singed my beautifully coiffured hair

AND tail, as well as losing a simple FLAWLESS collection of gems...”

After a minute or so more of listening to Rarity’s massive fashion crisis, Twilight eventually learned that it was this “soot” that had caused the fire - in Spike’s efforts to get to the gems, he’d broken through into a natural gap in the cave wall, filled to the brim with the dusty substance.

This was the reason Twilight was puzzled - as far as she knew, the only way for fire to make its way into a cave was by a wood torch, and yet Rarity had insisted that she hadn’t brought any wood to her gem hunt at all, instead lighting the way with her horn, and every book she had on the subject of caves and the materials in them gave no clue as to what the “soot” might be.

It must be a brand new substance altogether, that nopony has discovered up until now, she thought. And for it to be discovered by RARITY of all people. What kind of a world am I living in if people who live in a Boutique make more scientific discoveries than people who live in a library?!

Twilight sat among the ever-growing piles of books she had retrieved from the shelves, deep in thought, pondering and wondering what magical (if it were magical at all) properties the strange material had. After some time staring at the pile on her desk, she stood and trotted around what little room was available on the book covered floor, hoping for something in her brain to be jolted by the movement, hoping for some epiphany to strike her, for something she’d forgotten to be remembered and explain the inexplicable substance in front of her. But nothing came.

This is hopeless. Maybe a good night’s sleep will help me think more clearly, she thought. She quickly glanced out of the window and found, to her surprise, that it was still at least two hours before sunset. It’s still this early? It feels like I’ve been looking at this blasted pile for an age. Well then, maybe not sleep. Maybe I just need to get out of this library. Yes, a nice trot around Ponyville might get my brain moving better...ugh, that won’t work. This pile of...well, whatever it is, it’s gonna keep me from doing anything else until I figure it out.

Cursing her obsession to find the answer, Twilight sat back down at her desk. She knew what must be done, and she had known for quite a while, but she was reluctant to try. Going by Rarity’s story from the caves, this substance could be quite dangerous if it were experimented on thoughtlessly. Twilight quickly pushed the concerns from her mind, knowing that it was the only way to satisfy her curiosity.

Science only moves forward if you experiment on the unknown, she thought. So let’s start experimenting.

“Oh Spiiike!” she called, “I need you for a minute!”

* * *

The late afternoon sun was slowly descending, but it was still at least an hour before it would dip below the horizon, to signal the beginning of nighttime. The shops in Ponyville were just getting ready to close, and some ponies were already coming out of their houses to light their torches for the oncoming darkness. Tonight was to be a full moon, and, while the threat of Nightmare Moon had long since past, a lot of ponies still saw the full moon as a sign of bad luck. Shops would generally close a bit earlier as a result of this, as well as earlier torch-lighting and just a general lack of ponies wandering the streets at any time after dusk.

Rainbow Dash didn't believe in bad luck. She was relaxing on a custom-made cloud of her own creation, hoping to finally enjoy the view of the setting sun. A trait less openly known about her than most, Dash enjoyed the sight of the sunset, and enjoyed it even more if it was followed by a full moon. She wasn't going to let a bit of superstition ruin it for her. She quickly readjusted her cloud for maximum comfort, and let herself sink into the fluffy texture, as the sun continued to drop.

A booming horse's call from the ground ruined her relaxation effort: “Hey, Miss Dash! You sure you don't wanna get inside soon? You know the stories about the the full moon, dont'cha?”

Without even turning her head, she called back, “Yeah, and I also know the stories about how eating too much hay can turn you green and how Pinkie Pie lead a twenty-pony brass band, but that don't necessarily mean I believe in them.”

“Whatever you say, Miss Dash. You be careful, now.”

It was the fourth Ponyville citizen to call up to her in the last thirty minutes, and it was ruining what was an otherwise lovely sunset. *Seriously, she thought, it's been three years since Nightmare Moon attacked, and everypony is still running scared from the sight of a full moon? Princess Celestia would probably be a bit peeved if she knew that everyone was still frightened of her little sister.* She smirked to herself. *Besides, even if, for whatever reason, Nightmare Moon ends up returning, we'll just kick her skinny hind right into the dirt again! There should be no fear in this town while Rainbow Dash is in the skies!*

Dash wanted something to fight, regardless. Nearly three years and nothing particularly interesting had happened in the town. Sure, there was the odd random event that generally involved one of her friends, but they

happened far less often nowadays, and Dash knew that they were issues she could solve with no problem, even if her wings were clipped. She sighed. *Another encounter with Nightmare Moon would be a nice challenge, she thought, but not now that Nightmare Moon is just plain old Princess Luna. Another boring pegasus Princess. I could probably fly circles around her.*

Dismissing her want for a good fight, Rainbow Dash tried, for the fifth time, to get herself in a comfortable position for the coming sunset and moonrise. *She may not be a good flyer, she thought, but goshdarn it, that Luna can make a good moonrise. And I'll sit here and enjoy it if it kills me.*

* * *

The skies above Canterlot were getting ever darker, the sun almost half-swallowed by the far reaching horizon. The market was closed, and the workponies were heading home after a hard day. While the event of a full moon and the bad luck it brings was as much a superstition in Canterlot as it were in Ponyville, the ponies on the streets had a fair amount of security, what with Princess Luna being under lock and key within the chambers of the Royal Palace. Princess Celestia had let Luna continue her duties as the overseer of night-time in Equestria, but she was still keeping a close eye on her once-wayward little sister, and everypony in Canterlot knew that. Still, the stories about the full moon were still common knowledge, and the darkening streets of Canterlot were less busy than usual. Some ponies were even turning the nights of full moons into a monthly celebration of sorts, a time to spend time with families or friends indoors, rather than partying into the night on the streets like with most other city celebrations.

Even though the work day for most of Canterlot was coming to a close, Princess Luna's work was only just getting started. She moved with purpose around her chambers, getting ready for the night to come, a night which only she could make happen.

Celestia had given Luna quite a portion of the Royal Chambers in which to do her work, a space almost the same size as the throne room itself. In comparison to Celestia's bright and cheerful quarters, Luna's rooms were mostly made of darker colours, a request of Luna's which, as she told Celestia, was more befitting of the overseer of the night. A grand, dark-blue walled hall was the biggest area of Luna's space, with a personal reference library to the west and a grand pantry, stuffed full of food and drink, to the north. A massive arched window overlooked all of this,

dominating most of the southern wall, and giving an unimpeded view of the ever-darkening sky, above which was a small platform with a luxurious, black-sheeted bed, with a curling staircase leading from the platform to the open platform from which Luna could observe the night sky she was creating, and it was this staircase which Princess Luna was trotting down right now. She was trotting with a sense of purpose, although she was only doing this to fool the two guards stationed at either side of the Great Hall that she felt her work to be of the utmost importance - Luna knew, on the night of a full moon, that this was a delusional fallacy.

A night-sky with a full moon is probably the most beautiful night-sky you can get, Luna thought, and yet barely anypony will be around to witness it. All the work I put into creating a truly fantastic night-time, and everyone runs inside scared from the sight of it. She grinned to herself. Although I must say I do enjoy that I can still strike even the tiniest bit of fear into these stupid foals' hearts.

As she reached the bottom of the stairs, she gave a cursory nod to the guards in the middle of the hall, both of whom dropped to their knees in a polite curtsy at the sight of her. "Good evening, ma'am." the two Royal Stallions said in unison. "No disturbances to report, we look forward to another glorious night sky tonight!"

"Thank you, bodyguards." Luna replied, "I would like to be alone, if you don't mind. Full moon tonight, lots of work to be done."

"Yes ma'am. We'll be just outside your door if you need us, ma'am."

The stallions gave another quick curtsy, and half-trotted, half-marched out of the chamber's main door, quickly closing and locking it. While "bodyguard" was the official title of the two stallions keeping watch over Luna, she knew that they were just glorified wardens. She was either forever in their sights, or locked in some room, be it hers or any other, with their wary vigilant eyes looking straight at the doorknob. *Oh big sister,* thought Luna, *it's been three years since my last attack and you still don't trust me. I would call you paranoid but, well...you have everything to be paranoid about.* She smirked to herself, and turned to look outwards at the setting sun.

It's ironic, really, that my the first stages of my grand plan will occur tonight, on the night of a full moon. Maybe there is something to these foals' superstitions after all.

* * *

After two more attempts from Ponyville citizens to ruin her relaxation, Rainbow Dash was finally alone, and unpestered by anyone, so she could finally enjoy the sunset. Her entire body, however, was almost *too* relaxed. She was trying hard to not fall asleep in the twilight, but for a pegasus as energetic and easily disinterested as Rainbow Dash, one hour lying on a cloud doing nothing but stare at the sky was enough to make her fall asleep from boredom, not even counting the fact that her self-made cloud was feeling more like a warm bed every second.

It's okay, she thought, sleepily, the moon won't rise for another ten minutes yet, I'll just rest my eyes until then...NO, I'm not gonna fall for that old trick. I'm lying here to see a sunset and moonrise and I'm not going to sleep through it like a foal. Come on, Dash, think exciting thoughts! You know all this waiting around is gonna be worth it once that moon gets here.

For some reason Dash couldn't explain, she wanted to see this full moon more than anything else. Maybe because she wanted to show the ponies of Ponyville that there's nothing to be scared of, or maybe because her own body was now issuing a challenge by trying to fall asleep instead of watching the moon. *Hell, it's been a challenge just getting people to stop bothering me. Well, y'know what? I'm not gonna lose this fight. I'm gonna force myself to stay awake for at least ten minutes more so I can see this damn--*

"RAIINNNBOW DAAAAAAAASSSH!!!!!"

Once Dash had heard the high pitched wail of Pinkie Pie, she knew instantly that the fight was already lost. She poked her head over the edge of the cloud to respond to the Earth pony's cries, only to find that her vision became nothing but bright colours.

What the hell is that? she thought, confused. *It looks like...*

"BALLOOOOOONS! Don't you just love them Dash? They have SO MANY USES! Like, even though there's no party going on, I CAN STILL USE THESE BALLOONS AND FLY LIKE YOU PEGASI! Hey, is that why pegasi can fly? Because it rhymes? Because you know everything that rhymes is true, right Dash?"

Rainbow Dash rolled back onto her cloud and placed a hoof on her face. Clearly Pinkie Pie was bored of her home-built flying machine and was now choosing to tie a few dozen balloons to herself to help get her to the skyline. Dash knew that any hopes to enjoy the moonrise had now been squashed.

"Like pie rhymes with sky, right? And my name is Pinkie PIE and I am in the SKY right now! And you know why you have blue skin, Dash? It's because BLUE rhymes with YOU! Ohmygosh, I gotta tell Twilight about

this, THIS IS A SCIENTIFIC DISCOVERY WORTHY OF IT'S OWN BOOK! I'VE ALWAYS WANTED TO BE A WRITER --"

"Pinkie Pie, can you quiet down?" Dash said in desperation. "It's hard to get some shut-eye while you're yelling so much...I mean, watch the moon rise...I mean...hell, I'm not getting either of those things done while you're hovering around here am I?"

"Why would you want to do EITHER of those things?" Pinkie asked, with a quizzical look. "Neither of those things is as EXCITING as what I'm here to tell you now! And it's not even an invite to one of my Equestria-famous parties! IT'S BETTER THAN THAT!"

Pinkie Pie had finally floated up to eye-level with Dash with her balloon powered hovering, and Dash could see the pure excitement in her face. *Well, that could mean anything from finding 1000 bits on the floor to Fluttershy finding a new frog.*

"Fine Pinkie, I'll bite." said Dash, glancing quickly to the horizon and frowning, having missed the start of the moonrise. "What's the fuss all about?"

"WELL, Rarity was out looking for gems and found something COOL. Well, not cool actually, in fact it's HOT! Ha, get it? Wait, you don't get it because I haven't told you about it yet. BUT IT'S REALLY COOL! BUT HOT AS WELL!" A look of puzzlement crossed Pinkie's face. "Wait, now I don't get it. Well, anyway, Rarity and Spike were out gem hunting and found SOOT. Well, it wasn't soot but something NEW, that's what Twilight said anyways..."

Dash sighed and rolled her eyes, knowing that she was in for at least a five-minute wait before Pinkie got to the point.

* * *

"Are you sure about this Twilight? I mean, just a tiny pile of that stuff nearly turned me and Rarity into roast dinner! And you want me to do it again? Except with a BIGGER pile?" Spike was looking worriedly at the pile of the "soot" Twilight Sparkle had magicked from her desk to her back garden, a pile which was almost five times as big as the one he'd accidentally ignited back in the caves. "And if you ARE sure about this," Spike continued, "Are you sure you want to be doing it quite close to your mostly WOODEN house?"

"Don't worry, Spike." Twilight said. "I've got everything under control. I've got my best shield magic ready to keep the house, and you, safe. Plus I've got Pinkie Pie fetching everyone else to help out if things go wrong,

and even then, there's plenty of water in those pails behind you in case things go VERY wrong. But things won't go wrong. Or VERY wrong. I've worked it all out, don't worry."

"But did you have to choose TONIGHT?" Spike replied. "It's a full moon! It's bad luck!"

"Oh please, you haven't been scared by that old mare's superstition as well have you? A full moon doesn't instantly mean things will go wrong. In fact, it's perfect! Since everyone has hurried inside earlier than usual, there's no-one innocent ponies wandering the streets to get hurt if this goes wrong. BUT IT WON'T GO WRONG. Do you not trust me, Spike?"

"Yes..." Spike said, with a grin, "...but when it comes to undiscovered "soot" found in a dark cave that could cause a massive fire, I trust you a bit less."

Twilight giggled, and Spike couldn't help but join in. "Look," Twilight said, pointing her hoof behind Spike. "Here come the girls now, I'll tell you all the plan and maybe you'll feel a bit better. And anyway, what have you got to worry about? Since when is a dragon afraid of fire?"

Spike was about to respond, but was interrupted by Applejack and Fluttershy's arrival.

"Howdy Twilight!" Applejack said, trotting over to Twilight, with Fluttershy at her side. "Sorry we took so long, had some last minute bucking to do before the moonrise, full moon an' all, ya know how it goes. So Pinkie was tellin' me you had summat cool to show us?"

* * *

"And so Twilight was all like: "It'd be useful to have Dash here just in case, she could probably just fly past the possible fires at high speed to put them out, should we need to.". Whaddya think of my Twilight impression? I mean, I'm working on it, I know it's not great, it's NOTHING compared to my Pinkie Pie impression! All the other girls say it's UNCANNY."

There was a slight pause for the first time during Pinkie Pie's monologue, and Rainbow Dash wasn't gonna let an opportunity to make her voice heard slip by.

"So, what you're saying Pinkie, is that Twilight needs my help to stop a fire?" she asked, looking confused.

"A POSSIBLE fire. She told me to MAKE SURE you knew that a fire is probably not going to happen, but it might, and that you should be there to make sure there isn't too much fire. Am I the best messenger or WHAT?" Pinkie Pie smiled widely at Dash, waiting for her to agree.

A chance to help a friend AND save helpless ponies from a fire and be a hero? Dash pondered. *Sounds like a win/win to me.*

“Ok Pinkie, I’ll go help. This “experiment” all going on outside her house?” Dash asked.

“Righty roo!” Pinkie replied. “She’s in her back garden, Fluttershy and Applejack should be there by now too. OH THIS IS SO EXCITING! I mean, if it all goes wrong it won’t be TOO bad, because we can have a party to take our minds off the fact it went wrong! And if it all goes right, we can have a party to celebrate! ALL ROADS LEAD TO PARTY! I mean, I used all the balloons with this balloon wings thing but I CAN GET SOME MORE! And we’ll have a balloon shaped cake and...”

Pinkie Pie was too wrapped up in party based thought to notice that she was only addressing a rainbow coloured streak in the sky.

* * *

Princess Luna had finished her work for the night, in a sense. She looked at the night sky she had created, and knew it was sub-standard compared to some of the masterpieces she’d created, but she also knew it was good enough to fool any foals looking up at it. She knew there was more important things to be done tonight, and the night-sky would have to take a back seat.

“All done! Bodyguards, you can come back in now!” she called.

The tumblers and handle of the main door rattled as it unlocked and opened, and the guards walked back into the room. “Finished in record time ma’am!” said the larger of the two stallions. “And the sky looks as good as ever. You’re getting better at this every day!”

Luna faked a smile. “Oh, you flatter me, anyone can get better at anything with practice you know!” *Especially with three years of FORCED practice*, she thought, bitterly. As she saw the second guard heading to close the door, she quickly added: “Oh, bodyguard, would you mind so much as to leave the main door open? I’m working on some new constellations and it’s an awfully warm night, a draught from the corridors will cool this place right down.”

The smaller of the guards stopped, and shifted awkwardly from hoof to hoof. “Well, ah, y’see, ma’am” he stuttered, “Princess Celestia gave us strict orders to keep this door closed at night. All for your security, of course, ma’am.”

At this, Luna trotted as gracefully as she could to the guard and flashed him a wide grin. “Oh, come now, I’m sure, should any brigands or

assassins get through that door, that you big tough guards should be able to stop him, right? It's just that the constellations are very hard work, I wouldn't want to be overly flustered and not make a night-sky good enough to please Princess Celestia now, would I?" She looked the stallion right in the eye, and batted her eyelids very deliberately, knowing the guard would crumble like chalk.

"Oh well...uh, I suppose it'd be no harm. Wouldn't want to ruin that night-sky that you've put so much work into. And don't worry, no-one's getting in while we're here."

"I would never worry while I've got the most capable bodyguards in all of Equestria." replied Luna, flashing him another wide smile. "I'll be in the library for the rest of the night, and I don't want to be disturbed. Is that clear?"

"Yes ma'am!" the guards shouted in unison.

Luna gave the guards one last forced smile, and made her way towards the library door. *Ugh, what kind of foals have they got guarding me if I can do anything just by batting my eyelids?* she thought. *This'll be easier than I thought. Not that it wasn't easy already.*

Luna opened the door to the library and trotted in, leaving its door purposefully open. She headed for her main working desk, and opened one of its many drawers, revealing the item which she had been working on for her last three years of house arrest.

The casual observer would see the object as just a regular red gem, and not a particularly good gem at that. It was full of flaws and imperfections, which was kind of the point. Gems were so common in Equestria that no-one would give this one a second look, which was very befitting of its purpose. Or at least, the purpose for which Luna was planning.

While the gem was nondescript, the magical energies that Luna had been infusing it with certainly weren't. What she had created, using her own knowledge, the knowledge contained in the books around her, and three-years of trial and error, was a magic-blocking gem. A gem which, when activated with a magical pulse, would prevent all unicorns near it from casting any type of magic at all. No telekenisis, no teleporting, the horn on a unicorn's head would just become a useless appendage. It was Luna's brand new invention, something the likes of which Equestria had never seen before, and would be the lynchpin of her eventual plan to rule Equestria once again.

Luna had pondered the idea ever since Celestia had let her back into the castle, when trying to find ways to weaken the strength of her sister's

immensely powerful magic. It was a simple logical step that, in order to beat her magic, one should stop it entirely. While the original magic-blocker was actually created and fully operational since two years ago, Luna had been adding, fixing and tinkering with ever since, to make it match her specifications. Now, it had enough range to block most of Canterlot and a lot of the surrounding area, it was clever enough to distinguish Luna from every other unicorn it would block, meaning that Luna would be unaffected by the block, and it's magic was sophisticated enough to be completely untraceable, unless you are looking directly at it.

It's still not perfect, Luna thought. I would've liked the gem to also block pegasi flight, but this will have to do for now. And anyway, I'll have plenty of time to do more tinkering once I'm in charge again. She smirked to herself. *This gem, and the new spells I've been working on over the last three years, will all be integral in Celestia's downfall, not to mention it will make mincemeat of those damn fillies from Ponyville.*

It was Luna's only worry so far, that the Elements of Harmony would once again foil her plans, but she had an idea to get rid of them. Or, at the very least, make herself strong enough to resist them.

Third time's the charm, after all.

* * *

"...and so if we all just follow my instructions TO THE LETTER, everything should be fine." Twilight looked at her friends, hoping to see nods of approval, but instead got looks of confusion.

"Er...so Rarity found this 'ere dusty thing which can catch fire better than wood?" Applejack asked.

"Yes. MUCH better." replied Twilight, with a big smile on her face.

"And you're gonna get Spike to light it."

"Yes."

"And y'all gonna have Spike AND your tree house guarded by a magic unicorn shield."

"Yes."

"And in case there's a massive fire, you want us guys to be right ready with the water to sort it out."

"...yes. But that shouldn't be necessary."

Applejack paused for a moment. "...so, what it took both you AND Pinkie Pie ten minutes each to tell me, I could sum up with one sentence: If there's a fire, put it out."

"Well, YES," Twilight said, crestfallen, "but I thought you might all be interested in what could be a crowning moment for all of ponykind! It's a discovery that could affect...."

"All right, all right," interrupted Rainbow Dash, "Can we just get this show on the road? We get the jist. Fire bad."

"Well there's gonna be a BIT of fire. That's the point, I want to see how this damn stuff works. Just...if there's a LOT of fire, as in, enough to POSSIBLY burn down the town, that's when you should step in."

All Twilight received from this statement was a bunch of startled looks from her friends.

"Ok, not the WHOLE town." she revised. "Just a BIT of the town. BUT NOTHING WILL GO WRONG, dear Celestia, does nopony trust me anymore?"

For the first time since her arrival, Fluttershy spoke. "Uh...I trust you Twilight. But this does sound very dangerous. Even you said you don't know what will happen. And I wouldn't want you to set Spike on fire..."

"YES, Fluttershy, very good point! No-one wants that!" Spike interrupted.

"Look, everything will be fine. And if it isn't, I know I can count on you guys to help sort it out. Okay?"

This time, Twilight got exactly what she wanted - nods of approval from all of her friends. Well, almost all of them.

"Hey, Pinkie," said Twilight, looking around. "Where's Rarity? Did you not get her?"

Pinkie instantly looked downhearted. "I TRIED TWILIGHT," she cried, "I really did. But she said she didn't want any part of this. Said her hair and tail still had recovered from...er..."that FRIGHTFUL experience in the caves today, so I shalln't be helping make it happen a second time." " Suddenly, Pinkie's expression brightened. "Ha, my Rarity is getting better too! This is such an awesome day for impressions."

Twilight frowned, sad that she was one friend short for what could've been a really cool experience, but quickly moved on. "Ok then. Fillies, stand back. Wayyyy back. Spike, get in position. I'll get these shields up."

Spike very reluctantly shuffled his way to what now looked like quite an intimidating pile of "soot", standing on the X that Twilight had drawn on the ground. Twilight's horn was already glowing by the time he got there, with thin, wispy waves radiating around Spike, and around the entire visible side of Twilight's tree house. "Ok, it takes quite a bit of energy to keep these shields up, so let's get on with this, shall we? You girls ready?"

She saw three nods, as well as seeing Rainbow Dash starting to hover in readiness.

"Ok Spike. Fire away."

Spike inhaled, and blew a small lick of fire at the pile.

Pinkie Pie couldn't help herself. "FIRE IN THE HOLEEEEEEE!"

The pile, when touched by Spike's flame, instantly went white hot and shined a bright, dazzling light, and was followed by a bellowing boom, throwing off a shockwave of magical energy that knocked everypony off their hooves, knocking them out cold. Rainbow Dash, however, was not on her hooves, although the shockwave had pushed her quite far into the sky, high enough to touch the first layer of clouds. The explosion had been strong enough to disorientate her in the sky, with the massive sound of the "soot"'s detonation still ringing in her ears. After a few second, she recovered from the initial knockback, and realise she'd gained more altitude than she'd thought.

Okay, it exploded. Well, that was pretty cool, I suppose. It'd be even more cool if my ears weren't ringing so much! Her thoughts about her ears were quickly cast aside by the realisation that most her friends on the ground below were unmoving, and she quickly descended to the ground to see if they were ok.

"Guys?", she asked, the ringing in her ears blocking most of the sound of her voice. "You all alright? Can you hear me?" She brought a hoof to her face in realisation. *Well if I can barely hear me, they won't be able to, now will they?* She hovered over to the nearest pony to her, Applejack, and gave her a tentative poke with her hoof. "AJ?" she said, "You alright?" The only reply she received was a grunt, as well as a bit of movement, assuring her that her friend was at least, alive. Shuffling noises from behind her told her that her other friends were also okay. *Well, I knew they wouldn't be DEAD.* she thought. *It was a cool explosion and all, but I doubt it would've killed anyone unless they were stood right next to...uh-oh.*

Rainbow Dash quickly glanced around the garden, initially looking for any sign of Spike, when she noticed the small fires that had appeared in the garden, burning slowly, but steadily, towards Twilight's house. She hastily turned back to Applejack and gave her another hard poke. "AJ, get up! You need to help me put out these fires!"

Applejack seemed to stir more at the sound of the word fire. "Ugh..what, fire?" she croaked, unsteadily getting onto her hooves. "Sorry Dash, I can barely hear ya, my ears are ringing somethin' fierce. What in the hay just happened?"

"Explosion, but we'll get to that later, grab a pail from over there." she

said, pointing towards Twilight's back door, "I'll see if the other girls are okay and get them to come help." Applejack nodded, and galloped at full speed towards the pails of water. Dash turned to the other ponies, to see that Pinkie Pie and Twilight were also slowly rising to their hooves, and yelled to them the same instructions she had given Applejack. Whether they had heard her yells over the ringing in their ears, Rainbow Dash wasn't sure, but both of them had caught sight of the fires and were already running to the pails. *Okay, four ponies for four fires, we should get them put out easily enough. Whew, disaster averted, thanks to me!* She turned back to look at the ground, where one pony, Fluttershy, was still unmoving. "Hey, Fluttershy, wakey wakey! We've got a bit of a situation here!" she shouted.

Fluttershy still didn't move to the sound of Dash's calls, but the steady rise and fall of her breathing told Dash that she was just unconscious. *Well, this is Fluttershy, after all. She'll probably need a bit longer to recover than the rest of us.* She turned back to the others, seeing that the last of the fires was just being quenched by Applejack. Again, her thoughts returned to the absence of Spike, and she hovered around the (now mostly burnt) grass in Twilight's back garden, her eyes darting from left to right, searching the ground as fast as she could for the dragon.

Twilight, however, had no thoughts about such things, merely registering that pony-esque shapes were moving around the garden and assuming that all of her friends were fine. She was overjoyed that her experiment had given such explosive results. After making sure the last fire was out, she breathlessly exclaimed, "That was BRILLIANT! I mean, I didn't expect it to react with such magnitude, but that SHOCKWAVE! It was clearly magical, maybe not as strong as a unicorn's magic but still, it makes for some interesting theories. We could harness that energy to help boost a unicorn's power! It wouldn't help all that much but it would be fascinating..."

"Twi', we got a problem." Rainbow Dash tried to snap Twilight out of her train of thought, but she kept on rambling. Applejack had also realised Spike's absence, and was frantically searching.

"...not to mention that Rarity's gem hunts could be MUCH easier if we use this to blast through the walls rather than her having to dig, it's probably make her stop whining about her hooves..."

"Science is fun! But Twilight, we can't find..." This was from Pinkie Pie, who had also joined the search, but her attempts to get Twilight's attention also fell upon deaf ears.

"...of course, I should really thank Rarity for bringing this to my attention, this could really help..."

“TWILIGHT!” Applejack yelled, finally breaking Twilight’s monologue, causing her to turn her head angrily, clearly annoyed that she’d been interrupted. “Not that that ain’t MIGHTY interesting an’ all,” continued the ever more worried yellow pony. “But Fluttershy is still face-down in the daises and we can’t find hide nor scale of Spike!”

Twilight’s look of anger turn to a slight look of worry. “Oh, I’m sure he’ll be around here somewhere, he’s smaller than the rest of us, that blast will have tossed him a bit further. Spike? Spiiiike!” She trotted around the garden, her eyes darting frantically left and right. *Fluttershy will be fine, she was far enough away from the blast, thought Twilight, but Spike was inches away from it, and since I was knocked down, I can’t be certain that my shields held. Oh Celestia, if my stupid curiosity has hurt Spike...*

“Spike?! SPIIKE!!” Twilight’s movements and speech were becoming more frantic, but with four ponies searching the back garden, she knew that every square inch of grass would be covered - and Spike was not here.

* * *

Princess Luna was sat at her desk, grinning to herself. She’d perfected the spells she’d need to, at the very least, knock Princess Celestia from her throne. And tonight was the night to execute the opening stages of her plan.

Casting any of these spells is forbidden within Equestria. thought Luna. Makes sense, because these are all the good ones. If any of this research gets found, I’ll be in hot water. Her horn glowed, Luna preparing to torch all of her work. But she stopped, thinking for a second. *Hmm, now that I think about it, if these papers are found, it’ll only be a small leap of logic to figure out that I was planning something big. And the charges for experimenting with forbidden magic are a large step from the charges for high treason. No point putting a torch to all of my hard work if all roads to failure also lead to high treason.*

She instead used her magic to roll up her papers, open a drawer of her desk, and place them inside. *I’ll keep a legacy either way, she thought, with a smile, either I’ll have them placed in a museum after becoming Queen, or they’ll be used by master unicorns to hone their skills while I rot in a jail.*

She wasn’t worried about being caught, not in the long run. It’d be difficult to overthrow royalty without everypony noticing. *But that’s exactly*

the point. Everyone will see me become Queen, and they won't be able to do a damn thing about it.

She rose from her desk, taking deep breaths while slowly walking to the door. She paused for a second, the light from her horn slowly pulsing to the beat of her heart. A minute had passed before she started casting.

If anyone could see Princess Luna at this point, it would almost look like she was melting away. Her entire image shimmered and swayed, slowly becoming translucent, before becoming completely transparent altogether. If anyone could see Princess Luna at this point, then they would be lying, because she had just turned herself invisible.

Forbidden spell number one: she thought. Invisibility. No points for guessing why it's forbidden, wouldn't want to make a thief's job too easy. While the magic-blocking gem took most of her three years of magical work in this library, she had spent any remaining time working on the spell she needed to succeed in her plans. The invisibility spell was one of the hardest. While the initial cast wasn't too difficult to learn, the challenge came in with prolonging the effect of invisibility as long as possible - even a unicorn of high magical skill could only hold it for three minutes. Princess Luna had the time to practice a lot - she could now hold the effect for over an hour before tiring, as well as being able to cast a second spell, of her design, silencing any sounds she made. *You could be as unseen as a ghost's shadow, thought Luna, but the clip-clopping of hooves on these marble floors is enough to turn anypony's head.* The noise-dampening spell was forbidden spell number two, though still allowed sparingly depending on your line of work - in fact, there was a special branch of the Royal Guard trained in such magic, so as to stay stealthy and keep a low profile, for ambushes and the like.

The two spells had been combined in such a way that nopony could detect Luna in any way, although she still had to be careful of bumping into the patrolling palace guards, or knocking into any free-standing objects. Luckily, the guards in the main hall were well out of the way of the door, which they had kindly left open.

Luna knew she had to act fast. It wasn't a long walk to Princess Celestia's chambers, but she wanted plenty of wiggle room in case of unforeseen circumstances. Grabbing the magic-blocking gem in her mouth, she trotted, her magic masking her steps, out of her library door, straight through the eyelines of the two bodyguards, and straight out of her chamber door.

Like a ghost's shadow. she thought, giving one last look at the oblivious guards, cantering casually to the staircase leading to Celestia's chambers.

* * *

Half an hour later, Luna had finally reached the chamber door of her sister. The guards were out in full force tonight, effectively blocking her path to her sister. Luckily, there was a guard change, allowing her to find a point to slip past them, but she had wasted twenty minutes waiting for the opportunity, and she could feel the first pangs of tiredness from keeping her invisibility active. *Why are there so many guards tonight?* she thought, frustrated. *Is Celestia expecting me? Does she know of my plans? Or does the superstition that comes with the full moon now affect the Royal Guard too? Ugh, it doesn't matter. I'm here now, and there's no turning back.*

By chance, Celestia had also left her door open for the night. While it was indeed quite a warm night, like Luna had told her guards, it did nothing to help her growing worry. *She wouldn't just leave her door open like that. She must know my plan! She must know that I'm going to sneak in there and she's going to catch me in the act! That'd probably explain the high volume of guards, too. In case I resist.* She stopped at the door, and took a long, deep, breath, trying to convince herself that her worries were unfounded. *The door is open because it's warm tonight, and the Princess got some extra guards to wander around to make up for the lack of magical door-based powers. You've planned this out perfectly, Luna, and you've already wasted enough time playing Blind Pony's Bluff with the guards, so stop wasting more by standing here and worrying.* Pulling herself together, Luna walked into the open door of Celestia's chambers.

While Luna's chambers were built to be more like a guest house, this was Celestia's castle, hers to roam free whenever she pleased. For that reason, her own private chambers were smaller than Luna's, without the need to store a library and a pantry in close proximity. What it lacked in size, however, it made up for in grandeur and class. The walls were dark now, but during the day-time, the sun would shine straight through the giant, east facing arched window (a window not unlike Luna's) and match the colour of the sun, going from a dark red at sunrise, to glorious yellow at the sun's peak, before turning back to red at sunset, finally going to a sedate light blue during the night. Celestia herself was sleeping in a grand bed - just as grand, if not moreso, than Luna's herself - resting upon a platform in the center of the room and exactly in line with the middle of the

massive arched window. Two spiral staircases lead from this platform down to the deep red carpeted floor, but the path to her sister was not what Luna was interested in. Well, at least not tonight.

Her plan was, in fact, to stay as far away from her sister as possible, and plant the magic-blocking gem in a discreet place. It had to be well hidden, for even the tiniest glance at the gem would give away its magical powers, and Luna wanted to be sure that it would never be found. She knew she would have to work fast, she was fast approaching forty minutes of straight invisibility, and she could already feel the beads of sweat rolling down her face.

She had already “cased the joint”, as it were, during her last visit into this room. Celestia had called Luna for a private discussion, something which had happened each month ever since she had returned to the castle. Celestia had tried to assure her that it was just a friendly chat with her once-estranged sister, but Luna knew exactly what it was - it was a check-up, a monthly interrogation under the guise of a catch-up session, so that Celestia could keep an eye on her, to see if there was any danger of her slipping back into old habits. But Luna had been smart. She’d acted nice, raved on about her joys of being back in the castle, apologising again and again for her past misdeeds, even going so far as to magically remove parts of her overthrow plan from her mind with her own magic, in case Celestia was using her magic to poke around inside her mind, only to later remind herself of them from a quick glance at her notes. Despite playing the part, Luna had already spotted five or six prime positions for the gem to be placed, eventually deciding on the one nearest the entrance. She didn’t want to stay in the room any longer than was necessary. She moved quickly, yet carefully, over to the spot she had chosen.

Celestia did not have a personal library, but she did have plenty of bookcases on the borders of her room, and it was here that Luna was planning to hide the magic-blocking gem. The particular shelf she was looking at was filled with books now, but a few months ago it had been bare, after a big studying session by the Princess. During her monthly “chat” with Celestia, Luna had glanced quickly towards it, noticing that the books had concealed a sizable crack in the woodwork. Knowing that the thick wood bookcases were mostly hollow in the middle, she had figured she could hide the gem within the very bookcase itself, using the crack as an entry point.

This was the delicate part of Luna’s operation, because it required Luna to cast spells inside Celestia’s chambers. Even though Celestia was asleep, and some distance away, a unicorn’s ability to sense the casting of

spells was an unconscious reaction, and if she wasn't careful she could very easily wake the sleeping Princess. Not only did she have to use magic to open the crack wide enough to fit the gem, she needed to cast her third forbidden spell of the night - soul link.

Despite the fact that soul links had only been theorized by the top magical professors within the walls of the fabled Canterlot University, Princess Celestia had been quick to ban its use, should it ever be able to be used. The basic idea was that any unicorn could link with any object of magical power using their own spell, and in doing so, would be able to apply any spells they knew to the linked object from any range or distance, as well as destroying the object in the result of the original caster's death. Since the magic-blocking gem required a magical pulse to activate, it was the only way for Luna to use the gem discreetly, which would be necessary for the time she was planning to use it. And since the slightest disturbance of a soul linked item could cause the link to break, Luna had to do the link in Celestia's room, to avoid the link becoming broken on her trip to the chambers.

Luna's wasn't too worried about the magic required to widen the crack in the bookcase, but a soul link required far more effort, especially to link to an item of such power, and ESPECIALLY especially while maintaining invisibility. Luna had learned all the tricks she could for masking her powers, but there was no way for any cast of a spell to be completely undetectable. *Still, thought Luna, either this works, or I get caught and put to death for high treason. But even death is better than the fake jail I'm being held in now. Can't keep this invisibility up for too much longer, I'd better hurry this up.*

Using her hooves instead of her magic, Luna carefully moved three of the books from the bookcase onto the floor, revealing the crack in the bookcase. Using as little magic power as she could, she slowly widened the gap in the bookcase, being careful not to overdo it and break the entire bookcase. Eventually, she realised that the bookcase was not a hollow as she thought - the only way she was going to hide this gem here was to simply wedge it into the crack, meaning that the only thing keeping the gem from being seen would be the books covering it.

Luna scowled. She didn't like the fact that, if Celestia happened to pick up this particular book, she would see her gem as clear as day, and instantly learn its secrets. She didn't like leaving it to chance, but with her time invisible running short, and with the soul link still to do, it was the only choice she had. She worked the gem into the gap, again, with her hooves rather than magic, and readied herself for the soul link.

Moment of truth, thought Luna, nervously. She looked hard at the gem, and visualized the link between her and the gem. As she did, her horn began to glow, a different glow to the one of a normal spell, a more sedate low glow than the shining light of a regular spell. As she did it, she felt her invisible shroud start to wane, but knew she was too far into the link to stop now. She kept her eyes fixed on the gem, still visualizing the bonds between her and it, as they became a few threads before becoming as thick as a tree trunk. The glow of her horn stopped, and she closed her eyes - the link had been made.

She made a quick glance behind her to where Celestia slept, and she slept on, unstirring. There was no time for celebration, however. Luna knew that there was only minutes until her energy would be spent, and her invisibility would wear off. She quickly moved the books back from the floor to the bookshelf, and cantered back to the door of Celestia's chamber. Seeing the guards a few yards in front of her door, she knew that she didn't have time to be careful now - she needed to get back to her room as quickly as she could, and she didn't care what guards she had to brush past.

She quickly dashed and darted between the four guards in the hallway, hoping to not cause too much a breeze with her movements, but none of the guards seems to notice it. Halfway back to her chambers, she felt her spell flicker away - she was now completely visible. *BLAST! Any of these guards could see me plain as day! I can't get caught now...don't panic Luna, you're clear of the guards near Celestia's room. All you need to do is catch your breath before sneaking back into your chamber.*

She stopped five feet from her door, giving herself a moment to regain her composure. After a few deep breaths whilst leaning against the wall, she recast a far weaker version of her invisibility spell, and slipped back through her open door, past her still oblivious guards, and dashed back into her library, practically collapsing next to her desk.

She was sweaty, tired, and panting heavily, but she didn't care. Tonight's plan had worked, paving the way for tomorrow. Unless Celestia found the gem in the bookcase, there was no way she could stop her, and the chances of her wanting to read that exact book in the three hours she would be alone would be quite slim.

Luna lay in her library, panting like a common workhorse, but soon the panting turned into small giggles. *The hard part is over. I cut it pretty close, but I got away with it. Everything is in place.* Her giggles were replaced by an evil smirk. *Sleep tight, Cel'. You'll need your rest for tomorrow. It's going to be a big day for both of us.*

Chapter 2

While the sounds of the explosion from Twilight Sparkle's experiment were still ringing in the young ponies' ears as they searched for the missing Spike, most of the ponies in Ponyville hadn't heard it. As the rest of the ponies were up to their ears in parties, festivities and good cheer, due to the full moon somewhat forcing them into their homes, most of them had no knowledge of the accident that had occurred, with those hearing the dulled sound of the blast over the music and chatter of the night simply shrugging it off as just the over-zealous slamming of a door, or the sound of a particularly loud party popper. Rarity, on the other hand, had neither music nor chatter to cover the sound, having chosen to get an early night's sleep in preparation for an early trip back to the gem caves the next morning, to make up the losses from her fiery encounter earlier that day. The sound of the blast had, naturally, woken her up from her brief sleep, and, naturally, she was not happy about it.

First that dust nearly burns my perfectly coiffured mane and loses me half my gems, she thought, tiredly rummaging through her spacious closet, and now it rudely interrupts my beauty sleep? All that's come of that confounded dust is me losing my gems and my fabulousness! She fished her dressing gown out of the closet and quickly wrapped it around herself, trotting slowly to her bedroom door as she did so. I'm going to go and give these ponies a piece of my mind. Maybe they don't care about ruining their good looks with things like fire and explosions, but dear Celestia, SOMEBODY has to, and I suppose it's going to have to be me.

She made her way down her stairs, annoyed that her early morning gem hunt was probably now out of the question, but her annoyance was pushed from her mind when she heard the shouts of her friends through her still open sitting room window. Twilight's library was not too far from Rarity's boutique, and while she couldn't hear exactly what was being yelled, she could recognize the frenzied shouting of Rainbow Dash anywhere. *If something's made Dash lose her cool, she thought, worriedly, then something must have gone very badly wrong. Did someone get hurt?* Anxious about the safety of her friends, she cantered out of her front door and onto Market Street, feeling the cool night air on her face. Wasting no time, she galloped at full speed towards the sound of Rainbow Dash.

* * *

“SPIIIIKE! Where are you? If you’re just trying to play a prank on us by hiding where we can’t see you, then here’s some news: IT’S NOT FUNNY.” Rainbow Dash was hovering around, still frantically searching the grass of Twilight’s back garden, despite the fact that nearly fifteen minutes of searching by the ponies had brought up neither scale nor tail of the baby dragon.

“Dash is right, Spike!” chimed in Pinkie Pie, her round eyes re-scanning every square inch of backyard for Spike. “I mean, I appreciate a good prank more than anyone, but even I know there’s a limit, and that limit is usually when, y’know, everyone thinks you’re dead! I mean, I’ve only hit that limit once throughout my entire history of pulling pranks on everypony, and everypony was so super-duper mad once they found out it was a prank! Not that we’ll be mad at you or anything...okay, we may be a teeny-weeny bit mad, but you should come out anyway!” She paused, thinking for a second. “Okay, someone else should try this whole convincing Spike to come out thing because I’m pretty awful at it.”

“It’s not that your bad at it, sugarcube.” said Applejack, also quickly re-searching the ground with her eyes, despite having given up trying to find Spike in the back garden. “It’s jus’ that there ain’t no place for that gosh-darned dragon to come out from! We’ve been lookin’ round this garden for near fifteen minutes, and haven’t found a buckin’ thing.” she sighed, looking over to Twilight Sparkle, who was still searching for her number one assistant at the far end of the garden, a look of supreme worry on her face. “I dunno where he’s gone, but one things fer sure, he ain’t here.”

Rainbow Dash landed in front of Applejack and nodded. “You’re right, AJ. We need a new plan. Although it’ll take a more convincing pony than me to get Twi’ to stop this search.”

Applejack sighed again, her eyes still fixed on the worried unicorn. “I’ll go talk to her. You go check on Fluttershy, the poor girl ain’t moved since that blast.” She turned and headed towards Twilight, trying to figure out a kind way to convince her to give up the search. *Gonna be a hard sell*, she thought, *but all this pointless scurryin’ around ain’t gonna help no-one.*

As Applejack walked towards the restless unicorn, Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie turned to the still unconscious body of Fluttershy. Dash

could once again see the slow movement of her breathing, in addition to the slight fluttering of her eyelids. "I think she's waking up," said Dash. "She's tougher than she looks...but that still isn't all that tough."

"Should we splash some of the water on her?" Pinkie Pie asked, motioning her head to the mostly empty pails near Twilight's back door. "Always helps me wake up after a night of partying!"

Dash shook her head. "Nah, we'd best let her come to on her own. Should be any minute now." She turned back to Applejack, who was already talking to Twilight. "I'm more worried about Twilight, to be honest. She's been friends with Spike for years more than us, if it turns out that her experiment has hurt Spike, she'd probably be as guilty as hell."

Pinkie Pie took another quick glance around the garden. "Where could he have gone? The big boom was enough to knock us all onto our hinds, but Spike was so much closer! For all we know, he could've shot up into the sky like a rocket!"

"I don't know what happened, Pinkie." Dash replied. "What I do know is that Twilight is the smartest out of all of us, and if she's spending time searching where Spike *isn't*, she's not spending time think about where Spike *is*." She sighed, turning her attention back to Fluttershy. "I'm sure AJ will talk her down. She's the Element of Honesty, after all."

On the other side of the garden, Applejack had finally got Twilight to stop searching fruitlessly around the garden, but she still couldn't get her to calm down. "He's not here." she said, tears forming in her eyes. "He's not HERE. Where has he gone, AJ? That blast was strong enough to knock us all down but he was so much closer! And he's so much lighter than us! Who knows where that blast took him? He could've been shot into the middle of the Everfree Forest for all we know! We need to find him, he could be hurt, or...oh Applejack, I can't bear the thought of it! And it's all my fault!" Twilight collapsed to her knees, her slow sobbing overtaking her worried speech.

"There there, sugarcube," Applejack said, trying to reassure the purple unicorn. "I'm sure he'll be fine, that little'un has been through worse."

"How do...you know...AJ?" Twilight said, between sobs. "You can't know...that he's okay."

Applejack sighed, and placed her hooves on Twilight's shoulders, looking her directly in the eyes. "Look at me, Twilight. Truth of the matter is, I don't know. But we ain't never gonna know unless we figure out a new plan for findin' him. An' we need you fer that. We put our heads together, and I'm sure we can figure out where that blast took him. What I do know is that sittin' around here or searchin' the same spot'a'grass ten times ain't

gonna help anyone, 'specially not Spike." She paused, hoping her tough love approach had not been too hard on Twilight, but her words had had an effect - Twilight was already getting to her feet, and her sobbing had stopped.

"You're right, AJ." she said, wiping the tears from her eyes. "I'm about as useful as a quill without ink if I sit here crying. Can't argue with the Element of Honesty now, can I?"

Applejack could see a slight smile forming on Twilight's face, and was relieved to see that her friend had pulled herself together. "Ha, that's more like it, Twi'. Keep ya spirits up, we'll find him soon enough. C'mon, let's go see if Fluttershy is awake yet, we're gonna need all the help we can get."

Twilight nodded, and followed her friend to the other side of the garden.

* * *

Rarity had planned to gallop as fast as her hooves could carry her, but this was before she had realised that a dressing gown wasn't the most gallop-friendly item of clothing. She had slowed to a canter when she reached Twilight's garden, but once she saw Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash standing over Fluttershy's lifeless body, she sped up to a gallop once more.

"Dash! Pinkie! What happened?" she said, speeding towards them, panicked and out of breath. "I heard the most awful sound, and then I heard you all yelling at the top of your lungs! Is Fluttershy okay? That blasted dust didn't hurt her did it?"

Rainbow Dash shook her head. "She's fine." she replied. "Well...she's alive, at least. She's a lot better than she was twenty minutes ago, anyways, we think she's gonna wake up in a minute. But that's just the start of our problems." She paused, a somber look on her face. "We can't find Spike. After the explosion he just...vanished. We've been searching the garden since it happened but he isn't here. Our best guess is that the blast shot him quite a distance, but we have no idea where."

A look of horror appeared on Rarity's face. "Spike's GONE?", she said, shocked. "Well, who's going to help me in my gem hunts?"

Dash stared at Rarity, a look of disbelief on her face. "Well, of course, that's why we're all so worried." she said, sarcastically, "Clearly this is a disaster for you."

“Wow, Dash, I never knew you cared about me so much!” Rarity replied, oblivious to Dash’s tone. “Come on, let’s get searching, he can’t have gone far.” Rainbow Dash placed her hoof on her face. *Mental note*, she thought, despairingly, *Rarity is not one for sarcasm*.

“Don’t bother,” said a voice from behind them. They turned to see that Twilight and Applejack had rejoined the group, both with determined looks. “We’ve searched every blade of grass in this garden,” Twilight continued, “and Spike’s not here. So we need to start figuring out where else he could’ve gone.” She looked towards Fluttershy. “Fluttershy’s okay, right?”

“She’s waking up, Dash thought it best to just let her recover on her own.” Pinkie Pie said. “You wanna hear our theory? We think the blast rocketed him up into the sky. Which is great, because I’ve been looking for a faster way to get into the sky, balloons are so slow!”

“You’re really thinking about using this after what happened?” said Rarity, shooting a stern gaze at Pinkie Pie. “I think we’d rather avoid another one of our friends rocketing off into the sky, you know.”

“Well obviously it’ll be better when Twilight experiments with this stuff some more.” Pinkie replied, “Then I’ll get just enough of a boost without being shot into the moon!”

“Be reasonable, Pinkie Pie, Twilight’s never going to go near this dreadful stuff again after tonight, isn’t that right Twilight?” Rarity said, looking at Twilight for support.

Twilight avoided her gaze. “Well, I’m not going to be doing anything at all until we’ve found Spike.” she told no-one in particular. “Pinkie Pie, that’s not a bad theory. But if the blast had shot him straight up, he would’ve come straight back down.” She shuddered at the thought of Spike taking such a long drop back into her garden, but quickly pushed the thought away. “And anyway, that would only have happened if he had been above the explosion. He was at the side of it, so if we figure out where he was before the blast, we’ll at least get an idea of what direction he went in.” She paused, as another thought popped into her mind. “Of course, the dust does have some magical power, so maybe that did something. Teleported him or made him invisible or something like that.” Applejack looked at Twilight and smiled, seeing she was back in thinking mode. “So if we go back to where we placed the dust...”

“BOOMDUST!” yelled Pinkie Pie, stopping Twilight’s theories in their tracks. “It needs a proper name after all. It made a big boom, and it’s pretty dusty, so it’s a totally cool name.”

“Okayyy....” said Twilight, shaking her head. “So, if we go back to where we placed the...Boomdust, and see out where Spike was standing,

we can at least get half an idea for where to start looking. Let's go have a look..."

"Oh, Twilight, your window is broken."

The ponies turned their heads to the ground at the sound of Fluttershy's voice. Her eyes were open, and she was very unsteadily getting back onto her feet, a task which was made more difficult after Pinkie Pie leapt on her in a loving embrace. "'Shy! You're awake! Girl, you missed some really cool stuff! There was fire and an explosion and a big boom and..."

"Pinkie Pie, give the poor girl some air," commanded Applejack, grabbing Pinkie's tail with her teeth and pulling her off the yellow pegasus. "Fluttershy darlin', you okay? The blast knocked us all on our hinds but you've been out of it a hayuva lot longer. And don't you worry about the window, we've got a mighty bigger set of problems here."

"Oh, uh, sorry Applejack, it was the first thing I saw after I opened my eyes. What happened? How long have I been out?" said Fluttershy, in a quieter voice than usual.

"Twenty minutes or so," replied Rainbow Dash, who had started hovering impatiently, waiting for the end of Twilight's interrupted plan. "Don't rush yourself getting up, 'Shy. We're still hearing the end of Twilight's plan for finding Spike."

"What? Spike's gone?" Fluttershy said, horrified, suddenly jumping to her hooves. "We need to find him! He could be lost or hurt or..."

"Don't worry," Dash responded, "Twilight's got a plan. Or at least half a plan. Isn't that right Twi'?" She looked over at Twilight. "I said, isn't that right Twi'?" she said, more forcefully.

Twilight Sparkle was not listening to Rainbow Dash, because she was busy looking at the broken window that Fluttershy had pointed out. There were four windows that faced the back garden on Twilight's treehouse, and the broken one was second from the top. Twilight knew it didn't look right. *If the blast had smashed one of the windows, it would've smashed them all, or at the very least the ones below it. So why is only the one window broken? Even then, if it had broken the windows it would've cleared all the glass out entirely, not just leave a hole...wait a second.*

She looked back at the spot where the Boomdust was, and tried to remember where Spike was standing. *He was standing between the pile and the house, which means the blast would've thrown him towards the house.* Her eyes widened as she realised what had happened.

"The window!" she yelled, galloping to her back door before any of her friends could respond. Bewildered, Applejack rushed after her friend,

the other ponies following close behind. Twilight burst into her house, taking the stairs up to the second floor of her library three at a time. She reached the top, noticing the broken window again, getting a chance to look at it a bit closer. *A hole in the window, like something had been thrown through it...* she thought. *And if I didn't know any better, I'd say it was a the rough shape of a baby dragon.* She turned to bookcase that faced the window, to see it in disarray. A pile of books had formed after having fallen from the shelves, and Twilight knew that it certainly wasn't like that before. She rushed over to the pile, and began magicking the books away as fast as she could, until, halfway through the pile, she heard a familiar noise.

She looked into the half-cleared pile to see Spike, nestled within the pile. The sound that she had heard was the sound of her number one assistant snoring, as he slept soundly in a makeshift bed of books. She sighed in relief with the knowledge that her number one assistant was alive and well, as well as feeling impressed that he made it through the ordeal with barely a scratch on him. *A baby dragon is still a dragon,* she thought, *and dragon scales are pretty damn tough.*

She heard the clip-clop of her friends making her way up the stairs, and turned her head to see that Applejack had got there first. "Twilight," she said, "What're you doin'? I thought you were planning..."

"Shhhh!" Twilight shushed her friends as the came up the stairs, and motioned towards the pile of books. "I found him." she whispered, "he's fine. The blast shot him through the window, he ended up here. He's sound asleep."

"He's asleep?!" said Dash, receiving another shush from Twilight. Lowering her voice, she whispered, "The blast knocks most of us out for a bit, but Spike gets catapulted through a window into a bookcase and falls asleep? That's crazy."

"I dunno, Dash." Applejack replied, also keeping her voice down. "Sounds just like our Spike to me." Everypony looked at Spike sleeping in the books, and all breathed a sigh of relief. Spike slept on, not knowing of the all worry and woe the ponies had suffered in the last half hour.

* * *

"Well, at the very least, that was certainly an interesting night." Twilight Sparkle said to her friends. Half an hour had passed since they had found Spike. Now, instead of sleeping in a pile of books, Twilight had carefully used her magic to carry him to his cot, leaving his sleep

undisturbed, and the ponies had gone to Twilight's sitting room to talk about the day's events.

"Interesting, certainly." replied Rarity, a look of disapproval on her face. "Fun, almost certainly not. Still, at least we can say fare-de-well to all of the Boomdust nonsense."

Twilight gave Rarity a disbelieving look. "Are you kidding?" she said. "There's still so much we don't know about it! It's full of magical energies, I could probably get a better handle on what's going on if I use a lower quantity next time..."

"Next time?!" Rarity said, bewildered. "You honestly want there to be a next time with this infernal material? Surely not, Twilight. I'm not stepping foot in that death trap of a cave ever again!"

"Uh, fer the record, I'm with Rarity on this one, Twi'." Applejack interjected. "I mean, this is probably a bit too dangerous for us to be messin' with." She grinned. "Although, I imagine we'd've all been a bit less shocked if you hadn't said "Nothing will go wrong" about a million gosh-darned times."

Twilight laughed, and replied, "Well, if you think about it, nothing did go wrong! I was expecting the fires - you guys did excellent work in that regard, by the way - and no-one was badly hurt. And I understand if you don't want to go back to the cave, Rarity, but if you just tell me where you found it..."

"I will do no such thing!" Rarity said, indignant. "I'm not having you experimenting on such dangerous things, especially when it could backfire just like it did tonight! I think it'd be safer for all of us if we just don't waste time thinking about this...Boomdust stuff again."

"That's not how science works, Rarity!" Twilight responded, her voice going a bit louder. "You have to take risks, you have to experiment on the unknown! The Boomdust is far too interesting to pass up, its uses could be limitless!"

"All that Boomdust has done for us so far has caused a lot of damage to your backyard and could've killed that poor Spike!" Rarity argued back. "That doesn't sound like limitless uses to me!"

"Hey, I know you guys are arguing, and you should stop, but I'm LOVING the fact that the name Boomdust has caught on." chimed in Pinkie Pie, with a wide smile on her face.

"Pinkie's right, guys." Fluttershy said, quietly. "You should stop arguing. It's late, we're all tired, this isn't really the time to be having this conversation." She paused. "I mean, well, that's what I think." she said,

sheepishly, "But if you want to keep arguing I...suppose that's fine. But I'm heading home."

"I'm with you, 'Shy. I'm beat." said Applejack, yawning loudly. "There's lots of apple-buckin' to be done in the morning, and I gotta' get my rest.

Twilight got to her feet, also with a yawn. "They're right, Rarity. We'll continue this in the morning, we're all a bit cranky. It's been a long night."

Rarity shot Twilight a glare. "If it weren't for you and your experiments, I would've been all tucked up and asleep in bed for at least the last two hours." She sighed. "But yeah, I suppose you're right. I'll see you tomorrow, Twilight, but don't expect me to agree with you then just because I've got a good night's sleep."

"Oh, don't worry about me, Rarity." said Twilight, with a smile. "I like a challenge."

Rarity laughed, and bode her friends goodnight. Five minutes later, the rest of her friends had followed suit, leaving Twilight alone in her sitting room, still thinking about the events of the night. *Even if Rarity doesn't show me the caves, she thought, I can still let Princess Celestia know what we've found. Maybe she'll get some of the professors from Canterlot University to investigate it.* She yawned again. *But I suppose that can wait until tomorrow. My bed sounds a lot more inviting right now.* Exhausted, she climbed the two flights of stairs to her bedroom, and collapsed onto her bed, instantly falling asleep the moment her head hit the pillow.

* * *

The sun had risen on a new day in Equestria, and the streets of Canterlot were already filling with ponies, the hustle and bustle of a new working day slowly growing. The ponies on the streets were moving slightly quicker than usual - most were busy in their Full Moon parties the night before, but the full moon was, by no stretch of the imagination, an official pony holiday, so work would start as normal. Of course, ponies being ponies, most expected shops to have slightly later opening times and for the day to be a bit more sedate than usual.

Like the average workpony of the morning, Princess Luna had a slower start to her day. While she did not spend the previous night partying, her infiltration into Celestia's chambers was an exceptionally tiring ordeal. The guards had not noticed her early retirement to her bed, but her late

awakening had certainly caught their attention. Luna heard the guards call before she'd even descended three stairs from her sleeping platform.

"Good morning, ma'am!" said the larger of the two guards, with a clearly forced look of concern on his face. "You know it's ten-thirty already? It's not like you to sleep in, ma'am, is everything okay? Are you feeling unwell?"

They fail to notice the opening stages of a royal coup, Luna thought, but I sleep for thirty minutes longer than usual and they're on it like wild dogs.

"Oh, I'm feeling quite fine, bodyguard. Quite wonderful, in fact! Nothing like a nice sunrise to get you ready for the day, and my sister has become quite adept at making that happen." She flashed a smile at the guards, before turning to her pantry, grimacing as she trotted to her already cooked breakfast. *Three years of singing praises of my sister to everyone. Forget being trapped in the moon for a thousand years, this is worse torture.* Her grimace turned into a grin. *Still, this'll be the last day of that, if all goes to plan.*

She knew exactly what she was expecting to find in her pantry - the royal cooks had Wednesday mornings off, so a simple daffodil and daisy sandwich was today's breakfast. Of course, this being the Royal Palace, the flowers in the sandwich were of the highest quality, all grown and picked in the palace's grand gardens, and the bread freshly delivered to the castle every morning from Sour-dough's bakery, widely considered the best bakery in Equestria. The quality of the food, however, was not what was on Luna's mind. If last night's events were the true test of her magical ability, then today would be a test of her persuasive talents.

Despite her library being very expansive, there was no book on her shelves that went into great detail about the Elements of Harmony, and it was the Elements that caused Luna the most worry. She'd been defeated by them twice before, and yet she still had no idea how she would defend herself from them, should their power be harnessed again. She'd only had one idea as to how to gain more information, and that was to ask the one person who could possibly know anything of great detail about them - Princess Celestia herself.

She sat at her dinner table, and took a bite from her sandwich, thinking carefully. She knew that even asking Celestia about the Elements was a risky move, almost certainly causing suspicion from her sister, and the question would have to be carefully worded. Luna didn't need much, just one flaw, one weakness in the Elements she could exploit, but she knew it would be difficult to coax such a thing from her sister's mouth. *I'm*

essentially calling her bluff, Luna thought. If she trusts me as much as she claims, then she should have no problem giving me some information, but I'm pretty sure she doesn't. I do certainly know that she would never admit to my face that she still harbours any suspicion of me, though, so maybe she'll just tell me to save face, assuming that I would never have the resources to pull it off. She grinned again. Ironically, sister, you gave me all the resources I could ever need.

While the library was a massive help in Luna's forbidden spell research, she knew that Celestia would've limited what books she had access too - it would certainly explain why there was no mention at all of the Elements of Harmony in any of her books. It was her initial plan to use her invisibility to sneak into the Grand Library of the Royal Palace, but this was at a time when her research into invisibility was at its infancy, and due to the sheer value of the antique texts in the library, it was one of the most guarded wings of the entire palace. She had almost given up on her plan altogether, thinking that her power would never be strong enough to take down Celestia, but it was her big sister who had given her a lifeline. After being told by the guards that Luna had spent most of her free time studying in the her own library, Celestia had invited her to accompany her on one of her monthly visits to Canterlot University, thinking that she would find the trip of great interest. Luna took her up on the offer, knowing that her and her sister's definitions of "great interest" varied quite wildly. She hadn't expected to get full access to the university sacred halls, and wasn't even expecting to glean anything new about magic from her visit there at all - Celestia's visits to the university were mostly of an administrative nature, and most magical breakthroughs would generally call for the Princess to be called to the university immediately, rather than summed up in a monthly meeting.

Luna's only real plan during her visit has just to keep her eyes and ears open, to look, listen, and perhaps learn. And she learned a lot. Apparently, the last few years had been rife with breakthroughs in modern magic, and most of these breakthroughs were the talk of the university. After only an hour within the university's walls, she had learned of a lot of new discoveries, straight from the mouth's of the over-talkative professors - it was from them that she'd overheard the concept of storing magical energies within gems, something that had never been attempted by anypony until recently, and something which many ponies thought was unique to the magical gemstones of the Elements of Harmony. It was here where she'd also heard the low mutterings and rumours of a new forbidden

spell being discovered, a spell which would be one of the most important elements of her master plan.

Were it not for you, sister, this plan would've been dead two years ago, Luna thought. There would be no magic-blocking gem, there would be no soul linking, and I probably would've given up on this plan years ago. I suppose that's something I should make sure everypony knows once I become Queen - careless talk costs lives.

Her thoughts returned to the task ahead of her. The takeover of Canterlot could easily be completed without the information she required, but then it would just be a matter of time before the Elements would track her down. The perfect version of her plan, however, was exactly the opposite - it was her plan to track the Elements down. After she took control, Ponyville was her first target, but if the Elements of Harmony were still in play, it would be a difficult target to hit. *There is no good way to ask Celestia about them without making me look a bit suspect, she thought, but hopefully her determination to keep up her fake trust towards me will make her talk.*

She finished her breakfast, and trotted back into her main hall. "Bodyguards! You wouldn't mind accompanying me to Celestia's chambers in an hour or so? I need to talk to her about something."

"Not at all, ma'am." the smaller guard said. "Just let us know when you want to head there."

She nodded, and took a quick glance at her clock. *Ten-forty five, she thought, perfect. I'll be in Celestia's room by quarter to twelve, get the information I need, then knock that foal from her throne.* She grinned to herself. *Midday is when it will happen. She will be struck down when the sun is at its peak...when HER sun is at its peak. Poetic justice is a such a lovely thing.*

* * *

As midday approached, the forests around Canterlot were brimming with life. The birds dawn chorus had long since ended, but their song was still easily heard from the trees, and the rustling of the rabbits and squirrels was happening at a near constant rate. The sun shone bright in the sky, bathing the entire forest in a glorious light, giving the the lush summer grass an incandescent shine.

While Spitfire was always usually always the first to appreciate a beautiful summer's day, this time, she had other things on her mind. She and Soarin' had been in the forest for three hours, practising and tweaking some new flying tricks for the ever-approaching Grand Galloping Gala, and even with that three hours, and time they had spent in the previous week, they still hadn't been able to master the outrageously choreographed tricks that their teammate Tyco had come up with.

"I mean, come on Soarin'," she said, indignant. as they sat in the shade of the trees, taking a break from the morning's training. "How in the hay does Tyco expect us to do six barrel rolls and three front flips within the space of two seconds? Even IF we manage to do it, if we were moving at that speed we'd probably just look like a pony-shaped blur to the audience!"

"Ah, don't worry about it, Spitfire." Soarin' responded, with a determined look on his face. "It's the same thing that happens every year. Tyco thinks of a new move, we both complain that it's impossible for a week or so, then we finally nail it, perfect it, and make the crowds scream about it. We'll get it down soon enough."

"If we keep up with that pattern, then one day he'll tell us to do something that's ACTUALLY impossible. And when we screw it up and end up face down in the dirt, I doubt there'll be much cheering going on."

Soarin' chuckled. "Do let me know when we actually reach that point, will ya? I haven't got a specific day marked on my calendar for my retirement, but it'd be good to know in advance when that day is."

Spitfire laughed with her teammate, enjoying the fact that she'd finally got some alone time with him. Tyco was supposed to be with them in the forest that morning, but, as usual, he was sound asleep when Spitfire went to get him, and she made very little effort to wake him. *I don't know what it is, she thought, but Soarin' always acts so macho when any of the other boys are around. He probably doesn't want to show weakness in front of them. But he's far nicer like this, I think. Laughing and joking. If one of the other stallions even heard him mention the word "retirement", he'd probably never hear the end of it.*

"Seriously though," Soarin' continued, his determined look having returned, "We just need to focus and we can get this done. At least we don't have Tyco around yelling at us every time we mess up. Well, not yet, anyway. Was he even lucid enough to tell you when he was getting his hind down here?"

Spitfire shook her head. "Nope. He was up quite late, y'know, full moon parties and everything."

Soarin' sighed. "So we should expect him about five-ish then. Marvellous."

"Five-ish? That's pretty optimisitic, dude." Spitfire said, with a smile. "The foal could probably sleep through the end of the world."

"True enough." Soarin' said, smiling back at Spitfire. "Right, you about ready to get back in the air? We need to figure out what went wrong that last time. Can't have you crashing into me when we do this at the show, can we?"

Spitfire raised an eyebrow. "I beg your pardon? You crashed into me! I was perfect the whole of that last run!"

"Don't worry, Spitfire," Soarin' said, jokingly, "I know what you ponies are like, all it takes is one cute little bunny to appear from the grass and you lose every ounce of your focus."

"Ohohoho!" Spitfire said, with a smile on her face. "Well, maybe you'd keep your focus better if you concentrated more on the flying and less on checking out my hind when you think I'm not looking!"

"Ah, well, uh...I never..." Soarin' stammered.

"Don't worry, I'm sure you like my personality too. Come on, time's-a-wastin' and the clouds are calling."

Spitfire jumped from her spot under the tree and shot straight into the sky, leaving a bewildered Soarin' on the ground. She giggled to herself. *Did I just make him blush? Embarrassment is probably quite a new experience to him*, she thought, glancing behind her to see Soarin' take off, in hot pursuit. *I do like the guy, but, dear Celestia, is it fun to watch him squirm.*

* * *

Just as planned, Luna and her bodyguards had arrived at the door to Princess Celestia's chambers at the stroke of eleven-forty five. The guards had already entered the room to announce Luna's arrival, and Luna knew this would be the last chance to figure out what she was going to say. She was less worried than she was an hour ago, however, since she'd thought of quite a nice way to explain her interest in the Elements to her sister without drawing much suspicion. *The Elements of Harmony defeated Nightmare Moon, but that's not who I am now*, she thought. *At least, not yet. At the moment, I'm just Celestia's sister Luna. Making that distinction could be the key to this conversation.*

The guards returned from Celestia's chambers. "You can go in now," the smaller one said. "We'll be right outside the door if you need us, ma'am."

Luna nodded. "Thank you, bodyguards." she said, as she trotted past them through the open door to Celestia's room. *Hopefully, that's the last time I'll have to thank these imbecilic guards for anything.*

She entered the chamber, seeing that her sister was seated in the middle of the room, her eyes focused on the book in front of her. Luna quickly looked at the bookshelf where her magic-blocking gem was hidden, and was relieved to see that the books hiding it had not been moved. *Off to a good start,* she thought. She cleared her throat, getting her sister's attention in the process as she moved her eyes from her book.

"Luna! My dear sister, it's nice to see you!" Celestia said, with a wide glowing smile on her face. "It's funny that you came to visit me today," she continued, "I was planning to drop by your chambers today and congratulate you for last night's fantastic full-mooned sky."

Luna smiled back at her sister, and said, "Haha, you always check up on my skies, Cel'? Making sure I've not lost my touch?"

Celestia shook her head. "Oh, not at all, Luna. I just love the full moon, that's all. Makes the night sky look so lovely."

Trust me, sister, Luna thought, bitterly, *the moon looks a lot less beautiful when you're trapped inside it for a thousand years.* She trotted over to her sister, and sat opposite from her. "My bodyguards were very complimentary about it too." she said, keeping her forced smile on her face. "It's weird, I wasn't completely happy with it after I'd finished, it certainly wasn't my best work."

Celestia laughed. "Well, do let me know when it is your best work, because that's a night sky I wouldn't want to miss. Now then, I assume you have something you want to talk to me about? It's been quite a while since you've been in my chambers without me summoning you."

Here goes nothing. "Well sis', you know that most of my spare time is spent in the library, yes? I've been doing a lot of research on all different types of magic. I find it *fascinating* to learn about it all, clearly I'm more of a unicorn than a pegasus."

"Haha, well that's perfectly fine, Luna, the world of magic is certainly an interesting one. You should see some of the new things going on over at the university, I'll make a point to take you back there sometime soon."

"I would love to visit it again, Cel'," said Luna. "Perhaps with a bit more of a...comprehensive tour? I felt that I barely saw any of it last time I was there."

The smile faded ever so slightly from Celestia's face. "Well, that could probably be arranged, but don't expect to get into every nook and cranny. A lot of the work going on in there is top secret, even I don't know some of the things the professors are researching in there!"

Luna gave an awkward laugh, and continued. "The thing is, during my research of all things magical, there's one thing I couldn't find any mention of with my library. The Elements of Harmony."

Celestia's smile faded even further. "Ah, yes. I wondered if your studies would ever lead you there. I made sure there weren't any books about it in your library due to the, ah, unfortunate circumstances of your encounter with them. Frankly, I thought that you would never want to speak of them again."

A very cunning excuse, sister, Luna thought, just trying to protect me from the big, nasty, Elements of Harmony? "Well, yes..." she continued, "That was what I figured. But, well, you can't exactly study magic without them cropping up at some point, so I thought I come to you to ask about them. I mean, you'd probably have more knowledge about them than anypony else."

"Well Luna, I can tell you what I know, but...." The smile had all but disappeared from Celestia's face. "Are you sure that you're comfortable talking about them? I mean, we can't really go into detail without talking about...well, without talking about our "disagreements" of the past."

Okay, that's the best chance I think I'm going to get. "The way I think about it, Cel'," she said, looking her sister straight in the eye, "is that it wasn't me you were "disagreeing" with. You used the Elements of Harmony to stop Nightmare Moon, and a thousand years later, Twilight Sparkle and her friends used them to stop her again. But I'm not Nightmare Moon, I'm just Princess Luna. Princess Luna and Nightmare Moon are two completely different ponies, in the same way that you can say that you and I are different. So, if the reason you're reluctant to talk to me about it is because you think it's inappropriate to tell me about the weapon which defeated me, then I'd respond by saying that it didn't defeat me, it defeated Nightmare Moon, so you shouldn't feel like the subject is inappropriate."

There was a few seconds of silence, but to Luna, the seconds seemed like days. *Will she buy that?* she thought, waiting in agony for the Princess' response.

Celestia closed her eyes and nodded her head. "You're right, Luna. You and Nightmare Moon are two different ponies. If you're comfortable with it, then I'll be glad to tell you all I know."

Luna widened her smile at Celestia's words, but she was shocked that it had been so easy to get her talking. *Was that seriously the only reason she didn't want to talk to me about it? Because she thought it would make me uncomfortable? I mean, she could be lying to hide her suspicions if she thought I was planning something, but surely if she had any suspicion at all, she'd make up a good excuse to keep quiet. Is that really all it took? Is it possible that she...genuinely trusts me?* She pushed the thought away. *If she trusted me, she wouldn't have kept me prisoner in this castle for three years. There's something more going on here, but I'd better not pass up this opportunity.*

"Thanks, Cel', I really appreciate it." She took a breath, getting ready to ask her first of her planned questions. "So, my first question about them is this - you used all of the Elements of Harmony to defeat Nightmare Moon the first time around, so why didn't you just use them again the second time? Why did you entrust it to Twilight Sparkle?"

"Well...there's two reasons for that, Luna." Celestia said, her smile starting to return. "Firstly, I wanted to teach Twilight about friendship. Her magic was powerful, and I knew if anyone could wield the Elements, it was her, but I knew she wasn't powerful enough to use all six at once. I figured it would be a good way to hone her skills while showing her that there was more to life than studying, and it worked. The bonds those young ponies made with the Elements of Harmony are still as strong as they were three years ago." She paused, breaking Luna's eye contact for a second. "Having said that, the second reason I didn't just use the Elements again was probably a bigger one. You see, no one pony, regardless of their magical ability, can ever use the combined power of Elements of Harmony more than once. Even if Nightmare Moon hadn't kidnapped me that night three years ago, I'd already used their power to defeat her the first time, so here was really nothing much I could have done to stop it. I chose Twilight to do it because she was had more magical potential than any filly I'd ever seen, so I figured choosing her as my successor to wield the Elements of Harmony was as good a choice as any."

Luna nodded to her sister's words, but she had long since stopped listening. *No-one pony can use the power of the Elements of Harmony more than once?* she thought, barely containing her excitement. *That means Twilight Sparkle and her silly friends can't stop me! They can't use their power again! THIS IS IT! This is the weakness I was hoping to discover, and I got it on my first question!* She tried to keep calm, but she was actually struggling to not laugh out loud. *And you've just told me, sister! You've given me all I need to win! I can't believe how easy that was,*

my foolish sister has a far looser tongue than I could ever have hoped for! Staying in character, she searched for absolute confirmation of this weakness. "So, you're saying that, should Nightmare Moon return, Twilight and her friends couldn't use the Elements to stop her either?" she asked, trying to keep an interested look on her face.

Celestia shook her head. "Not in the way you know of. The Elements still remain tied to their minds and hearts, making them a bit more powerful than the average pony, but they couldn't use their combined power again."

Luna couldn't believe her luck. *This is too easy, she thought, she might as well have said: "Oh, Luna, if you're planning on plunging the world into everlasting darkness again, don't worry, no-one can stop you, you go right ahead."* She glanced again at the clock. *Eleven-fifty five. Let's see what else I can learn.*

"Did you know that beforehand?" Luna asked. "I mean, the fact that they couldn't be used again? Was it written down in an old book or something?"

Shaking her head once more, Celestia said, "When I first used them, I had no idea that it would be my only chance. After Nightmare Moon's first defeat, I tried to learn as much as I could about them, even making a point to find an uninhabited part of the forest to try to use the power again. I just couldn't do it. There's no hard evidence that it was because I'd already used them the once, but..." she paused, looking away from Luna, thoughtfully. "I could just feel it. The Elements of Harmony have a weird way about them, it's like...it's like they *told* me that I could only use them the one time."

Luna nodded, still keeping a faked look of interest. "So, you say the Elements still affect the pony that uses them long after?" she asked.

"Yes, they do. Generally, they just improve your special skills. Like the fillies in Ponyville, for example - Twilight is a master of magic, far more powerful than most adults. Rainbow Dash is an expert flier, some say she's better than our very own Wonderbolts now! And it's the same for Fluttershy and her rapport with animals, Rarity's tailoring skills, Applejack's adeptness on her farm, and Pinkie Pie's skill at...well, being Pinkie Pie, I suppose." Celestia's smile had returned at the thought of her protege's friends.

"Does that mean the Elements are still within you, sister?" Luna pressed, knowing that any attempts to stay subtle were no longer necessary.

"No, they aren't." Celestia replied, frowning slightly. "Five hundred years after Nightmare Moon's defeat, I felt their presence leave me. Let's

just say...it wasn't a pleasant experience. I'd rather not go into it, if you don't mind."

"I understand." Luna said, again glancing at the clock. *One more question, I think.* "Well, what about Twilight and her friends? Will they also lose the Elements over time? I mean, I'd highly doubt they're going to be around five hundred years from now."

Celestia looked back at her sister. "This is the one thing I don't know." she replied. "My best guess is that when the six fillies pass on from this world, the Elements will leave them and go back to their place at the Ancient Castle of the Royal Pony Sisters in the Everfree Forest. To be perfectly honest, sister, I actually *hope* that is the case. Nopony should ever have to experience the ordeal of losing their Element, it's quite a trying event."

Luna nodded, trying to keep a thoughtful expression, but she couldn't help smiling at this new revelation. *I was planning to kill those blasted fillies anyway, she thought, but now I have another reason to do it. They'll lose their Elements of Harmony, and all I'll have to do is walk into the Ancient Castle and claim them for myself.* She closed her eyes. *Okay, sister. I think it's time to show my true colours.*

She leaned forward in her seat. "So, Celestia," she said, making no effort to hide the widening grin appearing on her face. "*Hypothetically*, if Nightmare Moon were to return to this world today, with the plan of bringing everlasting night, then all she'd have to do is kill Twilight and her friends, collect the Elements of Harmony for herself, and you would have no defense against her?" Luna was now grinning from ear to ear. "I mean, if the past is anything to go by, her power almost eclipses yours, right? Without the Elements to help you, she could probably knock you right from your throne!"

Celestia's smile vanished from her face, clearly taken aback by her sister's statement. She opened her mouth to answer, but was stopped by the chiming of her clock, as it signalled midday's arrival.

Ding. Ding.

Celestia looked at her sister, and Luna looked right back.

Ding. Ding.

Luna's grin had turned into a full on evil smile, her bright white teeth bared.

Ding. Ding.

Celestia's face had changed from a look of shock, and had contorted into a look of pure horror.

Ding. Ding.

I think she's finally realised what's going on, thought Luna, but she's three years too late.

Ding. Ding.

Oh, Princess, your face looks quite the picture. Luna had started giggling to herself.

Ding. Ding.

On the last chime of the midnight bells, Celestia could see the laughter of her sister. Luna was giggling hysterically, her giggling soon turning into full blown laughter, eventually becoming a maniacal cackle, the noise of which reverberated from the walls of the otherwise deathly silent room. Celestia's look of horror intensified, as she realised what she had done.

Luna's cackling abruptly stopped. "But of course, sister, that's only hypothetically speaking, right?" she said, an evil smirk on her face. She closed her eyes, and her horn flashed, activating the link between her and the gem, hidden just to her left.

There was a sudden pulse, and the city of Canterlot was suddenly colourless. The yellow of the sun, the white of the walls of the palace, and the bright hues of every pony's body within the city walls had all become shades of grey. Luna could feel the pulse moving quickly through Celestia's chambers, and, in a matter of seconds, everypony within the city had felt it. After a split second, the colour snapped back into the city. If anypony had blinked in that split second, then they would have missed the sudden monochrome flash, but nopony had missed the pulse of magical energy that had covered the entire city.

In Princess Celestia's chambers, there were a few seconds of silence before Celestia addressed her grinning sister. "Luna..." she said, weakly, "...what have you *done*?"

"The question, dear sister, is not what *I* have done." Luna replied, the smile leaving her face. "The question is, what are *you* going to do?"

Luna leaped from her seat, straight towards her still horror-stricken sister. Mid jump, she could see her sister try to defend herself, but the pained look on her face told Luna exactly what she needed. She collided with her sister, knocking her straight from her chair, and onto the floor, upturning the reading table in the process. Pinning Celestia's shoulders to the floor with her hooves, she finally came face to face with Equestria's ruler, with her true intentions as plain as the sun in the sky.

"I couldn't help but notice you trying to use *magic* to defend yourself just then, Celestia." Luna shouted, her face inches away from her sister's. "I'm truly sorry, but I'm afraid I can't allow that." she continued, her voice

lowering to a low hiss. "I'm sure you can see it's simply proportional response. You stole my freedom for over a thousand years, so I'm banning you from magic. I'd actually say I was being *quite generous*."

In her zeal, Luna had forgotten the fact that her big sister was twice her size, but was quickly reminded by Celestia's retaliation. She felt the blow from the princess' hooves hit her stomach as she was kicked across the room, straight into one of the many bookcases lining it's walls.

"GUARDS! GET IN HERE!" Celestia yelled, galloping for her chamber door, but her blow had only stopped Luna for a second, and she was quick to react to her sister's escape attempt.

"Not so fast, *Princess!*" Luna yelled, her horn glowing bright. Celestia stopped dead in her tracks - Luna had used her magic to fix her to the spot. "Forbidden spell number four!" she shouted, manically, "Suspended animation! Oh, it's a shame, I had honestly hoped to do this without having to cast it, even a pony as unforgiving as you deserves a little dignity."

She could hear the yells and hooves of the guards outside as the came to investigate the disturbance. "Celestia, I *really* don't think guards are necessary, do you?", she said, her horn flaring again as she used her magic to lock Celestia's chamber door. "There we are," she continued, slowly trotting around her sister's frozen body. "No rude interruptions. We've still got to finish out little chat, haven't we sis'?" She once again was face to face with her sister, and laughed at the fact that the look of horror was now frozen on her face. "Don't worry, you can still talk. But my magic can only hold that door for twenty minutes at most, so talk quickly."

There was a second's pause before Celestia spoke. "...what did you do? What did you do to my magic?"

Luna smirked. "I blocked it. And it's not just you, it's everypony in Canterlot. Every unicorn within this city is banned from their magic. It's a new law of mine. Oh, and to answer your implicit next questions, no, I'm not going to tell you how I did it, and no, I won't tell you why it's not blocking me."

"A new law of yours? After two minutes of keeping me fixed mid-gallop, you've already appointed yourself judge, jury and executioner of Canterlot?"

"Personally, I prefer the word Queen. It kind of bundles all of those titles together."

Celestia laughed. "You think *magic* is the only power this kingdom has to offer? The guards outside will be going to get help right now, the soldiers of the Pegasus Flying Corps will tear this room apart to save me!

You surely can't think confronting me in my own chambers with nothing but twenty minutes of solstice can get you the throne?"

Luna's smirk had faded. She spread her wings, and hovered up to her sister's eye level. "Oh, but there's so much more to it, dear sister. Three years in that fake prison you made for me only added to the anger I had amassed from a thousand years trapped in the moon. I find that, given the right motivation, and plenty of free time, you can achieve anything if you put your mind to it." She grinned, and moved closer to her sister's face, staring into her eyes. "The desire for revenge is a *massive* source of motivation. And I've had *plenty* of free time."

"Luna, think about what you're doing. Like you said, you're not Nightmare Moon, you're just Luna! Your magic is strong, but you can't think you're powerful enough to fight the entire military force of Canterlot! Not even Nightmare Moon would be able to stand up to that!" Celestia was pleading, trying to bring her sister back to Earth.

Luna paused, still grinning. "You're right, Celestia. Canterlot has quite the powerful army. Quite surprising really, since there's been nothing out there to defend yourself from. At least, until today." Her face was now centimeters from Celestia's. "But you're right. I'm just weak little Princess Luna at the moment. You'll see soon, though. Not only will I have enough power to beat your armies, but I won't even need to beat them, because they will be *my* armies. Today, everything of yours will become mine. Everything that was rightfully mine in the beginning."

Celestia couldn't hide the fear in her voice. "There's no way you can gain that kind of power. The stars can't help you this time, Luna."

Luna's grin had again turned into an evil smile. "No, the stars can't help me," she said, enjoying the look of fear in her sister's eyes. "But you can, Cel'. You might not know it, but you've already helped me a great deal. I might even go as far to say that you were *indispensable* to my plans. But you've still got one more part to play." *Forbidden spell number five*, she thought, with glee, as she placed her hooves on the sides of her sister's head.

"I'd like to say that you won't feel a thing, dear sister," she said, drinking in the fear from the princess' eyes. "Well, actually, I'd hate to say that, because it would be a lie. You *will* feel a thing." She smirked. "If you weren't frozen, I'd tell you to brace yourself, because this is going to *hurt*, sis'." Luna closed her eyes, and her horn grew brightly.

All Celestia saw was her sister's manic eyes before knowing nothing but pain. She screamed, a blood-curdling, deathly scream that echoed from the walls and rang in her own ears. She felt like her soul was being ripped

out of her skin, that her mind was being boiled within her head, and her body was being torn limb from limb. Luna saw her sister's screams, and laughed along with them, the sounds of Celestia's screaming and Luna's laughter reverberating throughout the palace halls in an eardrum-shattering discordant melody. "YOU THINK THAT YOU KNOW POWER, PRINCESS CELESTIA?" Luna yelled, over the continuing sounds of her screams and wails. "I'LL SHOW YOU POWER THAT WILL BREAK THIS WORLD IN HALF!"

The glow of Luna's horn died down, and she released Celestia from her magical binds, seeing her sister's body drop limply to the floor. Luna could feel new power coursing through her veins, and felt the power of two royal unicorns invade her body. She had expected to get a rush from what she had done, but the feeling she had was indescribably perfect.

She look upon her fallen sister. The slow, pained breathing she saw proved that her sister was still alive, but barely. *Good, the dark skinned unicorn thought, barely alive is exactly how I wanted her.* She walked to where her sister lay, leaning over to whisper in her ear. "Forbidden spell number five...magic drain." she hissed. "Nightmare Moon's escape was helped by the stars, but there's more than one way to get that much power, dear sister. And I knew that your power would be more than enough. You should tell your professors at the university that their hushed whispers should be hushed even quieter."

Celestia did not respond, as she lay on the floor of her chambers, her eyes half shut. Luna moved from her sister's side, and looked at the afternoon sun through her sister's grand window.

"Do you remember that old nursery rhyme, sister? The one our parents used to sing to us?" The standing unicorn turned back to look at her sister. "I've long forgotten the name of it, but I realised long ago that the whole thing was a metaphor for those damn Elements of Harmony." she trotted back to her sister, leaning forward again to whisper in her ear. "There's one line from that song that seems very apt here. It's near the end. Do you know which one I mean?" She smirked. " *"Magic makes it all complete."* Because that's how you feel without your magic, don't you? *Incomplete.* Like some large part of you is dead to the world, feeling like just an empty shell, feeling like your soul has been stolen." She glared at her sister, her voice taking a more venomous tone. "I know that feeling well, dear sister. You might not have known, but a side effect from being imprisoned in the moon is the loss of one's magic, and I was there for a thousand years. So how does it feel, *Princess*? How does it feel to know that your very *essence* has been stolen today?" She smirked, and turned

back to the window. "I'd open your eyes and look at your sun, Princess." she said, the venomous tone still infecting her voice. "It's going to be the last sun you see for quite a while."

She laughed, a high-pitched cackle that pierced Celestia's eardrums. The fallen ruler opened her eyes, and was hit by the bright light of the blazing sun. She looked at where her sister was stood, in front of her grand window, laughing manically to herself, and her eyes widened in shock. She had expected to see Luna on her viewing platform, but the pony that she saw at her window was no longer Princess Luna. She was looking at a different pony, a taller, darker skinned pony, with wings and horn a similar size to her own. She was looking at a pony that scared her more than any other, an unstoppable, infinitely powerful pony of supreme terror.

Princess Celestia was looking at the pony known only as Nightmare Moon. She watched in terror, as the pony cackled to herself, before all she knew was darkness.

Chapter 3

While the streets of Canterlot were full of panic and confusion, Ponyville's morning had gone without much incident, although that was probably because of the late start most of the ponies there had had. Like Canterlot, most ponies were allowing themselves most of the morning off, to shake off their Full Moon party after-effects before getting the work day to a good, albeit late, start. The midday bells from the Town Hall's clock had already rung, and the streets of Ponyville were becoming busy, with ponies left and right, deciding where they should have lunch.

While the midday bells served the purpose of reminding the ponies of the time of their grumbling stomachs, for Pinkie Pie, they had served as her alarm clock. She opened her eyes, sat up, and yawned, before immediately leaping out of her bed. "Morning's here!" she shouted, happily, trotting over to her drawn curtains and throwing them open. "Good morning, morning! Good morning, sunrise! Good morning, sky! Good morning to the morrrrrnning!"

It took Pinkie Pie a few second to realise that she had missed the sunrise by a fair bit. Peering out her window, she could see that sun was already high in the sky.

"Awwww, I missed the morning?" she said, crestfallen, looking to her clock for confirmation. "But I ALWAYS say good morning to the morning! Sorry for missing you, Mr. Morning, I was big sleepy tired lazy pants today!". Her crestfallen look was replaced by a big smile. "Oh well. Good afternoon, afternoon! Good afternoon, sun! Good afternoon, sky! Good afternoon to the afternoooooon!" She opened her window, leaning out to look at the sky.

"Now, Mr. Afternoon, you tell Mr. Morning that I didn't forget to greet the day!"

Satisfied that she had made up for her error, Pinkie Pie walked to her dresser, gave a quick look in the mirror, and went straight downstairs to get some breakfast. Unlike most other ponies, Pinkie Pie didn't do much to prepare herself for the day ahead - she hadn't used her hairbrush in years, preferring the curly, bouncy, ungroomed mane that a night in bed would give her. *Rarity always asks me how I get my hair this way*, she thought, bouncing down the stairs with a smile, *but she would freak out like hay if she knew I didn't even use my hairbrush. Her head would probably*

explode! She stopped at this thought, remembering the events of the previous night. *Ohmygosh, explode! Explosion! Fire! Boombust! That's why I'm up so late! And here was me thinking it was just a party I couldn't remember.* She moved to her kitchen cupboards, looking for something to eat. *Last night was weeeeird,* she thought, opening her cupboards had searching them for food, *but it had explosions, so that makes it AWESOME!* Seeing a cupcake in the back of the cupboard, she smiled and reached toward it, before an odd feeling in her knees stopped her. Pausing, Pinkie Pie waited for the all too familiar sensation, and it came seconds later.

“Pinchy knees! Pinchy pinchy pinchy pinch-a-pinch!” she shouted, jumping around her kitchen, the cupcake long forgotten. “My Pinkie Sense is telling me something scary is going to happen!” She stopped, noticing something weird. “Wow, BOTH of my front knees are pinchy! That means something really, really, horrifyingly, screamingly, terrifyingly scary is going to happen!”

Pinkie Pie had never had the sensation in two of her knees at once, so she knew this was something big. *I gotta warn everypony!* she thought. *Something scary this way comes!* Forgetting her hunger, she bolted out of her front door onto the streets of Ponyville, and darted from pony to pony, telling them of her prediction.

* * *

Nightmare Moon watched from Celestia's grand window, observing the panic on the streets below. The magic-blocking gem had worked just as planned, and, even though the guards beating at the chamber door would be through within a matter of minutes, Nightmare knew she had time to spare, time which she thought would be best used admiring her own handiwork. *The unicorns were the only ones truly affected, but everypony in the city felt that pulse,* she thought, with a thin smile. *I wonder how long it will be before they start coming here, coming to Celestia, for help? Hmm, I'd wager at least another half hour of mindless panic before then.*

Nightmare Moon's horn flared, and she looked at the door. Her magic had nearly worn off, and the guards would soon be inside. She flapped her wings and hovered over to her sister, who was still unconscious in the middle of the room. *Oh, sister,* Nightmare thought, casting eyes over the white pony's still body. *I'd hoped you be awake for my next trick, but your*

guards aren't really fans of our alone time. She landed next to her sister, closing her eyes, and prepared for another big spell cast. *Forbidden spell number six*, she thought, her horn sparking in readiness. *Another thing that I could never have done without your help, Celestia. The power of two royal sisters should make this an easy feat.*

Nightmare braced herself, her horn getting ever brighter, bright enough to light up the entire room even more than the sun could. She concentrated as much energy as she could into her horn, her knees buckling slightly at the effort. Hearing the sound of the chamber door bursting open, and the indecipherable yells of the guards, she released the energy from her horn, casting her spell.

While the pulse of the magic-blocking gem could merely be felt by the ponies of Canterlot, this one could be seen as plain as day. The first ponies in the streets to see it quickly pointed towards the Royal Palace, yelling to others to draw their eyes skywards. The shouting of the ponies quickly turned to a half-awe filled, half-fearful silence, as they looked on at the spectacle they were witnessing.

From the top of the Palace, a milky-white orb had formed, an orb that was slowly expanding in size. Its progress was slow at first, as the bottom of the sphere slowly crawled down the sides of the palace, enveloping it's walls as it made its descent to the lower levels of the Palace. The orb was growing at a quicker and quicker pace every second, and it wasn't long before it had reached the foot of the castle. And still it grew, faster and faster, a wall of milky-white heading towards the streets of Canterlot. Some ponies ran for their houses, shutting their doors and windows, others continued the mindless panic that had come with the first pulse, but most were enraptured by the sight of the sphere, which now covered the entirety of the palace and had started invading Canterlot's streets. It was moving faster than ever now, and it wasn't long before the wall reached the bedazzled ponies standing on the roads.

The wall passed through every building, every nook and cranny, and everypony within the limits of Canterlot. The wall's effect was different for everypony - some were calmed by it, some were angered, some fell asleep, some seemed to be filled with limitless energy - but these initial reactions were quickly overcome by a feeling of pure serenity and calmness in the minds and hearts of each pony.

As quickly as the feeling had come, it had vanished. The sphere had expanded to such an extent that half of it had disappeared into the ground - the entire city had been enveloped in a massive milky-white dome. The advance of the dome slowed to a halt, and suddenly it was gone, leaving

only the stunned silence of the ponies of Canterlot. This silence was quickly replaced by the resumption of the panic from five minutes before, with ponies screaming and shouting, wondering what would come next.

Nightmare Moon's horn had stopped glowing, but the magic coursing through her veins had not. The mystical sphere she had created had passed through everypony in the city, and she had felt the presence of them all as it had happened. She had felt the fear of the thousands of ponies on the streets, felt their anger, their confusion, and, while the casting of her spell had her panting for breath, she couldn't resist laughing. *That was harder than I thought it would be*, she thought, *but like everything else, it went perfectly*. She smiled turning to see the three guards that had broken into the room, who were now stood in place, looking dazed and sleepy. *Well, at least I think it went perfectly. Let's see*. She fixed her eyes on the middle guard, and her horn flashed. *Bodyguard*, she thought, keeping focus on her target, *lift up your left front hoof*.

Almost instantly, the guard her gazed was fixed one did exactly as she commanded, unsteadily lifting his left front hoof from the floor. Nightmare smiled. *Excellent*, she thought, not breaking her gaze from the guard. *Now use that hoof to hit the guard to your right. As hard as you can*. Again, the guard did exactly as he was ordered, turning to his right, and swinging his hoof towards his colleague. The hoof connected with his face with a sickening crunch, knocking the smaller guard to the floor, a splash of blood landing following him. *Even better*. Now, she thought, with a glint in her eyes, *beat him to death*.

The middle guard leapt, snarling, onto his downed prey, pinning him to the ground. Using his hooves, he landed blow after blow onto the already injured stallion, each blow accompanied by its own sickening crunch, and splatter of blood. The third guard did not seem to register the brutality of the beating at all, staying in place with dazed eyes.

Nightmare Moon watched the relentless strikes of the guard, observing each blow with supreme glee, her mouth twisted into an evil smile. *It worked!* she thought, starting to giggle. *Forbidden spell number six...mass telepathy*.

This spell was one that Luna had built from the ground up. She knew that unicorns had the power to read minds, as well as communicate through them, but mind control itself was something that required a lot of magical energy. Her testing of the spell had only confirmed this, with the limited power she had in the body of Luna, even the control of the spiders and moths that lived within the palace walls had been quite an exertion. With the power of Nightmare Moon and Princess Celestia at her disposal,

however, she knew she could amplify the power of spell to shockingly high degrees. That is what the white orb had been - a wave of magical energy, telepathically linking Nightmare to everypony it touched. She did not have full control over everypony in the city, though - the orb's power weakened as it grew - but she knew that, at the very least, everypony within the Royal Palace was now under her control, and that included the entire military force of Canterlot, who were all in the barracks a few floors below her. Even so, everypony within the radius of the orb was now telepathically linked to Nightmare Moon, so she could, at the very least, read their thoughts and talk to them through their minds.

The dull sounds of hoof against flesh had now stopped, as the bloodthirsty guard halted his assault, panting heavily. He moved his hooves from the now deathly still stallion, but not before giving him a quick nudge to make sure he was dead. This was unnecessary, however, as his victim was clearly dead, his once white fur now almost completely matted with blood, his face beaten into an unrecognizable pulp. The attacking guard walked back to his original spot, falling in next to the other guard, and his eyes drooped again, matching the dazed look of his other colleague, his face and mane stained with blood.

Nightmare turned back to the window. *Good work.* she thought, this time keeping her mind, rather than her eyes, focused on the guards. *Now, go down to the pantry and get some pails of water. Wash off that blood then bring them up here, I think it's time to wake my sister. Quickly!* She heard the sound of the guards' hooves on the marble floor, and then the sound of the door opening and shutting. *I don't even need visual contact, I can just DO it!* she thought, revelling in her success. Everything was in place - her sister had been defeated, she had gained a literal army of followers, and she had no fear of the Elements of Harmony foiling her again. *I think it's time to speak to my new subjects,* she thought, her horn flaring.

* * *

For the second time that afternoon, the panic in the city suddenly stopped. Everypony on the streets, in the houses, shops, and even in the Royal Palace were rooted to the spot, as they felt an unfamiliar presence in the back of their minds, which soon took over their entire body. The entire

population of Ponyville went silent, their thoughts and attentions fixed on the voice that was now dominating their mind.

*Fillies and gentlecolts, the voice said, venomously. This is the voice of your new queen, Queen Nightmare Moon! You surely all know that name, undoubtedly it was spoken in hushed whispers in your quaint little Full Moon house parties last night. You ran in **terror** from the mere sight of a full moon, so I'm sure it goes without saying that a chill has ran down your very souls just at the mention of my name, as well it should. I have taken over your palace and defeated your Princess, and now this city belongs to me, as well as the city's military force, just in case any of you had any thoughts of rescue. Even if you had, I would've known, my power is such that I can sense the thoughts of every single last one of you. So, to that end, there's gonna be a few changes in this city.*

Firstly, and I'm sure you're already aware of this one, the use of magic within the city is now a capital offence. That rule will be easily enforced, however, since I have already stopped all use of magic within city limits, so you don't have to worry about breaking that rule. Secondly, nopony is allowed to leave the city. I already have earth ponies and pegasi on their way to the city's perimeter, so all exits, whether by ground or by air, are blocked. Anyone caught trying to escape will be punished with death. And lastly, while my power can control your minds, I'm sure there will be some who think they can stop me. Remember, I can read all of your thoughts, so don't think that I will be unaware of such ideas. Thoughts of this nature will be considered an act of high treason, but it will not be punished by death. Instead, any unlucky pony or stallion caught thinking in this manner will have their entire family put to death, right before your very eyes. Brothers, sisters, fillies and colts, none will be spared. Follow these rules, and I have no problem at all with you living in this city. Break them, and you will face the wrath of Queen Nightmare Moon and the armies of Canterlot. Look at your sun, ponies of Canterlot, for it is the last sun you will ever see!

The presence had suddenly left the Canterlot ponies minds, but the effect of the message certainly hadn't. Panic once again rose to the streets of Canterlot, but this was quickly replaced by fear and fleeing as the ponies saw the skies fill with Royal Guard Pegasi, and the streets suddenly filling with Royal Guard infantry. They ran, some for their houses, some for a safe looking alcove, some jumping into the first place they could find.

Some pegasi, however, had not heeded their new overlord's warning, and had already made a break for the skies. Not heeding the calls of warning from the ponies around them, they had kicked off the floor and

shot into the sky at high speeds, but they did not last long. The Royal Guard Pegasi were fast and lethal, and not one pegasus lasted longer than five seconds in the air before being struck down, the speed at which they fell almost matching the speed at which they rose. In seconds, the streets of Ponyville were peppered with the bodies of pegasi - those who had survived the fall were quickly trampled by the wave of scared ponies running for their lives. What was mindless panic had become sheer terror in the streets of Canterlot, the air filling the screaming and shouting of the helpless ponies.

* * *

Soarin' and Spitfire hovered above the treeline of Canterlot's surrounding forest, their training session having stopped for some time. They had seen it all - the sudden lack of colour in their world, the white orb consuming their city, and now they saw the small shapes of the pegasi fights in the sky above the city, watching in horror as all who entered the skies were quickly cast down. They watched in silence, hearing the screaming of the citizens of Canterlot being carried on the wind.

Both of them had no clue what was happening. They had seen the expanding orb of Nightmare Moon's telepathy field, but they had been far enough out of the city for it not to reach them. Neither of them had heard Nightmare Moon's declaration, but, even with the pegasi's limited knowledge of magic, they knew that what they had seen and felt could only be the result of an extremely powerful unicorn.

Spitfire broke the stony silence that had descended between the two of them. "What...what is going...what is happening over there?" she stammered, knowing that Soarin' wouldn't have any proper answer.

"I don't know." Soarin' replied, not turning to look at his colleague. "But whatever it is, I think we can safely say that something very, very bad is happening."

"But what? First that weird pulse, then that white orb, and now every pegasus trying to take off is getting struck down?" She squinted at the scene in the skies of Canterlot, using her superior vision to try and determine what exactly was stopping the pegasi's escape. She gasped, realising that the attacking ponies were wearing the Royal Guard's uniform.

"I saw that as well," Soarin' said, in reply to her gasp, finally turning to look at her. "Royal Guard Pegasi, taking down any citizen in the sky."

"But...*why?*" Spitfire replied, looking at Soarin' in disbelief. "Only Princess Celestia can command the Royal Guard in this way, and she wouldn't do something like this!" She turned to the city, readying her self to fly at top speed towards it, but Soarin' had already moved his leg to block her.

"Don't be a foal!" he said, a growl in his voice. "You go speeding in there, and you'll get taken down just like all the others!"

"Well, we have to do *something!*" she replied, giving Soarin' a pleading look. "I don't know what's going on, but hundreds of pegasi were just killed and I'm not gonna' just hover around here like an idiot and watch!"

"And adding your name to the list of casualties is mighty useful, is it?"

"I'm sorry, did you forget the part where we're members of the *Wonderbolts*? The most skilled fliers in all of Equestria?"

Soarin' shook his head. "It won't be enough." he said, solemnly. "I know some of the Royal Guard. We could match them for speed but we've got no chance in a fight, especially with that many of them." He sighed, turning back to the city. "They're as deadly as we are fast."

Spitfire unclenched, knowing that the pegasus was right. "Fine. So what do we do then?" she said.

Soarin' looked at the city, in deep thought. *Whatever that orb was*, he thought, moving his eyes to the Palace, *it started on the upper levels of the Palace. That's where Celestia's chambers are. Whatever's going on, it's going on in there.*

He sighed, and turned to Spitfire. "Okay, here's what I think." he said, looking into his colleagues eyes. "Either Celestia has gone nutty-bananas and is culling her own city, or somepony's forcing her to do it. Either way, something's going down in Celestia's chambers."

"Makes sense," Spitfire replied, "Also, did you notice that weird orb? It started near the top of the palace, that's where her chambers are, right?"

Soarin' nodded. "That's what I was thinking."

"So, how do we get there without being swatted from the sky?" Spitfire asked.

There was a short silence before Spitfire answered her own question. "I know! Well, it looks like the Royal Guard are only focusing on people escaping, they'll have their eyes on the ground. If we go up and over them, we might be able to sneak past them."

"That might work," Soarin' said, "But all it'll take is one of them to look up and we'll be in trouble."

Spitfire quickly turned in the air, now looking at the opposite direction of the city. "Look! There's some clouds coming in, and I doubt the pegasi are gonna be caring about the weather right now. We can wait for them to pass over the city, and we can run across them. Should keep us out of sight too."

"There about the same height as the top of the palace, too," he replied, having also turned to look at the oncoming clouds. He sighed. "I suppose it's the best plan we've got. Those clouds aren't gonna be getting there for at least another hour yet, though."

Spitfire shrugged. "We might as well get up there now then," she said. "Ride them there. If we're gonna be waiting around then we might as well be waiting around in the right position."

Soarin' nodded. "Yeah, might as well. Let's get up there."

Both pegasi moved up to the clouds, neither of them in any rush. They both knew what the other was thinking, but it was Spitfire who put the thought into words.

"Soarin', Tyco isn't stupid enough to try and..."

"No," Soarin' answered quickly. "Hopefully he isn't." The worry in Soarin's voice didn't serve to make Spitfire feel any better.

* * *

Twilight Sparkle sat at her desk, using her magic to work her quill. She was just finishing her letter to Princess Celestia, telling her all about the events of the previous night and all she knew about the Boomdust. She had wanted to send it as soon as possible, but Spike was still asleep, and Twilight had the feeling that she should let him rest, even at this late hour. *I launched him through a window*, thought Twilight, reliving some of the worry from the previous night, *so I'm not a fan of adding "waking him up and making him cranky" to my list of crimes.*

She signed her name on her letter, and as she placed her quill down on her table, she heard a knock at her door. "It's open!", she called, and she turned to the door to see Rarity open it and enter her library.

"Good afternoon, Rarity," Twilight said, shooting her friend a smile. "I figured you'd be over to see me today. Give me a sec, I just need to stamp this letter."

"No need to Rush, darling," Rarity replied, returning the smile. "Letters to royalty need to look their best! Are you letting the Princess know

about last night's ghastly ordeal? Personally, I didn't see much of a friendship lesson last night."

Twilight giggled. "Well, me and the Princess talk about other things, you know." she said, using her horn to stamp the seal onto her letter, and roll it up. "But yes, this is about last night." Leaving the letter on the desk, she turned to her friend. "I imagine that's what you came to talk to me about?" she asked, already knowing the answer.

Rarity nodded. "Yes, it is." She broke her eye contact with Twilight, before forcing herself to resume it. "I just wanted to apologise about last night, I lost my cool, as t'were. You know how important I find my beauty sleep."

"You don't have to apologise, Rarity," Twilight said with a smile. "We were all a bit heated last night, it was a strange set of circumstances for sure."

"You're certainly right there, my dear! I'm honestly surprised that blast didn't wake anypony else up!" Rarity paused, thinking of how best to word her next statement, but Twilight had already predicted it.

"And don't worry, I'm done messing around with the Boomdust." Twilight said. "You were right, it's too dangerous to be playing with it here. I'm not exactly well equipped for accidents, as you found out last night." She paused, mirroring Rarity's desire for the correct wording of her next sentence. "Having said that...I would appreciate it if you could show me where you found it." She saw Rarity's mouth open in disagreement, but continued on quickly. "Wait, just hear me out a sec', Rarity. I promise you that I won't take one pinch more of the Boomdust from that cavern, but this is a brand new scientific discovery! The letter I was writing, I was asking Celestia if she thought it was worth getting some of the professors from the university down here to check this stuff out, and they can't exactly check it out if they don't know where it is."

Rarity's mouth had closed, and she motioned for Twilight to continue.

"Canterlot University professors are complete professionals," Twilight continued, "They'll take some samples, take them back to the University, and test it in their labs. Much safer than doing it at this library. And if they have any ideas for how they can use it in a constructive sense, they'll come right back and get some more."

There was a pause before Rarity replied. "Well, I'll admit, that sounds far more sensible. The way you were going on last night, I thought your plans were to get every gram of that infernal dust from that cave into this library! I didn't want to see my beloved Ponyville become a smoking crater!"

Twilight chuckled, knowing she'd got Rarity to see her side. "Well, there's no worries there, Rarity." she said. "Will you take me there then?"

Rarity nodded. "I will, Twilight. If Princess Celestia wants it investigated, then I'll do everything in my power to help her."

Twilight grinned. "That's fantastic, Rarity! Thank you for understanding. I'll get Spike to send the letter as soon as he wakes up." She glanced quickly at her clock, seeing that it was already one in the afternoon. *It's that late?* she thought, revising her afternoon plans.

"Actually," she said, looking back to Rarity, "I'll get Fluttershy to tell him. She was coming over to check up on him anyway, and I've got an errand to run."

"An errand?" Rarity questioned, watching her friend trot back over to her desk. "What manner of errand would that be?"

"Well," Twilight replied, rummaging through her desk drawers, "I still have a tiny bit of the Boombust left, I was gonna go take it to Zecora and see what she makes of it. I know it's not exactly her area, but she's quite knowledgeable about lots of things, so I figured it would be worth a trip." She had found the pouch with the remaining Boombust at the back of the bottom drawer, and used her magic to lift it onto her desk. "Plus, since you brought me this stuff, I've barely been out of this library. I could probably use the walk, get a bit of fresh air."

She turned back to her unicorn friend, and saw her eyebrow was raised. "Oh, don't worry, Rarity, I'm not gonna do anything with it. I just wanted to get Zecora's opinion on it. And I haven't seen her in quite a while, I wouldn't mind a bit of a catch up. And getting my hooves on some more of that fabulous tea she has."

Rarity's eyebrow had dropped, and she smiled at Twilight. "If you say so, darling." she said, turning for the door. "I doubt you could do much damage with such a small amount of the stuff anyway. Be sure to give Zecora my best when you see her!" She stopped, steps away from the door. Turning back to Twilight, she said, "And do be careful. We've been in the Everfree Forest enough times but it's still a very dangerous place."

Twilight smiled. "Don't worry, I'll be alright. I know that place like the back of hoof, now."

"I don't doubt it, my dear. Well, I'd best be going, Boutiques don't run themself..."

Rarity was interrupted by a frenzied knocking at the door, followed by a pink blur crashing into the house. "Pinchy knee knee pinchy pinchy knee knee pinchy!" the blur shouted, darting left and right around Twilight's library. "Something REALLY SCARY is coming! Ghosties! Zombies! Ice-

cream monsters! Blood-thirsty bunnies! Vampires! A really, really, REALLY big storm!"

"Pinkie Pie! Calm down, what's going on!" Twilight said, trying to stop Pinkie Pie's rampage of words.

Pinkie Pie stopped, bouncing on the spot in front of Twilight. "My Pinkie Sense!" she said, motioning her head towards her knees. "My knees are pinchy! Both of them! One pinchy knee means something scary is going to happen but I've never had them BOTH be pinchy before! Something really, REALLY scary is going to happen!"

Twilight sighed. While she had never been able to fully disprove Pinkie's random predictions, she was still skeptical of them. "Pinkie," she said, placing her hooves on the pink pony's shoulder, in attempt to stop her incessant bouncing. "Are you sure you aren't just a bit late with your prediction? I mean, I think last night was probably scary enough for two pinchy knees."

Pinkie Pie stopped bouncing, her fearful look replaced by a quizzical one. "Hmm, I never thought of that. But how come I didn't get knee-pinchy last night?"

Twilight shrugged. "No pony is perfect, Pinkie. Your Pinkie Sense had to get one wrong at some point. Plus, it's been quite a while since you've felt anything like this at all. Maybe you're losing your touch."

"No no no no!" Pinkie said, stamping her hoof with each no. "Everypony knows it works! Something big big big big BIG is coming!"

There was a short silence before Rarity cleared her throat, still inches from the door. "Well, erm, I'll just be heading off now. I'll see you girls later, make sure you say hello to Zecora for me, Twilight!"

Twilight pulled her gaze from Pinkie's pleading eyes, and turned to Rarity. "Sure thing, I'll see you later!"

Rarity exited, leaving Twilight alone in the library with Pinkie Pie, whose bouncing had resumed. "You're going to see Zecora?" she said, the fear back in her blue eyes. "In the EVERFREE FOREST? The place with all the scary monsters? That's what my Pinkie Sense must've...er...sensed! You can't go in there, Twi', something BAD will happen! Like, worse than Applejack's cupcakes bad!"

Twilight turned back to Pinkie Pie. "Oh, come now, Pinkie," she said, a smile on her face. "We've been in the Everfree forest so many times, it's hardly scary anymore!" She saw that Pinkie's bouncing had not stopped. "Look, if you're worried, you could always come with me. I could use the company, and, well, if anything scary does happen, I'm sure you could sing a song and make it go away in that...Pinkie Pie way that you do."

Pinkie Pie stopped her hopping, her eyes and smile wide at the opportunity to think up a new song, something that she hadn't done in a while. "Okie-dokie-lokie!" she said, bouncing towards the door. "Just give me a sec, I still haven't eaten anything today, and warning the entire town of impending doom is HUNGRY work!" She pranced out of the door, leaving Twilight alone in her library. *She told the whole town?* she thought, shaking her head. *That's the last thing this town needs after a full moon.* She sat back at her desk, waiting for Fluttershy's arrival.

* * *

Nightmare Moon's guards had returned with the pails of water, with the mane of the larger stallion's mane still dripping from the water he had sued to clean his blood-stained visage. Nightmare had barely registered the guard's arrival, as she was once again admiring the panic she had brought to the city, watching with joy as her new-found pegasus army struck down all of the foalish ponies trying to make their escapes. She had thought controlling a whole platoon of pegasi would be a trying experience, but it was much easier than she had expected. *It's as easy as just thinking it*, she thought, smiling, *and if there's one thing I've become very skilled at over the last three years, it's thinking.*

The sound of the pails being dropped on Celestia's marble floor reminded her of her next task. *Good work, guards.* she thought, not turning from the window. *Now, pour one of those pails over my sister, we still have some talking to do.*

She heard movement behind her, followed by a splash, and the spluttering and coughing of her the now awake Celestia. *Now leave us, guards.* she thought, *and take that other guard's body while your at it.*

Her eyes still fixed on the scene on the streets of Canterlot, Nightmare barely heard the grunting of the guards as they lifted the lifeless stallion, or the closing of the door as they left, but soon she became aware of the silence in the room, broken only by the heaving panting of her sister on the floor.

She turned, looking at the defeated Princess. The water had matted her hair over her face, but Nightmare could still see her sister's eyes, still filled with fear. "Rise and shine, sister." she said, an evil smile forming on her face. "We still have lots to talk about."

"What...did you do...to my guards?" Celestia said, weakly.

"I made them *my* guards." Nightmare responded, taking slow steps toward her sister. "Just as I did your armies and your citizens. As I said, I'm taking what's rightfully mine."

"But...how?"

Still smiling, Nightmare entered her sister's thoughts. *Like this, dear sister. I am part of all of them now.* Nightmare had thought that Celestia's eyes could not hold any more fear, but once she realised what had happened, she was proved wrong.

"Mind control?" she said, her eyes doing nothing to hide her horror. "How...how did you learn such a despicable spell?"

"I learned the spell two years ago, Cel', but it was your power that made it into what it is. I have complete control over your armies and this city and I barely broke a sweat!"

"Luna...Luna, why are you doing this? Why are you..."

Nightmare Moon's smile was instantly replaced with a scowl, and her eyes and horn flared. "My name is *NIGHTMARE!*" she yelled, shooting a bolt of energy into her sister's stomach, throwing Celestia across the room. Celestia barely had the energy to scream in pain as she collided with her chamber wall. Nightmare spread her wings and glided over to where her sister now lay, hovering inches over her face.

"And how can you ask *why?*" she said, her venom-laced voice having turned into a hiss into her sister's ear. "A thousand years trapped in the moon and three years in your fake prison, and you have the audacity to ask *why?* Well, let's just say that with you in charge, *I was never going to be free.* I was always going to be a prisoner in one way or another, sister, and I didn't like that thought one bit. But now I *am* free. And I'm hungry for revenge, dear sister."

She turned from her sister, heading back to the grand window, before something made her stop. She could hear her sister's heavy breathing, but there was the unmistakeable sound of laughter in between. Turning back, she looked on in disbelief as her sister made painful cuckles to herself.

"You...you really think that's what happened?" Celestia said, still chuckling between her words. "You think...I had you in that room...I had guards on you around the clock...because I wanted to trap you? To make sure you didn't try anything evil again?" She stopped chuckling, and fixed her sister with as stony a glare as she could muster. "That wasn't it. Those guards were for your *protection*. The ponies of Canterlot were...displeased that I had decided to trust you. Some of them wanted to tear you limb from limb! Do you know how many ponies are rotting in our dungeons right now because they tried to infiltrate this palace with the sole intent of *killing* you?"

I couldn't let that happen. I was going to have the guards stop shadowing you once these ponies had learned to trust you, like I did. This wasn't your *prison*, sister. This was your *sanctuary*."

Celestia saw her sister's eyes widen in shock for a split second, before her anger returned. "You're *lying*." Nightmare hissed.

"I have no reason to lie, sister." Celestia replied, a pained look on her face. "But you have access to my thoughts, yes? So you tell me. Am I lying?"

Nightmare had already entered Celestia's mind to confirm this, but she still could not believe it. *Is that why it was so easy to get information from her? she thought, Because she genuinely did trust me? No, that can't be it. The ponies of the town were such a problem that I wasn't even allowed freedom within the castle? I don't believe that for a second.*

She tried to regain her composure, and glared evilly at her sister. "Well, you should've listened to your subjects, Celestia," she hissed, turning to the window. "Clearly they shouldn't have had such a foolish leader." She looked on, drinking in the sounds and sights of the panic and confusion in the city, her horn sparking. "I mean, see for yourself! Look at all the ponies in the streets, screaming and shouting because of your mistake!"

Celestia's vision suddenly went white, before she saw the view of the streets from her window. She watched in terror as she saw her citizens running for their lives, saw the bodies of pegasi littering the streets. "What are you doing?" she asked, her voice cracking in fear.

Nightmare laughed. "It's a new trick of mine," she said, turning back to her sister. "Telepathic links can be used for so many things, Celestia. Right now, I'm sending everything I can see to you. I'm broadcasting what I see directly into your mind." She spread her wings again, and hovered over to her sister. "See, now, you should be able to see yourself, or at least, what you've become."

Nightmare was right, all that Celestia could now see was her own image, and she gasped in horror. Her white coat was now a shade of gray, her once rainbow-coloured hair almost jet black. She could see the bruises and blood on her body from her sister's blows, and see her once royal horn, now half its normal size.

"There's a reason you're not dead right now, Celestia." Luna said, her face twisted into an evil smile. "It's because I want you to *watch*. My first task as Queen? I'm marching on Ponyville, and I'm going to raze it. And I'm going to put the Elements of Harmony through tremendous fear and pain, and then I'm going to kill them. And you're going to *watch*." She cackled, her laughter bouncing from the walls of the room. "Just think about it, sister.

I'll find your little protege, Twilight Sparkle. I'll send my soldiers to collect her. She will be placed at my hooves. I'll drain her magic, just like I've done to you. I'll make her feel pain like nopony has ever felt. And then I'll kill her. And you'll experience *every second* of her pain-filled final hours."

"You...you can't do this..." Celestia groaned, her strength leaving her quickly.

"Oh, but I can do it, sister. You might not have been awake for my little speech, but I'm sure a quick summary will suffice." Nightmare Moon landed, her face centimeters away from her frightened sister's. "Anypony who crosses me, anypony who has ever crossed me, anypony who even has the slightest thought of crossing me..." She paused, lifting her hoof over her sister's head. "They will *die* by my hooves."

She brought her hoof down onto her sister's face, and Celestia's vision was consumed by darkness once more.

* * *

Just as Twilight Sparkle had predicted, her and Pinkie Pie's trip through the Everfree forest was completely uneventful. Twilight had visited Zecora numerous times, and had already found the fastest and safest route there, not even passing through some of the denser parts of the forest. Despite this, Pinkie Pie was still wary, and her eyes darted from tree to tree, looking for danger.

"Watch out! There could be a MONSTER behind that tree! Or two monsters! Or three monsters and their family! OF MONSTERS. Or they could be behind that tree! Or that one! Twilight, be careful, they could be living in THAT HUT!"

"Pinkie, that's Zecora's hut." Twilight said, trying to calm her friend.

"Oh yeah!" Pinkie replied, pleased that the trip had gone without anything even remotely scary happening. Her face instantly fell into a frown. "Does that mean my Pinkie Sense was wrong? But it's always right!"

"Surely you didn't *want* anything scary to happen to us, Pinkie? Just be thankful of that!" Twilight replied, shooting her friend a smile.

"Well, duhhhh." Pinkie said, her smile having returned. "Being scared is like, the WORST feeling ever. I'm just sad that my Pinkie Sense can't prepare me for it anymore."

Twilight laughed. "I'm not worried, you always seem to be prepared for the worst, Pinkie. I'm still confused as to how you got your hands on that zeppelin."

Pinkie Pie sighed. "I *told* you already," she said, "the bunny from my dreams taught me how to craft one! It's really not too hard once you have enough bananas."

"Ah, of course," Twilight said, in mock revelation. "How could I have forgotten?"

The two ponies walked up to the door of Zecora's hut, but the sounds from inside made them stop. They could hear the fast movement of hooves on the wooden floor, as well as the sounds of things falling from shelves. Glancing through one of the hut windows, she could see that Zecora herself was the cause of the commotion, as she was running around her hut, a panicked look on her face.

Twilight knocked on the hut door. "Zecora?" she called, "Are you okay?"

The hut door opened, revealing a worried-looking, panting zebra in the hut. "Twilight Sparkle, this is not a good time." Zecora said, the worry in her eyes making Twilight feel uncomfortable. "The three bells have already begun their chime." she continued, in her trademark rhyming speech, before running back into her hut.

Twilight and Pinkie took a few cautious step into the hut, to see Zecora clearing her shelves, throwing everything into a leather satchel around her body. *Is she going somewhere?* thought Twilight, watching the zebra's frenzied movements. "Zecora, what's going on?" she asked, "And does three bells mean?"

"Three bells is what you ponies call three 'o clock," Zecora replied, her hind still facing the young ponies as she continued her packing. "The lateness of the day has caused me quite a shock."

"Are you...late for something?" Twilight asked, hoping she could figure out the origin of Zecora's panic without having to work her way through a collection of cryptic rhymes.

"No, not late, just running out of day. I'm returning to my homeland, and darkness will obscure my way."

"You're going back to visit your zebra buddies?" Pinkie Pie chimed in.

"It's not a visit, I'm running away. My homeland is the only place I can stay."

"You're running away? From what?" Twilight pressed, now worried for her friend.

"My visions have warned me of a terrible event, some no creature could ever prevent. A great evil has risen in a not far off place, it is on its way here, so I am leaving with haste." She stopped and glanced around her room, making sure she had all the essentials for her long trip. "Ponyville is in great danger, not beasts nor monsters, but something stranger. I'm getting far away as fast as I can, and I hope for your sake, you mirror my plan."

"Wait, visions?" Twilight said, shaking her head. "You believe in that stuff? Prophecies and predictions and things like that?"

"Before today, I would have said no, but my previous night has been filled with woe." Looking around the now almost bare hut, she headed for her door. "If you wish to know more, than walk with me, the day is short, and I must flee." Twilight jumped in front of the door, blocking her path.

"Now hang on just a minute!" she yelled, looking the zebra in the eyes. "You can't just tell us Ponyville is in grave danger and then just leave us! Tell us what's going on, and we can help you!"

Zecora glared at the violet pony blocking her way. "I do not know how, I do not know why." she said, "But this night, everyone in Ponyville will die. There is nothing I can do to stop this, even if I stay, so please, Twilight Sparkle, move out of my way."

Twilight wanted to argue, but the frenzy in Zecora's eyes and the panic in her voice convinced her that zebra could not be talked out of her decision to leave. She sighed, and moved away from the door, Zecora moving as soon as she saw her way was clear. As she passed the unicorn and headed out of her door, she said, "I am sorry to leave you in this manner, my friend. But all who stay here will meet their end." She exited her hut, leaving Twilight and Pinkie alone, in a stunned silence.

* * *

Nightmare Moon had been watching the streets of Canterlot from her window, but they were now nearly empty. All of the ponies had fled to their houses, with only a few still on the streets, mostly earth ponies who were trying to clear the bodies of pegasi from the floors.

Nightmare moved from the window, back into the center of the room. Her horn sparking, she sent out a message to her new army. *All members of the Royal Guard, I want you in the Palace Courtyard in thirty minutes,* she commanded through her telepathic links. *You have a task to do, and I'd*

rather tell you about it in person. Her horn stopped glowing, and she exhaled in pleasure. Her plan was almost complete, but there was still one thing missing. While the acquisition of her own personal army was quite a boon, she knew that she would need someone more lucid at her side to help her for her attack on Ponyville, as well as everything that came after. Celestia had her assistant in the form of Twilight Sparkle, she thought, so it's only fair that I get a Twilight Sparkle of my own. She knew she had the entirety of Canterlot to choose from, but it was an important choice to be made. Taking some deep breaths, her horn brightening once again, she retired into her own mind.

Nightmare Moon's world was soon filled with colour and noise. She could feel the presence of everypony she had linked with, everypony in all of Canterlot, all bouncing from the sides of her brain. More links than I had thought, she thought, her head hurting from the noise. Let's tidy this up a bit. How about...a library?

Suddenly, the noise and the colours stopped, and Nightmare Moon found herself in a library. Within her own mind, she had turned the links between her and her subjects into a massive library, large oak bookshelves covering each wall, with each book inside them detailing the thoughts, fears, skills, weaknesses and memories of all the ponies she had linked with. Thousands of books means thousands of potential choices, she thought. Let's narrow this down a bit. Show me the unicorns.

As soon as she had thought it, she saw the library mould and change, with most of the books disappearing from the shelves in puffs of smoke. The thousands of books in the library had reduced to hundreds, still too many to pick from. Okay then, how about...the fifty unicorns with the most magical energy?

The library shifted again, almost disappearing entirely. Nightmare found herself looking at a single bookcase, the rest of the walls now bare, and saw that there were exactly fifty books inside it. I could just have a quick look in all fifty of these, she thought, but let's see if I can narrow this down even further. From these fifty, who has met the pony known as Twilight Sparkle in person?

The bookcase and books disappeared, replaced instantly with a desk, a pile of five or six books on top of it. That's more like it. One of these six will be at my side, and it'll be far easier to control them if they know their target. She approached the desk, reaching for the top book, but stopped, a new thought entering her head. Saying that, it will be

even easier if they hate their target as much as me. It's worth a try. From these six, show me the ponies that harbour ill thoughts of Twilight Sparkle.

In another puff of smoke, all of the books on the table had disappeared, except for one. Nightmare smiled, and used her magic to open the book. She was exceptionally pleased at what she read. Very good magical potential, but it's not been reached quite yet. The owner of a travelling magic show, touring around Equestria. Hasn't been to Ponyville in three years, after Twilight Sparkle showed her up in a fight with an Ursa Minor. Otherwise, she has a very good reputation as a magician everywhere else, but longs for more power after her loss in Ponyville. Hmm. Yes, I think I can work with that.

Using her horn to shut the book, she checked the cover for the name of her new assistant. Trixie.

* * *

Trixie sat on the floor of her wagon, her head pounding with pain. After hearing the shouts of the townspeople die down, she had planned to go outside and see what had happened, but, forgetting that her magic was gone, had collided head first with the door she had tried to magic open. *Oh dear*, she thought, trying to think positive thoughts, knowing that the new Queen could sense any negative thoughts towards her, wanting to avoid a painful death. *I suppose I'd better learn to open doors the regular way.*

She got to her hooves and looked at her door, before realising that she had no clue what the regular way to open a door was. She had never attempted to do it without magic before, and now looked quizzically at her obstacle. *I suppose...I use my hooves?* she thought, in despair. *Ugh, how do those earth ponies even live without magic to help them?* Eventually, she worked out how to manipulate the handle and catch of her door, and exited her wagon, entering the deathly silent streets of Canterlot.

The first thing she noticed was that it had started raining. With all of the Royal Guard Pegasi concentrating on securing the sky, and all the others either dead or locked in their houses, nopony was concentrating on the weather. Only during the great Wing Rot epidemic of twenty years previous had rain ever touched the streets of Canterlot, so the sight of rain was a rare one. Trixie looked up to see the dark clouds high in the sky, clouds which blanketed the entirety of the city. *If any pegasus wants to escape now, they'd never see those guards coming with all those clouds,*

she thought, her eyes moving down from the skies to the streets, and gasped at the sight she saw.

She knew that some pegasi had tried to make their escape - she'd even dodged a few falling from the sky as she fled to her wagon - but this was the first time she'd seen the result of that. From where she was standing, she could see four pegasi on the ground, all deathly still. It was the first time Trixie had seen a dead body, and she didn't know what to do with the feeling.

Trixie walked slowly over to the nearest, a yellow, female pegasus. If she hadn't known the circumstances, she would've thought the unmoving pegasus was simply sleeping. There was no blood, in fact, there was no real visible signs that she was hurt at all, but something inside Trixie told her that the young pegasus was long dead. She looked up again, seeing the Royal Guard Pegasi move slowly around the sky. *If only I had wings, she thought. I could show these guards a thing or two. They could never stand up to the power of The Great and Powerful Trixie!* She stopped in horror, remembering the constant overwatch of her new Queen. *Oh, er, beg pardon, Queen Nightmare.* she thought, hoping her apology would suffice. *Force of habit, you know, part of the job to talk about how great I am, it won't happen again.*

That's quite alright, Trixie. Trixie had hoped the Queen had heard her apology, but she was shocked that she was receiving such a personal response. *Don't worry, the voice in her head continued, at the moment, you're the last person I want to punish. Would you mind heading to the Royal Chambers? I have a...proposition for you.* Before Trixie could respond, she felt the familiar pull that came with a teleport spell, and in seconds, the streets of Canterlot were empty again.

* * *

The cloud on which Soarin' and Spitfire were sat on had finally reached its destination, as it brushed the Spire of the Royal Palace. The journey had gone in silence - partly because they didn't want to alert the Royal Guard to their presence, but Spitfire knew that even if they had the freedom to talk, the silence would've continued, because there was nothing to say. The cloud they were on had given them court-side seats to the still streets of Canterlot, and the bodies of the pegasi littering the streets weren't exactly a conversation starter.

Soarin' finally broke the hour long silence. "Ok, that's close enough. Royal Chambers are on the opposite side to us, so we're gonna have to fly there. Try and keep near the clouds, and don't move too fast - the last thing we need is a trail of thunderclouds marking out position."

"Roger that," Spitfire said, spreading her wings and carefully hovering from the cloud, Soarin' close behind. The clouds around the palace gave them more than adequate cover from the Royal Guard, but there were some parts of their slow orbit of the Palace where anyone could've looked up and seen them, clear as day. Luckily, even though the streets were now clear, the pegasi seemed to have their eyes locked firmly on the ground, allowing the two members of the Wonderbolts to reach their destination unseen.

Sticking close to the walls, they followed the perimeter of the Palace, before reaching the grand window of Celestia's chambers. Soarin' stuck out a hoof to stop Spitfire's approach. "Only one of us needs to look, Spitfire," he said, in a hushed whisper. "You stay here, I'll go have a look in the window."

"Yeah, no dice, buddy." Spitfire whispered back, grinning, "You aren't stealing all the glory here. If there really is someone holding the Princess hostage, I'm pretty sure it'll take two of us to bring him down."

Soarin' grinned back at his colleague. "Fair enough. You get on this side, I'll fly under the window and take the other. And Spitfire," he said, his face turning serious, "no heroics, 'kay? If things go sour, fly up, try and go over the pegasi line."

Spitfire nodded. "Same goes for you, I hope?"

"Let's see how things go." He had already gone before Spitfire could reply.

* * *

After a lengthy sleep, Spike had finally woken up. And he was very confused. All he remembered of the night before was a white flash, the next thing he knew, he'd woken up in his bed. Sitting up, he stretched and yawned, before his eye caught the clock on the wall opposite him.

"THREE O' CLOCK?????" he yelled, leaping out his bed. "Aw, I slept in *again!* Twilight's gonna be mad, especially with all that work on that weird dust she was doing...."

Spike stopped, memories of the night before coming back to him in lumps. *I lit that huge pile, and then...it exploded! Does that mean...*

He quickly checked himself, confirming that his arms, legs and, to his great relief, his tail, were all still intact. He breathed a sigh of relief, before seeing a butter-yellow pegasus hovering up the stairs.

"Oh, hey Fluttershy, good morning!" he said, smiling. "Well, uh, I mean, good afternoon."

"Hello there Spike," Fluttershy said, landing next to the baby dragon. "You're looking a lot better!"

"Er...yeah, I suppose, but I don't remember feeling bad at all, really. What happened last night?"

Fluttershy frowned and closed her eyes. "I don't remember much about it either, Spike," she said. "All I remember is you lighting that pile, the next thing I remember is everypony panicking because they couldn't find you. We were all so worried. But you seem to be alright, not even a scratch on you!" She opened her eyes, asking the question she'd wanted to since last night. "Tell me, Spike," Fluttershy asked, "Are dragon scales really strong? You took quite an awful trip, but you seem perfectly fine."

"Oh yeah, they're really strong. I mean, well, they get stronger as a dragon grows, but even mine are pretty tough."

"That's so interesting..." Fluttershy said, her passion for creature-based knowledge temporarily overcoming her worry for Spike.

"So, uh...what actually happened to me?" Spike asked, raising an eyebrow. "I mean, I'm fine, but it'd be still nice to know."

Fluttershy's priorities re-arranged themselves, and she trotted over to the baby dragon, hugging him gently. "Oh, Spike, I'm glad you're okay. I was so worried! Let me pop downstairs and get you some tea, you slept for so long, this will perk you right up."

"Uh, thanks Fluttershy, but I don't actually like..."

Fluttershy had already gone down the stairs, leaving Spike mid-sentence at the top of the stairs. He scratched his head, still trying to remember what exactly happened, but came up with nothing. *Oh well*, he thought, trying to get his mind to the day ahead. *I feel perfectly fine, so I suppose I'd better get back to work. Twilight would've left me a note if there was anything important to do...*

Following Fluttershy down the stairs to the bottom floor, he quickly scanned the bookcases and desks for a note, and eventually found one, next to an already sealed and rolled letter. *Spike*, it read. *If you're feeling up to it, would you send this letter to Princess Celestia? Don't strain*

yourself, though, if you still need to recover from last night, I totally understand. See you soon, Twilight.

Spike was now getting slightly irritated at all of the unnecessary worry. *Yeesh, he thought, does everyone think a puny little explosion like that could take out a dragon? Even a baby dragon? These scales aren't just nice-looking, y'know, they're also FIRE PROOF.* He grabbed the letter from the table, and blew a lick of flame at it, sending it on its way to Princess Celestia.

* * *

Trixie was suddenly standing in unfamiliar territory, and the odd feeling one gets from being teleported against there will did nothing to make her feel any better. Blinking a few times, she glanced around the room she was now in, instantly realising that this was a room for royal stock. The glorious white walls, velvet drapes and fine oak bookcases all told Trixie that. *The Royal Chambers!* she thought. *Well, it's about time that I got invited up here. A unicorn of my power deserves it!*

"You're quite right, Trixie."

Trixie looked towards the grand window, from where the voice came from. She saw a tall, black pony standing there, and was shocked to see that she owned both a pair of wings, and a magical horn.

"Queen Nightmare Moon, I assume?" Trixie asked, trying to keep a relaxed demeanour. "I forgot, you can read my mind, can't you? That's a nice trick, I had something like that in my show. Mind reading was all the rage a few years ago. Although I must say, I don't much appreciate being teleported here without warning."

Nightmare didn't turn, but added a slight hint of anger to her voice. "I forgave your earlier slip of the tongue, but my mercy does have its limits. Also, it's proper manners to curtsy in the presence of royalty."

Trixie was torn between submission and seeing how far she could push the new Queen, eventually settling for the latter. She did a quick curtsy, knowing that Nightmare would sense it, even without turning around.

"Hahaha, excellent." Nightmare Moon said, finally turning to her guest. "Even with the threat of death, even standing right there in my presence, you were still thinking of defying me. I've made a good choice here." Trixie finally saw the front of the omnipotent mare - if she hadn't

curtsied before, she would've curtsied now, Nightmare Moon looked far more intimidating from the front than she did from the back.

"Well, er, with all due respect...my Queen, I'm not exactly used to taking orders from anypony. It's something I imagine I'll have to adjust to."

Nightmare Moon eyed the blue unicorn, and smiled. "Oh, there will be no need for that. If I wanted you to fall in place with all of the other ponies, I'd be controlling your mind rather than just reading it. There is a greater purpose for you here."

Trixie returned the smile. "Well, ma'am, if you don't mind me saying...it's been a long time coming for me."

"Indeed it has, Trixie, indeed it has." Nightmare walked towards her potential student, knowing that playing to her ego would be an easy way to get her on side. "So, let's talk about why you're here," she continued, the smile not leaving her face. "I'm sure you're smart enough to figure all of this out on your own, but I've yet to formally introduce myself. I am Nightmare Moon, also known as the Mare in the Moon. Three years ago I broke out of my prison within the moon to try and bathe the world in everlasting night, but I was defeated by six fillies hailing from Ponyville, who bore the Elements of Harmony. You will recognize at least one of their names - Twilight Sparkle."

Trixie's eyes narrowed at the sound of her name. "Yes, I know of who you speak," she hissed. "She made a fool of me when my show was in Ponyville, and the blasted ponies there have never taken me seriously ever since. But you say..." Trixie's eyes widened. "She bears one of the Elements of Harmony? Well, no *wonder* she out-casted me, she had an unfair advantage!"

"That was my sentiment exactly." Nightmare replied. "Without the Element of Magic, I'm sure that your skills far outrank that of Twilight Sparkle's."

"Trust those back-country ponies not to fight fair!" said Trixie angrily. Nightmare Moon laughed, pleased that it was so easy to incite Trixie's anger.

"This is one of the reasons I have chosen you for what I have planned, Trixie." Nightmare said, placing a hoof on Trixie's shoulder. "You have some of the most powerful magical abilities in the land, you still have a loyal fanbase, even in these times of trouble, but most importantly...you *hate* Twilight Sparkle. This is one thing we have in common." She looked into Trixie's eyes, seeing the hatred within them. "There is one thing I need to know, though. Given the chance, would you *kill* her? If I gave you a taste of my powers, would you kill her where she stood?"

Trixie smiled. "Do I think she deserves to die for what she did to me? Probably not. Would I kill her to prove my superiority as the most powerful unicorn in Equestria? Definitely."

"Splendid." Nightmare Moon said, turning back to the window. "I have control of Celestia's armies, they're already forming up in the courtyard. We march on Ponyville once the sun sets...once the *last* sun sets. But before that..." she paused, letting the silence hang on the air. "If I'm going to give you some of my powers, Trixie, I need to know that you will be loyal to me. I encourage any thoughts, even criticisms, about my plans with my new world, and I am perfectly happy to let you speak your mind. That is an honor in itself. But before I can grant you this honor, you need to show me your loyalty." Nightmare's horn flashed, and Trixie suddenly felt like a great burden had been lifted off her shoulders. "Turn around, Trixie." she said, not bothering to turn herself.

Trixie did turn, and let off an audible gasp. In all of the excitement of being in the Royal Chambers and having this opportunity given to her from her new Queen, she hadn't even realised that the former ruler of Equestria was also in the room. She looked at the fallen body of Princess Celestia, her radiance gone, her strength missing, but still living.

"I just gave you back your magical powers." Nightmare Moon said, and Trixie whipped back around to face her. "And now I want you to use them to kill your former leader."

* * *

Soarin' and Spitfire had been listening at the window ever since Trixie's arrival, and had heard every word that had been said. At this last statement, Soarin' could see his partner barely being able to control herself - at the mention of the murder of Celestia, she had clearly wanted to bust right into the Royal Chambers and try to stop it. She looked pleadingly over at Soarin', but he shook his head. *There's no way we can beat her, and you know it, Spitfire. Don't do anything stupid.* Spitfire couldn't read Soarin's thoughts, but she gleaned enough of his opinion from his stern look. Sighing, she focused her attention back on the events in the room.

* * *

"You want me to kill...Princess Celestia?" Trixie said, nearly choking on her words.

Nightmare Moon nodded. "I can think of no better way to show your loyalty. Her death would cement my leadership completely. I'm the only one left in our royal line."

"But...she's immortal isn't she? That's what all the stories say."

"Immortal just means she'll never die of old age, but if you chopped off her head she'd die just like any other pony."

Trixie turned back to look at the pony she had been ordered to kill. *This is a point of no return*, she thought, for a second forgetting Nightmare Moon's unabridged access to her mind. *I kill her, there's no going back.* She smiled. *But think of the reaction, Trixie. When everypony finds out you killed Princess Celestia, why, they'll never doubt your powers again.*

Trixie faced Nightmare Moon. "Fine. How do you want it done?"

Nightmare Moon smiled. "Any way you desire. My personal favourite is a quick, simple bolt of energy to the head, but it's entirely up to you."

Trixie nodded, turned and walked over to the fallen Princess. Without even a second's hesitation, her horn glowed and a mighty crack echoed from the walls of the chambers, as Trixie fired her energy bolt.

The blue unicorn felt the energy she had shot pass quickly over her left shoulder after connecting with the Princess, and gasped, watching her bolt bounce and ricochet from the walls at a blazing speed, before hitting the gran window, shattering into glass shards of all sizes. Trixie look on, confused at what had happened. *Even in the sorry state of affairs the Princess is in...is she still powerful enough to just block my magic? Or did I miss?* Her thoughts were interrupted by Nightmare Moon's laughter, and she turned to the dark pony, who was still standing in front of the now paneless window, shards of broken glass littering the ground around her.

"Hahahaha, *outstanding!* You pushed away your doubts in seconds! You're a far better choice than I could ever have hoped for!" Nightmare Moon said, almost having to yell over the sound of the falling rain, now unimpeded by the broken window.

Trixie looked at her new mentor, confusion still on her face. "But...I failed! She's still alive!"

"I threw up a shield just before you struck," Nightmare said, seeing the confusion still on Trixie's face. "I'm keeping her alive, for now, but this test was never about whether you could kill her, it was about whether you *would* kill her. And you did it with barely a moment's hesitation."

Nightmare Moon turned back to the empty window, now exposing the viewing platform to the elements, and laughed. "Not only that, but you've inadvertently given me something else." she said, looking at the bottom of the window, and seeing a blue haired pegasus stallion hanging on the edge of the frame, trying to scramble his way into the room.

* * *

Spitfire put a hoof to her stomach, trying to ignore the pain coming from it. The outward breaking of the glass had caught both pegasi by surprise, the broken shards fired towards them at such a speed that not even a Wonderbolt could dodge it. Spitfire had been lucky - only one of the shards had hit her, catching her across her stomach, tearing her skin. It had been enough to draw blood, but the wound didn't seem to be too serious. Soarin', on the other hand, had not been so lucky. Lacking the lightning-quick reflexes of his smaller colleague, one of the larger shards had hit him right in the wing, piercing straight through it, while smaller ones had cut his legs and chest. Unable to fly, he had scrambled for the closest solid ground he could find, that of the Royal Chamber viewing platform, but gravity had caught him first - he had only been able to get his front hooves on the floor of the chamber, the rest of his body now dangling over the perilous drop to the streets of Canterlot.

Spitfire, like all pegasi, knew that a wound to the wing was not only exceptionally painful, but also very dangerous. Numerous major blood vessels ran through them, and she knew a shard of such size piercing Soarin's wing had to have severed one of them. *DAMN IT*, she thought, panicking. *He told me to run if things went bad, but he's dead for sure if I leave him here. Even if I did get him, I'd never outrun the Royal Guard if I had to carry him out. Ugh, what do I do?*

As if to answer her question, she heard the yell of her injured friend. "SPITFIRE!" Soarin' yelled, not bothering to hide the pain in his voice. "GET OUT OF HERE! YOU NEED TO GET TO PONYVILLE AND WARN THE PONIES THERE!"

Seeing that all attempts at subtlety had long since failed, she yelled back to Soarin'. "I can't just *leave* you here!"

"You **HAVE** to! You try and help me, and you'll be dead too. No pony else knows Nightmare's plans, you're the only one that can warn them! Now move it, the Royal Guard will be on your hind soon."

“But...”

“Stop worryin’ about me and GET THE HAY OUT OF HERE!”

Spitfire knew that Soarin’ was right, but that didn’t make the decision any easier for her. She took one last look at her friend, before rocketing into the sky, as fast as she could.

* * *

Nightmare Moon walked to the empty window, looking at the pegasus that had been eavesdropping. “Well, well, well,” she said, an evil grin on her face. “Barely an hour into my reign and we’ve already got some little rebels in the camp.” She had just seen the thunder-cloud trail of Spitfire’s escape as she reached the window. “And who’s your friend? No, don’t tell me, it doesn’t matter. The Royal Guard will be on her in seconds.”

The pegasus’ eyes suddenly flashed with anger. “You lay one hoof on her, and I’ll...”

“You’ll do what? Bleed on me? I’m sorry, but this is a Royal Chamber, and it’s already had more than enough blood spilled in it.” She raised her hoof above the struggling pegasus. “Not exactly your proudest moment, I imagine,” she said, flashing an smile at the pegasus. “But as they say, pride goes before a fall.”

Nightmare Moon started bringing her hoof down, ready to give the intruder a grisly end, but stopped as an idea came to her.

“Actually.....maybe I can use you.” Her horn flared, and Soarin’ felt himself be carried into the chamber, and dropped on the floor. Nightmare’s horn sparked again, as she sent an order to the Royal Guard to let the rogue pegasus escape.

“You’re letting her *go*?” Trixie said, having also heard Nightmare’s order. “We don’t know how much she heard! She could be warning Ponyville of our attack!”

“And what if she does?” Nightmare replied, her eyes still on the injured pegasus. “Ponyville is completely defenseless, and any slap-dash defense they could create will be no match for the power of Canterlot’s armies. All her warning will do is put the foals of Ponyville into a panic, lower their morale. And that’s exactly what I want to happen.” She turned to her student, smiling. “One thing you will learn while working with me, Trixie, is that it’s far better to be feared than respected. And...” Her horn flashed, as she searched the mind of the bleeding pegasus, looking for the

escapee's name. "...Spitfire, is it? Spitfire's warning will put fear into the hearts of all of the ponies in that blasted town."

"But this could give them the chance to escape!" Trixie pressed, her eyes still filled with disbelief.

"Yes, but I don't think they will. They won't abandon their town, especially when they think the Elements of Harmony will save them. And even if they did, they have nowhere to run to! Manehattan is the closest city to Ponyville, not counting this one, and that's more than a week's journey on foot. We can hunt them down, if it comes to that."

Trixie sighed. "If you say so, my Queen." she said. "So, what are we going to do with this one?" she continued, motioning to the injured pegasus.

Nightmare looked at Soarin', her grin not leaving her face. "Well, I've already called for a medic with my telepathy. She'll get him fixed up, and we'll use him in our fight."

"I'll...never...fight...for...you..." Soarin' gasped, the pain in his wing becoming more intense.

"Oh, I think you will, Soarin'. You might have been out of the range of my telepathy, but that doesn't mean I can't get you with it right now. But first, let's see if you're any good." Her horn flared, as she combed the pegasus' mind for information. "Aha, a Wonderbolt!" she said, excitement in her voice. "One the best casters, and now one of the best fliers! My power just grows and grows with each passing minute!"

A knock on the door signalled the arrival of the medic, and Nightmare used her horn to open the door and let her in. "Medic," she commanded, "Make sure this pegasus doesn't bleed to death, would you? And knock him out, while you're there, we wouldn't want him doing anything silly, would we?"

The white-coated medic nodded, trotting nonchalantly to the downed pegasus, before swiftly bringing a hoof down onto his head.

"Well," Trixie said, watching the medic go to work. "So much for First Do No Harm."

Nightmare laughed. "Haha, indeed! Right, it's time to get to work. We'll deal with the pegasus later, for now, let's go down to the courtya...."

Nightmare was interrupted by a flash of light from the center of the room, something she instantly recognized as dragon-fire. The fire was gone as quickly as it had arrived, leaving only a rolled up scroll in its place.

Nightmare smiled. *Only one pony's letters make it straight to the Royal Chambers - Twilight Sparkle's. That gives me an idea.*

“Trixie, grab a quill and some paper from the desk, will you? We need to reply to this letter with one of our own, posthaste.”

Trixie nodded, opening the drawers of the nearest desk with her magic, and producing the materials Nightmare had asked for. “You know who that letter is from?”

Nightmare nodded. “Yes, it’s from our mutual friend, Twilight Sparkle. She writes to the Princess quite frequently. Probably some drivel about friendship, that’s what it usually is.”

“You’re not going to open it?”

“Why, of *course* not, Trixie!” Nightmare said, in mock shock. “That’s a letter to *Celestia*!

It’s very rude to open another pony’s mail, you know.” Her faced turned back into an evil grin. “But that doesn’t mean we can’t be neighbourly and let Twilight know that my sister is...otherwise engaged. Now quickly, take this down, we don’t want to leave our troops waiting for too long.”

* * *

Twilight Sparkle and Pinkie Pie’s return journey through the Everfree Forest had been just as uneventful as the first, but Zecora’s warnings were still fresh in their minds. Pinkie Pie, of course, had just taken this as evidence to back up her Pinkie Sense. “See, Twilight!” she said, her nervous bouncing having started again. “Even Zecora thinks something scary is going to happen, and she’s WAY smarter than me! All I can do is make cakes, but she makes potions and brews and tea and soup and EVERYTHING! Something scary is coming, just like I said!”

Twilight had continued her stonewall attitude about prophecies and visions, but that didn’t stop her thinking on Zecora’s words. *There isn’t much that could spook that zebra*, she thought, worriedly. *I don’t even think I’ve seen her lose her cool at anything! Maybe there really is something coming...* She pushed the thought away. *No, there’s no way. So Pinkie and Zecora both have the same prediction at similar times. Quite a big coincidence, but that’s more likely than some unspeakable evil rolling into town. And hey, we’ve had our share of challenges, Ursa Minors, Hyrdas, Dragons, Parasprites, even Nightmare Moon! And we’ve always been able to handle it...eventually.*

“Twilight! Pinkie!”

The ponies turned to the call, seeing Apple Bloom running towards them. "Hey, Apple Bloom!" Twilight said, smiling at the young filly. "Where are you off to in such a hurry?"

"I aint goin' nowhere, Twi'." Apple Bloom replied, gasping for breath. "Applejack's bin looking for y'all, she told me to tell ya to go to your library as soon as I saw ya."

"Well, that's where I was headed anyway, Apple Bloom, but thank you for letting me know!"

"No problem, Twi'. I'd move y'all's hind, though, she seemed pretty scared lookin' from where I was stood. She told me to run straight back to Big Macintosh once I'd found y'all, and she wouldn't tell me what was goin' on! Is somethin' bad happenin'?"

Pinkie Pie opened her mouth to speak, but Twilight quickly covered her mouth with a hoof. "No, sweetie, I'm sure everything's fine," she said, trying to ignore Pinkie Pie's grunts of disapproval. "You'd best get back then, I wouldn't want AJ to get mad at you."

"Okay, Twi'. I'll see y'all later!" Apple Bloom said, turning and heading back to Sweet Apple Acres.

Twilight moved her hoof from Pinkie's mouth, her grunts of disapproval now turning into words. "...something BIG, like zombies or..." She stopped, realising that Apple Bloom had long since departed. "Oh, she's gone. But I needed to warn her about the SCARY!"

"Pinkie Pie," Twilight said, a note of disapproval in her voice. "It's bad enough you worrying the whole town with your predictions, but there's no need to worry all the fillies as well!"

Pinkie Pie shook her head. "But I'm not worrying anypony! I'm *warning* them! Warning them about the big scary evil frightening scary scary pants that's heading this way!" Her bouncing had started again.

"Well, how about you save the warnings until we *know* what we're warning everypony about?" Twilight replied. "Come on, AJ's waiting for us, we'd better go see what's up."

Pinkie Pie nodded, bouncing along with Twilight's canter, towards the library.

* * *

Reaching her library door, Twilight magicked it open, allowing her and Pinkie to enter. "Applejack?" Twilight called, before noticing that Applejack was already in front of her, as well as the rest of her friends. They all

shared the same grim look, a look alone which already filled Twilight with worry.

"Girls? What's wrong?" She glanced around, noticing that Spike was not in the room. "Oh Celestia," she said, her voice breaking with worry. "Where's Spike? He's surely not slept for this long, is he hurt? Is that why you're all here?"

"Spike's fine, sugarcube," Applejack said, her saddened features not changing at the statement. "He just had to go and lay down is all. He, uh, he got a reply from the letter you sent to Princess Celestia, but...well, it's there on the desk. You should, er, maybe take a look." Applejack's stuttering speech and refusal to meet Twilight's eyes did not help her worry. She magicked the letter from the desk and unrolled it, beginning to read.

Twilight already knew something was wrong the second she'd read the first line - she knew this wasn't Celestia's handwriting. Her eyes darted across the scroll, widening with fear at every sentence.

Dear Twilight Sparkle,

I'm afraid Princess Celestia is not available to answer your letter at the current time. I'm sure, if she could, she would offer her most heartfelt apologies, but, well...let's just say that she's taken ill. I wouldn't worry about it, though, because I'm taking good care of her.

I've always wanted to write you a letter, Twilight Sparkle. We've barely seen each other since our last encounter three years ago, so I think we've got a bit of catching up to do. So, how have you been? Personally, I've been really busy. Not by choice, mind you. Princess Celestia's hospitality demands that you do something to occupy yourself, to stop yourself losing your mind. Luckily, I managed to find something to fill the last three years, and that something involves you VERY heavily.

I'm sure you're smart enough to figure out whose words you're reading right now, and what implications that has for you. But, in case that you're not, I suppose I'll spell it out. Your Princess trapped me for a thousand years, and the minute I was free, you and your friends stole that freedom from me. Well, now I am free once again, dear Twilight, and I'm hungry for revenge.

I have control of Canterlot, and its armies. We march on Ponyville soon, and we are going to raze it to the ground. We are going to kill every pony, stallion, colt and filly. You and your friends will be brought to me, placed in front of my hooves, and I will kill you all, but not before you suffer tremendous pain at my hands. This is your punishment for crossing me, for

the treasonous act you committed three years ago, and this time, not even your Elements of Harmony can stop me.

I'll tell you the same thing I told your former ruler - take a good long look at your setting sun. It'll be the last sun you see for a while.

*See you very soon,
Queen Nightmare Moon*

Chapter 4

Spitfire landed in a forest she didn't know, panting heavily. She had flown at top speed for nearly an hour, something which was far removed from the ten-minute set of tricks she performed as part of the Wonderbolts' routine. She glanced around, trying to get her bearings.

I could just see Ponyville when I flew up to break the pegasus line, she thought, tiredly flapping her wings to get above the treeline. *But they were on to me so damn quickly, I don't even know if I was flying in the right direction.* After rocketing up into the sky, Spitfire knew the pegasi patrolling the skies of Canterlot were right on her tail, but in the panic of her escape, she had barely registered her pursuers as more than blurry shapes.

But then they...stopped, she thought, as she replayed the moment in her head. *They were probably close enough to bite my tail off, but then they just...weren't there.* Spitfire had already seen the Royal Guard annihilate anypony trying to escape, and yet she had survived. She was confused, but decided not to think too much on it - she had gotten out, and there was no point questioning why.

Suddenly, she gasped in pain, bringing her hooves to her stomach. The adrenaline rush from her escape had made her forget about her wound, and it was only now that she had a chance to get a good look at it. It had been deeper than she first thought, a wide slash stretching from her back hooves to her chest. Having flattened her body to increase her flight speed, she had opened the wound a fair bit, and a steady trail of blood was oozing from it.

The pain forced Spitfire into a reality check, as she suddenly realised the gravity of her, and Equestria's, situation. Celestia was at the brink of death, Nightmare Moon had brainwashed the most powerful army of the land, and soon they would begin their march onto Ponyville, with plans to kill everypony there. And who knew where Nightmare Moon would take her army after that? Would Manehattan be next to fall? Phillydelphia?

Her exhaustion overpowered her, and Spitfire slowly sank out of the sky, collapsing onto the floor. *Soarin'...* she thought, tears appearing in her eyes, as the image of her struggling colleague invaded her mind. *He was in trouble. He was in DANGER, and I just left him there! I just ran like a scared little filly! He could be dead, or worse...he could be a new puppet of Nightmare Moon's. And I didn't do anything to stop it...*

Spitfire lay on the grass, the setting sun casting an ethereal glow across the un-named forest. She forgot about her wound, she forgot about warning Ponyville, she forgot about the fact that the sunset in front of her might be the last one she'd ever see. She closed her eyes, and let her emotions take over, her exhausted panting turning into painful sobs, as she cried for the loss of her friend.

* * *

Twilight had finished reading her newly-received letter, but she stayed silent. Her horn still held up the ominous scroll, her eyes darting from left to right, as she read and re-read, not believing the words on the scroll.

Her friends were silent, too. They had all seen the letter before Twilight, but they knew that Twilight would probably need a bit longer to process it. The silence hung heavily in Twilight's library, as the rays of the setting sun started to grow dim. Everypony in the room could feel the silence consume them, but still they stayed quiet, none of them knowing what to say.

In the end, it was Twilight who broke the stony silence.

"Applejack..." she said, her voice laced with fear, "When did this letter arrive?"

Applejack looked at her hooves. "A few hours ago." he replied. "Spike had just sent off that letter you left and this one came about ten minutes afterward."

"Which means...with such a quick reply...she must've been in Celestia's chambers when the letter arrived there." Twilight's rational thoughts and emotional responses were battling in her head - part of her wanted to break down and cry, while another part was trying to figure out exactly what had happened in Canterlot. For the moment, the rational side was winning.

This can't be right! Twilight thought. Nightmare Moon can't have returned. It's only been three years, and if the stories are anything to go by, she needs the help of the stars to get her power back. And even then, Princess Luna surely wouldn't try to take her form again! She was thankful, grateful for our help freeing her from that evil alicorn's influence. And EVEN then, there's an army of unicorns and pegasi at Canterlot, with Celestia's help they could surely beat her!

"Uh, Twilight?" Applejack's voice broke Twilight's train of thought. "We all know when you've got your thinkin' cap on, sugarcube. If you got a theory on what the hay is goin' on, you mind lettin' us know?"

Twilight looked at her friends, seeing the worry in their eyes. "I'm certainly thinking, AJ," she said, trying to keep her emotions at bay, "But...this doesn't make any sense. I can't think of a way that Luna could turn back into Nightmare Moon without help from the stars...and that's if we assume that Luna would even want that to happen anyway!"

Rainbow Dash was now hovering impatiently, clearly waiting for some sort of action plan. "That's not the bit that caught my eye, Twi'." she said, her face uncharacteristically serious. "It was the, oh, I don't know, MASSIVE ARMY that this mare says she's got. I mean, if Nightmare Moon is back, we can just use the Elements of Harmony again, can't we? But if it's her plus a big fat army, I think our chances drop a bit."

Twilight closed her eyes. "One thing at a time, Dash," she said. "I'm still trying to get my head around this whole thing, let's save the battle plan for when there's an actual battle, yes?"

Rainbow Dash landed, crossing her legs. "Fine." she replied. "But if that letter's anything to go by, there's gonna be a battle pretty darn soon."

Twilight nodded, still processing what she'd read in the letter. Her thoughts turned to the phrase that had worried her the most, the one about Celestia "taking ill", as Nightmare Moon had put it. *I can only think of two ways in which Nightmare Moon could gain control - either Princess Celestia is actually helping her with it, or...*

Twilight didn't want to think of the "or", because she knew it was far more likely than the first idea. It was a thought that she'd been trying to bat away ever since she first read the letter, one carried more by her ever-strengthening emotional side this time - the idea that something terrible had happened to Celestia.

Twilight could feel the stare of her friends, as they waited for her to say more. *They want me to tell them what's going on, but I really don't know*, she thought. *This is all too much, I need to think, and I can't do it with these guys staring at me.*

"Girls..." she said, her eyes becoming ever so slightly watery. "...Don't go anywhere. I'm just gonna take this letter upstairs, give it another read, see if I can figure out what's going on. I'll be back soon."

Her friends silently nodded, and Twilight trotted slowly to her stairs, trying to hold the tears back.

After she had gone, there was another awful moment of silence before Rarity spoke. "Hmm," she said, "This reminds me of the first time we

encountered Nightmare Moon. Remember? We finally get to the Elements of Harmony and Twilight shoos us out of the room, trying to figure out how to use them on her own."

"Cept this time, she shoosed herself," Applejack replied, looking at the stairs that Twilight had climbed, a worried expression on her face. "Poor girl just got a heap'a bad news in the space o' ten seconds, I'd probably want some alone time mahself."

"...I hope she's okay." Fluttershy said, her voice barely audible.

The silence came again, but was broken by the sound of Twilight Sparkle's muffled sobs from above them, telling everypony that the purple unicorn was definitely not okay.

* * *

Nightmare Moon walked quickly along the corridors of the palace, her long strides forcing Trixie to walk at a slow canter to keep the pace. She drank in the sights of the regal, marble filled corridor, and the sounds of her hooves echoing through them.

This is all mine, now, she thought, with a small smile. *I turned my makeshift prison into the crowning jewel of my new kingdom.*

"Uh, Queen Nightmare..."

"Please, Trixie, just Nightmare will suffice," Nightmare said, interrupting her new student. "You need to stop thinking of yourself as my underling."

"Yes, of course...Nightmare." Trixie continued, stumbling on the act of addressing a royal without her title. "I...I was just...well, I'm no warpony, but couldn't telling your enemy your plan be considered a bit of a...mistake?" Trixie's attempt to word her enquiry without trying to offend her new mentor hadn't quite worked, but it seemed that Nightmare hadn't noticed.

"Yes, Trixie, that is quite true. And yes, all that letter served to do was tell them of my plan to invade. Not the finer details, perhaps, but enough to maybe force them into some sort of counter-plan."

"So...why did you do it?"

Nightmare smiled. "I'm no warpony either, Trixie, but there's one thing I do know. Destroying your enemy's morale is just as important as destroying their military strength. And since Ponyville has no military strength that I know of, I decided to prioritize the former."

"And...letting that pegasus escape? That was for the same purpose?"

“Indeed. If anything, her arrival in Ponyville would probably harm their morale more than the letter. Think about it...she’s a Wonderbolt, a national icon, and she’s going to collapse into Ponyville, bloodied and beaten, with exactly the same doom-filled message. When the ponies see one of their rolemodels has been bested by me, they’ll lose any remaining hope of ever defeating me themselves.”

Trixie was impressed. From what she’d heard of Nightmare’s plan, it was completely unstoppable, but she realised now that her goal was not just to win, but to break the spirits of everypony that crossed her, *as well* as win. She could have easily just steamrolled the town she was planning on attacking, but Trixie knew that Nightmare’s plan was far more ambitious than just a simple torch and burn.

The two ponies had reached the end of the grand corridor, approaching the Palace’s main entrance. With a flash of her horn, Nightmare Moon opened it, and trotted down the stairs, taking yet another moment to admire her own handiwork.

The courtyard was filled with members of the Royal Guard, sorted, rank and file, just as Nightmare had commanded. Three long columns of ponies stretched before her - unicorns to her left, hovering pegasi to her right, with the earth ponies taking up the middle. The columns were further separated into small troupes, groups of about twenty, each headed by a commanding officer of varying rank, the lieutenants at the back, the ranks ever growing until they reached the generals at the front.

Nightmare Moon smiled, and gave a quick flash of her horn. At her telepathic orders, every member of her army dropped into a bow, causing an almost ocean-like ripple spreading from the front to the back. The Queen cleared her throat, preparing to speak to her new army.

“My loyal troops of Canterlot!” she yelled, using her magic to boost the sound of her voice. “Thank you all for making your way here so promptly. I am Queen Nightmare Moon, the new ruler of Canterlot, and, indeed, all of Equestria! Before I start with my plans for you all, I’d like to personally congratulate the pegasi on a job well done. I imagine nopony will try and escape again any time soon, thanks to your vigilant overwatch of the skies.”

The ranks of unicorns and earth ponies roared with appreciation, the sounds of hoof banging ringing through the courtyard. Nightmare’s smile grew wider - exactly as planned, the majority of the troops had been far enough away from the telepathic wave to keep some semblance of ponyhood, unlike the guards near the chambers, who were so close that every move they made had to be personally dictated by Nightmare herself.

That's good, she thought, Keeping a permanent telepathic link to the entire army would've drained my power quite quickly. She raised a hoof, and the noise of the ponies quietened.

"The pegasi's ruthless and lethal nature must be mirrored in the task ahead, my subjects." Nightmare continued. "There is a town to the west, a town known as Ponyville. You have all been freed, and have embraced your new leadership, but I know for certain that this town will never be freed. There are ponies there will always plot to overthrow my plans, and they have already succeeded once! But they will not succeed again. They will be punished for their treasonous acts once and for all."

Her horn flared, as she broadcasted the image of the six ponies that had defeated her into the minds of all of her soldiers.

"These are the ponies of which I speak. Twilight Sparkle, Applejack, Rainbow Dash, Fluttershy, Pinkie Pie, and Rarity. Remember the faces. Remember the names. These are the ponies which will *die* by my hoof this night, and you are the ones that will let me carry out this judgement. This new empire will *never* be perfect while these ponies still breathe, and I refuse to live in an imperfect land. So, listen up, soldiers, and I will tell you all your roles for this night, the night where we will cleanse the imperfections of our new empire!"

The roaring and hoof-banging and started again, this time from everypony in the courtyard. Even Trixie found herself joining in. *Even without her mind tricks, she thought, awe-stricken, she could have had this army in the middle of her hoof just with a speech like that!*

Nightmare Moon heard the thoughts of her protege, and smiled. *Indeed I could, Trixie, she thought. You yourself are living proof of that.*

* * *

The combination of Spitfire's worsening wound and the long trip to Ponyville had taken its toll - no longer having the strength to fly, she had walked for almost thirty minutes before finally seeing the town in front of her. She soldiered on, a noticeable trail of blood being left in her wake.

Rainbow Dash mentioned that Twilight Sparkle lived in a tree, she thought, so that should be easy to find. She glanced at her stomach, but quickly turned her head away when she saw her own blood-stained coat. *Ten minutes more to get to the town, five minutes to warn everypony. I think I have enough blood left for that.*

* * *

If any of the six ponies in Twilight's library had any intention of taking Nightmare Moon's advice to take one last look at the sun, they had missed their chance. The sun had now set, with only the faint red glow on the horizon keeping the fullness of nighttime at bay.

Of all of the things in Nightmare Moon's letter, however, this advice was certainly not the highest thing on the young ponies' minds. In fact, for perhaps the first time since the letter had arrived, their minds were on something else entirely - the sound of Twilight's sobs had died down, but she had not yet appeared from the higher levels of the library.

Rarity and Pinkie Pie had both wanted to go and comfort their friend, but Applejack had stopped them both. "Just give her a bit o' time," she had said, before the stony silence had begun again. "Whatever happened over at Canterlot, the one thing I think we're all certain of is that somethin' pretty awful happened to Princess Celestia, and she was all but a second mother to Twilight. Aint nothin' we can say to make that any better for her. She jus' needs a bit of processin' time, is all."

After that, nopony had spoken. There'd been awkward glances, nervous pacing, but no talking, with the one exception being Fluttershy's announcement that she was going to make some tea for everyone. This had recieved silent nods from Pinkie Pie and Rarity, but Applejack and Rainbow Dash were lost in their own identical thoughts: *What do we do?*

What do we do? Applejack thought. *I've seen those armies, we'll never stand up to them. We need to get everyone out. It'd be mighty hard for Nightmare Moon to kill everyone in Ponyville if there weren't a pony in sight. The walk to Canterlot isn't far, a few days, max...but I imagine Nightmare's got the Royal Guard on high alert lookin' for us. Next closest place is Phillydelphia...I got there on my lonesome but it'd be a darn sight trickier to take the whole town there....*

What do we do? Rainbow Dash thought. *We gotta get the word out, we gotta tell everypony to get to battle stations, we gotta get our strongest stallions, quickest pegasuses, and most powerful unicorns and defend this town! Nightmare Moon was STUPID to out and out tell us she's coming, who does she think she is? Me? You gotta earn your arrogance, Nightmare, and as far as bringing everlasting night goes, you're 0 for 2. If you've got an army, then we'd better get ourselves one too.*

Applejack and Rainbow Dash both nodded to themselves, and both made moves to the front door, pausing when they saw the other move.

"You thinkin' what I'm thinkin', Dash?" Applejack said, raising an eyebrow.

"Think so." Dash replied. "We need to tell everypony what's going on, right?"

"Yep, we sure do. We should go the Mayor, she can get the word out to everypony faster than us."

"Yeah, good idea. Once everyone knows, we gotta get to work."

"Darn right, we got us some difficult times, and we gotta prepare."

"Psh, difficult? Nothing's difficult while I'm around, AJ. I'll get these ponies ready for battle in ten seconds flat, you'll see."

"Ready for...battle?"

"Yeah, for battle! It'd be kinda hard to beat an army without a battle now, wouldn't it? I mean, that's what you meant by difficult times, right? Because of the battle?"

There was a silence, as the earth pony and the pegasus looked at each other, finally realizing that their ideas were not as synchronised as they had first thought.

"You can't be suggestin' we stay here, Dash?" Applejack said, her eyes wide with disbelief. "Were you readin' the same letter I was? This mare's got an *army*, Dash. Didya not see the Royal Guards when we were in Canterlot for the Grand Gallopin' Gala? They're serious business, we aint gonna stand a chance against 'em in a straight fight!"

"We've got a better chance here than anywhere else!" Rainbow Dash replied, returning to her impatient hovering. "Where else could we go? Canterlot isn't safe, Phillydelphia is too far a trip for everypony, only pegasuses can get up to Cloudsdale, and if Nightmare really wants to get us, she'll catch us no problem if we're just wandering in some random direction. Either we make a stand here, or she chases us down like dogs!"

"Well the quicker he get our hinds movin', the better then! We can up and leave before Nightmare even knows we're gone. She can't exactly chase us if she don't know where we went!"

"And we can't exactly run away if we don't know where we went! Er...I mean, where we're gonna be...er, I mean...well it's a STUPID idea!"

"Right, an' assemblin' a group o' applebuckers, dress makers and pie bakers to fight the gosh darned Royal Guard is downright sensible?"

Rainbow Dash landed, and looked straight into Applejack's eyes. "Well, AJ," she said, with a sigh, "There's clearly only one way to settle this..."

“Dash, if you even say the word ‘hoof-wrestle’, I’m gonna break your darn neck!”

“Yeah, well, it’s only ‘cause you know you’re gonna loooooose!”

“GIRLS!”

The ponies in the room span around to the stairs, to see Twilight Sparkle at the foot of them. She was clearly trying to give them a stern look, but her puffy, bloodshot eyes and her tear stained face ruined this attempt.

“Now girls, calm down.” she said, looking at the two ponies as if they were rowdy school-fillies. “There’ll be no hoof-wrestles or neck breaking in here, this is a library after all.”

“Uhm, sorry Twi’, guess we kinda lost our heads there...” Applejack paused, noticing Twilight’s eyes. “Are you okay, sugarcu...”

“I’m fine.” Twilight interrupted. “Well, I’m fine now. If anything my biggest problem now is that it’s kinda hard to think with two ponies arguing a few feet below me.”

“But Twilight, Applejack thinks we should...”

“...get out of Ponyville and find refuge somewhere else, you think we should stay here and fight. Ceiling’s pretty thin, Dash.” Twilight gave an awkward grin, which was quickly returned - everypony in the room was jumping on any smile they could experience, awkward or not.

“But yes,” she continued, starting to pace up and down the library. “Those are the two choices here...run and hide, or stay here and fight. I’ll be honest with you, girls, they both kinda suck.”

“Everything kinda sucks today.” Pinkie Pie said, only a hint of her trademark grin on her face. “Like a big ball of sucky suckiness sucking us all into a sucky situation. Seriously, it sucks.”

Twilight nodded. “One thing I do agree with, though,” she continued, still pacing. “We need to tell everypony what’s happened. But doing it right now would only cause a panic, it’d probably be a lot better if we at least had half a plan before we make a move. I mean, we tell everypony that an army is coming here without some kind of action plan, then ponies might try and make a break for it on their own, and that won’t be any good. We’ve got some time...it’s three or four days march from Canterlot and not even the Royal Guards could teleport such a distance without putting themselves out of commission for a while...but yeah, like I said, the last thing we want to do is start a panic...”

Twilight was interrupted by a pegasus crashing through her front door, and landing in a heap in her library. It took her a few seconds to register that, since Rainbow Dash was standing just in front of her, that it

couldn't be another one of her crash landings. In the next few seconds, she registered the frenzied eyes of the pegasus on the floor, the Wonderbolt cutie mark on her flank, and the long wound on her stomach, which was already making a small puddle of blood on the floor. The ponies stood, slack-jawed at the sight, as the pegasus looked up at them, her speech punctuated by gasps of pain.

"Nightmare...Moon...is...back.....she's...coming...here.....you...need...to...run..."

Despite Twilight's advice, the ponies started to panic.

* * *

Nightmare Moon's original plan was to go back to Celestia's chambers after her chat with the army. There were still a few things left to sort out before heading to Ponyville - there was an unconscious pegasus to deal with, she needed to make a trip to the dungeons for some last minute enlistments, and she still hadn't given Trixie her reward for already becoming such a faithful student. These things would have to wait, though.

Literally ten minutes after her speech, one of the pegasus captains had reported that pegasi from outside Canterlot were helping some of the townsp ponies escape. It had been found out that they had come from Cloudsdale, which raised a few grievances in Nightmare Moon's head.

I've just publicly thanked the pegasi for being such ruthless skyguards, and then they make two big mistakes, she thought, trotting down the streets of Canterlot, Trixie hot on her heels. They let someone escape and warn the Cloudsdalians of what's going on, then they let pegasi back in to airlift Earth Ponies out? I'm thinking we may have a few dishonourable discharges before the sun rises tomorrow.

The pegasi hadn't been complete failures, however. They'd caught a Cloudsdale pegasus trying to escape carrying two earth ponies at once, clearly something that was outside of his capabilities. Nightmare was happy with one thing, though - the two ponies he was carrying had both fallen to their deaths, which, at the very least, had saved her a job. This was why Nightmare Moon was in the streets of Canterlot now - she'd requested for the pegasus to be left where he lay in the street, so that an example could be made in front (or, at least, within earshot) of the townsp onies in the houses.

Trixie, she thought, broadcasting her voice into Trixie's mind. These ponies all know me as I am, but they still think of you as just a showpony. Let's fix that. You can strike the final blow here. Don't worry, there won't be a shield stopping you this time.

Trixie didn't respond, but Nightmare saw her nod her head out of the corner of her eye. *Excellent. This should be quite amusing.*

As she turned on to Market Street, she saw the pegasus in question. Three Royal Guard unicorns surrounded him, stood to attention, with a pegasus hovering just above them. There were a few bangs and clatters from the nearby houses and shops - clearly the ponies had been watching the events, but the sight of their new Queen had scared them back from their windows.

Seeing his Queen approach, the taller of the Royal Guards approached her, making a quick bow before he spoke.

"He's been here about half an hour, ma'am. The pegasi roughed him up a bit, but he's still alive. He's not talking, though. We've tried to get information out of him, about who warned them and such, but he's staying silent. We figured you'd be...ah...more convincing."

"Well, I'll try my very best, Captain." Nightmare said, an evil smirk appearing on her face. "You and your colleagues can go, we're marching at dawn, and you need to prepare."

The unicorn nodded. His horn flashed for an instant as he commanded his underlings to head back to the castle, and, with another flash, he and his soldiers had disappeared.

Nightmare Moon now had full view of the rebellious pegasus, and was mildly surprised. Clearly, he was no soldier. His wiry, small frame could almost be mistaken for a female's, his pure white coat blemished only with the rainbow-shaped cutie mark on his flank, and the spots of blood on his torso.

Rainbow-shaped cutie mark...he's a weather-maker? Nightmare thought. *And he tried to get two ponies out at once? Well, he's ambitious, I'll give him that.*

She walked over to him, giving a quick nod to the pegasus flying above, motioning him down to the ground. She was finally close enough to see the rebel's face - clearly this had been the target of the Royal Guard's attack. His face was bloodied, red stains around his cheeks and eyes, with dark bruises forming on his chin. She could see the fear in the pegasus' green eyes, but once he had seen who was approaching him, the fear changed into defiance.

"What is your name, pegasus?" Nightmare asked. She received no response, save for a glare of disgust from the injured rebel. She smiled.

"I'm very understanding of the fact that you didn't hear my speech a few hours ago, so I'll just say the one thing from it that applies to your situation - the right to remain silent doesn't exist anymore. So, once again, what is your name?"

The pegasus returned the smile, as forcefully as he could. "My name is Screw You." he said, with an air of arrogance. "I've never been a fan of it, to be honest. I couldn't tell you how much abuse I got at school."

Nightmare's Moon suddenly vanished. "Listen, you *termite*," she said, her eyes narrowing and her voice becoming a hoarse whisper. "Regardless of what happens here, in about ten minutes, you will be dead. I have the choice to make that death either quick and painless, or slow and horrible, and I'm *certain* the former will be your preference. Last chance. What is your name?"

"Go to hell."

The Queen's smile was back. "Break one of his legs."

The Royal Guard pegasus moved quickly, dashing to the downed pegasus and quickly pulling him to his feet. He took one second to line up his attack, before bucking the rebel right on the side of his knee, as forcefully as a ram. Nightmare saw the leg give way, hearing the violent crack of breaking bones as the rebel fell to the floor again, a scream of pain exploding from his throat, echoing from the walls of the building around him.

Nightmare waited. She was giving the pegasus a chance to experience the pain he was in. She reasoned that no weather-maker had experienced pain so excruciating, but it was just the tip of the iceberg. At least, if he kept up his stonewall attitude.

The screaming stopped, and was replaced by the pegasus' heavy breathing, punctuated by whimpers of pain.

"I won't hesitate to remind you, pegasus," Nightmare said, not bothering to hide her pleased tone of voice. "You have three other legs to break. And if you still feel the need to be cute with me after that, then I'll move onto your wings. Trust me, breaking your legs is nothing compared to the pain of having a wing ripped off. Once again, *what is your name?*"

"...Starlight...Flash..."

"That's more like it. Although I can see why you wouldn't want to tell me, that's a rather...odd name for a male. How did Cloudsdale hear about the events here in Canterlot?"

The pegasus had clearly given up on his silence. "One of...the Wonderbolts..." he said, between grunts of pain. "Tyco...he got out...told us what happened...convinced us to come help..."

Right, mental note, Nightmare thought, annoyed. The Wonderbolts are far too much hassle than they're worth. When I make the new Shadowbolts, just find new pegasi. Probably far easier.

"He convinced you? How? There are no soldiers that I know of in Cloudsdale."

"Ha...do you...live under...a rock or something? He's a Wonderbolt...famous everywhere...but a god...in a pegasus town...like Cloudsdale..."

"You act so rebellious, yet you followed him like a lamb to the slaughter?"

"He...didn't tell us...how bad it was. We didn't expect...so many..."

"How many of you were 'convinced'?"

"Fifty...or so...your guards got...most of them...some of them...took off before we even got here...too scared."

Good, Nightmare thought. If this is the best Cloudsdale can offer, then it shouldn't be hard to nip this insurgence in the bud.

"It's a shame, Starlight," Nightmare said, turning and starting to walk away from the pegasus. "Your bravery and arrogance was quite impressive. Had you not broken so easily under torture I might have kept you on. Put you in the army. The potential was there, if only you hadn't screamed like a child from something as small as a broken leg."

"Are you gonna...keep rambling on...or are you gonna...kill me?" Starlight replied, the arrogance creeping ever so slightly back into his voice.

Nightmare gave Trixie a nod, and she walked past her on the left hand side, not looking back to the downed pegasus. Trixie approached him, her horn sparking in readiness.

"I think I'll go with the second one." Nightmare said.

There was a loud crack, and the pained breathing of the pegasus turned into silence.