

Solar Flare

A SURVIVOR'S EYE-WITNESS ACCOUNT OF THE WAR OF THE NIGHT

and

What Could Have Been

and

Deep Dark

By Dragryphon



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Chapter 1

This text is a gift to my wonderful daughters. May it record your many happy memories, and even the sad ones, so that if you may ever read it, the happier ones will seem that much more so. I have imbued this tome with powerful magic. No ink will ever touch its pages. No quill will ever scratch against them. It will record, by itself, your histories. Your achievements. Your love for each other. May your years of service to our nation of Equestria be the best it has ever had. Your mother and I will not be long upon this earth. Just as our ancestors left for the higher plane, so shall we. In our place, we leave you our kingdom. Our livelihood. Our lives. May you bring long lasting prosperity to your home. Long live the Daughters of Equestria.

A brief bit of knowledge about the race of alicorns. The earth can only support a minuscule amount at one time. They are gods within their own right, beings not from the mortal plane of existence. Their home plane is all but a mystery. Usually, there are upwards of only four or five, and always at the least two. One for the day, and one for the night. It has been this way for millenia. They are the rulers of all of ponykind, but for only a few thousand years do they rule before they Ascend, leaving behind a new duo to take their place. This history begins with the previous rulers' Ascension, and the new rulers' rise to power. Thus begin the histories of Celestia and Luna.

"Luna! Lunaaaa!" yelled Celestia as she burst into her little sister's quarters. The pink-maned white-coated alicorn was panting heavily from sprinting. It was nearly time for the Ascension and Luna was probably hiding like a filly again!

Scanning Luna's bedroom, nothing appeared to be out of place. It was decorated in dark colors: blues, violets, and blacks adorned every surface. The pegasus down bed lay made, the floor's woven carpet was clear, and even the desk lay neatly organized. Luna's selection of quills were

arranged nicely in a row, and her parchment was stacked, ready to use. The ink pot was plugged with a cork to prevent it from drying out, and Luna's prized abacus had been reset and was ready to use.

Celestia cocked her ears, thinking she had caught a small sound. Moving further into the room, she proceeded towards the back where a lavish washroom was located. Peering within, she saw her sister facing the large mirror upon one wall, sniffing and giving tiny sobs. Sighing, she walked into the tiled room and lay her neck over her younger sibling's in a hug. "Come, Luna. If we're too late, we'll miss the Ascension, and we'll never get to say our last goodbye. You know we can't stop it or delay it from happening..."

Luna leaned into the hug and gave a large sniff, wiping the tears from her eyes with a hoof. "I know, Celly, but I don't want mother and father to leave. I don't even know if I'm ready to assume the duties of the night."

"I know, dear sister. I don't wish them to leave, either, but we can't stop this. They said they had been called back, and that it is our turn to rule. I'm scared, too, but we must go! We'll only know regret if they leave without us there. Come, come." Leaning down, Celestia pushed her nose against Luna's flank, despite her sister's stubbornness to stay sat.

Then, an idea hit her and a mischievous grin spread across her face. "I'll tickle you again. Tickle tickle tickle!" Celestia slipped a foreleg around Luna and tickled a hooftip against her belly, eliciting a shriek of surprise from her sister.

Luna sprang up with a playful, "Nooooo!" and darted off, Celestia pursuing her out of the room and into the corridors, already feeling in a better mood. "I'm gonna getcha! I'm gonna getcha! And when I do, I'm going to pin you down and tickle you without mercy!"

Luna, her eyes already drying, giggled and put on more speed. She was slower than her sister, but she knew how Celly always hung back a bit, just to give her a fighting chance. "You have to catch me first, before I get to mom and dad!" Their parents were 'base', where Luna was safe until the game began again.

"You'll need to find them first, silly! And by the time you do, I'll have caught you!" Celestia exclaimed, half a ponylength behind her sister. She stretched her neck out and nosed against Luna's flank, another playful

shriek coming from her in response. *Let's hope this keeps my sister's mind off things, and gets her to mother and father before they go.*

Luna turned her head and stuck her tongue out at Celestia before taking a sharp turn down another corridor, bursting in through a couple open doors into Everfree Castle's audience chambers. The throne at the top contained two more alicorns: their parents, Queen Sol and King Altair of Equestria. One was rose in color with a gently sloping nose and a pair of bright green eyes, while the other a charcoal grey, had a sturdier build of body, and his crimson eyes seemed to pierce through anything they stared at. Luna ran up the steps to the throne and planted a hoof against her mother's flank, looking back at Celestia with a wide grin, "I win!"

Celestia herself galloped up next to her father and stuck her tongue out at Luna, to the bemusement of both their parents.

"My children, we have guests," Queen Sol admonished her daughters, causing the two fillies to start and hide behind the two elder alicorns. Beyond the throne, an entire crowd of ponies of all types and sizes lay watching. A few were even giggling at the sisters' antics, while others just rolled their eyes.

King Altair leaned down and gave Celestia a brief nuzzle of affection, "To our sides, my wonderful daughters, the ceremony begins."

The two alicorn fillies immediately switched places as they had practiced, Luna at Altair's flank, and Celestia at her mother's. Raising their heads to the sky, the rulers' horns began to emit vibrant light, Altair's an inky black and Sol's a pure, bright white.

All at once, light began to flood the chamber from the skylights, as if an immense light source had appeared directly overhead. Outside the skylights, the sky was a deep blue, not a thing within it. No clouds, no birds, not even the occasional pegasus. As the light began to focus upon the throne, all of the alicorns sat up straighter.

Altair cleared his throat and let his gaze slide across the crowd. "For three millenia we have gracefully ruled Equestria. And for three millenia, you have been faithful to us. We now ask that you do the same for our daughters. By the Power invested in me, King Altair, God of the Night, Bringer of the Dark, I relinquish my throne to my daughter, Princess Luna. She shall be entrusted fully with the Night, and will gain the titles of

Goddess of the Night and Bringer of the Dark upon our departure.” His speech was short, as the actual speech had been weeks prior.

“And I, Queen Sol, Goddess of the Day, Herald of the Light, do hereby relinquish my throne to my daughter, Princess Celestia. Whereupon our departure she shall gain the titles Goddess of the Day and Herald of the Light. May our daughters rule with fairness and benevolence for millenia to come.”

Their horns glowed brighter, and the crowns upon their brows vanished. Upon Luna’s and Celestia’s head, crowns sprang into being, crafted to their ideals. Celestia’s a golden with a gem studded upon the front, and Luna’s of a more simplistic nature, a dark violet crown.

A cheer went through the crowd, and everypony upon the throne smiled back at them. Stepping back to the sides, Sol and Altair nodded towards their daughters. Luna swallowed and peered over at Celestia with trepidation. Her sister gave a reassuring smile in return, then, as one, the two fillies took the throne, an even louder cheer echoing throughout the chamber. Ponies of all types began to line up at the base of the stairs to give the new throne their well-wishes.

And while the smiles upon their faces seemed real, the four alicorns at the top of the dais were anything but happy and smiling within.

“There are several things we must tell you before we Ascend, my dear daughters, Celestia and Luna,” Sol said in the ex-rulers’ private chambers. Celestia was clinging to Sol’s forelegs, while Luna hid beneath Altair’s chest. Sol glanced over to her mate, who nodded before she continued.

“We leave many things within your care. One set of objects being the Elements of Harmony. The magics of the Elements: Benevolence, Truth, Mirth, Allegiance, Charity, and Power, we leave to you. Please, my lovely daughters, do not use them except in the greatest of need. In the lower levels of the castle also hold rooms containing dangerous artifacts that we were unable to be safely disabled or destroyed. We leave upon you the duty to confiscate any magical item created that could be destructive. They stay near the Core’s chamber, so as to be shielded by the same wards the Core has. Remember to trust your ministers, too. They know what to do, learn from them, and from experience.”

Altair stood there, listening to his love list things off one by one as he leaned down to nuzzle at Luna lovingly. Quiet, little Luna. He worried for her, always so shy and reserved, trying to stay out of the way of everyone else. She always seemed so lonely, and he wondered if she could handle the long nights. "You'll be fine, little one. You'll have your sister there." Luna smiled at her father and rubbed her muzzle against his. "And Celestia?"

The white alicorn raised her head, staring back at her parents, "Yes, father?"

Altair smiled warmly and reached past Luna to nuzzle gently at Celestia as well. "I leave Luna within your care, as her elder sister. I thus set you this task, Celestia. Take care of her, as we cannot." Altair carefully maneuvered himself so that Luna was no longer beneath him. He blinked his crimson eyes at the two, then pushed his head against Luna's flank to move her to Celestia. "You are both the only pony each other truly has. Thus are the hardships of ruling."

Princess Celestia draped her neck over Luna's, dropping a wing over the night alicorn's side, the two of them watching as Sol and Altair took a few steps back into the middle of the bedchamber. The two fillies knew what was coming next, and tears began to stream down their cheeks. The wing over Luna's back was not only meant to comfort her, but to also hold her in place. This was the Ascension, the moment in time when an alicorn was called back to their home plane, to live and watch over the ponies of Equestria. A new alicorn is not taken to the higher plane right away, instead living the first few millenia of their life in Equestria, to live and learn, to grow, and to mature. But eventually, all alicorns must leave Equestria, joining their kind in the higher realm, and for Celestia and Luna's parents, that time had arrived.

Celestia's voice cracked as she spoke, "G-Goodbye mother....Goodbye F-father...W-We'll m-m-miss you..."

Luna's quiet sobs next to her did not help the mood, and Celestia could feel her trying to tug away, to go to their parents. Luna's eyes were wide, and whispers came from her mouth. The white alicorn could have sworn she heard, "Please....Please don't go...I don't want to be alone..."

A bright light began to shine within the room, from their parents horns, and as it grew brighter, the two elder alicorns said in unison, "Goodbye, lights of

our hearts. We will wait for you in Haven, we will not forget you, and we love you with all our being. Remember all that we have taught you, all that we have left to you, and all that we meant to you.”

As the light grew painfully brilliant, the two sisters had to avert their eyes, the radiance filling the room. Several long seconds passed before it dimmed, then vanished completely. Blinking the spots and tears from their eyes, the sisters glanced to where their parents had been and saw nothing. They were gone.

Luna let out an anguished cry and managed to pull herself from Celestia’s grasp, dashing over to the place where the two elders had been. The scream of sorrow that Luna let loose broke Celestia’s heart. Walking over to her sister, Celestia settled down beside her younger sister, the white alicorn pulling Luna against her side. *I guess I am her mother and sister now. She has nobody else. My poor dearest sister, I will always be here for you.*

Tears began to soak Celestia’s cheeks as she cried alongside her younger sister. Hours passed, and dusk approached before either of them spoke again.

“Luna...Luna, our duties. We can’t lay here all night. I have to take the day away to make way for the night...Come, little sister, maybe you can paint a portrait of them, to remember, to never forget them,” Celestia cooed softly, helping the silent Luna to her feet.

Luna nodded begrudgingly, and the two alicorns made their way out of their parents’ former bedchambers to take on their duties.

And thus, the rule of King Altair and Queen Sol ended, and the rule of Princesses Celestia and Luna began...

A week later, Luna stood in front of the windows of her bedchamber, an easel placed in front of her. Upon the easel sat a large painting of her parents; it was quite accurate, and done in a lavish design. Luna had always been the artist, and Celestia the thinker. She used her magic to tweak various things upon the portrait with a brush: adding a smidgen of grey there, maybe a bit more red for Altair’s eyes, a touch-up here, aaand...

The doors to her chamber opened, admitting her elder sister into the room. Luna turned, a smile upon her face as she set down the palette and brushes, running over to nestle in against her sibling. "Celly! I'm nearly done with the painting! It looks wonderful so far! Your idea to paint it was great, and I can't wait for you to see it when I'm finished!" Luna stared up at Celestia expectantly.

Celestia giggled softly and nudged lovingly at her sister's nose, "Dearest sister, I would love to see your painting, but not as of yet. I came to you about something else."

Luna's face fell, then perked back up at the good mood within Celly's voice. Her eyes probably asked the question, as Celestia replied, "I have been thinking, about our day and night. They seem....Barren. Empty. Devoid of anything, including..." Celestia peered over at Luna's portrait of their parents before replying again. "Art. We have the power, little sister, why can't we design our skies as we think they should be, rather than endless blue and black fields that nopony but the pegasi take notice of?"

Luna took a step back from her sister, deep in thought. *Decorate our skies? Can we do that? Can I do that!? But the night is meant to be dark, how would ponies see what I have done wi-Wait...What if I...?* Ideas sprang to Luna's mind, causing her to spring around in glee! "Yes! We should! I have the perfect ideas already for how to personalize my night sky!" It still felt so strange for her to call the night sky hers.

Bursting out in a wide grin, Celestia laughed in return and shook her mane, "As do I! My idea is that we take a part of ourselves and use it for the skies! Oh, I can just imagine now, a bright globe of flame high in the sky, looking down over everypony. It will become warmer, and the day brighter...Oh! And crops will benefit more, too!"

"And I am thinking the same. A globe of cool light, just enough light for night travelers to see by, yet not too much it leaves ponies unable to sleep! And...And..." Luna brightened further and continued, "Little diamonds of light, like pinpricks, made into all sorts of fanciful shapes, so many we couldn't possibly name them all. What a wonderful idea, Celly!"

Celestia smiled as she walked over to the open window to gaze up at the blue sky. The empty blue sky. *I knew this would cheer her up. She's stayed mostly within her room this past week, working on that painting. Ponies*

have been wondering where she had gone. “I shall get started, then, dear sister.”

Celestia’s horn began to emit a pure light as she reached deep inside of herself for that piece she had set aside, that piece that would be her addition to the day. Grasping it, she infused it with her magic, watching it burst into life. As Luna looked on in awe, a large orb extruded itself from her sister’s horn and began to drift away, seeping recklessly into the sky before vanishing into the distance.

“Where did it go?” Luna asked, before a sudden flare in the sky caught her eye. The sky brightened, flashing a bright, hot white before fading back to its familiar liquid blue as something new appeared. A great fiery sphere, casting its glorious radiance down upon all of Equestria.

“...I shall name her....Sol....The warmth of my heart...”

Luna had stayed up later into the night, way past her usual time to sleep. She had heard the whispers in the court, the awe and love the sun had generated for them. They loved the warmth, the extra light, and even farmers had come forth to express their gratitude to Celestia.

The alicorn was excited to begin her own work, ideas blooming within her mind as she stared out the window of her bedchambers. Closing her eyes, Luna felt her consciousness seep into the night sky, and spread out amongst it. All of Equestria lie below her. The hemisphere that was Equestria, the world she knew, lay beneath her in all its vast entirety. She could see all the ponies who had stayed awake, wanting to see what she would do with the night sky.

She imagined her father, an alicorn who did not need to show a lot of affection to his daughters for them to know that he loved them. He was strong, and was silent except when he needed to speak, having left most of the talking in the past to his beloved mate. And then she imagined that strength, that cool embrace, her father in the sky before her, and a new light burst into being.

But she did not feel that it was complete.

Taking the palette of her mind, Luna began to paint it, all sorts of whites, greys and blacks. In her mind's eye, it looked rugged, tempered in the fires of the sun's warmth.

But, Luna realized something. This sphere she could feel, could touch and hold if she wished to. This celestial body was not her father, and would discredit his name. So she named this celestial body Luna, after herself.

The alicorn was not close to being finished. She was not a minimalist artist. Oh no, she had the entire sky to paint, and so she created the stars, diamonds that hung onto the sky and glinted down to those below, arranging them into pictures and patterns for the ponies on the ground to appreciate.

One of these pictures was an alicorn, a very familiar alicorn, one who the moon was supposed to be named after. And the eye...the eye of this alicorn she named Altair.

Ponies were lined up nearly out of the Everfree Castle's audience chambers, wishing to speak with the new princesses. The hall was abuzz with talk about the sisters' beautiful creations: the sun, the moon, and the stars. The entire court could speak about nothing but them.

Upon the throne, two alicorns beamed at all the attention, proud of their creations. The ponies who enjoyed them greatly outnumbered the whispers of the dissenters.

Celestia knew she could not please everypony; the population of the Everfree forest, Everfree city, and all of Equestria was far too diverse to allow a single unanimous opinion.

As she finished talking with one of the more recent well-wishers, a gong sounded throughout the hall, indicating the end of court with the Princesses.

Luna breathed a heavy sigh of relief as the line finally disintegrated, some ponies staying to mingle with each other in the audience chamber while others simply went home. "Celly, why do we have to hold court? While I enjoy the attention my night gets, if I hear one more pony tell me that it could be sooo much better with their ideas, I'll scream!"

Her sister shook her head and stretched out her large, alabaster wings before refolding them to her back. She really wanted to take them for a fly in her sun, but her duties have prevented such a thing from happening so far. "They'll die down soon enough, Luna. Remember, mother and father warned us that many ponies would only come to us to seek things for themselves. It...is something we may have to get used to. Ugh, I can't imagine the trouble we're going to have." Celestia rolled her eyes and wrapped her sister within one white wing, then blinked as Luna yawned. "Are you alright, sister?"

Yawning again, Luna nodded, "I'm just tired. I was up most of last night decorating my sky. I only had a few hours of sleep, otherwise. I also have more ideas of what to do with my night, and, well.... another idea of mine that I want to talk to you about tomorrow, too. I call it the Continuous Universal Talent Integration of Equestria Mark. It is very interesting, you should like it. I just need more time to figure it completely out."

"Well, alright. Until then, I suggest you get to your bedchamber and get some sleep, dearest. I'd like to see what you have ready for Equestria tonight!" Celestia chuckled.

"Yeees, mother!", Luna crowed, rolling her eyes and sticking her tongue out at her sister. Then, giggling, she ran down the throne's stairs and past the guards stationed at their base before Celestia could retaliate with a swipe of her wing.

Having slept until sunset, Luna's consciousness was back in the sky, placing more stars throughout her canvas. Every once in a while, she decided to place a differently colored gem in the sky, but while Luna was happy with her art, she was as yet unsatisfied. *What if I make them real? Gems are fine....But what if I made them like Celly's sun? Yes! That should do!* Flexing her magic over the night, Luna watched as the stars darted off, spreading through the cosmos.

Making sure they kept their shape from her viewpoint, she watched them place themselves, some bright, others dim, depending on their distance and luminosity. Still, something was not.....*Aha! Something for the ponies to enjoy!* Summoning tiny gems of light, Luna sent them streaking down over the night sky. First one, then three, then dozens as the night sky lit up with

them. *And I shall call this a meteor shower! A perfect tribute to the stars, and especially to Altair.*

The Goddess of the Night and Moon located her father's star, one of the brightest in the sky. *I hope you are proud of me, father, proud of what I have done with your night. I hope I have done right by you...*

Her consciousness retreated back to her body, feeling strangely empty from no longer encompassing the night sky. She had never known Altair could do this, and now she knew why he had mostly been awake during the night.

Heading to her pegasus down-filled bed, Luna set her crown down upon the nearby nightstand before slipping beneath the covers. She did not feel too tired, but she needed her sleep for the next day.

Luna....Lunaaaa....Wake up, little sister.....

The voice brought Luna out of her dreams, and she opened her eyes to see....A face! Oh sister, a face in her face! In fact, it was her sister's face, which did not help in the least! Luna scrabbled off the side of the bed, clunking down upon the floor as her covers draped over her, pulled with the alicorn's fall.

"Oh! Sorry, Luna! I did not mean to scare you! I was worried, it's nearly noon and you were still asleep!" she exclaimed, peering over the edge of the bed at her sister.

Luna slipped the covers down over herself as she stared at Celestia in wide-eyed shock. "N-noon!? B-but it only feels like I slept a few hours! I've been so tired during the day lately, but during the night, it seems I have no end to my energy! Oh, Celly, I'm sorry for sleeping in, I did not mean to..."

"Ohhh....I am just not terribly good at apologizing. Am I?" She hung her head as she balled up the sheets and threw them back atop her bed, nearly smacking Celestia in the face with them.

Neatly dodging the ball of bedcovers, Celestia warmly smiled to her sister. "There is no need to apologize, dear sister. I rose the sun myself this morning, took care of morning deeds, and later you can repay me by

helping with court. But, I had another thing I wanted to ask. What is this idea you have about 'CUTIE Marks'?"

The comment about the court elicited a groan from Luna, but she stood upon her hooves before replying, "Cutie Marks...Oh! My Continuous Universal Talent Integration of Equestria Mark. Oh, well..." Luna ran over to her desk, then produced a parchment with a drawing upon it over to her sister. "Celly, this is the Continuous Universal Talent Integration of Equestria Mark..." Celestia looked expectantly at Luna, which drew a sigh from the younger sister's lips. "Fiiine, the 'cutie mark'."

The drawing showed a basic sketch of a pony. In fact it looked like Luna herself. Her hindquarters were circled, and within the circle, a blotch with a crescent moon were drawn. "I think all ponies should have a mark upon their hips that shows what they are best at. Or their best talent, in other words. Just imagine what kinds would appear, and each the great pride of their owner!"

Celestia's eyes lit up as she imagined a golden many-rayed sun upon her hip, and she clapped her hooves together enthusiastically. "Yes! That is so delightful! I already know what I wish for mine to be! And you have yours, so do the spell, sister! Do it do it do it!" Celestia was nearly bouncing around the room at this point, stupefying Luna into freezing, who had very rarely seen her sister act this way.

"Ummm, Celly...? You can calm down now, I'll...Uhhh, do mine first, then do yours. And then we can see about doing it for the rest of Equestria and releasing a statement about it. You know, if you want to. I am a little worried what everypony else will think, really." She stepped back over to her desk, taking the drawing with her and setting it aside as she looked over the spell she had written down upon another piece of parchment.

Calming her hyperactivity, Celestia drew near and watched over Luna's shoulder, memorizing the spell with her. It did not seem to be too difficult, just repetitious to a certain extent. She stepped back as an expression of intense concentration appeared upon her sister's face, the glow upon her horn matching the one appearing on both sides of her flank. It seemed to take a good bit longer than expected, but just as Celestia began to think that the spell was a failure, a flash from her sister's rear drew her eyes, the mark that she had drawn on the parchment flashing upon her flank before fading into view.

Slumping a bit from the fatigue of casting that spell, Luna immediately perked up as she saw what lay on both sides of her flank. A blotch of starry sky with a crescent moon, exactly as she had imagined it would be! This time, it was her turn to dance around her bedchambers, causing Celestia to overly exaggerate an eye roll, before bursting into a small fit of giggles.

“Okay, me next!” Celestia jogged her way over to Luna’s desk, taking another moment to look over the spell before beginning her for herself. Once again, it took a few moments for it to take effect before Celestia’s own mark came into being. A many-rayed golden sun which highly matched her coat, it was everything she had imagined it to be.

For the next several minutes, both sisters pranced about the room, excited and prideful about their new identification marks, even taking several long seconds at times to just stare back at their flanks. Their Continuous Universal Talent Integration of Equestria Marks...er, sorry, CUTIE Marks as Celestia was want to call them, were mystifying, having turned their fur into a representation of their best skill.

Of course, their elation eventually faded, only to be replaced by an excitement to share their marks with the rest of Equestria.

“Celly, I don’t think I have enough power to do a spell this large throughout Equestria, not for everypony. Painting my sky and raising the moon are one thing, but something like this...?” Luna hung her head as her excitement briefly left her, before coming back with a vengeance! “What about the Core? Do you think we could use that to bolster our magics? It does control all the passive and automatic magics the palace and surrounding city have!”

Celestia laughed and nodded, “Yes, I agree! We should do so! I think that is what it is there for, to help us. Come!” And with that, Luna’s sister sprinted out of the room, followed closely by her younger sister. They dashed through the halls, nearly running into no small number of ponies about their business, and even the guards themselves, who barely raised an eyebrow at the alicorn sisters’ antics.

Down corridors and stairs they went, the levels becoming more abandoned and unused the deeper they went until finally, at the furthest depths of the castle, they came to a simple stone hallway with doors along either side and a massive room at the end. Luna peered at each of the doors, the

palpable sensation of strong magics coming from either side of the sisters, and especially from up ahead. "What's in the doors to either side, Celly? The magic from them feels....wrong."

Celestia looked to either side of themselves as they trudged forth, "I presume it must be the rooms the magical items are sealed in. Some are said to be too dangerous to touch, or even look at without protection. I would prefer if you didn't go near any of them, Luna. I don't want to lose you as my only sister. Or see you turn into a horrible beast with a thousand tentacles!" Celestia teased, a twinkle in her eye.

"Or a thousand horns and wings, Celly?" Luna retorted, a smug expression upon her face.

"Oh, that would be absolutely horrifying! Even worse than you look right now," her sister jibed, poking Luna in the breast with a hoof.

As they neared the chamber, Luna blew air out from between her lips. "That's nothing, Celly. There's nothing more scary than you with bedmane in the morning. I still have nightmares about that!"

"Hey! It isn't my fault that I-" Celestia paused. They were within the room, which appeared much different from the plain stone corridor. The room was a large dome, with alabaster walls, and in the center of the room hung, suspended in thin air, an impossibly large crystal, a luminescent glow emanating from its center. They had arrived at the Core.

"Alright...Ummm....I forgot what we're supposed to do with it, Luna. I think it was to open ourselves up to it, as if we were expecting a hug?"

Staring up at the Core in awe, Luna replied, "*Like we're expecting a hug?* Really? No no, I paid attention in class, Celly. We're supposed to connect our magic to it, and through it. We form the spell and the Core aids us in giving the power we need."

Celestia turned her head with a sheepish look, a dawn of understanding upon her face. "Well, should you be the one to do this, then, sister?"

The midnight alicorn walked into the middle of the room, staring straight up at the Core before bobbing her head, "I know the spell best, so I should." Her horn began to radiate a deep violet glow, which then speared upward into the Core itself. Luna slowly filled it with her consciousness, and it filled hers in return. She could see how it connected with all the magics in

Everfree City and Castle, even down to the magical torches lining the walls in corridors. And the magical power it held! Its presence filled her to bursting but hers was not yet even a drop within its bucket! The flow was exhilarating, and she nearly lost herself within it. She remembered the task at hand, and formed the spell within her mind. Luna felt the Core take a hold of it, analyze it, then add its power to her own.

All at once, a power wave of light spread outward from the core and across the sky, blanketing all of Equestria. Where it touched, ponies of all types stared in fascination as a picture of their best talent appeared upon their flank. The only ponies left out were the fillies and colts who had yet to find what they enjoyed and were best at.

Luna was reluctant to release the power in her grasp, it was so very addicting. But, she had to do so, and she felt herself drain back into her own body, wobbling from not only the amount of power that had flown through her, but also from the fatigue of the spell itself. Celestia was there within a second, bracing herself against her sister and keeping her from falling.

“Did it work, do all our little ponies have cutie marks...?” Celestia asked.

Wavering, Luna felt her strength returning by the second until she was able to stand on her own without fear of toppling over. “I-I think so. Oh, Celly, the Core, it was so wonderful! The power it gave me! It made me feel like I could do anything! Is that what mother and father always felt coursing through their veins? Power of that magnitude?”

“I wouldn’t know, dearest sister. I felt nothing as I was not connected to it. Here, let us go, court begins soon and we do not wish to be late for it,” Celestia reinforced, pulling herself away from her younger sister as she began to walk out of the chamber and down the hallway.

Letting out an ough and sticking a hoof to her mouth in a gagging motion, Luna followed her elder sibling. She so did not want to deal with court right now. She wanted to run, to play, to just have fun. But...She was a princess now, a ruler of Equestria. This was her duty. Luna wasn’t so deep in her thoughts when she felt something pull at her mind. Ahead of her, Celestia was beginning the climb up the stone steps to the next level, while beside her, in the direction the mental tugging was coming from, was one of the

doors leading to the stash of magical items deemed too dangerous to be used.

No, Celly told me I must never go in these rooms, she would be so mad if she knew I had disobeyed her. The pull, however, became more urgent, as if there was a pony stuck within. *What if there is?*

Curious, the alicorn pushed open the surprisingly unlocked door and walked inside. It was nothing more than a small room, the walls lined with shelves that had all manner of objects of every shape and size stacked upon them. Yet Luna ignored them. The tug of the trapped pony was gone, instead being replaced by a pull of pure power. There, where her eyes were locked, sat an onyx statue of a pony, no bigger than her hoof. No, not a pony, something seemed strange about it. She could not put her hoof on it, she knew it was a pony, but it felt like it should be an alicorn, the ghost of an image persisting as Luna crept up to the object, ignoring all the other items around her. She wanted to touch it so much. To feel its power course through her.

Raising her hoof, the filly alicorn daintily touched the fragile looking item, and was immediately thrown back against the partially open door, slamming it shut. The pain in her hoof was excruciating, but in the time it took for her daze to be gone, it had all but vanished. The onyx pony was still there, but the image of an alicorn was gone.

I shouldn't be in here, what was I thinking!? Oh, Celly is going to kill me! She turned to the door to open it, only to find out it was locked. *W-Whaaa? it was unlocked a second ago!* She pounded upon the thick wood with her hooves, but the door didn't budge an inch.

"Celly! Cellyyyyy!" Luna cried in obvious fright, still pounding upon the door with all her might. She even tried her magic to unlock it, but the wards within the room were too powerful, and all her horn did was fizzle pathetically. "Cellyyyyyyyyy!"

She leaned back against the door, staring at all the objects in the room before her eyes settled back upon the onyx figurine. She could have sworn it was smaller. No, she was right, it *had* been smaller, and was getting larger by the second.

As tears began to streak down Luna's cheeks, she heard the sounds of the door being unlocked from the outside, she took a step back just as it opened, inches from smacking her in the face.

"Sister, how did you get in here!? WHY were you in here!? I told you not to ever go into these rooms!" Celestia had a look of anger upon her face, causing Luna to shrink back upon herself and curl up upon the floor. It did not help that she had already been terrified of being trapped in the room, and Celestia's anger only scared her more.

However, seeing Luna so frightened cooled Celestia's ire, and she leaned down to give her sister a loving nuzzle, "Come on, we're not supposed to be in these rooms, not until we can handle anything that comes at us."

Nodding just a bit, Luna began to follow Celestia out of the room, tears still clouding her eyes. She sniffed a bit and wiped her face before turning around to take one last look back at the onyx statuette. It was the size it had been before and she could swear that she had felt something when she touched it...

The Court was made of the same self-serving ponies, well-wishers, and voyeurs who wished to see the new rulers as last time, meaning it was downright boring for Luna, and at times, extremely frustrating. It did not help that the ponies kept thinking it was Celestia's idea, and her doing that the marks on their flanks came about. Celestia, of course, corrected them, and gave her the credit, but it did not help. It also did not help that her moods were dark today. Luna kept having thoughts of how unappreciative the ponies were of her designs. Of all her hard work.

And it was true! For every five ponies who loved the sun, barely one would say they enjoyed her night, if they even mentioned her night at all!

She was tired, and it was only mid afternoon, but she had to hold the facade that she was happy to see everypony that came up to the shared throne. *Why am I so tired? I slept until noon, and while the spells I'd been doing were fatiguing, it was only the fatigue of casting, and nothing more. It quickly went away. And...* Luna suddenly felt a wave of dizziness, and her eyelids grew heavy. *Maybe I should retire... Maybe those spells took a lot more out of me than I'd thought.*

Waiting until the current well-wisher had left, Luna spoke to her sister quietly, “Celly...? I’m just about ready to collapse, I need to retire.”

The night alicorn’s sister could easily hear the tiredness in her voice, and nodded, smiling over at her. “I’ll take care of court and our duties for the rest of the day, dearest sister. Go, get your rest, you’ve done a lot for Equestria today.”

“Thank you, sis...” Luna gave her sister a tired kiss upon the cheek, which rose a blush to Celestia’s face, before walking off down the side steps and out of sight through one of the side doorways. It did not take her long to reach her quarters, and as Luna was snuggling deep into her covers and started to fall asleep, a thought wormed its way into her head. *What if Celly doesn’t actually care about me? What if she only puts up with me? What if that’s what everypony does?* Luna didn’t pay any mind to the fact that such worries were so unlike her, she was too tired, and without another thought she drifted off to sleep.

As the days and nights passed, Celestia and Luna began to form a noticeable routine, as much of one as they could get out of their differing sleep schedules, anyway. Their schedules differed so much, in fact, that Luna had to sleep entirely during the day and be awake at night. The only times the two were able to see each other was in the morning at breakfast, later that evening at dinner, and in the few twilight hours at dawn and dusk when they would both be awake. Celestia presumed it must be because of their different affinities to light and dark, even going so far to say that she felt the same way during the night as Luna did during the daytime: she could barely keep her eyes open at all.

The nights wore upon Luna, and they were lonely without her sister. At first, her court had seen many ponies, as those who wanted to personally thank her for the night came to do so. Of course, there were the usual selfish ponies as well, and even a petitioner or two, but as a week went by, then two, and then a month, they died down to barely anything. The second month, she was lucky to see even three ponies a night. By the third, maybe three a week. Around the fourth month, Luna just had to see for herself what exactly was going on.

During the first month, the goddess had painted her sky every night, filling it with more and more detail until it looked like a mosaic of shapes made by her stars. She even had a river of stars going across the whole of the night sky. And still, few ponies told her of how much they loved her night, yet it was often that she heard of how popular her elder sister's court was, and of how many ponies that came just to thank her sister for the *wonderful* sun.

The past few months, a little voice had filled Luna's ears, telling her how much she was unappreciated, and how her wonderful night went unnoticed. How even her own sister barely wanted anything to do with her, going so far as to only see her at dusk and dawn, when they raised the sun and moon respectively. It was never enough these days. She was always so alone. *Was this how father felt when he held the night within his hooves? The ever present loneliness? Did he ever manage to somehow get rid of that tiredness he must have felt during the day? He must have, he was always so strong...Father...Why did you leave me alone...?*

Luna sat upon her throne, looking up through the audience chamber's skylight at her canvas. Her moon was barely a slice of a crescent, mirroring her current mood. Even the guards who normally stood around the chambers during the day were asleep.

Stepping down from the throne, Luna briskly walked across the marble flooring of the throne room, and then out of the doors into the large garden that surrounded the entire castle. It was a warm night, the height of summer, but the Bringer of Night did not care. She had to see. Had to see for herself.

Spreading her large wings, Luna took to the air, the moons upon her flank and new breastplate shining from the light of the one in the sky. Her sister had matching breastplates made for them, with their marks upon the front. It had been a delightful gift, until her inner voice had reminded Luna of everything that was going on. It soured quickly when she realized it was probably a gift meant to mollify her.

Below her, as she gained altitude, the entirety of the castle spread out before her, and then the city itself. She could see a light here or there, either from a flame or a magical lantern, but everywhere else, all throughout the city of Everfree, it lay dark. *No...* With powerful thrusts of her wings, Luna pushed herself to her limit as she raced for the nearest settlements. They were quite small, the one she was approaching named

Ponyville. Once again, dark as the night had been before she had painted it.

No matter what town she flew over, they were dark, with maybe a single light showing a pony up late, probably studying. It had taken her most of the night to do her search, and she landed back in front of the castle in a stormy mood. *No, no...What if I am just too late? What if they are awake the first few hours of my night to study and be in awe of it? Yes, yes, I shall do that! Tomorrow, I shall do another flyover at the beginning of my night.* But the voice in her head, that ever present voice, insisted that she not get her hopes up.

The next night, Luna flew out once again, flying over Everfree and the neighboring towns and villages. This time, the sight of many lights of various types burning below set her hopes high, but as the night went on she watched them flicker out and die one by one. By the time it was midnight, her night was as dark and alone as it had been the night before.

The next morning, Luna was already eating her breakfast in the dining hall when Celestia came in. The Sun Goddess immediately knew there was something wrong. It almost seemed as if a black cloud hung over her little sister. She did not say anything though, as this wasn't the first time Luna had been in one of her moods.

As she levitated bites of pancakes that seemed almost as light and fluffy as clouds to her mouth, Celestia kept taking sidelong glances at her sister. *I-I should say something. She always seems so lonely, but I don't know what I can do to help...Mother had warned me that she may become lonely and withdrawn, but not so angry!*

However, Luna noticed each of the stares her elder sibling gave her, grinding her teeth until finally she shouted, "WHAT!?", snapping her teeth inches from Celestia's face, causing her elder sister to recoil in shock. A moment of silence went by before Luna stood and snorted, "That's what I thought."

Galloping off out of the dining hall, the Goddess of the Moon could hear Celestia calling out behind her. *No, not this time. This time I will take matters into my own hooves.*

What is going on with her...? My dearest sister, the other half of my heart, what pains you so? I am sorry I cannot be there for you through the entire night. I am not yet strong enough to overcome the lethargic nature our opposites cause...Please be alright... Celestia was at the door of the dining hall, yearning for her sister to come back. To talk with her. To tell her what was wrong. She wished to offer her sister a shoulder to cry on, and a few hours where they could at least be together.

Throughout the entire day, Celestia's thoughts chased her. She was so worried for Luna, worried that her silence at breakfast may have made things worse. Her mannerisms at court were half-assed, and matters at hand with her court's ministers were done without giving much thought to them.

Even at dinner, Luna was nowhere to be seen. She wasn't in her bed, though that may have been emptied shortly before.

Celestia spent the rest of her free hours searching all the hiding spots in Everfree Castle that she knew Luna to have hidden within in the past, but she was nowhere to be found.

As she felt the moon begin to rise, Celestia raised her horn and lowered her sun to make way for it. She could feel her younger sister's magic at work, far above the castle of Everfree, and Celestia knew that she was out flying. *I hope it's to think, to clear her mind...Be well, my dear sister...*

Luna was indeed thinking, but not in the way Celestia imagined. The Night Goddess soared in the air above Everfree, the city and forest stretching out in all directions below her. *I need to find a way that will get all of ponykind to recognize me, recognize and enjoy my night! Not to simply sleep during it! What if I...No...I can't do anything too drastic, sister would be disappointed in me.*

Her inner voice answered with a sneer, "Your *sister*? The same one that abandoned you to this lonely duty? The one who kept looking at you strangely this morning? The one who tries to 'help' and yet does nothing that actually would do so!? *That* sister?"

That's right...She hasn't helped me at all with this, only told me to wait, that it would get better! And it hasn't! It has only gotten worse! The knowledge that everypony in the land ignores my night was the last straw!

"The last straw, indeed. And what better way to make Equestria love your night than to give them nothing but such? An everlasting night that will shroud the land, forcing everypony to take notice of your painted skies, to study it, to love it!"

The voice within her mind was hitting all of Luna's tender spots, all her hopes, everything that would resonate with her. And it was working. *But...How do I do that? Each of us makes way for the other at dawn and dusk, and even if I refused to lower the moon, the sun would still rise!*

"Leave that to me. If you trust me, of course, dear Luna. I am, after all, you, and if you cannot trust yourself, then who can you trust? Hmmm?"

I...I don't know. What do you have in mind?

"Oh, dear, sweet Luna. Have you forgotten? The Core is ours now. Its magnificent powers ours to take, to hold, and to use. Give that power to me, and I will show you how to be the ruler everypony loves. You will never be alone again. All ponies would exclaim at the wonders of your rule. You would have your choice of a mate from countless suiters, and even our dear sister, Celestia, would come crawling back to us, begging us to teach her to be as loved as we were. And we would. We would teach her. And for her cooperation, we would allow her sun to be seen again. At our sufferance, of course." The voice enticed her, as a parent would a child with the promise of sweets.

The future Luna imagined was wonderful. Surrounded by friends of all types, lovers awaiting her within her bed, and a line of suiters asking for her hoof outside the door stretching out beyond the castle's gates. And Celly, dear sister Celestia, would love her again. Be there for her again. Just this thought alone brought tears to Luna's eyes, which were quickly dried by the winds as she soared through the air.

I-I-I....accept...What do you wish me to do...? Luna swore she could feel a malevolent glee rise within the part of her that talked back, but she ignored it. This was herself she was talking to, after all.

"We need the Core."

As Luna walked down the hallway she had been in months ago, she took note of the door that she had somehow managed to enter months before. However, she gave it no more than a passing glance as she carried on down the hall. The mare, as she was now, had more important things to do, and as she entered the Core's chamber, she knew what the first thing on the list was.

The Moon Goddess didn't need to hear her voice's instructions to know how to do it. She stood beneath the Core and sent a lance of magical energy up into it, creating a magical channel through which her essence passed into the Core. It returned the favor. Power filled her to the brim, and she swore she could hear the voice laughing inside her mind.

"Now, all you need to do is hand me the power, and I will show you how to use it, dear Luna," her mind's voice said. She didn't think much about it, and opened a conduit to the part of her mind she knew the voice resided in. But as she flooded it with power, a blast of darkness reverberated about within her head, causing her to shriek in pain. A pure, unadulterated pain which only increased in intensity.

"Celly! Nooo! Noooooo! CELLY!" Those words broke the silence in the Core's chamber, echoing down the hallways of the lower levels. But, alas, they fell upon nopony's ears.

A distorted mix of sobbing and agony-induced shrieking could be heard, Luna's voice crying out in pain and terror before being abruptly cut off, leaving only dead silence as the Core's pure white light turned an ominous blood-red. After a few long seconds, a dark, maniacal laughter began to fill the chamber...

Twilight Sparkle pulled away from the tome before her and rubbed at her eyes, surprised to find them wet with tears. The clock on the wall said it was nearly midnight. She could not go on any further with the history of the Princesses. Not tonight. She already had enough to think about.

The tome had been difficult to translate from Ancient Equestrian, but so far, it had been worth it, showing the early lives of her teacher and Princess Celestia's sister. *Alicorns are not a race from this plane of existence,*

though? I find that to be a bit far fetched. There are things this tome has not yet answered, and tomorrow, after a night's rest, I intend to find out more. Oh, poor Princess Luna...I cannot imagine the things you went through...

As Twilight turned in for the night, snuffing the light orb she had magicked and crawling beneath her covers, she failed to notice a soft blue ripple, fading in and out in the corner, just near the base of the ceiling. A surveillance spell, hanging just out of sight, just as it had been the entire day.

Chapter 2

Twilight Sparkle had tossed and turned throughout the night. Her dreams had been anything but pleasant. In them, she observed a Nightmare Moon who seemed to be composed of two parts: One of these was but a small fragment, diminutive but immensely powerful, and the other was the Night Princess herself. Around them, her dreams rapidly disintegrated into a horrifying parade of nightmares. War, death, and destruction echoed through Twilight's dreams, things nopony should ever have to see presented to her, each image more terrifying than the last. And try as she might, she could not force herself to wake up from them. Oh Celestia, the unicorn could not awaken! *Why am I being shown this!? WHY!? Such terrible things! Nothing this horrible could have ever happ-*

Finally, Twilight Sparkle awoke, shaken from her restless slumber by her number one assistant, Owlowisc- Wait, no, her number one assistant was Spike! *I must be really out of it...* It was Spike who woke her. Those nightmarish images had really gotten to the unicorn.

"Twiliight! You've been sleeping all day! I know you were really tired, but I had to wake you! We got a scroll from Princess Celestia and Princess Luna," he announced to Twilight, staring up at her with large, apologetic eyes.

Shocked at his words, Twilight stared out the window and noticed Princess Celestia's sun sitting high in the sky. Panicking, the mare leapt out of her bed, not taking the time to make it or even comb her bed-raggled mane. Passing by her vanity mirror, she caught a glance at just how awful she really looked. There were heavy bags under her eyes, and her mane had been reduced to a tangled, knotted mess. No matter. She shook her head, putting her appearance out of her mind for the moment.

"I have to get back to my reading! I won't unravel what happened during that war if I don't study this tome!" As Twilight began to trot over to her desk, Spike interrupted her with a cough and held up the scroll, causing Twilight to stop and ask, "Yes, Spike? ...Why aren't you reading it to me?"

Spike scratched a footclaw against the wood floor before replying, "Ummm, it's addressed straight to you, Twilight. In fact, it's sealed with the royal crest, so... I'm not exactly permitted to read it."

Rolling her eyes, Twilight hovered the scroll over to herself and unfurled it, the parchment crackling with an otherworldly energy as she broke the seal. She began to quietly read it to herself.

"To my Faithful Student Twilight Sparkle,

This is meant for your eyes only. Once your magic touches this scroll, the rest of the message shall appear."

And indeed it did, the words slowly appearing on the scroll as the rest of the page wrote itself into existence in front of her eyes. What could require this kind of secrecy? Twilight read on.

"It has come to the attention of my sister and I that you have found a history involving us. We suspected that you would be the only pony powerful enough, aside from us, who could undo that lock I placed. It seems that we were correct.

There are certain things that nopony should know. Histories Equestria should never have to bear witness to. An entire civilization's innocence can be lost by knowing the wrong things. We trust in you, my student, not to reveal what you may discover, for whatever you may find in your thirst for knowledge will bring you only sadness in the end. I presume the book's magics have already begun their work on you, revealing bits and pieces of what occurred during the War.

Understand, my faithful student, whatever may be recorded in that book I have tried to cover up as best I could, to save the innocence of my little ponies. Even our current legends do not touch upon what happened during those times.

However, above all, please, do not think less of my sister for the things that transpired back then. It is not her fault. Part of the blame lies with me, and

the rest with that wretched statue. I discovered it in the rubble shortly after banishing Luna those many centuries ago, and I have kept it hidden ever since.

My student, you must tread carefully. If you do not read this tome, your innocence will be spared, but if you decide to go on, please do not let what happened change your views of us. We were young, so very young...

Your teacher, Princess Celestia."

Twilight could only stare at the parchment with her jaw upon the floor.

There was a rather forceful belch from Spike, causing Twilight to snap out of her disbelief as something heavy thumped loudly upon the floor. Sweeping her gaze over to Spike, she saw that, there upon the floor in front of the baby dragon, lay another tome with a second scroll set neatly upon it. Before Spike could react, Twilight hurriedly snapped them both over to her with her magic, setting the book atop her desk while she cracked open the second scroll. The beginning was the same as the first, and she watched intently as more writing appeared in front of her eyes.

"This will probably come as no surprise, but I already know your decision, my student. You never could resist the lure of the histories. In light of this, I have included with this scroll a tome of what could have been. Shortly after you and your friends freed my sister I divined what might have happened had you failed. In this book are all of my notes and observations relating to what I saw. Take heart, my dearest Twilight. Your actions prevented something the likes of which only exist in the histories. What you read in this tome, you may share with your friends at your own discretion, but do not take what lies within its pages lightly. It has no happy ending.

Your dearest friend and teacher, Princess Celestia."

Twilight was perplexed, but she got herself back into order right away. Turning toward Spike, she gave him a reassuring smile before saying, "Spike, I will need to study alone for quite some time. I will release you for

the next few days so that you can have some time for yourself.” And now, to make sure that her assistant would agree with her, “You know, come to think of it, I heard that Rarity has been completely overrun with orders recently. She may need your help.”

Spike, who looked cautious at first, suddenly bounced up and saluted, exclaiming, “Yes, ma’am!” He then darted off down the stairs, and shortly thereafter she heard the library door slam shut.

Works everytime. That should keep him busy enough to allow me privacy for the time I need to study these tomes. Now... She turned toward the desk, upon which lay the two tomes: the history of the Princesses, and something still unknown to her. *I feel I should be afraid of what I may find in them both, but I have to know! Ohhh, Princess Celestia knows me all too well.* Climbing atop her seat, Twilight Sparkle steeled herself as she picked up from where she had left off the night before...

Power. The power! The strength! It was exhilarating! The intensity of it all! There was so much of it, and she couldn’t hold it all! Oh, yes, something would have to be done about that. But for now, she had to see her new form! Yes indeed! All this glorious energy had allowed her to transform this young, feeble body into something truly befitting of a goddess!

A whimper drew the alicorn’s gaze inward. Dear Luna sat in a corner of her mind, terrified of what was occurring. A thought jumped across the synapses of their shared mind. *W-What are you!? Who are you? What did you do to me!?*

The creature grinned. She would need a name. Indeed. Luna was a weak name for a weak alicorn. No, she would need something stronger. Something powerful. Something terrifying. She deigned to reply to her other self, “I? I am you, my dear Luna. You beholden with anger, sorrow, and your loneliness multiplied a thousand fold. I want everything you want. I am....Nightmare Moon. Yes, I think that shall be a very fitting name. Now, my dear Luna, be good, stay quiet, and I shall deem you worthy of staying within *my* mind untouched.”

A simple feeling indicating that Luna nodded her assent caused Nightmare Moon to cackle with glee! Everything was so bright! So new! She had a body of her very own, and all the feelings that accompanied it! And most

importantly of all, she had the power of the Core pulsing in her veins. Yes, like this not even her dear sister could stop her. Especially not once she enacted her plan. Everything she wanted, everything she had tempted Luna with could wait. The power of the Core sang in her ears; it was...intoxicating... addicting... controlling in a way. It wanted to be used, not held. In fact, what Luna wanted did not matter! She was a goddess! A goddess with more power than any other pony had! She could do *anything*!

And right now, Nightmare Moon wanted revenge. Revenge upon the ponies who had forsworn her beautiful night. Revenge upon her sister, who had abandoned her. Her plan to shroud the day with night, to become a ruler over even Celestia herself, was not enough! The Nightmare wanted even more than that. The power sang its siren's song to her, whispering sweetly in her ears. She would crush Equestria beneath her hoof, and the entire hemisphere would cower in fear at her total domination. Celestia herself would bow before her, only to be made into *her* slave. The power was driving her *mad*, and she was loving every second of it.

Luna could only cower in distress, buried deep within Nightmare Moon's mind, her soul heavy with the knowledge of everything that was about to befall her sister and all of Equestria...

Celestia woke, groggily rubbing at her eyes with her hooves. It was nearly dawn, and she had duties to perform. Slipping out from under her pegasus down covers, she picked up a brush from her nightstand and began to pull it through her mane and tail, which were being quite unruly at the moment. It took her several minutes to pull the pink hair into behaving, but she managed it. She then proceeded to levitate her hoof-ornaments, chestplate, and crown upon her body, settling them in place. Lastly she grabbed a simple little toy that lay upon her bedstand, a little black alicorn, which she slipped into her mane.

I don't like this morning, I can already tell that it will be a bad day. The heavens feel strange, and even the ambient magic feels wrong. Like there is a storm blowing in and there isn't time to close the shutters. Heading out to her balcony to raise the sun, she looked up into the night sky. There wasn't a cloud to be seen, but something seemed out of place. *There. Why is Luna's moon on the wrong side of the horizon? She must be trying*

something new, I should not be worried. I look forward to what she has in store for Equestria this time.

Raising her horn to point it at the sky, she began to emit a pure white glow. The sky in the east lightened as the sun began to peek over the horizon. But the moon did not go down like it should. It hung there near her sun. *This...What is my sister doing?*

As the sun's rays hit Celestia, she could feel herself become empowered by the light of her day. It was when she was most alive, when Celestia felt like she would never tire. Her Sol was too bright to look at directly, but she still smiled at the celestial body she had named after her mother.

About to turn away to head back inside, something out of the corner of her eye caught the white alicorn's gaze. Darting her head around to peer back at the moon, she watched as it crept across the sky and covered her sun. At first, it was only a small slice, but as it grew, the day's light dimmed. Soon, the sun's radiance had completely vanished as all but a sliver of light escaped around the edges, her sun completely eclipsed by her sister's moon!

Celestia could feel her power seep away, leaving behind the lethargy of the night. *No...No! My dearest sister, what have you done!?* With her sun in eclipse, the stars were in full bloom, and the sky was as dark as the middle of the night.

Thoughts raced through Celestia's mind as she began to panic. Then, a voice boomed out from high over the Everfree Castle.

"My sun-loving subjects! I am Nightmare Moon, your Queen! It is I who will control Equestria from here on out. Those who accept my rule will be safe from my upcoming judgement. Those who run, those who fight, and those who do not accept me as your empress will have their lives *forfeit*, to do with as I please. Consider this your first and *only* warning. Those who wish to bow before my graces, head to the throne room now. Everypony else?*Run.*"

Celestia had galloped out of her bedchambers halfway through the speech, and all around her she saw nothing but panic. Her little ponies were running all over the place. Some had saddlebags upon their backs, evacuating while they still were able. Some had nothing, simply trying to find a place to hide or to get as far away as possible before it was too late. She could

not worry about that now, Celestia had to find Luna and find out who this pony was. The audience chambers were her best bet, and she more than once nearly plowed into one of her fleeing subjects in her run there.

Bursting into the throne room, she could immediately see who the commanding voice had belonged to. Sitting upon the throne sat an alicorn the size of her mother with a pitch black coat, ornate head and breast armor, and a tail and mane that billowed out, shifting shape and displaying a vast field of stars against the black of night. What hit Celestia hardest, though, was that the mare shared her sister's cutie mark, and yet the eyes, the violent turquoise eyes bared no resemblance to her sister's own.

Nightmare Moon turned to Celestia and flashed her a wicked grin. Throughout the audience chambers stood multitudes of ponies, which Celestia had not noticed until now, and a small group, a family it looked like, were in front of the throne, bowing before the mare.

"Ahhh, my *dearest* sister. I see you have come to pay your respects to me as well. I am afraid you will have to wait in line. It's a very, VERY long line, but I want to make sure everypony knows who you bow to," Nightmare Moon jabbed at Celestia before bursting out into a contemptuous laughter that echoed around the hushed chamber.

Princess Celestia could only stand aghast at what had become of her sister, speechless. It took her several seconds for her to find her voice again, and when she did, it was wavering and uncertain. "L-Luna? What happened to you? Why are you eclipsing my sun? Doing all this?" The amount of hurt that lay within her next word could be felt by anypony close enough to hear, "*Why...?*"

Keeping an eye on Celestia, Nightmare Moon leaned forward, her horn glowing as white crescent moons appeared upon the foreheads of the earth ponies. They walked off and stood to the side of the chamber while the next group came forward. "My dear, *dear* sister. Did you honestly think abandoning me to the cold, lonely night would not have its consequences? Did you consider how it felt for me to sit alone in my chambers all night, longing for your presence, just wanting to sit against your side while we talked? Or for all these sun-loving foals in front of me to not acknowledge my night in the slightest? Oh, yes, that may have hurt; it hurt to know my night sky, my *painting*, my **masterpiece** was ignored. But what hurt the most was YOU leaving me to this fate!"

Nightmare Moon's eyes flared, and she glared down at Celestia, daring her to contradict her. Celestia only fell upon her haunches in disbelief, managing to only mumble, "Why...Why didn't you talk to me about it, Luna...?"

The Nightmare stamped her hoof, causing the sound of thunder to echo throughout the chamber, frightening the already terrified ponies gathered within it. "I am no longer Luna! I am *Nightmare Moon*! And you had best remember that, sister. This fault lies with you. How many times did we come to you in the dawn, or the dusk? How many times did you say things would get better, and yet they did not? How many times did your shoulder become soaked in our tears!? *Four* months we suffered, *alone!*"

Celestia flinched back, unsure of who Nigh-No, Luna, meant by 'we' and 'our'. But her sister's argument hit close to her heart. It was true she had not helped Luna as well as she could have. The princess imagined how she could have stayed up late at night to keep her sister company through the lonely nights, and of how she did not, a pang of sadness causing her to flinch once more.

The guilt upon her face must have been evident, because Nightmare Moon cackled again, her glare intensifying, "Yes, you know what you could have done to prevent this, but it is too late now."

Celestia stepped forward, her pain all but evident in her eyes, "Luna...My dearest sister, Luna...P-Please set your moon. Now that I know just how much this has been bothering you, I can keep you company during those long nights as best as I can. I can fight against the weariness to keep you from being lonely. To keep you happy. Just, please, you don't have to do this..."

It almost seemed like Nightmare Moon had, for a moment, considered her sister's request. However, that hope was quickly dashed, her voice ringing out like a hammer on cold steel. "**No**. You had your chance, *sister*. And you threw it away. *EVERYPONY* did. *No!* You have two choices, *Celestia*." The Nightmare did not use Luna's normal way of calling her name. "You can either remain here, bow before me, and continue to rule by my side as my subordinate. If you do, you will have my pity, and I will allow your sun to occasionally shine over this land." Nightmare Moon raised a hoof, and all humor in her voice vanished, "Or, you can run. Run far, far away. You run

as far away as you can and *never* return! For if you do... I will take you captive, and you will never see the light of your precious sun again. *Ever!*"

Celestia took a step back, then another, and then a third. "T-This isn't you, Luna! Please, you must break free of whatever has you in its grip! *This isn't you!*" With that she sprinted off back into the depths of the castle, chased by Nightmare Moon's relentless laughter.

After the laugh faded away, Nightmare Moon grinned to herself as she raised her horn into the air, a wave of powerful magic blasting out of it and spreading across all of Everfree forest. "Celestia has made her choice. Those who are loyal to me will be protected. Those who are not, will perish or Slumber for all eternity within my Nightmares. Guard Captain?"

From the other side of the throne, the captain of the Royal Guards stepped out into view, having been hidden from Celestia's gaze. A white moon sat emblazoned upon his brow, both upon his armor and his fur. "Yes, my Liege?"

A chuckle bubbled from Nightmare Moon's throat, and she replied, "I will require an army. Train the unicorns in battle magics, the pegasi in aerial tactics, and the earth ponies in hoof to hoof combat. It has been decided. We go to war..."

What do I do? What do I do!? Oh my dearest sister, what has happened to you? Why did I allow it to go this far! How did I not see the signs! Rounding a corner, Celestia nearly slipped and fell as she skidded upon the floor tiles. She had to find the Captain of the Guard! Her Ministers! Somepony that knew what to do!

The hallway ahead of her suddenly exploded as a lance of energy cut through it at an angle. Just ahead of her, a pony that had been too close to the blast vaporized with an anguished scream, leaving behind little more than a greasy stain upon the floor tiles. Splinters of stone and tile flew everywhere, pelting angrily against her skin as she herself was knocked off her feet, sliding across the tile floor as bits of rock dug into her hide. Thunderous blasts began to resound all throughout Everfree Castle, each one causing the walls to shudder violently. *That.... That was the Core! Oh mother, what has she done!?* Finding her ministers would have to wait, she

had to escape from the castle and help with evacuation. If the Core goes, so would all of Everfree!

Galloping off, Celestia came across even more intense destruction: huge, gaping holes in the masonry; piles of rubble littering the halls; the bodies of the dead strewn about like wet laundry, soaked in their own blood. Some of the bodies had been crushed by large stones, while others...She could not think it. Magic gone wrong did awful things. There were pools of crimson everywhere, and it seemed to be seeping out from the debris throughout the ruined halls. Celestia couldn't look at it. She had never encountered death before, and nothing could have prepared her to see it on such a grotesque scale. The stench and sight of it made her gorge rise. She had to get out.

Locating a sufficient enough hole in the exterior wall, Celestia leapt out into the dark sky and fled out to the city of Everfree. She could see the destruction ravaging the city below. There were fires everywhere, and even as she watched, arcs of power from the Core burst forth from the castle, carving blackened swaths through the city. Helpless, she watched one land amongst a group of fleeing refugees, the blast leaving only sooty remnants, splatters of blood, and various unidentifiable bodily parts. It was all too much for her to bear, and she turned her head to evacuate her stomach.

The taste within her mouth was dreadful, and Celestia took several deep breaths, keeping her eyes averted from the disaster to compose herself.

My little ponies need me. They need their Princess. To bring order to things, to help them. I have a duty to perform...

Ponies of all kinds still shuffled into the throne room while the castle around them shuddered from the explosions. Nightmare Moon had no worry that the charges she was setting off would hurt any pony who had pledged themselves for her, or were coming to do so. Oh no, she was only targeting those who refused her right to rule. Who refused her!

A voice within her mind whimpered, *Please stop...This is not what I wanted at all...*

Nightmare Moon sneered and snapped back, "Silence, foal! You know what will happen if you fight me. I will make you *beg* for death!"

The voice of Luna clammed up quickly, bringing satisfaction to Nightmare Moon. The bothersome foal still spoke every once in a while, but she was too fearful of what the Nightmare would do to her if she did anything more than that.

The ponies filling the audience chambers all looked up at Nightmare Moon with fear and trepidation. Those who bowed before her became marked, her silver moon placed upon their foreheads.

Suddenly, she spoke, making sure her voice carried to all those awaiting within the room, as well as those approaching from outside, even through the destruction of the city. "My subjects of the Night. You are amongst the few intelligent ponies who obeyed. Who knew who their true ruler was, and who came to pay me homage. Know this: your marking will protect you from the coming tribulations, and even those who do not yet have my mark, but are coming to my side now will be protected."

Indeed, the only room truly left untouched in the entire castle was the audience chambers. Oh, yes, she knew not to waste loyal subjects, especially not for the coming days. The rest of the castle, however, was in ruin, to one extent or another.

Willing it to stop, the lances of energy erupting from the Core ceased, and Nightmare Moon drew deep upon its power. While rumblings still reverberated throughout the castle, its destruction was at an end.

Shaping that power, she infused it within her mane and issued a burst of maniacal laughter. The power whispered to her, commanding her to use it. "And now with the everlasting night comes the everlasting Nightmare. I require an army of bodies, and so they shall come..." A piece of her mane severed itself from the whole and fell to the floor, fusing itself to the stone tile. It then began to spread out in all directions, covering every surface. Her eyes closing to little more than narrow slits, Nightmare Moon willed it to spread further, and so it did, darting out in all directions and causing panic amongst her subjects. They backed themselves against the walls, trampling and climbing over each other to get away, but upon touching them, nothing happened, and they became calm once more.

However, once the creeping darkness spread past the castle and into Everfree city, that is when the screaming started -- the screaming of ponies facing things infinitely worse than their greatest fears...

Celestia was rushing, attempting to help with the evacuations as best she could as she flew between the groups of refugees fleeing Everfree. She landed next to a family who was trying to lug heavy furniture upon their backs in the false night intent on assisting them, but just as the Princess was about to grab their attention, the screaming began. It was something the likes of which nopony had ever heard, and they all stopped to look back as it grew closer. Taking to the air again, Celestia watched the creeping night spread itself upon the ground, and wherever it touched, screams erupted, only to be silenced immediately.

As she watched, the shadow began to pick up speed ...swallowing portions of the city at an ever-increasing rate.

The Goddess of the Sun's eyes widened as fear gripped her heart. Rearing back, she yelled into the air, her voice ringing out across the city over the horrified screams of its inhabitants, "*Flee*, my little ponies! You must run into the forest! Abandon anything you cannot easily carry! GO!"

Joining a group of fleeing pegasi, Celestia looked back just in time to see her ancestral home destroyed; the entire city of Everfree becoming completely engulfed in the darkness of night. All she could do was watch, and as she did, tears streamed from her eyes.

Knowing that she needed to get more magics to supplement her own weakened powers, Celestia set course for the unicorn city of Canterlot. The alicorn did not wish to look back anymore, to see the death and destruction her sister had caused. No, she needed time to think and to plan. And right now Celestia believed it was time that she did not have.

The white alicorn hovered in the skies above Ponyville, the earth pony town on the edge of the Everfree forest. *I failed them....I failed them all...* The shadow had chased them to the edge of the Everfree, overtaking all but the pegasi and those unicorns that had teleported themselves out. Celestia could still hear the screams, knew she would hear them within her dreams for years to come.

The shadow had followed them up to the edge of the forest, and then had receded shortly afterward. What it left behind... It defied description. A

twisted, wild forest lay in Everfree's place. A deep foreboding sense told her never to enter that forest again, less she not return. And Celestia did not doubt it.

No, she had failed her subjects, failed the city of Everfree, and failed all of Equestria. An entire city, destroyed, ponies lying dead within its walls. Others...worse than dead. Her subjects bowing at the feet of whatever her sister had become. Lowering her head, she could see several pegasi Royal Guards waiting for her below, survivors from the castle who had managed to escape. Jerking her head to beckon them, they rose up to meet her, taking positions around their Princess.

"We fly for Canterlot."

As Celestia's eclipsed sun crept across the sky, hours seemed to go by as the guards and their liege flew onward, the mountainside city growing larger in their sights. Celestia's thoughts tormented her the entire way, but she kept a somber face so as not to worry her guards.

The entire trip from Ponyville was spent in silence, up until they landed in the courtyard in front of the building for the Canterlot Ruling Council. Almost immediately one of the two guards stationed in front of it ran inside, and a procession began to stream out, stopping in front of Celestia and her guards.

As the council and various other ponies finished gathering in front of their ruler, one of them stepped forth and bowed before Celestia, inciting the rest to kneel before their goddess as well. She was a crimson unicorn with a blue and red mane, further into her years than the others around. On her flank stood the symbol of an eagle. "Your Majesty, I am Prime Minister Bushel Gorge. It's absolute chaos out here, Your Highness, and we have only heard of rumors of what may be going on in Everfree, but the implications are terrifying. Please, if you would be so kind, Madame, follow us inside to the ready room."

Celestia simply raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. She needed them, of course, to plan for whatever may come, and to use the Core they had there in Canterlot to supplement her diminished power.

As the ponies filed back into the building, Celestia followed close behind, bracketed by her guards, who seemed to be trying to watch everything around them all at the same time. As she stepped inside the elegantly

designed building, a wave of emotion struck Celestia and she nearly stumbled over herself, causing one guard to glance over at her in concern. Altair and Sol had taken the white alicorn and her sister here on a state visit not long before their departure, though right now it seemed like years ago. Luna had managed to trip on the stairs and injure her forelegs... Celestia could still hear her crying and whimpers as she had nestled into the safety of her sister's wings.

Blinking the wetness from her eyes, the Princess of Equestria pursued the group of ponies into a large chamber that had a massive table stretching the length of the room, with large piles of cushions adorning the floor for the ponies who sat at it. Gesturing wordlessly to her guards, two took positions outside of the doors, while another two stood on the inside when the doors shut. The final stood back and to one side of Celestia once she had seated herself down upon the cushions at the head of the table.

It took several more moments for the rest of the Council to sit themselves down around the table, muttering to themselves as they settled in. Celestia herself was not answering any questions directed at her, momentarily lost in her own thoughts. *I must be strong. I have to **show** them that I can be strong. To be like mother, like father. How would they deal with this situation...?*

The sound of a hoof slamming down upon the tabletop interrupted the alicorn's thoughts and she brought her gaze to Bushel Gorge, who sat across the length of the table from her. "Princess Celestia should be able to clear up the reports we've been getting from refugees entering the city. Please save all questions until after we are done hearing her report." The mare turned to the princess and bowed her head, "The table is yours, Majesty. *What* is going on in Everfree?"

Scanning her eyes across all of the unicorns whose rapt attention were upon her, Celestia cleared her throat before beginning. "*Something* has possessed my sister, Princess Luna. She is not herself, and now calls herself **Nightmare Moon**. She..." Celestia paused and shut her eyes tight.

Be strong. I am still new to ruling, but I must be strong!

"She attacked Everfree. The castle now lay in ruins; the city -- in flames. Anypony who could not fly or teleport themselves to safety is dead...Or worse..."

Taking a deep breath, Celestia slowly let it out before continuing, her eyes opening with a rock hard stare as she decided what must be done. "We must prepare for war. Even if only to defend ourselves. I... We must release her. I came to this city because you have a Core of your own. Without it, we will stand no chance against Nightmare Moon. The spell she used to corrupt Everfree Forest could only have been done with the Core located in the castle, and with my sun eclipsed, I do not gain strength from it. Nightmare Moon has the upper hoof."

Immediately, the unicorns within the chamber burst out in a heated debate, yelling and screaming at each other, each trying to be heard over the others, arguing with one another or trying to attract Celestia's attention. She caught little snippets of what they were saying: how they were not prepared for war; how Altair and Sol had never needed war; that Celestia was mad, lying, exaggerating, or a multitude of other things. Gritting her teeth, she slammed her hoof down upon the table, the sound cracking across the chambers as the force split a massive rift across the table's length.

"You will all be silent as of **now**. We do not have the time for *arguing* or *accusing*! We have a nation-wide emergency and you all bicker like foals caught stealing from the cookie jar!" Celestia said sternly, the stress of the day's events bleeding from every word. "My sister has already wiped out not only Everfree, but the entire forest as well, and you accuse *me* of making this up?! I do not have the power to take her on alone, and-"

A knock at the door interrupted her, and an aide opened it to poke his head in. "Majesty, Councilmares? I would not be here if it weren't dire. There is a...messenger." He pulled his head back out, and not a second later another pony walked in. An unicorn mare.

But there was a sense of wrongness about her. Her eyes were completely shut, as if she were sleeping. Her coloration was monotone, all the color drained from her being, and where her cutie mark should be, sat only a silver crescent moon.

Before anypony could say a word, her horn lit up, causing many of the council to gather up magic in their own just in case. However, instead of an attack, a snide voice resonated throughout the chamber.

“Hello, my subjects, loyal or otherwise. I am your new Queen, Nightmare Moon. If you wish to survive, you will surrender immediately, or you will be cast into the shadows, just as I have done to Everfree. Refusal to comply will be severely punished. And do not think you can hide this matter from the citizens. My messengers are everywhere. You have one day, starting at midnight. If you have not given me your answer by twenty-four hours afterward, or given me a non-favorable reply, you will be destroyed. Any city found harboring the Traitor Princess, Celestia, will be found guilty immediately, and all ponies will be put to Sleep without clemency. If you doubt me, look to my messengers. They will show you what it is like to Sleep.”

The moment the message ended, the grey pony collapsed upon the floor. The Councilmares sprang from their seats, and rushing over to the fallen pony, gathered around her. Suddenly, she opened her maw, and a horrified scream came from it. Celestia recognized it. It was the same screams she heard back in Everfree. The scream of a pony being subjected to nightmares infinitely worse than anything they could possibly imagine.

Everypony covered their ears. They could hear echoing screams from many points in the city. Nightmare Moon hadn't lied. Her messengers *were* everywhere! And then, just as the screaming had started, it stopped abruptly, and the messenger was teleported out of the room in a flash of silver moonlight.

The entire chamber was shook up. Turning to the councilmares, all of them pale with shock, Celestia whispered one thing.

“We must defend ourselves...”

She...she ran from us... Abandoned us... Our sister, the one I thought we could rely on most to support our decisions...she left us here... Luna whispered within Nightmare Moon's mind, the pain of Celestia's betrayal aching within her.

And Nightmare Moon agreed. If there had been one pony she thought would join them, it had been her sister. No matter what her name was, she was still a copy of Luna at her core, and she felt Celestia's betrayal just as much as Luna did herself, “She gave us her answer, foal. Her actions

Speak clearly for what she had done. She...never cared for us..." Even in her blackest of hearts, Nightmare Moon truly felt that this was the case.

No matter how Luna felt about Nightmare Moon's actions, she still knew that her alter-ego was part of her, and no matter how much she was put through, no matter what terrible things she saw Nightmare Moon do, she had to trust her, as now she could not trust the one person she had cared for most. *Then what shall we do? Nightmare... You're the only pony I have left. What will we do with our sister?*

Nightmare Moon was surprised at Luna's words. Perhaps she was not as weak as the Nightmare had first thought!

"We will soon find out, dear Luna. The messengers have been deployed. Now, we await the answers from every town and city. And as for Celestia? If we cannot capture her and turn her back to our side, then we will have to kill her. Pure and simple. I see no other way around it."

The Nightmare uneclipsed the sun, Sol's light going out across the land as it began to set beyond the horizon, and as it did Luna replied with something that made Nightmare Moon smile so *very* wide.

Agreed.

The quarters that had been provided for Celestia weren't lavish, but they were the ones typically used by the royal family during their visits. The day had been long for the alicorn, involving meetings of every kind, addresses to the public, and extensive planning for the days ahead. The city of Canterlot was indeed going to war, but nopony knew just how to go about it and many of the meetings were concerned with just that problem: How to go about acquiring conscripts for their force, what sort of training their troops required, the logistics of any possible campaigns, the acquisition of important supplies, and many other impenetrable details that served only to give Celestia a tremendous headache.

She was no general, and if those Messengers were any indication, her sister had an entire city's worth of bodies for her army. The princess felt Luna's chosen name was more than apt for this situation, as trying to figure out how to defend Canterlot itself was turning into an absolute nightmare.

Celestia slumped down upon the bed within her quarters, every fiber of her being exhausted. Lowering the sun had tired her out even further, but the cycle had to be maintained. She did not dare risk agitating the situation before her ponies were ready, and now that true night had come, that familiar feeling of lethargy had all but shut her down. However, she was trying to hold on. There was too much at stake for her to sleep now. Too much to think about.

I will not give up on you, dearest sister. I will find a way to free you! I just....I just don't know how to do it... Canterlot's Core is not even a fraction of the strength that Everfree's was, and with the forest now... the way it is, I cannot see getting to the castle being easy, Celestia thought to herself, her mood heavy with depression. *I do not see you or I getting out of this situation unscathed. Already I have seen more than any pony should. I cannot imagine what it is like for you, Luna, to be committing these atrocities...*

Laying her head down, Celestia's thoughts turned to memories of her sister. Of times good and bad. Of times with their parents, when they had been totally carefree, save for their schooling. The bond between the two siblings had been so strong. The love they had for each other: immeasurable. *What had gone so wrong as to result in this?* Eventually Celestia could hold out no longer and gave into her desire to sleep, her exhaustion from the day's events finally catching up with her.

All the two felt was guilt and regret, and Nightmare Moon was all the more angry for it. It was midnight, and the moon was in full glory overhead the castle. The Nightmare had repaired her bedchambers as best as she could, and then tidied up a bit before refreshing herself in the washroom. Afterward, she had released the power of the Core, so as to conserve its energy. She would need it for the days ahead.

But now, without the Core's voice singing in her ears, the overwhelming need for power and retribution had seeped away, leaving her cold and contrite. In the back of her mind, Luna kept asking *What have we done...?*

Nightmare Moon kept asking herself the same question. This hadn't been meant to happen. Yes, she had wanted eternal night, so that everypony would finally take notice of its splendor. She wanted everypony to love her,

just as they did her accursed sister and her equally accursed sun. But the Core...The Core had filled her with a lust... a lust for power, blood and destruction, and the irresistible desire for more had driven her mad.

"What we have done... was done with with purpose. It's too late for us to turn back, now. We've crossed the line, even I know that, and I...dare not think of what will happen to us if we lose this fight, dear Luna," Nightmare Moon's bravado was gone, instead replaced by the endless, gnawing guilt she felt for her actions, "We have to win now, through whatever means necessary . We may even have to do more abhorrent things than we have already, just to survive."

Do we even deserve to live, though? And what about all of your confidence? Has all that vanished, now that we know the things we've done? Was it all an act...?

"No!" Nightmare Moon snapped at her other half. "I suppose some of it was, but not all of it. Remember, dearest Luna. I am you. A different you, to be sure , but you nonetheless. Every insecurity, every fear, every dislike of yours is mine as well. Even your own self-doubt infects me just as much as it does you, if not more! Just one more thing I have to curse you for, foal."

Nightmare Moon had removed her breastplate and helmet, setting them aside so she could relax upon the pile of cushions on the floor. But try as she might, her body rebelled against her, staying tense even now.

"We cannot go back, we can only keep moving forward. Whatever may happen, we cannot give up our plans. Everypony will love us and our night, and Celestia, curse her name, will bow before us and come to love us again, or by our own hooves, will she die..."

I...I have been meaning to ask, Nightmare... Luna ventured, hoping that her other self would not be angry at her request.

The Nightmare was surprised that her alter-ego would go so far as to ask something of her, but she was curious, and so said, "Ask me what, foal? I will consider it, depending on what it may be."

Luna took a moment, as if gathering her thoughts before replying, *I want us to do that link again, the same as the day you took over. I will go through the pain again, and it isn't a takeover! I promise! It's just...if...if we must*

fight Celly, I would rather us do it together. If our sister has to die, I want it by both our own hooves, and nopony else's.

A broad grin spreading across her muzzle, Nightmare Moon knew then that the foal sharing her mind could be salvaged, replying, "You know what will happen if you try to take over, but this idea of yours intrigues me, so I shall allow it."

Thank you, my dearest Nightmare..., whispered Luna, who meant every word. Without Celestia, Nightmare Moon was all she had...

And Nightmare Moon knew this.

"We must sleep now. Night it may be, but we need our full strength for the coming days... and to deal with the Core's whispers."

The skies above Everfree were once again dark, Celestia's sun eclipsed by Luna's moon. A pegasus stallion ran through the afternoon darkness, coming straight into audience chambers of what remained of Everfree Castle. Upon his forehead stood a silver moon, glowing against his night black coat and watery-colored mane. The cutie mark upon his side was of a group of clouds over the full moon. He ran straight up to the throne, past several ponies who leered at him for his rudeness.

However, Nightmare Moon herself did not bat an eye, and smiled down at her subject graciously. "Ah, Aqua Mane, by your presence, I assume that you have something to report regarding the answers that my lovely little Equestrians have given me in response to my royal decree. Yes?" She quirked an eyebrow, her smile growing wider, nearly daring him to say no.

"My leige!" Aqua Mane announced, bowing deeply before her. "I am too loyal to you to permit failure of that kind. I have the reports alright. To begin, Ponyville surrenders and awaits you. The earth ponies are all ready to serve. They knew they could not fight you, Majesty. Cloudsdale has started mobilizing their air forces, and has sent us a very clear, 'Buck you, we'll fight!' How unfortunate. No word yet from Canterlot, though we will need none. Your spies have told us that the Traitor, Celestia, is sequestered within their Ruling Council's headquarters. Manehatten and Fillydelphia have yet to respond..."

Aqua Mane continued his report, listing off the various towns and cities that had surrendered, refused, or have not yet answered the call of his Queen.

The entire time, Nightmare Moon smiled down at him, and in the back of her mind, Luna quietly spoke. *I did not wish for it to come to this, but we will have to fight her...Our own sister.*

"Yes, and we must make an example of Canterlot after we capture her. And make use of their Core; ours is fading. I do not see it lasting more than another week at our current usage," Nightmare Moon replied within her mind.

Aqua Mane, finishing his report, had of course heard none of the internal exchange and had remained bowed the entire time, his eyes to the floor. "...And that is where matters stand now, my Queen. Our forces are ready to mobilize at your command, and are currently stationed in a portion of the city we have cleared for their bivouac. They are ready for your inspection."

Tapping her hoof upon the tile near the throne, Nightmare Moon responded, "This is fine news indeed, my subject. You are dismissed. Oh, and one more thing?"

As the pegasus had stood and began to turn away, he turned his head back, hesitant. "My liege?"

"Report to the Captain of the Guard. He is to promote you to the Captain of the Shadowbolts. Your current orders still stand, however. Do not disappoint me," she announced to him, making sure she put the hint of a threat in the last sentence.

Saluting with a wing, Nightmare Moon could see the pegasus swallow visibly, "Y-Yes, my liege. Thank you, my liege!" He then galloped out of the throne room to take up his new station.

The Shadowbolts were her pegasi air forces, a counterpart to that ridiculous showpony squadron that her parents had created. Except for one thing, and Nightmare Moon grinned, the Shadowbolts were no showponies. They were the real thing, and under her direct command. Their suits and goggles were magically linked to her, and any mistakes they made? Well, they best pray to her that they not *make* mistakes. They had already seen what had happened to the pony who blundered earlier in the day. She now Slept eternally.

Spreading her mighty ebon wings, Nightmare Moon threw herself into the air and bolted out of the throne room. Below her, most of the city lay in ruins, the fires and her lances of destruction having taken out many of the homes. What remained, however, were now being used by her loyal subjects. She could see the attempts to have regular markets and day to day events going on, but those were not what she was interested in.

Oh no, her attention was fixed on the part of the city that had been completely cleared of rubble by her unicorns. At one portion, the ranks and files of her Messengers were evident, an entire legion of bodies ready for war. She could make out the individual companies of earth ponies, unicorns, and the pegasi. Her Sleepers needed no food, no water, and little rest. The perfect soldiers, ready to attack at her command.

The rest of the field lay to her army, the various companies of unicorn and earth pony recruits. The unicorns were practicing combative spells upon dummies, and even the occasional pony who had accepted her gift, and then renounced it. Such a waste, but it was necessary.

The earth ponies themselves were training for charging in and bucking, amongst other ground maneuvers. And above her lay her pride. The Shadowbolts. Wings upon wings of them raced across the sky. Some were down below, doing low flying drills against target dummies, dropping pots of liquid fire at them, or scooping them up into the air before taking them high into the sky and hurling them back to earth. Pegasi were very ambitious ponies, and many had come at her command to serve her.

I am sorry I doubted you last night, Nightmare. Our army-- No, our legion is immense and powerful! We will have no trouble marching across all of Equestria. Celly was foolish in refusing to bow to us. Many were.

"Yes. With the Core singing within our ears, and her sun eclipsed, Celestia will be too weak to stand against us more than once. She will feel our wrath."

Together.

"Together."

"This is it? No more than a hundred ponies? And this is not including the guards we can spare, is it?" Celestia asked, turning her head aside to whisper to the Guard trainer next to her.

He was a musclebound fellow, his armor being highly decorated concerning his position, with his white hide visible beneath it. The unicorn quickly replied, "Everypony is frightened, Your Highness. We all saw the Messengers. Heard their screams, and their message. Many of the viable recruits have already fled the city; I am surprised we even got these hundred. The major problem is this, Princess Celestia: They're no use to us even as shields unless we have the time to train them, and from what we've all heard, time runs out tonight. By what you've claimed to have seen back in Everfree, Nightmare Moon could have an army in the thousands, if not ten times that."

The trainer swallowed and turned his head to the side, unable to look his Princess in the eyes. "Excuse me for saying this, Majesty, but we've already had several assaults on the Council building by desperate ponies who want nothing more to save their hides and turn you over to Nightmare Moon. And I must agree with them. We're not ready to fight. At all. The last war we even had was a border skirmish, and that was centuries ago... But an example made out of an entire city? Princess, we can't afford to let that happen..."

Celestia felt resignation take over her being, and she let out a heartfelt sigh, "I know, I just...I...I need to figure out what to do first. And first thing's first, we have to get some sort of defense ready for Canterlot..."

The trainer turned his head to stare over at his ruler, anger in his eyes. "Princess, with all due respect, I can do my job just fine. The question is, will you do yours? If that means surrendering yourself to save the people that you rule over, then it should be done. We took you in, but Nightmare Moon may not forgive us for that. I would rather not become a mindless automaton living an eternal nightmare! None of us do!"

Celestia took a few steps back, aghast and ashamed. *I'm dooming an entire city to death if I don't do something. And there isn't anything I **can** do. The city doesn't have enough guards to make even a sizable force, and there is no chance that these colts and fillies will be trained in time to last any length of time against my sister's army. I...* Celestia couldn't take it. She ran away from the scene, dashing into the council hall for her quarters,

her thoughts following her. *What if I had bowed to her!? Could I have kept all this from happening? Kept Everfree from being destroyed? Kept the countless lives of my subjects from being lost?* She avoided the ponies in the halls. Celestia could see their glares, their accusing eyes. They blamed her for all of this. *It is my fault that this has all come about. I failed Father, I failed Luna, and I failed all of Equestria. I...I will...*

A voice broke her from her thoughts as a page came running up to her, yelling the Princess' name. She had nearly been to her room, and she stopped to see what he had to say. Probably more like what the Guard trainer had said to her.

He stopped in front of her, panting as he caught his breath before finally exclaiming, "We have a report! Nightmare Moon's army has been spotted emerging just outside of Ponyville! She's with them! Princess, what do you wish for me to tell the Council!?" His eyes were wide, and he was obviously frightened.

Taking a deep breath, Celestia closed her eyes for a moment before opening them again and exhaling, "Tell them they are to do nothing, and that I thank them for their hospitality. But I must do this alone. I mean to bargain with Nightmare Moon, and, if necessary, offer myself up in surrender to save Canterlot and as many ponies as I can. It... it is the only way. Now off! Go! Tell them what I have said!" Celestia shooed the page off with a hoof. She had made her decision. She was these ponies' protector, and she would see them safe, even if it did not mean her safety in return...

Stopping in her quarters, Celestia grabbed a single item that she had placed a spell upon, hoping that it would help her sister. A tiny toy in the shape of a midnight blue alicorn.

Nightmare Moon landed upon the town hall stage within Ponyville. In front of her stood every resident of the town, some watching in anticipation, others in abject fear, all waiting in the field in front of the hall.

Within her mind, Nightmare Moon asked, "Ready?"

In reply, Luna answered, *Ready.*

And in both their voices, speaking in unison, Nightmare Moon announced, "My faithful subjects, I am delighted to see so many ponies who know their place within Equestria. You will be a welcome addition to my new Lunar Republic, and know that, from this day forth, Ponyville will be spared any and all attacks and retaliations for their loyalty to the throne. Any and all ponies who wish to register within the Lunar Republic army, air force, or magics corps, please march out of Ponyville to where our legion currently camps."

While Nightmare Moon talked, continuing her speech, Luna spoke along with her. Their voices intertwined and melded into one, an effect of their link. While their minds were still mostly separated, allowing their thoughts to be separate from each other, their actions and speech were as one. Nightmare Moon had been emotionally split in two about the excruciating pain her counterpart had gone through to establish the link. While she took a savage enjoyment in causing it, she was also concerned for her. Luna was, of course, herself, and utterly loyal to her. Nightmare Moon could trust her like no other pony.

Their speech, however, continued unabated, "...Breaking of these laws will result in immediate arrest, followed by a punishment befitting of the crime. Last, but not least, I require an oath of fealty, whereupon you will gain a mark that will not only protect you, but show your loyalty to me. And make no mistake, I will *know* if you fore-swear your loyalties. Now, bow to me, my subjects! Bow to me and show your allegiance."

One by one, ponies amongst the crowd began to kneel to their new queen. Some, of course, looked uncertain, but bowed before Nightmare Moon regardless. However, inevitably a small group amongst the crowd rebelled.

One shouted, "No! I serve only Princess Celestia!" and three of them darted out of the crowd, sprinting away from the gathering.

Nightmare Moon was ahead of them, though, as shadowy tendrils crept out of the ground and immediately wrapped themselves around the three traitors. Her horn glowing a deep violet, the three ponies drifted back through the air, nicely bound, to the stage.

With the power of her Core coursing through her, Nightmare Moon exclaimed, "Now witness what happens to those who refuse to join my Lunar Republic! To kneel in their place before their Queen!" Her nebulous

mane snaked out toward the terrified ponies, fear deep within their eyes. And upon being touched, each screamed out violently before falling silent. The color bleached from their coats, and their cutie marks vanished only to be replaced by Nightmare Moon's signature mark: the crescent moon.

Once the three Sleepers got to their hooves, the Nightmare pointed her horn to Ponyville's road and ordered, "Join your brothers and sisters." The three Messengers walked off without a sound, while the alicorn turned back to her subjects. A simple glare made any ponies who had stood immediately bow back down before her. Smiling to herself, Nightmare Moon's horn began to glow once more, and all across the field, the crescent moon sprang into being on everypony's forehead.

Just as she was about to speak again, she heard the sound of hooves landing upon the stage next to her, as well as an audible gasp from the ponies gathered. She didn't even have to look to know who *that* was.

"Ahhh, my *dearest*, or should we say, *our* dearest sister, Celestia," Nightmare Moon said without turning her head. Then, her tone changed and she screamed at the crowd, "Go about your business foals, this does not concern you!" Immediately, the crowd scattered in all directions, leaving Nightmare Moon to face Celestia alone.

Celestia did not look amused in the least, though Nightmare Moon did not think she would be. The silence between the two stretched on for minutes, each alicorn waiting for the other to make the first move.

Finally, Celestia deigned to speak, lowering her head but keeping her eyes upon the Nightmare in front of her. "I...I've come to bargain...For the safety of all my little ponies..."

Nightmare Moon laughed, a sinister cackle full of threat and malice. "*You've* come to bargain with *us*? After you *abandoned* us back in Everfree? We gave you the choice to rule with us in our new Lunar Republic, and you cast aside our gift without so much as a thought! And then you dare to stand against us?! Why should we *ever* bargain with you, *traitor*!?"

Celestia sat rapidly, glancing everywhere but at her sister, trying to figure out what to say. What *could* she say?

"I..." It was hard to speak to Nightmare Moon, knowing full well what she had done to help Luna along the path to this insanity. "I...I want you to release Luna, to free her! I'll do whatever it takes for you to do so!" Celestia finally exclaimed. She had taken note of how strange Nightmare Moon's voice had sounded.

"Oh my, how brash and demanding," the Nightmare replied, tapping her hoof against the floorboards. Then, her voice changed to only be that of her own, "Of course, I do not think the answer lies only with me. Perhaps your *dear* sister should get a vote in, don't you think?"

And then, from Nightmare Moon's mouth, a second voice came, causing Celestia to gasp in shock.

"Celly, I made my decision. I want this... You weren't there for me. You *abandoned* me! My Nightmare has been here the entire time and kept me company. She wants what I want. No, I will be staying, thank you. I made my choice; I made my unforgivable decisions. Leave me to them."

And then, the duo's voices were back in sync, "There, you see, dear sister, we made our choices long ago. I am Luna, and Luna is me. We are together, one. *Inseparable*. What could you *ever* offer that would separate us, hmmm? Surrender, Celestia. It is over! You know Equestria cannot win against my army. You know that *you* cannot win!"

"Maybe not, Nightmare Moon, but I can fight! Fight for my sister's freedom!" Celestia yelled, getting herself into what she thought was a good combat-ready stance. Still, she was mentally shaken from hearing Luna's voice come from Nightmare Moon, and wasn't prepared for what happened next.

Nightmare Moon simply laughed in her face, causing Celestia to blink in confusion. "Oh you stupid, silly foal. Did you think you could... The black alicorn's horn suddenly flared to life, several dark bolts of energy shooting out from it and striking Celestia in the chest, flinging her back to slide across the dry earth, which shuddered in protest. "...Fight against us!? You have the pent up rage of both of us to deal with! You will *die* by both our hooves! Your memory will be erased from the chronicles, and we will rule without you!" Nightmare Moon's eyes blazed a bright blue, streams of raw power seeping from her eyes.

Another flurry of bolts leapt at Celestia, knocking her prone again as she slid further into the gathering area. The ground heaved once more, a

violent tremor rocking the land, and in the far distance, a mountain collapsed in on itself. The skies above them shuddered, and animals took flight across the countryside. A second volley, then a third, tore into Celestia, throwing her battered body about. The ground in all directions protested, great rents in the earth appearing. New mountains rose up all across Equestria, while old ones crumbled into dust as the stars above trembled in fear. The Goddesses were attached to the land, after all, and the one attacking the other was damaging the very world itself irrevocably.

Even in immense pain, her skin feeling as if it were on fire, Celestia could sense what was happening. "S-St-Stop..." She choked, as she managed to stagger up once again, just in time to dodge Nightmare Moon's hind-kick and take to the sky. Her sister's Nightmare swiftly followed. An immense fireball flew from the ebony alicorn's horn this time, and Celestia barely managed to get a shield up in time to dissipate it, plowing through the orb of flame. It was close; she felt her mane and tail smolder, but before her sister could react, Celestia dove down and drove her back with a kick to the side of her armored plating.

Throwing the daze of the blow off, Nightmare Moon glared at Celestia with barely concealed hatred. She drank deep of her connection to Everfree's Core and with a great surge of power unleashed a tempest of bolts upon the Sun Goddess. The time for playing games was over.

Celestia tried to get a shield up in time, but it happened too fast. Her shield was crushed around her body and the bolts of energy pummeled her from every direction. They smashed into every inch of her body, bruising and battering her further, and just when she thought it had ended, Nightmare Moon flew up and delivered a punishing two-hoofed blow to the Goddess of the Sun's chest, snapping no small number of ribs and causing a spurt of blood to issue from the princess' maw. The ground gave one final shudder in protest just as Celestia's body hit the earth below with a sickening crunch.

Celestia was dimly aware of her surroundings through the fog of her pain. She watched helplessly as Nightmare Moon landed nearby and approached up to her to glare down at her broken body. "No mother and father to act as base this time, *dear* sister. I win. You may have one last chance to say something to deter me from killing you. Choose your words carefully."

Celestia cried out in pain as she tried to move, barely managing to bring up a hoof to her mane, and pull something out of it. Losing her strength, the object fell from her hoof and rolled across the ground, drawing Nightmare Moon's gaze.

It was a little toy alicorn, a representation of Luna, in fact. Luna remembered it fondly. Celestia had carved it herself back before mother and father had gone, and took it everywhere with her, even sleeping with it at times. It was a quaint little thing and as the two stared at it, it sent them a message...

My dearest sister, Luna. I am greatly ashamed that I did not help you, or be there for you as much as I could have. Some nights, I cried myself to sleep when you were in one of your bad moods, feeling powerless to comfort you. In fact, right now, all I've been wanting to do is cry for you, knowing that I had helped you become this Nightmare. And while I cannot yet forgive you for everything you have done, I can definitely say that I just want you back. I miss you little sister...

Nightmare Moon scoffed at the toy and its message. A ploy! A trick to throw them off guard. Lies. Nothing more than lies! But Luna... Luna herself caught something her counterpart did not. Love. One hundred percent pure and absolute. Unadulterated, unconditional love. She could feel it deep within her heart, and as she did, it cracked through Luna's emotional armor and pushed her to doubt her actions. Every single one of them.

Luna's hesitation caught Nightmare Moon's attention, however, and she snapped at her within their mind, "What are you doing, foal?"

Luna didn't reply, and the backlash of Luna breaking their mental link stunned Nightmare Moon, forcing her down and allowing her counterpart to take control.

Dashing forward, Luna in her Nightmare's body knelt down beside Celestia, causing the Sun Goddess to flinch back and screw her eyes shut. But, instead of more pain, a gentle nuzzle brought Celestia to open her eyes, gazing straight up into the other alicorn's. And the eyes she saw were Luna's. "I'm so sorry, Celly...I can never apologize enough for what I've done to you..."

And just as she felt the faint stirrings of Nightmare Moon coming back to her senses, Luna's horn flashed, and she vanished from sight in a swirl of

blackness, leaving Celestia broken and battered upon the ground in the center of Ponyville. The village itself had been all but demolished, a causality of the vindictive rage of their new Queen.

Celestia drifted in and out of consciousness. At first, the ponies with the crescent moon upon their foreheads had been gathered around her. Then next she knew, she was being air-lifted by several pegasi, a pair of medics doing their best to make her comfortable and trying to sooth her grievous wounds. It wasn't working out too well. The goddess was in pain regardless of the position, and every inch of her body hurt. She swore she could even feel the grating of broken bones grinding against one another whenever she was moved. Fortunately, it wasn't long before the bliss of unconsciousness took her once again.

Later, she woke up in what she presumed to be Canterlot's hospital wing. Everything was painfully bright and she could barely see at all. There were multi-colored blurs moving about her with an alarming quickness, and she could hear the frightened mumbles of several different ponies. Just then, a voice rang out nearby, "She's awake! Get her sedated! She's not ready, yet; we need more time! There was a great clamor about her, ponies rushing around her in a panic as the pain began to bleed slowly back into her body. She was about to scream, but a sharp prick made itself known in her neck and suddenly everything went away as she faded back into a peaceful, medicated bliss.

In Everfree Castle, an infuriated alicorn paced through her quarters, seemingly debating with herself.

"I *trusted* you! I allowed you that link *because* I trusted you! And you even gave me your word you would not try to take control! You're no better than our sister! We had her at our mercy and you prevented us from killing or capturing her! If you were any other pony, I would have slain you where you stood!" The hate and anger rolled off Nightmare Moon in waves, the tension in the air thick enough to cut with a sword.

Luna could only cower within the back of their mind, not daring to even give a frightened peep. She had never seen her counterpart this furious, and she knew she had screwed up in a big way. But she also knew now that

Celestia still loved her, that there was hope for things to be fixed between the two of them.

Nightmare Moon stopped pacing, and Luna whimpered in fright. "I know what to do with you. Tonight, you will Slumber until the morrow. A fitting punishment for what you have done, my *dearest* Luna." This time, her Nightmare sneered at her in derision, the hate being trained on at Luna now.

No! NO! Please, I beg of you, Nightmare! Don't- A tendril of Nightmare Moon's power touched Luna's mind, and she cried out in terror before being silenced. This time, the Nightmare took glee in the pain that arced across Luna's mind. A day within her Nightmares would sufficiently cow the upstart foal and give her time to think about betraying the one who had done so much for them. For now, *she* had things to plan for. There were Cities to attack, and Celestia to find, though Nightmare Moon could guess that Canterlot was where she was recuperating. That was fine. She would destroy Canterlot last...

No...No! Why? I...I can't take anymore of this! I just can't! Not tonight... Twilight thought to herself, pulling away from the book while tears streamed down her cheeks. It was as if the memories from the book itself had a stranglehold on her heart. Princess Celestia had been right. Her deep desire to see what was hidden within the tome was bringing her nothing but sadness.

Ohhh... I've got to get it together! I haven't cried this much since I was a filly! Of course, when I would miss mother and father, Princess Celestia would be there at night to take me under her wing and comfort...Wait... Taking a quick look outside at the setting sun, her hopes brightened just a bit. She still had time. If she hurried, maybe she could. She could most certainly use the soothing, and her teacher's guidance through this tome would help a lot more. Twilight Sparkle hurriedly slipped her saddlebags out from their cubbyhole, then placed both tomes on either side. *Will I need food? No, they'd have some...Shelter? No, once again, same answer...Ah! Parchment, quills, and ink, yes!*

Quickly penning a note, she set it on the book stand where she did most of her reading, just in case any of her friends were curious as to why she was

not around. A few moments later she was finished packing the supplies into her bags, going over a little checklist in her head before she set out, just to be sure she hadn't forgotten anything. *Okay, calm down, Twilight. The note's written, I have both books, along with supplies for writing and notes... Oh Goddess, I hope she'll welcome me! She was right...*

Stepping to the center of her room, Twilight sent off a tracer spell first to locate the Princesses before starting her teleportation. She needed to know where she was going before she did it, after all. Gathering up the energy in her horn, she formed the spell and then released, feeling the gentle tug of magic as she was thrown in the direction she needed to go. After a few seconds, Twilight rematerialized on the beach, to the surprise of two resting Princesses.

Celestia could see her prized pupil standing before her with not only saddlebags upon her back, but also a tear-stained face and puffy eyes. "Twilight, my faithful student, why are you here? Is it... the histories?" she ventured, Luna awkwardly quiet beside her.

Twilight stood there for a moment, simply nodding before rushing over to her teacher's side, breaking out into fresh tears as she pushed herself under one of Celestia's wings. "Ohhh, Princess! I should have listened to you! I had no idea things had gotten to be so awful back then! I reached the point after you lost to Nightmare Moon, and I just couldn't keep going anymore! It was all too much!"

Luna looked away and crept across the sand, trying to appear as small as she possibly could. Celestia hunkered down with Twilight, keeping a wing over her student's body and nuzzling her like a mother would. "I never said, Twilight, that it would be easy to read them. It just gets worse from there... I had to make a great many decisions that I am not proud about, and that set the ponies of Equestria against me for years after that. Luna and I both did things back then we greatly regret. We were very young, not yet having the experience we needed, but it was all of Equestria that paid the price for our ignorance. However, do not worry, my pupil. You need not continue with your studies tonight. For now, rest, I'll be there tomorrow to help you through it."

That night, the three ponies sat and talked as they looked up at Luna's glorious night sky, the stars shining brightly above and the moon gazing gently down upon them. And when Twilight asked about why Princess

Celestia was not tired, Celestia explained to her student, “I beat the Lethargy centuries ago, Twilight, out of having to also perform the night duties in addition to my own. Shortly after Luna was released, I taught her how to beat it, too, though we still tend to remain awake during our preferred times. But now at least, we make sure to spend as much time with each other as we can, and to always be *there* for one another...”

Chapter 3

Shortly after the breaking of the dawn, the two alicorns stood together on the beach, having momentarily left the comforts of their temporary shelter and the sleeping unicorn within. The morning air was cool upon their flanks, and the sound of the waves and the waking shore birds drifted through the air around them. It was quite picturesque, and the two alicorns stood side by side, staring wistfully up into the sky.

“Celly...” the midnight blue alicorn finally spoke, breaking the silence. “Are you sure Twilight can handle the book? You saw how shaken she was when she first arrived. She’s never been exposed to that sort of thing before. I fear it may be too much for her.”

The alabaster alicorn was quiet for several long moments before she responded in turn, “I still believe that she will be able to handle it, little sister. My most faithful student is stronger than you think.”

Luna sat down beside her sister, and thought a moment before speaking, “But what if she isn’t? How will she react when she discovers the horrors that we’re responsible for? That you, her beloved teacher, have committed?”

Flinching, Celestia raised a hoof and placed it gently upon her sister’s shoulder, “I have faith in her, dear sister. I believe wholeheartedly that she will be able to overcome the memories of the tome. That is not my concern. No, what I am more worried about is that her perception of us will change. Luna, you know that you were not at fault for the things that Nightmare Moon did, and I do not blame you for them. However, the things I did were my decision alone. And try as I might, I... I cannot forgive myself for some of them, no matter how much they were needed.”

“Celly, what about the spell, then? If she cannot handle it, would you use it again upon your own student, if you must?” Luna leaned against Celestia’s side, looking up at her loving sibling with worry in her eyes.

Celestia swallowed, leaning down to nuzzle lovingly at her younger sister’s cheek for a moment, before replying in a most serious tone, “If she

asks for it, then I will. Then her innocence will be spared, and I will hide the tome once again. Perhaps this time so that nopony will find it until our Ascension days." She settled down upon the sand beside her sister, their sides pressed up against one another as they basked in each others' presence.

A short time later, Twilight Sparkle dragged herself out of the little hut the princesses had been using as resting quarters, blinking the sleep out of her eyes. That night, her dreams had been quiet, and her sleep, restful. Princess Celestia had placed a little shield around the tome so that it couldn't intrude upon her rest that night.

Slipping back into the hut for a moment, she shortly re-emerged, floating a rolled up blanket and the tome itself before her as she trotted out to the two princesses.

Looking up at Twilight's arrival, Celestia and Luna smiled pleasantly at the unicorn.

"Ahhh, my faithful student. I assume you are ready to start your studies into our history once again?" Celestia asked, watching as her student lay the rug out upon the sand next to her, before lying down upon it herself with the book in front of them.

Looking up uncertainly at her teacher, Twilight replied, "I think I am, but honestly, I'm afraid of what I might find, Princess."

Twilight's horn glimmered, and the book began to open to her bookmark, but was stopped by Celestia's hoof resting upon the cover. "Understand me, my faithful student, what happened in this book is in the past, and many of the things that were done, were done because they *had* to be. Please keep that in mind."

What has the Princess done in the past that she's so concerned I'll discover? Is she really that worried about my reaction? Twilight wondered as Celestia withdrew her hoof and allowed the tome to open to where she left off.

The skies about Cloudsdale were bright and clear. It was a warm and sunny day, a welcome change from the previous one that the pegasus

ponies had spent shrouded in darkness. The sun hadn't risen at all that day, and they had begun to worry that it might simply... not. The city below was bustling, and pegasi were flying about everywhere, either on their daily duties, or for the simple thrill of flight itself.

They were not the ponies Nightmare Moon's attention was focused on, though. Far below, she was studying the cloud fields that the pegasi were drilling upon as they prepared themselves for war. All around, there were ponies suspended upon the clouds, some were obvious lookouts while others tried to look like they were doing other things, like sleeping or going about their business. The Nightmare knew better. No touch of dreams rested within their heads. It was no matter.

She wasn't worried about being spotted, oh no. She and her Shadowbolts were hidden within the sun's glare, far too high to be seen or cast a shadow onto the cloud city below. Of course, her Shadowbolts weren't the only ponies she had hidden, either. Through out the city, her Storm Mages, the unicorn corps, were stationed within the clouds themselves, able to fly from the bat-like wings she had given them with her magic. Not only that, but in the likelihood that a pegasus would might stumble upon them, she had also fitted her Mages with a temporary invisibility spell, to keep them hidden until the time was right. Nightmare Moon would have nothing jeopardize her plans.

No. No. Nothing will stop me now. Not only do I have backups, but if all my plans fail, well... I could always just wipe Cloudsdale off the map. It is not something I would prefer to do, but if I must, I will.

The ebon alicorn continued to study the city below her, her thoughts with the events of the day prior.

It is nearly time...

Earlier...

It was the day after the battle with Nightmare Moon's traitorous sister, and the sun had not risen that day. It gave Nightmare Moon immense satisfaction to know that she had crippled the 'Princess' enough to actually keep her from doing her duties. The heavens felt strained, though, having been robbed of their natural order, but the monarch did not dwell on it.

Nightmare Moon had released Luna from her Nightmares earlier that morning. It had been so satisfying to hear her alter-ego break down in tears before her, apologizing profusely, and not only that, but *thanking* the Nightmare for releasing her from the Slumber, and promising to never fight against Nightmare Moon again. *Of course, I didn't believe her in the least. Why should I ever trust that foal again?*

No. Never again would she allow Luna to rise in her favor. She might even begin torturing her *dear* partner for **fun**, as sending Luna to Slumber had been quite the delicious amusement.

Oh, I so wish that upstart foal would say something to cross me, then I could do it again with a real reason. Nightmare Moon thought as she traveled down the ruined halls of Everfree, which, while having seen better days, had been cleaned up as best as they could. Red splotches were still present where blood had stained the stone, but at least the corridors were traversible.

Of course, I could just torture her for whatever reason I like... No, she has not done anything as of yet that deserves such. She continued to think, looking inward as Luna cowered within a far corner of her mind.

The Queen's self-appointed advisor emerged from a nearby doorway, falling in step beside her as she proceeded through the castle. She was green unicorn, with a light blue mane that was combed simply to one side and stark sea-green eyes. She wore a pitch black vest with the silver crescent moon emblazoned upon it magically, and on her flank, an image of a piece of parchment with several checkmarks written down one side. Her expression was grim, and she avoided looking at the Nightmare's face as she accompanied her. The two said nothing for several long moments as they walked, and the Nightmare knew why. Self-appointed or not, the advisor knew when to hold her tongue, and was deathly afraid of treading upon her Queen's ground. No, she was a smart one, which is why the alicorn had kept the mare around. Whenever she had said something over the past few days, it had proved to be very important and the advice she had given to Nightmare Moon had actually been instrumental in establishing the Queen's rule. Finally, tired of the silence, the Nightmare spoke abruptly, "Report."

The advisor, who had never even told her liege her name, gave a start and finally replied, "My Queen, I bring news, and... advice... Your

troops have all been fitted with the spells that you desired, and have begun deploying to their assigned positions near Cloudsdale. They should arrive by tonight, my Queen. In other matters, the continued night of your reign has begun causing plants to wilt. If this keeps up for much longer, we will have a widespread food shortage on our hooves, and no city under your rule will last the winter with their shortened stores.”

A simple look from Nightmare Moon was all it took for the other mare to quickly come to the point, “All that I wish to suggest is that you should allow the sun to shine upon the land every couple days. It will give you a night long enough for your subjects to adore, but will also keep the land alive. Crop yields will drop, of course, but that can be easily remedied by an increase in the crops planted. It will also be a good way to keep order; the slightest bit of disorder and the sun is eclipsed once again for a certain number of days.”

Turning her head away, the Nightmare considered this proposal for several long minutes, her advisor next to her trembling with anxiety. While serving under their Queen would eventually be rewarding, the penalties for failure was quite severe. “What is your name, mare? And what title do you think would serve you best?” Nightmare Moon finally said to the young mare, who recoiled at her Queen’s voice.

The unicorn wilted visibly under Nightmare Moon’s gaze, stumbling over her words. “I-I-I’m C-Check L-List, my I-I-Ieige. I... g-guess I...could be....Chancellor...?” Check List ventured forth, terrified that she might have overstepped her boundaries.

Nightmare Moon had other plans, however, and was actually quite impressed by the unicorn’s bravery. Few ponies would have had the backbone to outright tell her these sort of things. Still, a little fear was good; it kept her subjects in order. “Well, then, Chancellor Check List, I do believe you have earned your new position. We will discuss what your new benefits and pay will be at a later time, as well as outlining your new duties. As for right now, you are dismissed. This goes without saying, but... Do not fail me, Chancellor...”

At first, the mare brightened up considerably, but at the utterance of those last few words, her eyes widened and a little squeak escaped her muzzle, “Yes, Majesty, thank you! Of course; I will never fail you!” She

then galloped off to some other business that desperately needed her attention. Far away from Nightmare Moon.

I do have to say, that idea was quite brilliant for coming from some other pony. It will come in most useful for my first attack. The city of Cloudsdale will be expecting me to attack at night, when I am at my strongest, not during the daytime. Foals! I will show them just how wrong they are...

Nightmare Moon glanced to either side of herself. To one side, shrouded by her invisibility spell, were her Shadowbolts, hovering in place as the last couple wings fell into position. Each one had a readied crossbow within their hooves, poised to attack at their Queen's command. To her other side were her pegasi Sleepers. Not as many in number as her Shadowbolts, but more than quite enough to bolster her Storm Mages below. All the while her unicorn Messengers stood at the ready to form a shield around Cloudsdale, preventing anypony from escaping.

Taking a quick look at the sun overhead, Nightmare Moon smirked to herself. The lethargy brought on by the day would not stop her. Oh no, she was much stronger than her pitiful counterpart, the sun's rays meant nothing to her. It was most certainly time to begin the attack.

With a simply gesture of her hoof, the Nightmare sent her enchanted Shadowbolts forth, the wings diving down to hover above each of the cloud fields that the pegasi of Cloudsdale were drilling upon. Each took careful aim, awaiting their Majesty's signal. Beneath them, the pegasi took notice of the changed air currents, but not seeing the cause of it, they went back about their duties.

Perfect... Nightmare Moon thought, as she looked through the eyes of each of her Shadowbolts, taking in the sights of the floating city as she basked in the fear radiating from many of the pegasi below. They were terrified of her, terrified of what she could accomplish, and what she could do to their precious Cloudsdale. Oh, yes, she would certainly show them exactly what it meant to fear her.

Once her air troops were in place and ready, Nightmare Moon let her gaze slide over to the various lookouts, and grinned. A very *wide* grin full of nothing but malice. Beneath the sentries, pools of whirling darkness

sprung into being, the screams of the pegasi cut off before they could even leave their lips, as they were dragged down into the black depths beneath them. The pitchblack alicorn drank in their fear and pain, revelling in the waves of distress emanating from her victims.

As the sentries sank into the dark pools and vanished, Nightmare Moon narrowed her eyes and whispered...

“Fire.”

Earlier...

All it took were a few spells to simulate a three dimensional map of Cloudsdale and the surrounding airspace. Added onto the diagram were an abundance of tiny ponies indicating the wings of Sleepers and Shadowbolts, as well as each of the individually placed Storm Mages. Cloudsdale was well and truly surrounded on all fronts.

Sneering at the battle plan set before her, Nightmare Moon adjusted it for several more moments before pulling away and turning to her officers. “Captains, this is your structure for the start of the decimation of Cloudsdale. Study it well, for if you screw this up, you know what awaits you.” She began to glide the tiny ponies across the diagram, picking out which wing was which as she sent them to their positions. Aqua Mane, Captain of the Shadowbolts, Storm Chaser, Captain of the Storm Mages, and Check List, her Chancellor all watched in rapt attention.

“Aqua Mane, your Shadowbolts will cut down any and all military forces once I give the signal. I want to see those crossbow bolts blot out the sun. Any military personal that surrender are to be rounded up and brought to the Knightmares’ base. Once the initial assault has been completed, you are to break formation after the military personal have been dealt with and fan out through the city proper. Hunt down any and all resistance, crush it, and expect aerial combat to happen. I want three Shadowbolts guarding each others flanks at all times.”

The wings of pegasi within the diagram broke apart after striking the illusionary air force base, sweeping in to engage with the rogue forces within the city. At the same time, new symbols began to show up on the battle plan, all moving toward a different goal.

The future ruler of Equestria continued her plans, keeping pace with the happenings on the board. "Storm Chaser, your Storm Mages will hide within the clouds once the spell to give your troops wings has been cast. Your targets are the Weather Factories. They are your **only** objective. We must have those factories to prevent them from being used against us."

Stepping back, the Nightmare sent off the last company of troops: Her Sleepers. "Finally, the Sleepers will spread themselves out amongst the populace, aiding you in putting down any rogue elements. Once positioned, they will open their mouths and eyes. Only soldiers under my banner will be protected from them, everypony else will be unable to act, frozen in fear. During this instance, I will converge upon the town hall with my honor guard and I will take control of the ruling government."

Then, staring at her captains each in turn, she snorted, "Well? You have your orders! Dismissed!"

Aqua Mane and Storm Chaser immediately snapped salutes and trotted out of the war room.

The carnage was absolute and the death toll high for the Cloudsdale Air Force Base. A torrent of crossbow bolts had seemingly come out of nowhere, striking down all but the swiftest pegasi. All across the field, entire battalions lay dead or dying, waving their perforated limbs feebly while their life's blood drained into the clouds beneath them.

Even out of the lucky ones that had managed to evade the storm of bolts, a few were struck down immediately by forces unseen. The rest of the base was thrown into a panic, pegasi fleeing for shelter, burrowing into the clouds or even hiding beneath their own wings up until the moment their enemy showed themselves. Wings upon wings of Shadowbolts appeared in the skies, and even higher, entire companies of Sleepers. At the pinnacle of the formation sat the Dark Queen herself, Nightmare Moon, hovering in place above the battlefield.

The sight was horrifying. With their main force slaughtered, the clouds running red beneath their bodies, Cloudsdale was left nearly defenseless.

As she watched, her Shadowbolts descended upon the clouds, brandishing their crossbows at the survivors. Within a few moments, a multitude of prisoners had been taken and marched to the center of the cloud field. Folding her wings to her back, the alicorn dove down toward the prisoners before pulling up and landing her hooves upon the clouds.

The fear rolling off the group of surviving fillies and colts was palpable, and Nightmare Moon relished it. While her Shadowbolts stood guard around the prisoners, the Nightmare looked each one up and down, most of the ponies keeping their eyes away from her own, but there were a few who locked their gaze with hers. The cold, unforgiving malice within her eyes made them each flinch in turn.

“...Remove them from my sight. Find out which are soldiers and separate them from the rest. I will deal with them all later,” she said as the guards snapped smart salutes and began to guide the prisoners off. *Their life-force will be drained to bolster the Core’s power*, she thought to herself.

One terrified pegasus panicked and tried to take flight, but the sudden twang of a crossbow stopped him short as he fell to the cloud below, a bolt buried in his heart.

Ignoring the now dead pegasus, Nightmare Moon looked up into the sky and whispered another command, “Phase Two.” Her Shadowbolts that were not indisposed of at the moment immediately sped off into the rest of the city, while around her, unicorns began to rise from the clouds, taking flight toward the Weather Factories at the edge of the city.

And above her, oh yes, above her flew in her Sleepers. The legion that would terrorize Cloudsdale. The city soon became encased in a dark shield, preventing escape for anypony, while her maniacal laughter filled the air.

Earlier...

The day’s events had gone by quite quickly, leading to the time when it would have been dusk, though the moon was still high in the sky. Dinnertime had come and gone, which had caused quite the hectic rush amongst the remaining castle staff to find a suitable chef. All of the castle’s previous cooks either had fled or been killed.

The dining hall had been refitted as best as the staff could manage, which hadn't been very well considering that tables and cushions were in desperate need at the time. What they did have had either been salvaged from the ruins of the castle itself or from Everfree City and was thus in pretty bad shape.

What had come out of the kitchen, however, was even more disappointing. The food was passable at best, and Nightmare Moon had been about to severely punish the offending ponies when dessert was been served. In fear for their lives the servers swiftly placed a small plate in front of her and then fled back to the kitchens.

What lay before her, Nightmare Moon had never seen. It appeared to be a roundish treat layered in chocolate, and the Nightmare was not quite sure what it entailed. Hovering it up to her mouth, she took a tiny bite of it, noticing one of the chefs peeking around the corner of the kitchen out of the corner of her eye.

The treat was still quite warm, and when the taste hit her tongue, her eyes lit up. In fact, she had to keep herself from devouring the treat all at once, instead keeping her bites slow and small.

Now that was quite delightful, a fitting highpoint to my dinner so far, she thought to herself, turning her head suddenly to glare in the direction of the chef peeking around the corner. "You, pony. Are you the one responsible for this dessert? What do you call it?" she demanded of him.

Nightmare Moon's stare was enough to put a quaver into the chef's steps as he approached his Queen. "Y-Yes, my liege. I call it a M-Moonpie," he stuttered out.

The Nightmare raised an eyebrow, then said, "Indeed! I'd like to see more of your 'Moonpies', and in many different varieties. See if you can create a cheesecake version." Cheesecakes had always been her guilty pleasure even before she had become Nightmare Moon.

"Y-Yes! My Queen!" the chef exclaimed before dashing back into the kitchen.

The taste of the dessert still within her mouth, Nightmare Moon stood and slipped out of the dining area, only to be met by her newly appointed Chancellor, who bowed before her.

“My Queen, I bring important news from our spies in Canterlot. The Traitor Princess, Celestia, is currently in critical care within their hospital. She will be out of your mane for at least a week, even with her magic to help heal her wounds faster. For other matters, Stalliongrad has accepted your terms, and await your presence, albeit a day late.” After dealing with the Nightmare all day, Check List had become a little more comfortable with her presence, if still extremely wary of it.

I’m so sorry, Celly..., came a voice from the back of Nightmare Moon’s mind, which she promptly ignored. “This is exceptional news, my Chancellor. Reply to them that I will get to them within the next week. For now, I have cities to overtake.”

The eve of the battle was quickly coming to a close...

The exhilaration of flight flowed through Nightmare Moon as she dove and spun through the skies above Cloudsdale. The resistance was strong, but nothing that could not be handled by her or her Shadowbolts. Oh no, in fact, it was going so well she had decided to join in on the fun, and was currently engaged in aerial combat with two very brash young colts who thought *they* could take on an alicorn. She had to laugh about it. Their aerial acrobatics were more akin to a courtship dance than actual combat maneuvers; they had no chance of getting anywhere near her.

Spotting an opening, the alicorn folded her wings to her sides and dove, keeping a watchful eye behind her as one of the two colts dove after her, trying to close the distance. Nightmare Moon ignored the battle raging around her, instead focusing upon her current airspace. *Come on you stupid foal, I am such a tantalizing target, am I not? Go ahead, try to catch me!*

Suddenly, she flared her wings, slowing down greatly before angling them in order to twist around and face the upstart colt. Bringing her hooves up, she kicked out with her hind legs, the speed at which the colt was diving giving him little time to evade the sudden attack. He ran full speed into the Goddess of the Night’s hind kick, and the loud *snap* and spray of crimson were all that Nightmare Moon needed, to know he was dead on impact.

As his body tumbled down into the city below, Nightmare Moon's eyes snapped up to see the other foalish colt breaking away from the fight as fast as his wings could take him. A Shadowbolt came diving down from above, the Nightmare watching through her puppet's eyes with fiendish delight as he struck the fleeing colt in the middle of the back. The blow crippled the unfortunate creature, and his limp form went spiraling down into the cloud-bank below.

All around her, the battle raged on, with the resistance growing ever weaker by the second. Ponies fell from the sky like rain, a few wearing the uniform of the Shadowbolts to her minor disappointment. *Foalish ponies, wasting their lives. If they cannot survive, then it only makes my army stronger.*

Indeed, she watched the battle wane around her as fewer defenders were left in the sky. In fact, it did not need her right now, leaving Nightmare Moon able to turn her attentions elsewhere. "Phase Three, Honor Guard, to me!," she whispered, sending out her thoughts to her Shadowbolts.

Immediately, four pegasi in her colors dropped out of the sky to take up wing positions behind her, and together they descended upon the city below. The screams were distant at first, but became more apparent as the alicorn and her guards drifted down into the city. There, her Sleepers were spread out, their mouths wide open as their Slumbering minds screamed at the horrors besieging them. Even their eyes were open, windows into the torment they were being subjected to. Any pegasi foolish enough to look in the direction of the Sleepers' gazes were held fast by fear, unable to act.

Cloudsdale was a militaristic state, and as such, its headquarters were located in a fortified building at the center of the city. That was Nightmare Moon's destination, and when she arrived, she was greeted by the sight of mares and stallions of all ages frozen in place by pure, unadulterated fear. She reveled in it, drinking the whole scene in before turning her attention to the cloud building before her.

Taking the steps up to the building, Nightmare Moon called to those inside, her voice booming out over the anarchy of the battle raging throughout the city. "**SURRENDER!** Cloudsdale has *fallen* and my Lunar Republic now controls the skies. Refuse and my Storm Mages will destroy

the entire city. Surrender, and you will be accepted into the Lunar Republic and your city will remain floating in the skies. You have **five** minutes.”

Time ticked slowly by, but just as the Nightmare was becoming impatient, a simple white flag pushed itself out of one of the high windows, bringing a gleeful smile to her lips.

Cloudsdale is mine...

Celestia lay deep within the shroud of unconsciousness. Voices drifted around her, hidden in the fog of sleep, but not yet waking her. She was wrapped in a cocoon of pain, and though she realized that it must be hers, it was distant and numb. She felt it, but not as a part of her. Drifting within this nothingness for what felt like years, she heard the occasional voice clearly.

“Where’s the sun? Has she given up on us?”

“Come back to us! We can’t do this without you!”

“Princess! You must wake up!”

No, the alicorn was much too tired, though she did not understand why. She ever so wanted to feel the warmth of her mother... her Sol... her sun upon her coat, and yet she could not sense it. It should be nearing sunset by now. Why wasn’t it in her sky...?

Weariness took over, and the Princess slid into the realm of dreams. Dreams that quickly transformed into nightmares. Nightmares of what her sister had become, how Luna had yelled at her for abandoning her... for never having loved her. And no matter what Celestia wished to say, what came from her lips were things so very different.

“Of course I abandoned you! Why wouldn’t I leave you behind just as mother and father did? You’re weak! *Worthless!* Why would I *ever* love such a foal as you!?” Celestia shouted at Luna, watching as her words changed her beloved sister into Nightmare Moon. Her sister’s Nightmare then attacked, forcing Celestia to relive the battle over again. And again. And again.

After what seemed like the hundredth time she had been beaten into the ground by Nightmare Moon, Celestia started out of her sleep, opening her eyes to the pre-dawn darkness. Oh Sol, did she ever ache. Every muscle felt bruised, every bone felt cracked or broken, and the painkillers flowing through her veins barely suppressed the pain. Celestia was lying upon her side in a hospital bed, and breathing was difficult. The remnants of magic not her own told her that unicorns had been brought in to assist with healing, which would explain why her chest didn't feel like it was in a thousand pieces, though it was certainly not fully healed yet. Magical healing was a difficult process.

Groaning as she shifted positions and tried to stretch her wings, Celestia noticed a shape move near her in the darkness. It turned out to be a nurse, who whispered, "Princess, please don't move. We did the best we could, but your wounds were extensive. You need to rest!"

Celestia stopped moving, but she did manage to say, "Thirsty..."

She could see a faint glow emanating from her nurse's horn as a large glass of water floated over to her lips, whereupon she drank deep, quenching her thirst. This time, her voice wasn't as gravely, but the alicorn's throat was still sore as she spoke. "Thank you..."

"Of course, Princess."

"What...What time is it? What day...?"

Celestia's unicorn nurse was silent for a moment before she said, "It's just about time for you to raise the sun, Princess. You've been... incapacitated since your defeat at the hooves of Nightmare Moon... The sun did not rise yesterday."

Inwardly flinching, Celestia let out a drawn-out sigh. *So that was why I could not feel my sun's familiar warmth. My little ponies must be in a panic! I have to raise it today, if even just to show that I am still alive.* She began looking around her room, trying to spot a nearby window when she finally noticed one on the side of the room she had her back to.

Before her nurse could ask her to stop moving, Celestia turned over and settled down into the mattress of the hospital bed, waiting for what seemed like eternity until finally the time for dawn came about. Raising her horn into the air, Celestia grimaced as her raw throat was irritated further.

Her nurse had not yet noticed, so the Princess began to channel the magic needed to pull the sun into the sky. It was difficult. Her weakness was hindering her ability to do so, and if the alicorn had not been so familiar with her celestial orb, she probably would not have been able to complete the task.

“Princess!? What are you-” her nurse began just as the first light of the dawn crested over the horizon and hit the wall opposite her bed, leaving the nurse flabbergasted.

She had done it, though, once the sun was above the horizon, Celestia felt drained to the point of exhaustion. Her breathing became labored and she collapsed back upon the bed.

Panicking, the unicorn sprinted to the door and threw them open. Shortly afterward, two of Celestia’s guards, as well as some hospital staff, rushed into the room. A mare well into her years said to the rest, “Get her into the sun! Move! She’s fading!”

And indeed Celestia was. She could feel herself slipping away, her eyes fluttering as she tried to keep herself from falling asleep. As she began to sink, she felt a lifeline tether itself to her, followed by another, and then another. The clerics were doing their best to lend her their strength, but it did little to help. Her body was slowing down. She was going under.

She felt herself moving, involuntarily, and as her body shifted a warmth alit upon her. Little by little, her body was immersed in that familiar feeling, and it radiated throughout it, giving her the strength to pull herself up out of the dark abyss.

The Princess opened her eyes to find that the bed she was in was now next to the window that her sun was peeking through, and that her covers had been removed to allow Sol’s light to fall upon her.

Blinking the darkness out of her eyes, Celestia raised her head to peer at all of the worried ponies crowded against her bed, and flashed them all a thankful smile. The alicorn’s strength was returning to her little by little, fueled by the celestial orb that was very much a part of her. Suddenly, a thought came to her and she blinked, *My sister’s moon wasn’t in the sky! My sun reigns alone this day! Did... did she come to her senses?*

This hope filled Celestia throughout breakfast and the painful healing session that followed. They had informed her that she would be bed-ridden for at least a week, even at her current rate of healing. There had been many injuries, including internal bleeding and many broken bones, and they needed time to heal properly.

It was not until late in the afternoon that a messenger solemnly entered the room and delivered the news, "My Princess? Nightmare Moon and her forces have attacked Cloudsdale. Long distance viewing of the city has been obstructed, preventing us from seeing exactly what has occurred, but... there have been sightings of a 'rain of blood' falling from the clouds, along with reports of a multitude of bodies strewn about the countryside beneath the city. From this and the lack of any communication with Cloudsdale itself, we can only conclude that the city has fallen... I'm sorry, Your Majesty..." He stayed for a moment longer before bowing to her and making his way out of the chamber.

Tears sprang to Celestia's eyes and she buried her face into her pillow, sobbing into its limited comfort. Her nurse could only watch sympathetically and gently pat the Princess' shoulder with a hoof. Celestia felt like she stayed that way for hours, and by the time she finished, it was nearly dusk. Using her strength gained from the sun, she set Sol beneath the horizon, and then set about to planning.

If the doctor's predictions were correct, Celestia had a week to figure out what to do.

Days went past, and as Celestia healed, she grew antsy. She wanted to fly, to get up and stretch her legs, but neither her nurses nor her guards would allow her to even move from the bed except to go to the washroom, and while the Goddess of the Day took advantage of that little movement as best as she could, it was not enough.

The news that kept coming in from around Equestria was not helping her recovery in the slightest, and many of her afternoons were spent crying into her pillow, or on the shoulder of one of her guards.

Manehatten had fallen with barely a whisper, whereas Fillydelphia had been the exact opposite: A complete bloodbath. Further reports from the front confirmed the first; Cloudsdale's entire military hierarchy had been

slaughtered, only to be replaced by her sister's so-called 'Shadowbolts.' Cloudsdale had become their new base of operations, and Celestia knew that it was only a short flight to Canterlot from there. She knew that her sister's Nightmare planned to leave Canterlot for last, as an example to every other pony.

Every plan Celestia came up with failed to stand up to her intense scrutiny, and by the time the Sun Goddess was able to get to her hooves without falling on her face, Canterlot was the last city in Equestria not part of this 'Lunar Republic.' She knew what would happen next from the reports.

What the Sleepers would do. What her *sister* would do.

Celestia's throat choked with a coming sob, her eyes threatening to soak her already dampened pillow once again. Despite rotating shifts, her nurses had become accustomed seeing her cry and would still give her the occasional shoulder to lean on.

That didn't prevent the thoughts that were racing through Celestia's mind. *She'll kill me as soon as she lays her eyes on me this time. Or... she might even take her time in doing so... Oh, what am I going to do? The only way I could save Canterlot is by surrendering, but that would leave me to my fate either way. I may have to do it anyway, and simply expect myself to be imprisoned. Or banished... Or even imprisoned in the place I was banished to! I can't stop Luna's... No. Nightmare Moon's Lunar Republic from happening. I... I can't fight her...*

An hour passed, then another, while Celestia remained deep in thought. Finally, the alicorn's voice broke the silence of the hospital room, startling the attending nurse out of her own thoughts. "I need parchment, ink, and a quill, please. I... I wish to take a letter..."

The nurse hopped up immediately and trotted out of the room, returning shortly with the requested items floating before her, saying, "Would you like me to act as your scribe?"

A simple shake of Celestia's head was all it took for the unicorn to lay the proffered writing implements upon the end table. Celestia rolled over with a groan, her joints aching with the effort as she floated the parchment and quill over to her pillow and began to scratch out a letter. All the while, tears ran down her face, splotching the ink where they fell to the

parchment, but the Princess did not care. She would not hold that title for very long.

Nightmare Moon's ever present laughter floated through the corridors within Everfree Castle. The scroll the alicorn had received from her oh so dear sister was the best news she'd had all week! The Nightmare had read it a dozen times already, and would read it a dozen more, she could not keep herself from chuckling as she read through it once again.

"To my dearest sister, Luna;

I cannot keep hiding any longer, nor can I keep running. Neither can I abandon the nation of Equestria to its fate and watch Canterlot suffer for taking me in. I know what I must do, and what I should have done a week ago when I approached you. In but a few days, I will have recovered enough to be able to escape the confines of this hospital. Until then, I beg of you, please hold your hoof against attacking Canterlot, they are not to blame, as I had approached them. I have left their Council an order of what I wish for them to do.

Moreover, when I am recovered enough for travel, I wish to meet up with you, my dearest Luna. I wish to surrender. A week I have attempted to form plans of any type, so that I might be able to do something, yet after studying them, they all fell apart before my eyes. I concede defeat, and will leave myself within your care, loving or not. I just beg that you do not destroy and subjugate Canterlot as you have done with the rest of Equestria. I am unable to fight the Nightmare within you, and she knows it.

If you acknowledge my surrender, I will await at the location and time you wish to accept my defeat and abdicate my claim to the throne. I can only hope that you will.

Your loving sister, Celestia"

Victory was within the Nightmare's reach! It was so close she could *taste* it. All of Equestria, nay, the entire hemisphere was within her grasp, and even her *dearest* sister, Celestia, was going to bow down to her. Of course, Celestia would not get off so easily. She would have to be broken and remade so that she would be a most productive and loving sister.

"Chancellor Check List. Take a return letter. 'To my Traitorous Sister...'"

It took everything Celestia had to fly herself to the rendezvous point, exhausted in both mind and body. The past few days had crawled by painfully with Celestia readying herself for the day that she would bow down to her own sister, and it had taken all Celestia had not to run and hide like a little foal. After donning her crown, chestplate, and hoof ornaments, the alicorn had flown out of the hospital, leaving her best wishes behind. Her flight had started out shakily, with her wings still sore from healing, but any problems Celestia had soon worked themselves out as she got back into the routine of flying.

The area Nightmare Moon's letter had pointed out was a large clearing, devoid of trees, within the Whitetail Wood. It was empty for now, yet Celestia still landed within the center, lying down immediately within the tall grasses to rest. Within little time at all, the pearl alicorn had fallen sound asleep.

"Oh, my *dear* sister. Sleeping during your surrender? Do I bore you that much?"

The voice jarred Celestia from her dreams, and she stumbled to her hooves, noticing her sun had crept across a fraction of the sky. In front of Celestia stood several ponies, including her sister's Nightmare, who was looking down upon her with a barely contained sneer. "You will not be needing this for quite some time, *sister*," Nightmare moon hissed, her horn shimmering as Celestia's crown rose off her head into the air, then soared through it to land within a Shadowbolt's saddlebag. "Kneel before me."

Swallowing and staring up at her sister, Celestia shakily dropped onto her knees and lowered her head in front of Nightmare Moon. *I... I can do this... I can't mess this up... I have to do this by the conditions my sister's Nightmare and I had agreed upon.* Her thoughts did not prevent her tears

from flowing down her cheeks, not unlike the blood of all the ponies who had died in this war.

The Nightmare, of course, gloated over her fallen sister, her laugh ringing out across the clearing.

“So weak. So *powerless!* Not even worth your title of ‘*Princess*’. Oh, yes, my *dearest* sibling. Soon, you will publicly announce that you are stepping down and leaving me complete control over Equestria. And then? And then I will make sure to properly train you to be a worthwhile addition to my Court. Royal Guard? Court Jester?” Nightmare Moon sneered, her hate filled voice hissing from between her teeth, “...Royal Pet?”

“Oh, my, that does sound like it would have a good ring to it. A former Princess of Equestria, reduced to nothing more than the obedient *pet* of the new Queen. Such *delicious* irony!”

Her eyes clenched tightly shut, the shame of Nightmare Moon’s words digging into her heart, a sob escaped from Celestia’s lips. Her cheeks were soaked, the ground beneath her face wet with the alicorn’s sorrow.

Next to her ear, she heard steady breathing, and then Nightmare Moon’s silken voice, “I must say, you held out for longer than I thought, but you are my prisoner now, and you will be bound like one.” The feeling of magic was in the air around her, and Celestia was surprised to feel bindings and chains attach to each of her ankles, a wide band encircle her torso to keep her wings down tight, and a little ring upon her horn. Almost immediately, she felt her magic dim and then vanish, seemingly sucked away by the inhibitor placed on her horn.

Smirking, Nightmare Moon turned to her Shadowbolts and barked, “Prisoner Escort positions! We have a distance to walk, and I want to be back in Everfree by dusk!” Turning her head back to Celestia she said, “My *dearest* Celestia, get to your feet. We march. As of now, you are prohibited from using magic until the time comes to set your eclipsed sun, and that will be the only magic you’ll be permitted for a *long* time to come... now **MOVE!**”

Swiftly, the Shadowbolts took up flanking positions around Celestia as she rubbed the tears from her eyes, getting to her hooves as Nightmare Moon began the long march through the winding paths of Whitetail Wood.

The shackles and chains clinked together as they walked for what seemed like hours, Celestia's head hanging the entire way as her hooves dragged upon the packed earth.

As the forest turned to sparse trees, and then the occasional building, Celestia's downcast eyes widened as realization hit her. They were passing through Ponyville, and not just through the outskirts, but straight through the center of town. As the procession continued, Celestia dared to look around her, noticing the buildings under repair, and even worse, the many eyes upon them.

The white alicorn could feel the heat of their gaze upon her. After all, it was her, not Nightmare Moon, that they blamed for the needless destruction of their town, along with the deaths of so many of their friends. Celestia rapidly set her eyes down back to the ground before her, if just to avoid the residents of Ponyville from reviling her with their gaze.

It seemed like forever, but finally the tiny parade marched their way out to the perimeter of Ponyville and into the forbidding depths of Everfree Forest. While the paths through the forest still seemed to be intact, they felt dangerous and foreboding. Leaving the beaten path here seemed as though it would mean certain death. *No... We would not be taking this route if we were in any real danger. We'd have flown... Or teleported... Or... any number of things...* Celestia thought to herself, keeping quiet as the wild canopy overhead began to block out the tiny amount of light that escaped from the eclipse.

Something Celestia had noticed during her stay in the hospital was that every few days, the sun would shine unabated. *Nightmare Moon needs Equestria to stay alive. No sun means no plantlife. No plantlife means no ponies. And no ponies means no nation to rule over. At least she isn't so corrupted as to destroy all that Equestria is... At least she is still sane enough not to bring about eternal night...*

The trip back to Everfree Castle was spent in silence, even when the small group of travelers were walking through the mostly empty streets of what remained of the city. The entire time, Celestia kept her head low and her eyes lower, staring at nothing but the ground in front of her hooves, and trying not to listen to anything but the clink of her shackles. The former princess did not want to see the blistering stares from the subjects she failed, nor hear their caustic whispers.

It took all Celestia's strength to whisper her next words.
"Nightmare...?"

The alicorn in front of her tensed for a moment before snapping,
"*What does my prisoner want?*"

The fallen ruler flinched back with each word, then whispered in a lower voice, barely able to be heard, "I... I want to see what remains of the Castle, of my childhood home before... Before you do whatever it is you have planned for me..."

Nightmare Moon kept silent up ahead, momentarily crushing Celestia's hopes of being able to see what remained, or maybe even salvage something of hers from the wreckage.

However, the alicorn's hopes were returned once they reached the large gates signaling their arrival at the audience hall of the Castle, taking a deep breath as she glanced up at the foreboding doors opening to her new life. A hoof in front of Celestia stopped her, though, and she turned to stare directly into Nightmare Moon's eyes.

"I am not without *some* mercy. You have two hours, no more, and you will be accompanied by my Messengers. You will be on your *best* behavior, my *prisoner*, or my punishment will be swift and severe. *Do I make myself clear!?*" Nightmare Moon hissed, the alicorn's dark face inches from Celestia's own, while the Nightmare's eyes drilled themselves through her own and into the back of her skull.

At no other points during this entire ordeal had Celestia felt as powerless as she did at that point, and her voice refused to be heard. Instead, the alicorn merely nodded her assent, too frightened by the Nightmare's gaze to say anything else. *I cannot imagine what it must be like for Luna! Oh my dear sister, I'm so sorry...*

Nightmare Moon stared deep into Celestia's eyes for a few long moments before turning away and making a motion with her hoof. The Shadowbolts guarding her turned away and flew off to other matters, only to be replaced by a duo of grey-coated Messengers. A nod of Nightmare Moon's head was all it took to spur Celestia to make use of the two hours given to her...

While exploring the remains of Castle Everfree, with the two Messengers in tow, Celestia came to the realization that everything she once knew within the palace was gone. Her old bedchambers had completely caved in, and many of the other rooms that had a personal touch were irrevocably changed. This castle was indeed Nightmare Moon's now.

However, as Celestia was passing by one of the many old halls, she sensed something completely new, something that she hadn't ever sensed before. Nearby, there was a hole in the wall, which lead into a chamber she did not recognize. Upon entering it, Celestia felt a wave of peace and happiness was over her.

The room itself was nothing spectacular, just stone walls that hid within them the actual prize. Standing in the center of the room was a large pedestal with multiple branches. Upon those branches were beautiful gems that lit the entire room, emitting a gentle and soothing aura that made Celestia feel as if she were immersed in the light of her sun. And they sensed her dilemma, calling to her to come closer.

The... The Elements of Harmony? All I knew was that they were within the castle somewhere, but hidden? Here? Celestia's mind was at a loss of what to think, so she entered the hidden chamber and stepped toward the Elements. As the Messengers followed, they entered the light the Elements gave off and collapsed onto the floor.

Celestia took no notice of this, instead enraptured by the pedestal before her. Reaching a hoof up, she touched one of the Elements, and her mind was instantaneously drawn into them. Endless warmth and tranquility surrounded her, and she felt as if they were her best friends and she had known them her entire life.

*"We **are** your best friends. We help those who are so ever in need of our aid. And you, dear alicorn, need us more than anything right now."*

The voices were deafening, as if a crowd of ponies were all speaking in unison somewhere inside her head. "How... How can you help me? The fight is lost..." A feeling of sadness crept into Celestia's heart, but was swiftly brushed away by the Elements.

"The fight is only lost when you completely give up, our little pony. Your sister can still be saved, but only if you accept our help to banish the

Nightmare within. Here, let us give you a token of our favor. Will you accept our aid, little one?"

As Celestia watched incredulously, her bindings crumbled into dust, and the inhibitor around her horn vanished in a puff of smoke. Even the chafing around her hooves from the shackles had been healed. Opening herself up, Celestia replied to the Elements, "I accept." and the sudden influx of warmth filled her to the brim, and past that to bursting, her body shining with the power the Elements gave her.

Nightmare Moon was galloping as fast as she could down the halls, her anger showing as crackles of power pulsed through her mane. The alicorn had been keeping close watch upon her traitorous sister through the 'eyes' of her Messengers. The moment she had lost contact, she had dropped everything and took off for the region of the castle they had been in.

Sprinting by, she caught sight of the fractured wall and turned into the room, stopping and covering her eyes due to the blinding light that emanated from within. As her eyes adjusted, she caught sight of Celestia at the center of it, the source of the blinding radiance. "You **FOAL!** What have you *done!*? You lied to me!" she roared, the Nightmare's rage resonating throughout the chamber.

A shriek from the back of her mind drew her attention for a brief moment, *Nightmare! Those are the Elements! She- She's planning to use them against us!*

"Don't you think I already know that, you stupid foal! No matter, she lost to us once before, and she will again," the Nightmare snapped back at Luna, before turning her voice toward Celestia. "This time you will **die**, sister! I hold no more patience for you, and I can see that even my mercy fell upon deaf ears!" Nightmare Moon's horn flared, and a flurry of dark, crackling bolts flew through the air at Celestia.

Each was deflected in turn by a burst of power from Celestia's horn, the bolts slamming into the stone walls, ceiling, and floor around her. One blasted a hole through the roof of the chamber, masonry crumbling to reveal the darkening sky, the eclipse having ended to show the setting sun once more.

“No, Nightmare Moon. Not this time. Now I have the power to fight you, and to free my sister. Nightmare Moon, I hereby banish you from the lands of Equestria and from the hemisphere, to be imprisoned within the one thing you thought was yours. You thought to control what Luna calls her own. To control my sister, myself, and all of Equestria. No, now it is my turn to show no mercy...” Celestia spoke, taking a step closer to Nightmare Moon with each word, all the while deflecting her every attack.

The chamber shook with every blast, and Nightmare Moon stood her ground until Celestia was no more than a pony-length away. “No! **NO!** You will not succeed! You will *never* succeed, Celestia, not while I hold breath! Not while Luna and I are one!” Nightmare Moon screamed in defiance, froth escaping from her lips as she gathered as much power from the Core into her next spell as she could.

But Celestia would not have it. In return, she wove a spell of her own, and a rainbow cascade came from her horn to encircle her sister’s Nightmare. The black alicorn screamed in rage as the power of the Elements weakened her, causing the power within her horn to flow back into the Core at an astonishing rate, irrevocably damaging it.

“Nightmare Moon! From this moment henceforth, you are banished from Equestria and sentenced to imprisonment within Luna’s moon for all eternity! **BEGONE!** And free Luna where you stand!” Celestia announced into the chamber, rearing up upon her hind hooves as she poured more power into the spell.

“No... No! I will not be *defeated!* **No!**” The rainbows tightened around Nightmare Moon’s body, weakening and pushing her down into into Luna’s mind. When they retracted, what remained was Luna within her original body, collapsed upon the floor.

Opening her eyes and looking around, Luna slowly smiled, tears springing to her eyes as she peered up at her elder sister through the swirling maelstrom of rainbows. “I’m sorry, Celly, I never meant for any of this to happen...” Then, she began to float upward, her legs dangling beneath her, the princess too weak to do anything. “Goodbye, Celly... I’ll miss you...”

At first, Celestia was overjoyed, her sister had returned to her, and healthy, too! But as Luna raised into the air and said her goodbyes,

Celestia began to worry, “W-What? Goodbye? No! I freed you, dearest sister! You’re free and Nightmare Moon is banished!”

The last thing Luna said as she floated up into the sky through the hole in the roof was, “So I am...” Far below, she could see the ruins of Everfree Castle, could hear the soft sounds of the night, and could hear her sister screaming in heartbreaking despair.

“I WANT MY SISTER BACK!

While Nightmare Moon raged on in a corner of Luna’s mind, her own thoughts became peaceful as an intense lethargy settled over her. She felt the long slumber coming, and her thoughts slowly drifted away until only a single one remained as she fell into the realm of dreams.

Goodbye, Celly... I love you...

Tears streamed down Celestia’s eyes as she stretched her neck out as far as it would go towards her rapidly dwindling sister, and a sob broke through when the outline of an alicorn’s head appeared upon Luna’s moon.

No! No no no nononononono! You said she would be freed! That I would have my sister back! You lied to me! Why did you lie to me? Give me this false hope!? Celestia demanded of the Elements coursing through her body, collapsing to the floor as her strength gave out on her.

“We never lied to you at any point. We did free your sister, and you had her back for a short time, but you chose the punishment without realizing that the two entities may be connected. When your sister’s Nightmare was banished, you banished your sister, too. No, this is not our fault, we did as you had asked of us, a tool in your hooves, nothing more.” The Elements pushed their warmth and peace at Celestia to calm her heart, but the alicorn pushed it all away.

N-No! I couldn’t have! I couldn’t have done such a thing to my own sister! I... I... It took a moment for Celestia to finally accept what she had done. What do I do to get her back...? I’ll do anything, even if I am put in her place!

“We took care of that for you. While we could not change the spell you had chosen yourself, we could at least add to it. We work best when we each have a vessel of our own to work through that possesses our specific trait, so we looked forward and found the earliest point at which we would be able to take up containers. Originally, you were going to banish them both for eternity, and for the next thousand years, she will slumber, but on the eve of the thousandth Summer Sun Celebration, as you call it, your sister will return to you, and we will be able to free her once again.”

As Celestia was about to reply, a rumble shook the entire castle, and a wave of disrupted magic passed through the stone, causing the Princess' eyes to widen in fear. The Core! It had become unstable and about to blow!

*“Our little pony, you must leave. **Now.** We will survive this. You however, will not. Go! Flee! Escape! Live on for your sister! If you are not there for her when she returns, then she will never break free from her Nightmare!”*

The Elements' words caused Celestia to hurry to her hooves and sprint from the chamber. The alicorn was fearful, panic in every step as she galloped through the halls. The short battle between the two alicorns had done a number on the palace, with once clear halls now strewn with more debris. Whatever ponies that had been within the palace had fled this time around, but she did see the occasional body amongst the debris as she fled.

One of them caught her attention. It was that of a former Minister of hers, Check List, her form half crushed beneath a pile of stone blocks. Her horn had been shattered by falling masonry and her eyes were wide open, a look of shock and regret frozen upon her face.

Oh... Check List... Not you, too... The shock of seeing the body of one of her former Ministers brought Celestia out of her panic. *I will mourn you later... but right now, I must go! There isn't much time!* The Princess steeled resolve and she refocused her efforts more on escaping than simply running away. Gathering magic within her horn, a loud whine began to rise into the air, and just as it reached an unbearable pitch, the light from Celestia's horn surrounded her body, and she winked out of existence.

The next few days passed in a fog to Celestia. While she had escaped from the castle and reappeared within her quarters at Canterlot, she was still able to witness the destruction of Everfree castle. It had started out as a dim light on the horizon outside of her window, followed by a bright flash, like a second sun, that turned night to day. Now, Everfree City was but a memory.

Once the adrenaline had drained from Celestia's body, she had collapsed and took her frustration and despair out upon her bed. On pillows, large damp areas were evidence of the tears she had spilled, while on the mattress, it looked like the fabric had nearly been torn apart from where she had battered it with her hooves.

The few inquisitive ponies who had tried to find out what happened had been unceremoniously tossed from the chambers, the doors magically bolted and shielded from further entry behind them. At first, the sound of pounding hooves had resonated through the chamber from the door, but over time, they decreased and then stopped. Through the windows, the only thing the curious pegasi or even levitating unicorns could see were their Goddess in weeping misery, or asleep.

So they left her to recover, at every moment afraid that Nightmare Moon's army would come rolling in to finish off the last city of Equestria. In a corner of Celestia's mind, she could still hear the goings-on outside of her room. How the Sleepers and Messengers had collapsed where they stood. The Shadowbolts, Storm Mages, and Knightmares were in disarray and quickly falling apart. Cities were regaining control, and the only link to what had actually happened was laying within her chambers unwilling to inform anypony.

After Celestia had cried herself out for what seemed to be the thousandth time, she looked up and noticed the sun high up in the sky. Even through her tears and mourning, she had almost subconsciously raised the sun every morning. She couldn't touch the moon itself, so, instead of trying to control her sister's night, she instead used her sun to push it along the sky. It wasn't the best solution, but it worked for now, until she could find a way to assume the duties of both the day and of the night.

Hunger gnawed at her empty belly, and although she wasn't weakened from it, it still drew her attention. *It's been days, I can't sit here*

the rest of my life and cry for my sister, that can wait until I've gotten this mess cleaned up... Come on, Celestia, let's get up and get moving, one hoof in front of the other. I have cities to regain, ponies to comfort, and problems to address!

The Princess pulled herself out of bed and looked at her reflection in the vanity mirror beside her, shuddering at what she saw. She looked like she was half dead! Her mane was mangled and disarrayed, worse than she'd ever seen it before, and the alicorn's face was soaked and puffy from crying, her eyes more red than white at this point. Crawling from the bed, Celestia stepped into the washroom to bathe. Once that was done, she could then began the long and arduous process of taming her pink mane and restoring her damaged facial features.

Afterwards, Celestia felt refreshed and considerably better than she had earlier. She still wanted to bawl her eyes out, but that could wait for another time. She was now the sole ruler of Equestria, and she had to show it. Dropping the shields around the room, she threw open the doors, surprising the two guards waiting outside. As they dropped into a bow before her, Celestia thought that she saw the hind-end of a page go running around the corner at the far end of the hall.

She was quite right in her assumptions, it seemed, as she was quickly swamped by the Canterlot Ruling Council and swept off into their meeting chambers. Hours went by as Celestia recounted the happenings of that fateful night, and several times she had to stop as she choked and nearly broke down into tears once more. The questions they leveled at her were scalding and pervasive, and she answered them as best as she could, but still the unicorns were not satisfied. She gave them everything she could and more, but the unicorns of the council seemed intent on pushing her to her limits and beyond.

So far, in fact, that she had to leave the meeting partway through and return to her room, locking herself inside for the remainder of the day.

"What will we do with them, Princess?" a gruff guard asked of her.

Looking across the field, Celestia grimaced at the sight that lay before her and had to shake her head to get the afterimages out of her mind as she turned away.

Multitudes of Messengers and Sleepers lay strewn haphazardly across the fields near Canterlot, many of the Sleepers dead from having tumbled out of the sky. It appeared they had all been prepared to march upon Canterlot.

Celestia crept forward and knelt down before one Messenger, a colt. Nightmare Moon was long gone, but she could not understand why her army of ponies was still in this condition. Nudging the unicorn, The Princess touched her horn to his to figure out what, if anything, that she could do for him, and was immediately plunged into nightmares so severe she could have sworn they were her own.

It felt like an eternity until something broke the contact between their horns, bringing Celestia back to the present. She was shivering, her breath coming in ragged gasps, and she was honestly surprised to find that she had not wet herself out of terror. “Wha-What happened...?” the alicorn questioned to one of her guards, who was knelt down beside her in concern.

“You touched your horn to the Sleeper’s, then screamed and were cut off somehow. Almost immediately your colors began to fade, and that’s when I wrenched your horn away from that...thing’s. What did you find out?”

Lowering her head, Celestia swallowed and whispered, “I can’t save them... When I went in... Whoever these ponies were, there’s nothing of them left, only the Nightmares remain. I... I don’t know what to do! I want to save them, but there’s nothing I can do to help!”

The sound of swords unsheathing caused Celestia’s head to dart up and look behind her. More guards had arrived from Canterlot, and each had their sword unsheathed. “What? Why?” the Princess inquired, worried of what each of the ponies had in mind.

“We’re soldiers, your Highness. We may not have fought in a war, but we’ve seen plenty of things over our years of duty. Right now, if there is nothing you can do for them, then the only merciful course of action is to give them a swift death.” He held up his sword and raised an eyebrow down at her. “Do we have your blessing?”

Celestia shut her eyes tight, wishing that this wasn’t the case, but she did not wish to see her ponies suffer further and finally nodded, standing to

turn away. "Wait until after I have gone, I... I can't watch this, but please end their suffering..." Opening her eyes wide, Celestia took to the skies and tried to get as much distance as she could, but even then she could not escape the sounds of steel sliding into flesh.

"My little ponies, we are all gathered here so that I may announce that the War is over. It was through great fortune that I personally defeated Nightmare Moon not more than seven days ago, and banished her from these lands. My... My sister, sadly, was lost..., and I now rule Equestria alone."

Just before her speech, reports had come back to Celestia of how everypony that had fallen to the Slumber of Nightmare Moon had finally been to rest and the bodies disposed of.

She could not help but think about all the innocent lives that had been lost as she spoke, and though, in reality, it only lasted for a few minutes, the speech seemed as though it carried on for hours. Once Princess Celestia had finished, she saw a number of ponies raise their hooves into the air, eager to ask questions. Unsure of where to start, she simply chose one at random, pointing to them and listening to their query.

"Now that this 'war' is over, what are your plans for Equestria?"

Smiling at the audience, Celestia rose her voice, "I plan to begin the reintegration and reconstruction of all the cities attacked by Nightmare Moon, back into the nation of Equestria, and to begin construction of a new Royal Palace within the city of Canterlot. Next question?"

However, as she pointed to the next pony she was to address, another mare spoke up instead.

"And what about all the ponies hurt in this war!?" she cried out, "What are you going to do for their families?!"

"Do we even know what started this bloody thing in the first place?" another said. Ponies began to speak and shout at the Princess without giving her a chance to respond and gradually the whole thing degenerated into a cacophony of voices all wanting to be heard as angry ponies each raised their own questions.

“Who’s going to pay for all this?!”

“...and what of the allegations that you could have prevented this war from even starting...”

“...heard that you abandoned your sister to ...”

“...crock of horseapples, you caused this war to get rid of your sister and become the sole monarch!”

“...my brother was in Cloudsdale!”

“...rumors that all the remaining enemy forces were slaughtered without mercy!”

“I... What I can say is... That’s untrue! No, that did not...” Celestia tried answering the questions, but new ones constantly interrupted her, and the more she tried to answer questions, the louder the crowd became.

Until, the crowd had become little more than an unruly mob and had begun pushing against the guards at the edge of the stage in protest. Cries of “Tyrant!” emanated from the frothing mass, slowly merging into a discernible chant which rose into the air as more ponies took it up.

Celestia took a few uneasy steps backward, unsure of how to proceed when a guard pushed against her side and snorted, “Go. It’s become too dangerous for you here, Princess. We’ll handle this.”

Continuing to back up, Celestia’s eyes went across the mob of angry ponies gathered in front of her. Turning away, she fled from the auditorium, leaving the jeering mass behind her and sprinted across the courtyard into the Council building. The alicorn’s eyes began to dampen as she felt tears fill them. Galloping back to her quarters, all she could think was, *I’m not a tyrant! I was just trying to do my best for my little ponies! I’m not a tyrant! No no nonononono!*

As time passed, Celestia’s approval went down the drain as the rumors and accusations of tyrant went out across the land of Equestria, and while she did her best to gently quiet them, it did not help that many of the communities hated her for allowing the war to even occur. In time, however, order was eventually restored to the kingdom. More or less.

Remnants of Nightmare Moon's armies were still fighting in places, lead by two of the former captains of the Nightmare's Legion, and what little that remained of Equestria's armed forces were consistently faced with fighting them off. Morale was low, after all, what were they fighting for? A tyrant princess?

Even so, Canterlot's new Royal Palace was proceeding along quite nicely, assisted in no small part by the magic of the unicorn workforce present in the city. A dungeon had to be built, unfortunately, due to the disorder still raging throughout the country and because of that, it filled up quite quickly. In order to offset this, the worst of the offenders went to the headmare, who gave them a choice: the axe or the noose. This was, of course, done behind Celestia's back, as the Council did not feel it necessary to trouble her with such depressing duties.

When the Princess eventually found out, her anger could be felt across all of Canterlot. Though she did little more than remove the offenders from their positions, the whole ordeal only succeeded in fueling the flames, and gave more ammunition to those that accused her of being a tyrant. It was at this point that the Goddess of the Sun became desperate. Desperate enough to use a spell that *would* label her as a tyrant for sure if it was ever discovered.

A new day found the alicorn at the entrance chambers of Canterlot's own Core. As she entered, she noticed that it certainly did not seem as spectacular as Everfree's chamber. In fact, it was much smaller, with this Core nothing but a shard compared to Everfree's massive crystal.

Stepping forth, Celestia's thoughts roiled within her mind. She had to get this spell right the first time. She did not want to think of what would happen if she did not.

Swallowing, the alicorn thought back to the first time Luna had used Everfree's Core, and going over the steps in her mind, repeated them. Standing beneath the floating crystal, Celestia sent a ray of power into its heart, filling it with her consciousness, and in return, the Core filled hers with its own. She stood in awe at the immense amount of energy at her disposal. She felt it well within her and marveled at its intensity as it bolstered her own power. Thanking the Core for its gift, the alicorn wove her spell ever so carefully, double and even triple checking it. She could afford no errors. The slightest mistake would be catastrophic. When she

finished, she passed on the completed spell to the Core, which used its power to strengthen and expand it until the spell was cast.

What passed through Equestria was an immensely complicated spell that touched every creature, large and small. They knew something had happened in the previous weeks. Something... Horrible? They could not place their hooves upon it. They of course knew that there had been somepony named Nightmare Moon, and that Celestia had to banish her to the moon, losing her own sister in the process, but the specifics were always vague, as if it had happened so long ago.

Memories of loved ones who died vanished, instead replaced by ones of them moving on. Accidents killed their friends, a slew of accidents that spread across Equestria. Maybe perpetrated by this 'Nightmare Moon'?

Even Nightmare Moon's own troops questioned what they were doing. What were they fighting for? They could not remember. Why did they have a moon upon their foreheads?

Even Everfree was barely a memory now. It had always been an abandoned castle in the middle of Everfree Forest, a strange place where the forest followed no rules or guidelines.

No... Celestia's little ponies would not remember. They would not remember the terror that was the War of the Night. Of course, she would have to hunt down and destroy anything that mentioned it and leave no histories behind. If necessary, she would even have to make sure that nothing was left behind from the current generation at all. While the spell would work upon them, any future generations would not be affected by it...

Months passed, then years, and Celestia had, to the sorrow of her heart, just discovered the very last mention of the War of the Night. Looking up into the night sky, Celestia could clearly see Luna's image drawn against the moon her sister had created. Sitting atop the remains of Everfree Castle, she could see that the forest had all but overrun the remains of the city, hiding it within the foliage, and the castle itself now sat upon a high cliff, presumably because of the destructive energies released by the Core's detonation.

At her hooves lay two objects. One was special to her, a gift from her parents to their daughters: a gold and silver filigreed tome. Celestia's and Luna's life. Recorded by an invisible quill for the ages, forthright and impartial. The other was something Celestia knew was so very dangerous: A simple, onyx statuette of a pony. It carried the feel of her sister all through it, but Celestia refused to touch its inky surface.

The first object, Celestia lay bound within a ornamented box and hid away, the box locked by the strongest magics she could place upon it. The other made its home within Canterlot Castle's deepest dungeons, placed within a room specifically made for it, shielded, and then walled off. No pony would ever find her sister's downfall again.

Time passed, years went by, and Celestia grew, physically, mentally, and emotionally. She matured greatly in her years of rule, growing taller and more regal, as her mane began to take on the colors of the Borealis, flowing eternally in the breeze of the Solar Wind. She ruled with a gentle heart, her many years of hardship giving her great wisdom, something that she wished she had possessed during her sister's war. Still, with the years came a new serenity for her.

While the days were lonely, and the nights ever more so, Celestia knew she would be reunited with her sister one day, and she made plans for when that time would come, some nights even looking up at the moon and talking to her sister, hoping the alicorn would be able to hear her words. And sometimes, unknowingly to Celestia, she did...

Something shook Luna from her dreams, and she let her now conscious mind explore her prison once again. Her moon was cold and desolate, and far below, through the vastness of space, she could sense the hemisphere of Equestria, and the Deep Dark that it rested upon. She never seemed awake while the moon was within the Deep Dark, only when it shone high above Equestria.

Looking inward, Luna noticed Nightmare Moon was asleep, herself. The two had only been awake at the same time once in the past... Luna did not know how long ago it was, all she could sense were the bright lights

beginning to spread across Equestria during the night. She did not know what this implied, but was only too happy to hear the words sent to her.

“My dearest sister, I hope you can hear me... I do not blame you for anything that happened. I read our parents’ gift to us, and found that statue. Both are hidden safely away now, hopefully never to be found again. I-I’m so sorry everything turned out the way it did, I never meant for this to happen to you. To us. Time’s ticking slowly away from me, and I cannot yet see the stars that will aid you in your escape... I just wish you were here.”

They were the same words Celestia spoke to her whenever she was awake to hear them, and Luna smiled as sleep took her once again...

Centuries passed, and Equestria prospered, growing larger by the year. Memories became tales, tales became legends, and legends became myths. Luna and Nightmare Moon became something even less than that, an old mare’s tale, nothing more than the story of Mare in the Moon.

It was the eve of the thousandth Summer Sun Celebration, and Celestia was nervous and downtrodden. The stars were approaching the moon quite quickly now, nearly to its edge.

The Princess was as prepared as she could be. She had removed the Elements from their old resting place and put them within an accessible chamber. She had made sure that the path to Everfree Castle was at least traversable, and she had sent her most beloved student on the quest that would enable the whole plan to come to fruition.

Celestia’s student was the young Twilight Sparkle, a bright unicorn mare with a knack for learning. She was also the most magically proficient unicorn that she had ever come across in her entire thousand years of ruling, and as Celestia tutored her, she came to the realization that Twilight was also one of the containers the Elements of Harmony had spoken of. The one for Pow- No, not Power. Magic as it was called now. And so, when her faithful student had discovered the old tale of the Mare in the Moon, the Princess had simply laughed it off and sent her off to Ponyville to make some friends.

Celestia's student would find the other containers, and the Elements would stop Nightmare Moon and return her sister to her, and all would go back to how it was. Or so the alicorn hoped.

She was currently waiting in one of the dressing rooms, having been attended to by a unicorn by the name of Rarity, gazing up at the moon hanging silently in the night sky outside the window. As the four stars connected, the image of her sister's head vanished from its surface. Celestia hung her head, waiting until she felt a dark presence seep into existence behind her.

"A thousand years. A thousand years I dreamt. A thousand years I *suffered* in total isolation, and when I return, you have nothing to say to your *dearest* sister!?" the Nightmare said from behind Celestia, venom dripping from every word.

Celestia slowly raised her head and turned to stare at Nightmare Moon, sadness within her eyes, "I have nothing to say because I cannot think of anything to say except that I am both grateful, and saddened, to see you once again..."

Nightmare Moon approached up to Celestia, circling the Goddess of the Sun as her intense gaze pinned Celestia where she stood. "You look much different from when I last saw you. Older. That will not save you, of course. A thousand years, even asleep, is plenty of time to figure out a plan of revenge. Oh, yes, *dear* Celestia. I came up with the *perfect* spell for you! Just as you banished and imprisoned me, so shall you be, but this time, it won't be a thousand years. Oh no, my sister. You will be imprisoned within your precious sun. And then, when I have subjugated all of Equestria, you will return here, and *this* time, there will be no Elements to save you. I will **break** you! And you... *will*... **bow** to me!

Celestia kept her eyes upon her sister, silent for a time before finally replying in a whisper, "...And I deserve every last bit of it... I'm sorry, Luna."

Nightmare Moon's horn began to shine brightly as the coils of the black mare's spell wrapped themselves around the Princess. Celestia felt herself becoming insubstantial. Her sight blurred, and she could feel the intense heat of her sun become one with her...

Please, Twilight, be swift...

A gentle nuzzle to her cheek shook Twilight Sparkle from her studious trance, and she looked up with sorrow-filled eyes into Celestia's own. Her beloved teacher's hoof gracefully came up and shut the book in front of them, and the Princess nuzzled her once again as she smiled to her student, "And you know what happens after that, my faithful protege."

Twilight looked down at the closed tome, and then back up at the white alicorn, her eyes beginning to dry. "But Princess...? Why all the death, and the spell? Why those?" Twilight's eyes begged for some justifiable reason, for *something* to show that her teacher wasn't some sort of monster.

Celestia had expected this, raising her head away from Twilight to speak. Taking a moment to gather her thoughts, the Princess breathed deep and closed her eyes, before reopening them to stare down lovingly at her student.

"The tome does not list everything, Twilight Sparkle. It does not list exactly how much I went through. There really was nothing to be done for Nightmare Moon's Sleepers and Messengers. Even if there could have been, they would have been little more than vegetables. The Nightmares within had destroyed their minds. They were... already dead. Their bodies just didn't know it, yet." Twilight could see the intense sorrow in Princess Celestia's eyes and turned away.

"As for the spell, I had run out of any other course of action I could take without actually resorting to tyrannical measures, and even that spell I knew crossed the line, but it was the best I could do considering the events circumstances. In more ways than one, it was a necessary evil. My little ponies forgot about the war, the atrocities, and the deaths of their loved ones. Because of it, peace settled over the land once again, but in spite of what has been forgotten to the ages, I still carry the burden of what I have done with me, my student."

Celestia laid her neck over Twilight's, the pony giving a little shiver at the touch. From around Celestia's other side approached Luna, who lowered her head to brush her nose against Twilight's mane, "Twilight, my sister has always meant well."

“But... What about me being a container for the Element of Magic? Was that all you took me in for, Princess?” asked Twilight, begging for any answer other than what she feared, even a lie would suffice.

Princess Celestia chuckled, pulling her student into a hug, “Twilight, you should know me better than that! I didn’t know you would be the container until you were nearly a mare. I have always loved you, and since the day I took you on as my student, you’ve been a dear friend to me. Of that, there is no doubt.”

Twilight gave her teacher a loving nuzzle in return, then peered down at the book before them, a thought coalescing in her mind.

“Princess... You had that spell ready for me... didn’t you?”

The unicorn thought she saw Celestia flinch, but could not be sure. The pony who spoke, however, was Luna, who laughed softly, “Your student is quite perceptive, Celly!”

Celestia smiled at Luna’s laughter and nodded in return, “Yes, you are Twilight Sparkle. ...I did. I had the spell ready in case you could not handle what was within that book, but my worries seem to have been unfounded.”

As Luna settled back down next to them, Twilight leaned against Princess Celestia and sighed, “...I suppose I should go get the other book and get started on it.” As she began to stand, however, a hoof pushed her back down into place.

Staring in amazement at Celestia, Twilight began to speak, but was instead interrupted gently by her teacher. “Not tonight, my student. We’ve covered quite a lot, and though I know of just how great your thirst for knowledge is, it is good to pace yourself. For now, rest yourself, and let us just watch the sunset, having just ourselves for company and knowing that all is right in Equestria...”

And so they did, the three of them taking in another glorious sunset over the ocean.

And yet, not all was right.

In a sealed room, deep within Canterlot Palace, a malice a thousand times worse than Nightmare Moon's lay waiting, gathering its power. A thousand years had given it enough to take shape, but that was it. Soon, however, it would have enough energy to break out of its stone and magic prison. The entity cursed that the violet creature had moved out of range of its surveillance spell, but no matter. It knew that it would not be long now.

The Deep Dark would feast upon the world of Equestria soon enough...

EPILOGUE

Everything comes full circle. Life begins, life ends, and life begins again in a never-ending cycle. As the sun sets, the moon rises, only to give way to the sun once more on the following day. Our daughters, the skies are yours now. Our Sol and Luna, yours to command. This tome that was given to us by our parents, we now give to you. May all your adventures be written within, and may you both always be there for each other. Learn from our mistakes and our experiences, and may the Daughters of Equestria rule in everlasting peace.

“Come, come my daughters, we must hurry. Ascension waits for no pony, no matter who they are,” former Queen Luna said to the two alicorn fillies ahead of her. She had grown over the years into a body much like that of Nightmare Moon’s, but not quite. While she bore the mane of galaxies, her coat remained the same color as it had always been. No, she was glad she was no longer that menace.

Ahead of her walked her daughter and her adopted daughter. One was hers, of course, and the other Celestia’s. She quite missed her mate, who had died of old age over a decade ago, and while it still pained her, she was happy he had lived quite the lengthy life, as well as giving her a beautiful filly.

“Mother, what will the Ascension be like?” Venus, her own filly asked of her, while Sirius looked back at her adopted mother. Venus had a deep violet coat, with a velvet black mane that seemed to soak in the light of the day. The cutie mark on her flank was of a crescent moon with one star within its cradle, representative of the name that she was sometimes called: The Morning Star. Sirius beside her could not contrast more so. Her coat was the sky blue of a warm summer day, and her mane the orange of a lively flame. Her mark was much closer to her mother’s: A many-rayed sun of white and a darker blue.

“Sad, and yet happy at the same time, and very very bright, my Morning Star.”

Luna shooed both fillies ahead of her with her wings until they entered Celestia's personal chambers. There, in the center waiting for them, was Celestia, looking the same as she had two millenia ago. Luna walked forward and embraced her elder sibling, whispering into Celestia's ear, "I wish I could come, Celly, but a thousand years on the moon in slumber prevented me from aging. Please wait for me on the other side?"

Celestia chuckled at her sister's enthusiasm and hugged her in return just as hard, "Of course, my dearest Luna. You won't be alone, either. You'll have our wonderful daughters with you. Venus will never experience the deep loneliness of the night with you around."

Breaking apart, their children rushed in to embrace their other mother as Luna stepped back to a safe distance. After several minutes, Celestia pushed them gently away, and the two fillies made their way beneath Luna's wings, which held Venus and Sirius tightly beneath them, just as Celly had done with her so many years ago.

And as a light began to shine from Celestia's body, Luna whispered, "Goodbye, my dearest Celly. Wait for me, just as you did after I left..." Soon, the light grew too bright to look at, and Luna shielded her daughter's faces with her wings.

Once the light vanished, there was nopony there, and Luna nuzzled each of the fillies, as tears streamed down all their faces.

"Come, let us go paint a picture of your mother. When we're done... we'll hang it alongside the one of my parents..."

The thousand years that passed since then seemed like an eternity for Luna, but soon enough, her own Ascension day came, with her fully grown daughters looking on. All her affairs were in order, and as the light began to take her, Luna felt a great peace settle over her mind. Her own light became too bright to keep her eyes open, and she felt something shift.

After what seemed like only a few seconds, Luna came to find herself upon a pure white platform within a gazebo-like structure. Blinking and stepping out, her eyes were met with a sight so beautiful she could not put it to words. Haven stretched out before her in every direction, and there, at the bottom of the steps stood a large crowd of alicorns, waiting to greet her.

However, Luna's eyes saw only the three at the forefront. Three alicorns she had not seen in millenia... and as Luna galloped down the snow-white steps to Sol, Altair, and Celestia, she thought only one thing.

I'm home!

THE END
OF SOLAR FLARE

WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN

No pony ever thinks of what could have been. What might have happened if Nightmare Moon had triumphed over Celestia during the War of the Night? Or if Luna's Nightmare had won over the future bearers of the Elements of Harmony?

A thousand years is a long time. So unimaginably long, and enough time for any plan to be refined to perfection.

A thousand years, alone in that silence, with only a slumbering alter-ego for company would be enough to drive any pony insane.

A thousand years is a very long time to be punished for just wanting to be known.

To be loved.

To have power over those who ignored you for so long.

When freed, what would any pony do... what *could* any pony do but look for revenge...

Confound these ponies! They drive me to failure! I will not allow them to stop me! Not here, not now, not even if another thousand years went by! Nightmare Moon was fuming as she retreated from the rainbow maned pegasus, her ingenious plan to recruit her having failed miserably! The spell she had used to trap Celestia had drained her nearly to nothing, leaving just barely enough magic for the Nightmare to be able to shift forms, or perform the most basic of spells. Hardly enough to do anything but inconvenience the persistent pack of ponies.

No, I must do something else, something that can prevent them from acting or... the alicorn's thoughts ceased as she flew into the ruins of Castle Everfree, rage building within her as her sight fell upon the very weapons

that had been used against her a thousand years prior: The Elements of Harmony. They were just sitting there, waiting for the foals to stumble across them. *No, not this time! If I cannot defeat them, then I will rob them of the one thing that they can use against me! **Forever** shall I reign over Equestria!*

The midnight alicorn materialized before the dais containing the Elements, gazing up at her sister's old weapons as a strange sensation swept over her. She hesitated, a creeping doubt causing her to feel as if she wasn't *meant* to be there yet... as if she had somehow arrived too soon. She pushed that feeling away and glared at the offending orbs, grinding her teeth in contempt. Somewhere behind her, she could hear the ponies approaching. *They come for the Elements. If what they come for isn't here, then what happens to them?*

A wicked smile crossed Nightmare Moon's face as her horn glowed, her magic gathering the Elements into a pile before her. There was one place where she could send the Elements and not have to worry about somepony stumbling across them. *And after I do this, I will deal with those troublesome foals. I gave them their chances. That one who knew who I was certainly intrigues me. A scholar too, by the looks of her.*

Nightmare Moon focused the last of her magical energy into her horn as she lowered it to the elements, and banished them to her celestial namesake, the usually taxing spell lessened by her natural bond with the moon. Just as the Elements blinked out of existence, the alicorn heard the sounds of several sets of hooves pounding upon the stone floor of Everfree Castle behind her.

Nightmare Moon rose, turning to look upon the troublesome troupe making its way through the large doors into her castle, and a snide smirk danced across her visage as she saw the looks of determination on their faces melt away, leaving their faces contorted in pure shock. The violet unicorn stepped forward. She had been the only pony to remember who she was and the only unicorn in that entire hall who had even an inkling of power. Now, face to face, Nightmare Moon could tell that this young unicorn was strong. Without the static of all the other auras that had littered the hall back in Ponyville, she could see the raw power that this one possessed, and not only that... but the sheer potential that it carried with it, as well.

“W-What did you do?!” Twilight Sparkle demanded, mouth agape in astonishment. The whole group was aghast, having just seen their chance to bring Nightmare Moon down vanish before their very eyes. Twilight, herself, was having a hard time just comprehending the magnitude of what she had seen and she stammered as she tried to collect her thoughts.

“W-What did you just do with the Elements?!” she shouted once more, glowering at the pitch black entity before her.

The alicorn turned gracefully to fix her gaze upon Twilight, her form energized from being in such close proximity to the power of the Elements, and as she began to address the unicorn, a grin spread slowly across her face. “Do not worry my little pony. The Elements are somewhere nice and safe... *on my Moon!*” The Nightmares’ laughter filled the room as she watched the hope fade from the ponies’ faces.

“So, the question you have to ask yourselves, is this... What are you ponies going to do now?” Nightmare Moon asked haughtily as she looked down upon the foalish ponies. “What *can* you do, now that your only hope of defeating me is on the Moon!” the last words resonating throughout the hall as Nightmare Moon’s form dissolved into a violet mist that surged towards the group of ponies. Twilight began to gather energy for a spell, her horn starting to glow as it welled up within her, but it was too late. The malevolent cloud enveloped her body and a terrified scream left the unicorn’s mouth before being completely silenced, the glow from her horn fading instantaneously.

A few moments later the cloud dissipated, revealing Twilight sprawled on the ground, near motionless except for the rising and falling of her chest. The cloud reconvened above Twilight, solidifying to reveal Nightmare Moon, looking down at the incapacitated unicorn with a derisive smirk.

“Twilight! What did you do to her?!” Rainbow Dash demanded, launching herself forward only to have her tail grabbed by Applejack, a sound much like ‘Whoa nelly, there’ coming from the clamped earth pony’s mouth.

“Hey, you big meanie pants!” Pinkie Pie yelled, bounding forward to confront the gloating alicorn.

The Nightmare raised her gaze, letting it fall upon the pink earth pony. "You dare address your Queen in such a manner?" she asked raising an eyebrow, amused.

"Yeah! What are you doing?! You're not following the script at all!" Pinkie Pie continued, stomping her hoof to accentuate her words.

"A script? Hah! No pony tells me what to do!" The Nightmare responded as she jumped over Twilight's fallen form and charged the other ponies.

She was tired. So very tired. More tired than she had ever been before. Muffled noises permeated her consciousness, breaking through the grey walls of dreamless slumber, as flashes of white and purple filled the darkness surrounding her, the sounds of battle echoing through the void. Shouts of defiance. Cries of concern. The loudest of all were the shrieks of pain, easily distinguishable from the cacophony of sound.

Everything was growing louder, brighter, and more distinct. The ominous clouds surrounding her mind began to thin, and the shadows were growing less dim. She struggled, fighting to break free from her own mind's prison.

Then suddenly—

Light.

At first Twilight saw only grey, but it wasn't the same grey from before, this was clearly stone. She groaned, her thoughts still incoherent, turning her head around she spotted a yellow form. "Fl..Fluttershy..?" The yellow pegasus was hunched over, facing away from Twilight, her body racked with sobs. It took her a moment, but Twilight realized that, the pink mane that she thought belonged to Fluttershy was much too long. There was somepony else there, and the only other pony with any pink was... She didn't finish the thought, turning her head further. She was just able to spot Rarity's lavish tail at the edge of her vision. Mustering up the strength she turned pushed herself over, garnering a much wider view of the situation. She immediately wished she hadn't.

Twilight saw Rarity standing off away from Fluttershy, her mouth agape, her eyes wide, in a silent scream.

“Don’t you dare come any closer!” Twilight snapped her attention in the direction of the shout. She caught sight of Rainbow Dash standing with one of her wings hanging limply at her side over an orange figure that could only be Applejack. Then she saw Nightmare Moon, having previously missed her in the darkness of the room, advancing upon Rainbow and AJ with a wicked smile on her face upstaged by only the bloodlust in her eyes. Twilight’s heart was racing. She struggled to say something... *anything* to attract the Nightmare’s attention. “St-stop it! Leave my friends alone!” Twilight cried.

The Nightmare stopped suddenly and turned her head to look back at Twilight, her face a mixture of surprise and rage. “*What?*”

A shiver ran down Twilight’s spine at the ice-cold response. Shaking, she picked herself up off the ground, barely able to stay on her feet.

“I said... leave my friends alone!”

Taking a single glance back at Rainbow Dash, the alicorn walked slowly up to Twilight Sparkle leering down at her with eyes full of turquoise fire, her rage barely contained, the pupils having been narrowed to little more than nearly imperceptible slits.

“‘Leave your friends alone’? And *what*, my dear unicorn, can you do to stop me from killing your friends where they stand?” Nightmare Moon towered over Twilight, her wings flared out behind her, blocking out the light from the moon above and casting a dark shadow over the violet unicorn.

Twilight’s courage fled her and she fell back upon her haunches, her eyes unable to move away from the Nightmare’s gaze. Seeing how easily her friends had been defeated by the Nightmare, she felt her will to fight drain out of her, and with the alicorn confronting her, the only thing present in Twilight’s mind was fear. “I-I-I...”

Nightmare Moon rolled her eyes and snorted, “You, you, you... It’s always about **you**, isn’t it? That’s all you little foals can concern yourselves with! *Your* lives. *Your* friends. *Your* Princess. Well, you know what? I have a wonderful idea for exactly what to do with *you*.” The Nightmare brought her head closer, a venomous smile present on her face.

“Would you like to hear it?” she enquired before her smile vanished abruptly, replaced by pure contempt. “Become my Royal Pet, foal. A servant answering only to **me**. Do this and I will allow your... friends to live. *Deny* me, and you will get to see them die one by one, in the most excruciating ways possible...”

Twilight’s mouth worked, attempting to get coherent words to form, however, nothing left her other than the occasional squeak. *This wasn’t how it was supposed to happen! We were supposed to find the Elements and use them to defeat her! How did it all go so wrong!?*

Above her, Nightmare Moon’s horn began to shimmer as a matching glow slowly formed around each of her friends, lifting them all bodily into the air. Applejack and Rainbow Dash both groaned in pain as they were hoisted off their hooves, the Nightmare cackling fully as she began to appraise her prospective victims.

“Perhaps I should start with the yellow one, hmmm? She looks like she could cry for quite some time, and I can imagine such beautiful shrieks of pain coming from her lips. Or maybe the rainbow one? So strong looking... I bet you she could easily be broken. No, no, no. I have *plans* for her. Nopony refuses *my* gifts.” Nightmare Moon floated Fluttershy over to her side, a maniacal grin parting her maw, her eyes radiating madness. “Oh, but I digress. I should start now. Don’t you think so, my little pony?”

Fluttershy could only whimper and hide behind her wings as she came to hover near the Nightmare. Twilight frantically looked around in every direction, searching for some saving grace before finally screaming out in desperation, “*Stop!* No! I’ll... I’ll do it! If it means you won’t hurt them, or any of the other ponies in Ponyville, I’ll do it... I’ll become your... pet...”

You can do this... You can do this... If it means they live, then I’ll become Nightmare Moon’s... pet. Alright, Twilight, just breathe... Remember what books have told you... Friendship, loyalty, and obedience...

...Oh Celestia what have I gotten myself into?

Nightmare Moon let a laugh bubble within her throat before allowing it to burst forth. Without their precious Elements of Harmony to help them, the pack of persistent ponies had been easily defeated, and now it seemed that she even had a new servant to boot. *Now, to deal with these troublesome foals.*

Gathering them all up in the air before her, the Nightmare deigned to speak to them, "My little *foals*. Each of you should be very much appreciative that your 'friend' gave herself to me in order to save your pathetic little lives." Turning her head, she allowed her gaze to fall upon Twilight, the alicorn's mind roiling with her plans for each of the pathetic ponies.

A quick dip into their dreams revealed everything about them to the Nightmare that she might care to know. She was the Keeper of the Night, after all, and as such, she could see into the dreams of ponies, regardless of whether they were asleep or not. A pony's dreams and nightmares offered a window into the very nature of their souls, laying bare everything about them, from their greatest ambitions to their darkest desires.

Rainbow Dash, the one who cast my gift aside, she will become mine, willingly or not. And Rarity, she appeared to be a filly in the now, and well, a Queen always needs a proper outfitter, Nightmare Moon thought as her horn began to light up. "Now begone with you. I have plans for all of you foals." The light expanded, encompassing all of the ponies who vanished from sight.

"What did you do!?" Twilight screamed from behind her, anguish in her voice. "You said if I joined you, you wouldn't kill them!"

"Silence!" Nightmare Moon yelled into the eternal night, not even bothering to turn to face the diminutive unicorn. Only the silence responded, holding its own for a moment as Twilight cowered against the floor. Then, all at once the Nightmare swung around to glare at her new pet, rage burning in her eyes. "It seems... that I need to lay down some ground rules! **One!**" she punctuated the declaration with a step in Twilight's direction. "You will *only* speak when spoken to! **Two!** I expect obedience from you that not even the most loyal subject can match! **Three!** You will *never* question your Queen! And **four!** You *will* do anything I command of you! Am I *understood!*?"

Each rule was emphasized with another step in the unicorn's direction, Nightmare Moon's eyes beginning to shine from the amount of magic coursing through her. Although Twilight held her ground, the alicorn could see the terror in her eyes.

"*Well!?*" Nightmare Moon challenged as she towered over the unicorn, ready to snuff Twilight out of existence if she should answer wrong.

The alicorn could see Twilight Sparkle visibly struggling over what to say until, finally, she lowered her head in defeat and replied, "Yes..."

"Good..." the Nightmare said, taking a few steps back and sending her mane out in front of the unicorn before her, the billowing night blocking the alicorn from Twilight's view. "Walk through my mane to make things between us official. If you don't, my *pet*, then I will most definitely kill all your friends *and* raze Ponyville on top of it!"

Twilight Sparkle's eyes widened and she shivered in place before stepping forward, her body shuddering the moment the unicorn's nose came in contact with the Nightmare's mane. The pitch black alicorn watched on in barely concealed glee as her new pet entered her mane, disappearing within and failing to emerge from the other side.

Feeling that the magical rush she had taken from the Elements was beginning to fade, Nightmare Moon mentally sorted through a list of the places she could teleport to, including those that she had lifted from the minds of her pet and the foals that had accompanied her. One stuck out to her in particular, so she gathered power within her horn and vanished from the old castle ruins.

Where she reappeared was a quaint room with a balcony. It did not seem like much, but it was livable. Inside, the room was decorated in violets, with a four post bed near the center, and an entire wall with a single large bookshelf filled to the brim with tomes. A door in one wall led out into a hallway outside, with another in the back leading to a small washroom. Even the writing desk wasn't too fancy, at least, not by Nightmare Moon's standards. It was all fairly typical, really.

As the last of the power from the Elements faded from Nightmare Moon's body, the alicorn flumped herself down upon the bed. It wasn't the best bed she's had, but apparently it was still quite fancy for her sister's

student, *and* her new pet. There was nopony to impress here, no theatrics to keep up. No, she was thoroughly exhausted from the day's events.

Maneuvering her mane to the floor, it bunched up before pulling away to show Twilight Sparkle laid out on the ground with some fine new decorations. A black band circled itself around her horn, while an onyx collar of the same material, something like the breastplate Luna wore, was encircled around the unicorn's neck and emblazoned with the moon. Even around the pony's hooves, ebon circlets were attached. It took a lot of magic to create such devices, and their crafting, not a simple teleportation spell, had been the cause of the Nightmare's sudden fatigue.

Her armor clinked together as she began to remove it piece by piece, tossing the breastplate, helm, and shoes casually into a corner of the room. *Oh, this feels good... I had forgotten what it feels like to have a real bed beneath me...* Nightmare Moon, thought, ignoring the still sleeping twitches of Luna in the back of her mind.

Staring down at the unconscious unicorn upon the floor, Nightmare Moon narrowed her eyes in thought. *Pet or not, she'll be my student, of course. Not by name, though. I'll need to make sure to shape her into a perfect little extension of my will. Fortunately, I won't have to worry about her turning on me. I made doubly sure of that...*

The alicorn reached down with a hoof and brushed aside Twilight's mussed mane, then gave her onyx collar a tap. "Awaken, foal..." The unicorn shuddered and opened her eyes, breathing heavily for a moment before her eyes darted around, taking in her surroundings. Nightmare Moon's gaze told her not to speak. "Welcome back, my *pet*. Sleep well? If you would, take note of your surroundings. Familiar, no? Also, take note of the fine additions I've made to your appearance. Not so familiar, of course. These objects you now wear are unable to be removed by you or any other pony. The Inhibitor, for instance, is an old favorite of mine. It keeps all your magical abilities in check, and I decide how far it goes to do so. You will not have full access to your magic, unless it is when I am tutoring you. Good behavior on your part will allow for me to lift some of the restrictions for you, permitting you to taste magic once again on your own."

"The collar around your neck is more than just for show, or to signify ownership. Oh, yes, my dear pet, it also serves as *much* more. With that around your neck, I will always know where you are and what you are

doing.” Then, the Nightmare flashed her pet a grin full of wickedness, “Of course, it will also take care of your punishment for me. All I have to do is telepathically send it a signal, and well... you won’t challenge me more than once, perhaps twice, Twilight Sparkle. I can assure you that. Oh, and did I mention that it will kill you in the most excruciating manner if you try to escape?”

The silent shiver of fear running down Twilight Sparkle’s spine was all it took for Nightmare Moon to know that she hadn’t. The alicorn didn’t mention the unicorn’s anklets, of course. She wanted those to be a surprise if they were ever needed. “Go wash up, pet. I will need a couple of days to recover... before I go about enacting my plans for retaking Equestria, once and for all.”

Twilight Sparkle looked back at her captor as she entered her washroom.

She’s exhausted, she thought to herself. Drained. But I am helpless to do anything to stop this... she’s made sure of that. Oh, Princess Celestia, I wish you were here, you would know how to proceed! How to help me!

No, she had agreed to becoming Nightmare Moon’s... pet... As much as she hated the title, Twilight knew she had to take this seriously. Her life was at stake, and she did *not* want to see what would happen if she defied her new... owner. The thought left a sour taste in the unicorn’s mouth, and she shook her head to clear it.

Taking a look in the mirror, Twilight gasped as she took a look at herself in the mirror. *No wonder Nightmare Moon ordered me to wash up! I look half dead!* The unicorn’s mane and tail were more bush than hair currently, having various small sticks and other assorted forest pieces scattered within it. Even her normally glossy coat was dull, covered in dirt and mud. There were scratches on her hide in places, and her eyes had deep pockets beneath them.

At that moment, all the aches, pains and fatigue of the journey hit the unicorn like a ton of bricks, and she nearly collapsed upon the floor. *Maybe a bath would be nice right now...* Setting about to fill the tub, Twilight looked in the mirror at her adornments.

How will I bathe with these? Maybe I can remove them, though I was told I wouldn't be able to... As Twilight raised a hoof to see if she could take the collar off, the charge of energy that flashed through it told her it was best not to try. *Alright, so she wasn't lying. Perhaps I might be able to just move it out of the way?* The crackle of power vanished, allowing the unicorn to lift the collar off her fur. *Well, that's a relief. The collar must monitor my thoughts or intentions, or activate due to some other circumstance that I'm not aware of.*

Finding out how they functioned would have to wait till later.

I can study these objects once I'm cleaned up, and back in shape. Turning back to the tub, she saw that it was just about full enough. Cutting off the flow of water, she climbed carefully into the tub, letting her weary body sink slowly into the water. She lay there, soaking for some time, the warm water easing the pain in her battered body. It took a while, but eventually she was able to bring herself to try and restore herself to a presentable state. Of course, this was made more difficult by the fact that she couldn't use magic, but she did the best that she could, her thoughts rolling over everything that had happened that night.

*What could Nightmare Moon have done with my friends...? They should be safe if I do my part. Right? Applejack and Rainbow Dash looked like they were the only ones actually hurt in the fight, but they didn't seem in grave condition. Rarity wasn't visibly harmed.. just in shock. I'm sure she'll be okay. Oh and poor Fluttershy... she must be scared to death! And Pinkie... Fluttershy had been crying over Pinkie's body... but she's gotta be okay, she's just **gotta**...*

Twilight sighed as she ducked her head under the water for a moment, pushing her mane back behind her as she surfaced. Reaching down to pull the plug on the tub, she climbed her way out of it, water dripping from her body as she made her way over to the mirror. Grabbing a towel in her mouth as she went, she sat down in front of the mirror, peering into it sullenly. *Argh, I can't believe I'm going to have to dry my mane and tail by hoof. This will take forever.* Staring into the mirror, Twilight shook her head and sighed, silently chiding herself for her selfishness. *Am I seriously thinking about how long it's going to take to dry my mane when there's an evil goddess in my bed and Princess Celestia is missing...*

Twilight walked back into her room after taking what seemed like hours to dry her mane and coat. She looked over to her bed and saw the Nightmare drowsing; her head wavering back and forth as her eyes fluttered, closing at times for a second or two. As Twilight's hooves clopped upon the tiled floor, however, Nightmare Moon's eyes shot open and she turned to face the unicorn. "Ah... Good. You look much better. Presentable, as my pet should be. Now, come here, I have things I wish to discuss with you, pet"

Twilight cringed slightly at the word but continued making her way towards her bed. "Good, now stop there and sit." The unicorn groaned as she rolled her eyes, sitting back on her haunches. The Nightmare laughed as she looked down at Twilight, saying, "Off to a good start, are we? Though groaning will not be tolerated the next time, nor any rolling of the eyes. Don't think I didn't see you."

Nightmare Moon turned her body to face Twilight, her hooves crossing over each other as she looked down at her. "Now... as for what I'm going to do wit-"

"What did you do with my friends, what did you do to Pinkie?!" Twilight cried, her ears flattening against her head as she finally demanded to know the answer to the question that had been eating at her the entire night.

The Nightmare raised an eyebrow, chuckling as she leaned forward, her eyes narrowing. "That, my dear pet, was a mistake."

Suddenly a jolt of pain lanced through Twilight's body as the collar around her neck sparked and crackled. The unicorn gasped and fell over as spasms wracked her body, the Nightmare looking on with barely concealed amusement.

"Well, I suppose I might as well tell you, since you had the courage to ask. And, to be honest, I can't have you distracted, worrying over those foals. They've all been sent back to their pitiful lives in Ponyville, *and* as long as you cooperate, they will be allowed to keep them. As for the pink one... she was rather annoying, so I decided to make her sleep instead, for a time." Nightmare Moon smirked as she looked down at the still spasming unicorn, cutting off the charge as she spoke once more. "Now... Are you ready to listen to my plans without a fuss?"

Twilight groaned as she shakily brought herself back to a sitting position, her legs shaking with the strained effort of her sore muscles. Still, she wanted to have at least some dignity and fought to stay seated rather than collapse again. Glaring up at her captor, she nodded. “Y-Yes.”

“Good. As I was saying, before being so rudely interrupted, in addition to being my pet you will also be my own personal student. Now, I know that you were my sister’s student before I came back, and I want you to know right now, that I am *nothing* like my sister. Under my tutelage, you will learn of magic that my foolish sister would have *never* taught you. You will learn spells that are as practical as they are deadly, and be allowed to delve into dark arts that even my sister was afraid to touch. Of course, you’ll only be allowed to practice under *my* personal supervision. But, it’s not as if you will be out of my sight for very long any time soon... Which brings me to my next point. As my student, you will learn my manners in governing. You will learn how I do things and when I do them, and later, you will be given your own assignments to carry out as my right-hoof mare. You will be as my voice where ever you go, and I expect you to act the part. But most importantly, you will obey my every word.” Nightmare Moon leaned forward, her mane coming around to raise the unicorn’s gaze, looking straight into her eyes. “Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes...”

Nightmare Moon grumbled as she awoke. Turning her head around, she looked over to see Twilight, snoozing away in the corner of the room where the Nightmare had set up some cushions for her. Shaking her head, the Nightmare’s mane resumed its ethereal flow behind her, levitating her armor before her, she placing them upon her body piece by piece.

Making her way to the window, Nightmare Moon looked down upon the city of Canterlot. It had been over a millenium since her last visit here, and the city had only grown larger since the last time she had lain eyes on it. It was nearly dawn, and the city was still quiet, with just a few ponies making their way down the dark streets. There were a few streetlights scattered throughout the city, but most of them seemed to be carrying makeshift lights to guide them. “It seems some things have changed... Even so, it would seem that most of my subjects appear to be sleeping

through my beautiful night, even after all these years. No matter. That will change..." the Nightmare whispered quietly to herself.

Turning back inside, she sent a thought across the room, smirking as a small cry of pain came from the pile of cushions in the corner. Twilight raised herself out of it, her hoof rubbing at her neck as she glared at the Nightmare.

"I'm glad to see that you're finally awake, my pet. I hope to see you learn to conform your sleep to my own. As long as I'm awake, you will need to be available to serve me. Now, get up. We have a busy day ahead of us."

Twilight grumbled as she reluctantly made her way over to the window. "You remember your duties to your Queen, I hope?" Twilight nodded slowly as she stepped up to the alicorn's side. Nightmare Moon smiled wrapped a wing around the unicorn as she turned back to the window, her horn glowing for a moment. "Good, and now, we're off." The Nightmare stated as the ebon alicorn winked out of existence with the violet unicorn in tow.

They reappeared in the castle's throne room, sunlight just beginning to make its way in through the windows. Nightmare Moon's gaze traveled around the room, taking in the scene before her; there were three doors, the ornate main entrance directly in front of her with two pegasus guards on either side, and two side doors leading deeper into the castle with a unicorn guard each. And at that moment they were all staring at her, dumbstruck.

"What..? No welcoming committee? Not even a fruit basket? I mean... the least you could do is come pay your respects to your Princess." The Goddess sneered, the guards regaining their composure and charging the throne. She paid them no mind, looking over as her pet steeled herself and took an anxious step forward.

"Hold gentlecolts! Don't attack her, please!" The unicorn's voice wavered as she tried to call off the guards. She stood ahead of the Nightmare, letting the guards take a good look at her, the desperation in her voice now more readily apparent. "I, Twilight Sparkle, Celestia's most faithful student pleads that you stay your attack!" It took a moment for her to be sure, but the unicorn's plea must have made it through to the guards,

as the lead pegasus held up a wing, the other guards falling into step behind him.

Nightmare Moon leaned forward, whispering into Twilight's ear, reminding her of the plans they had discussed on the previous day. Twilight's eyes appear stricken by grief as she turns back to the Nightmare "I can't do this... I can't..."

The alicorn's eyes narrowed as she sent a brief shock to the collar, just enough to make the unicorn wince in pain. "You *can*, and you will do as we planned. You know exactly what is at stake, after all, and exactly who's lives are forfeit if you do not obey me."

Twilight's eyes screwed shut for a moment before she took a deep breath and addressed the guards again, her throat constricting at the thought of what she was condemning them... all of Equestria to... "This is Princess Luna, long lost sister of Princess Celestia. The Princess is in grave danger and it is imperative that the Assembly is convened immediately," she forced from between her teeth, hoping that she sounded natural enough to avoid alerting the guards.

The pegasus, who she assumed was the ranking officer among the group, stepped forward and saluted. "Yes Miss Sparkle, the Assembly will be called together right away." The colt motioned the two unicorn guards forward as he continued speaking. "These two will escort you and her Majesty around the castle until the Assembly is convened." The unicorn guards saluted as the other two turned and left the throne room.

Nightmare Moon looked down at them, a small smile gracing her lips as she addressed the colts. "Very good. Tell me, do you know where I can find a chess board, perchance?"

Twilight grimaced as her second rook was taken almost effortlessly by the Nightmare's Queen, the snide smirk having never once left her face since the game's commencement. Even so, the unicorn was more than glad to be able to use a bit of her magic again after all these days; the inhibitor on her horn had been modified to allow her the briefest telekinesis so that she could play the game properly. Still, despite this small allowance, she was growing increasingly frustrated at how easily the alicorn was controlling the board. The black queen seemed to be an

unstoppable force that was incapable of being cornered or forced into a trap. The Nightmare kept smiling as she moved the pieces around the board, using the cover of the telekinesis in order to continue constructing the complex spell she would be needing soon enough. The unicorn guards had been concerned at first by the seemingly large amount of magic that the alicorn was employing as she moved the pieces, but the guards had foolishly accepted her excuse that her magic was a bit rusty after so many years and she'd need to retrain herself to use it. It was a simple ploy, and the fact that it had actually worked had kept that smile plastered on her face for hours.

There was the creaking of hinges, and Nightmare Moon looked up at the door as a pegasus guard stepped into the room, nodding to the alicorn to signify that the Assembly was ready for her. Looking back to the board, her smile broadened, and picking up her queen, she sent it straight down the board, knocking out the white queen that Twilight commanded, sealing her fatally in a corner. "And that, my dear, is checkmate."

Nightmare Moon looked around at the assembled ministers. They were seated about a large round table, situated over a stone mosaic of the half Moon and half Sun, intertwined harmoniously. The moment she walked in, she had veered towards the end with the moon at its head, rather perturbed to see a layer of dust covering the cushion on that end, knowing fully well that the cushion on the sun side was likely clean and well kept. Shaking her head at the whole thing, she levitated the other cushion over to her side, placing it in front of Twilight, fully aware that she'd balk at the idea of sitting on something that had once belonged to Celestia. Once seated, she turned her attention back to the ponies in attendance. There were a number of pegasi and earth ponies, though most were unicorns, not including the guards stationed around the room and at the doors.

"Greetings, everypony. I'm so glad to see so many of my little ponies in attendance today for my announcement." The Nightmare smiled as she saw the ponies glance at each other nervously around the table. She reached into her mind, pulling out the complex spell she had been weaving previously, as she searched out the familiar traces of energy that could only emit from a Core, much like the one that had been present in Everfree over a millenia ago. Finding the tendrils of power, she latched onto them, noting that the unicorns in the room were beginning to take notice of complex

spellcraft being conducted. “After one thousand years, I have returned, and I am ready for my re-coronation! The Reign of Nightmare Moon begins anew!”

She watched the chaos unfold, the ponies before her jumping up off their cushions, shouting with aversion and acrimony. The guards, wasting no time, charged her from all sides as Twilight cowered against her, forgetting herself for a moment in fear of the sudden onslaught.

Nightmare Moon scoffed at them all, closing her eyes as she concentrated and latched onto the final tendrils of power permeating throughout the castle. Snapping open, her eyes blazed from the light of the magic that was filling her body. With a simple thought, a brilliant shockwave of light burst forth from her horn, blasting the charging guards into the walls and pushing everypony else to the ground, the shockwave vanishing as it passed through the walls of the chamber.

The Nightmare cackled as she gazed upon the fallen ponies. “Foals! How could you have ever hoped to oppose me! Now.. I shall have leniency with my new subjects, because as it stands, I require you to ensure the continuation of the government. But at least now, we won’t have to worry about any wayward thoughts any longer.”

All the fallen ponies had risen by that point, bowing to the ebon alicorn in a most docile manner. “Yes, My Liege!” resonated from around the room as each pony declared their allegiance to the Nightmare in sequence. The alicorn smirked, looking down at her pet, relishing just how easily her plans were coming together.

And in the back of her mind, beyond the reach of her consciousness, a long dormant entity began to stir, awakened by the powerful magic that had just been used. A spell made to change the allegiance of all ponies it touched.

Nightmare Moon stood on the balcony outside the royal chambers, looking down upon Canterlot as the hustle and bustle of the grand city began to die down with the waning light of the day. Watching as the sun made its way closer to the horizon, the alicorn addressed her student. “Wasn’t today simply divine? Canterlot is now completely under my

control, and my Lunar Republic is reborn! And all without a single drop of blood spilt.”

Twilight stepped out onto the balcony, the crestfallen unicorn looking up at the setting sun, a weariness having befallen her through the day. “Well, at the very least nopony was hurt.” Then, looking up at the alicorn, Twilight asked, “What happens now?”

“Now...” The Nightmare looked down at the unicorn, her eyes narrowed to mere slits. “Now, we inform all Equestria of my glorious return.” A glow surrounded the alicorn’s horn as she looked towards the horizon, the sun was setting on one side as the ethereal sphere of the moon began to rise on the other. As night fell, the moon continued to rise far past where it should have reached, stopping at its apogee. Twilight looked up as she felt energies rile around her, much as they had in the Assembly room earlier that day, the radiant glow coming from Nightmare Moon’s eyes intensifying once again as she embraced the power of the Core.

An eerie silence fell across the land, the usual music of the night completely absent. The air felt heavy, as an ominous weight of expectation felt throughout Equestria. Then suddenly, a voice. A booming voice that rang out all across the land, seeming to come from everywhere at once, as if it were calling down from the sky itself. “Good Evening, my sun-loving subjects. This is your Queen, Nightmare Moon! Now... I realize that there aren’t many of you that will remember me. In fact, I’ve only met one pony who has. But no matter. The reason I am speaking to you tonight is to inform you of some changes that will be happening around here. Now, I’m sure you all noticed that the Sun did not rise yesterday or the day before. That was my doing. I am also glad to inform you all that tomorrow will be another glorious ‘day’ of night. I will be holding court tonight in the Canterlot throne room, and all are welcome to come pay their dues.” A pause, the air growing heavier. “The Lunar Republic is reborn this day.” Silence hung in the air for a moment once more, before the sounds of the night resumed their concert.

The Nightmare smiled as she released the magic and turned back inside, making her way to some cushions beside the bookshelf, and browsing for anything that would keep her interest. She heard the soft clapping of small hoofsteps behind her. “Nightmare, I was wondering, why do you let the sun shine if you seek an Eternal Night?” A voice asked from behind her.

“Well, I suppose I could indulge you with a bit of a history lesson.” The onyx alicorn smirked as she turned around to face Twilight Sparkle. “You see, a thousand years ago when I first took up the fight for my Lunar Republic, I had overlooked some things in my grandeur plans for the night. Little details. Plants need sunlight to live, for instance, and I hadn’t taken that into consideration initially. Of course, I did not want to rule over a dead queendom, so I was forced to make the necessary adjustments to my plans. Now, back then, I had a spunky little advisor to help me out with these things...” A sudden knock at the door of the bedchamber brought a scowl to Nightmare Moon’s face.

Before the Nightmare could rebuke the pony that dared to disturb her, the door opened to allow entry to a very stately appearing unicorn. Her coat was of a simple off-white and she was possessed of a grey mane and tail, the image of a rolled scroll with the royal seal upon it emblazoned upon her flank. On her nose sat a pair of half-lensed glasses, and the knotted rope of a high official lay draped over her neck.

Her mouth open, Nightmare Moon quickly shut it with a click of her teeth. *There is something oddly familiar about this unicorn...* “Who are you, and why are you so foalish as to skulk past my guards, much less enter my chambers.” Out of the corner of her eye, the alicorn could see her pet smiling to the unicorn.

The unicorn took several more steps forward in silence before dropping to her knees in a bow before her Queen. “I am Royal Writ, your Majesty. Your new Advisor. Worry not, my liege. My family has been awaiting the day of your return since my foremother, Check List, served under you.”

While Twilight stood in shock at Royal Writ’s words, an alarm went off in the Nightmare’s head, causing her to step forward cautiously and glower down at the prostrated unicorn. “What do you *mean* by waiting for my return? My sister wiped out nearly every trace of my existence after I was banished!” Her eyes blazed and her horn lit up, about to deal with whatever menace could easily occur.

However, the self-assigned Advisor simply stood up and looked her Queen straight in the eyes. “I am part of the Cult of the Night, of course! My ancestor, Check List, made doubly sure that she had recorded and hidden the happenings of the War of the Night. The Princess, of course,

found most of the caches, but fortunately, we were able to keep one hidden within our family vault.”

Her eyes glowing with power, Nightmare Moon lifted the unicorn into the air. Royal Writ, however, did not seem fazed by this in the least. “And what, pray tell, does your precious Cult do? Hm?” The look the alicorn gave her would have seared any other pony to the bone, but the unicorn didn’t even flinch.

“We simply awaited your return, Highness, so that we may serve you. You left quite the mark on my family, you know. Check List was but a simple background pony in the affairs of Everfree, but you made her *important!* You should read her diaries, Majesty. She *adored* you. You actually took her advice, unlike Celestia, who tended to simply dismiss her. And then, when that sister of yours banished you and Check List was killed... save for the kingdom itself, I think it was her daughter that suffered the most. All those hopes and dreams quashed... It was she who founded the Cult, and hid the precious records away in our vault. My family, and those who have joined us, simply wish the same as Check List did, Your Majesty. A seat by your side, unlike this nonsense with Celestia, where we’re simply one among a sea of faces,” explained the unicorn, who, while she seemed stoic enough, her eyes begged to have some part in the alicorn’s reign.

Nightmare Moon thought for several long seconds before finally setting Royal Writ back down upon the floor and releasing her ethereal grip upon her. Turning to Twilight Sparkle, the alicorn raised an eyebrow in question, “My pet, what can you tell me about her? I would rather hear it from your own mouth, than go digging around within your mind for it.”

Twilight briefly blanched when Nightmare mentioned that, but she quickly recovered. “She’s, um, one of the group of minor Ministers appointed to do various duties about the palace. I am not exactly sure what all she does, but I know it isn’t anything much inside of the palace, much less Canterlot,” Twilight said, eyeing the unicorn before her.

“Indeed,” Nightmare Moon replied, her eyes swiveling back to stare at Royal Writ through half-closed eyelids. “Fine. Assemble your ‘Cult’ and I shall see if they are worthy of serving me. If not, it will be *you* who takes the blame, *am I understood?*”

Swallowing hard, Royal Writ nodded swiftly, then thumped her hoof to her chest in a rough salute. "I will not fail you, my Queen" She then turned and briskly trotted from the chambers. Outside, a third guard was waiting for her to acknowledge his presence.

Nodding to him, he bowed to the alicorn without entering the room and said, "Your Majesty, we caught a pack of intruders earlier who tried to break into the castle. They already appeared to be in various states of injury, and I think one might be an innocent. A unicorn, two pegasi, and two earth ponies. They await you in the dungeons."

A soft "No..." from behind Nightmare Moon caused her to smile.

Twilight hung unwillingly by Nightmare Moon's side, her head lowered nearly to the floor with her ears laid back. Her hoofsteps echoed along the corridor, the sound rebounding back to her a hundred-fold as if there was an army somewhere within the depths of the castle. The alicorn beside her, however, was seemingly weightless as she walked along, her hooffalls completely silent. She had never been down this deep into the castle before, and Twilight didn't even know why they had dungeons in the first place. She hadn't heard of anypony ever being incarcerated in any of the history books she'd read, let alone in her lifetime. She tried to avoid letting her gaze drift to either side, instead focusing on the ground straight ahead of her, not wanting to think about her friends being stuck in a cell much like the ones lining the corridor to either side.

A sigh escaped her lips as she brought her thoughts back to the present moment. Nightmare Moon turned her head and glared down at her. "What are you going on about. I've already told you that your friends will be allowed to live, so as long as you keep obeying my commands." Twilight raised her head to see a smug smirk on the alicorn's face. "Besides, I have my own plans for your friends. I would not get rid of such worthy tools so haphazardly." Twilight watched as the Nightmare stopped at a heavy iron inlaid wooden door, opening it with a brief flick of her horn.

Nightmare Moon levitated one of the torches from the walls through the doorway, filling the dank room beyond with just enough light to see the five particularly pastel ponies. Twilight gasped at the scene before her. Apple Jack and Rainbow Dash were looking a bit battered, chained against

the far wall, both clearly fuming over having been caught. Pinkie Pie was sitting somewhere in the middle of the group, looking rather downtrodden with what appeared to be a muzzle placed on her. Rarity and Fluttershy were leaning against each other, both looking frightened but thankfully unharmed, as far as Twilight could tell.

“Guys! What are you all doing here!?” Twilight cried as she stepped into the room.

“Why, isn’t it obvious Twi? We came to rescue y’ah.” Applejack said as a smile spread across her face, clearly relieved to see the violet unicorn unharmed.

“Yeah, we wouldn’t leave ya hanging Twilight, even if you are an egghead.” Rainbow Dash spoke up from beside Applejack. As she raised her head Twilight could see that her face was inflamed and she was bleeding badly from a cut below a bruised eye.

Pinkie, Rarity and Fluttershy all brightened up to see her as well, standing up to make their way forward before freezing in place, the three of them cringing and backing up as Nightmare Moon walked into the room. The Goddess chuckled as a sardonic sneer spread across her face.

“How laughable! Did you foals really believe you would be able to rescue my pet on your own? And without the Elements of Harmony to support you, no less! I would be amazed if you even made it past the front gate, which coincidentally, you didn’t!” The alicorn cackled as she uttered this last remark, watching as looks of anger and annoyance resumed their places on the faces of the chained earth pony and pegasus. “Well, now that your precious little reunion is over and done with, there comes the matter of your sentencing. Trying to break into the royal castle isn’t something that’s taken lightly, you know. Nor is conspiring to steal the Queen’s property.”

“Twilight isn’t your property you no good varm- hrrk”

“I don’t believe you want to finish that sentence.” The alicorn said with a sneer as her magic tightened a chain around the earth pony’s neck, distorting it in a rather alarming manner. The others could only sit and stare, unable to believe what they were seeing happen right before their eyes.

The surprise in Rainbow Dash's face began to give away to the rise of fury, a rabid glare pointed right at Nightmare Moon, but right as she opened her mouth, the sound of Twilight speaking out stopped her.

"Stop it!" Twilight cried as she threw herself at Nightmare Moon, beating on her side with her hooves as tears blurred her vision. "Stop it! I'll do anything you ask, just stop hurting my friends!"

"Oh?" The alicorn released the magic holding the chain and lowered her head to face the violet unicorn. "It's about time you came around to accepting your fate," she sneered as she turned back to the other ponies. "Fear not, my little ponies... I've jobs for all of you, and shortly, you will each find out your place under my rule!"

Twilight took an uncertain step back when Nightmare Moon's gaze suddenly fell upon her. "And *you*, my pet. We will discuss your punishment *later!* Come!"

Nightmare Moon turned to leave, Twilight following with a lowered head as the two of them exited the dank cell. However, at the last second, just as the door to the dungeon began to close, the Nightmare's voice rang through it one last time. "And Rainbow Dash? You should have accepted my offer, you know. You are no longer the best flier in Equestria. I have somepony *better* as my Shadowbolt Captain."

Twilight could only stare at the ground, her emotions a maelstrom of conflict within her. *What's going to happen to my friends... I know that she said they would be fine as long as I listened. But after what I just did... Still I couldn't just let her do that to AJ.* She raised her head to look at the door of the chamber as it opened, only shadows visible to her, moving about erratically on the other side, accompanied by the sounds of a scuffle. *What's going to happen to me?* She watched as a guard pushed somepony through the door where they fell unceremoniously to the ground. The guard followed, only to stand quietly at the door.

"Why ya yella' belli-"

"Silence!"

Twilight cringed, Applejack shutting her mouth immediately and doing the same in spite of herself. *What's going to happen to all of us...*

Nightmare Moon laughed and Twilight knew it was because she could see the fear in her friend's eyes, but even now Twilight could still see a small flame of defiance burning in Applejack's gaze. *Oh just don't do anything rash AJ...*

"It's good to see that you are learning who is in charge, Applejack." Twilight felt one of the alicorn's wings draping over her. "Twilight here has learned as well, though later she will be having some... remedial lessons." The wing squeezed her for a moment, a chill running through her body as she heard those words. "Isn't that right, my pet?"

"Y-Yes--" The weight lifted from her back, but the chill remained all the same. Looking up at Applejack, Twilight saw only worry in her eyes—worry for her.

"Now, for you. From what I've garnered you're but an apple farmer. I have no need for your skills, but you are important all the same." The scowl of disdain on the earth pony's face could not cover the confusion that she was feeling. "Seeing as your farm accounts for a portion of Equestria's food supply, I feel it pertinent that you know that you must tend to your crops better than ever before. Since the sun will only be shining once every three days."

"Wha'?! But all the apple trees will wither with that little sunligh—" Applejack started, only to be cut off.

"And you will increase your harvest yield by at least thirty percent. Or would you rather I repossess your farm now and fill it with laborers who *will* do what I say for them to. Just remember, as long as you do your duties, Twilight comes to no harm," Nightmare Moon threatened, a gleam in her eyes.

The stubbornness in Applejack's eyes was all but evident, and Twilight could see the earth pony's jaw grinding her teeth. However, Applejack surprised her when she finally muttered, "Yes'm..."

"Good. Take her back to her farm, bring in the next one," was all Nightmare Moon said in reply. While the two waited, Twilight noticed her

owner taking occasional glances into a shadowed corner of the room, yet when she looked, there was nothing there.

The entrance of another guard into the room signified the presentation of another of her friends, and Twilight turned to spy Pinkie Pie being dragged in, still with the muzzle around her mouth. She even looked a darker pink than before, with her mane not as poofy as it usually was and a look of toxic contempt in her eyes. Before Pinkie could say or do a thing, however, the Nightmare spoke up, "Ahhh, my exuberant subject. I have *quite* the perfect thing for you to do. I wish for you to throw parties in my honor. As many parties as you can."

This caused Pinkie Pie to blink, her eyes going wide in surprise, and Twilight could have sworn that she saw the mare's mane puff up as something along the lines of "Really?" emanated from her muzzled mouth.

The Nightmare chuckled, giving the pony a brief nod of amusement. "Of course! How else would I have you spread my influence? You'll of course need streamers, cakes, and party favors, and time's a wasting! Canterlot will need the biggest party of them all, even bigger than..." Nightmare Moon paused for a bit, then cast out the bait, "...The Grand Galloping Gala

What Pinkie Pie did next surprised all within the room. She leapt into the air with a gasp and sprinted immediately out of the room. At a questioning glance from the guard, Nightmare Moon shook her head and laughed, "No, I believe she's off to go throw the biggest party Canterlot has ever seen. Some ponies are so easy to please... No, go fetch the next one, but be sure to leave the rainbowed one for last.."

As the guard left, Twilight thought to herself, *This isn't going that bad so far, Nightmare Moon seems to be setting them tasks for what they each do best. I... I will have to thank her, later...*

Shortly, the guard returned with Fluttershy, who had to be carried upon his back as it seemed she had lost her ability to stand on her own four legs out of fear. As he set her down, Nightmare Moon cleared her throat.

"Fluttershy, for you I have a special task. My garden attendants don't seem to have quite the... skill with animals that you have, so I will be hiring you on as one of the garden's keepers. You will have access to any

and all things you may need to complete your job, as well as access to the garden storage,” the alicorn explained down to the cowering pegasus.

Once she had finished, however, Fluttershy stopped shivering and pulled herself out of her huddle, standing to stare up at Nightmare Moon with such heartbreakingly hopeful eyes that made Twilight want to race over and hug her. “Do... Do you really mean that?” Fluttershy ventured forth cautiously.

Another surprise hit Twilight, as she looked up to see Nightmare Moon smiling: an actual smile, no malice within it. “Of course, and if you wish, you may start now.”

“Oh! Thank you!” Fluttershy exclaimed in her diminutive voice before turning and trotting out of the chamber, followed closely by the guard.

Rarity was next, and after a thoroughly theatrical performance of her lamenting the current state of her coat and mane, the living conditions of the dungeons, and, of course, the treatment of her and her friends, Nightmare Moon had finally explained to her what the alicorn wished her to do. Become a dressier for royalty.

“Wait... really? You’re serious?” The violet maned unicorn stood there, looking up at Nightmare Moon with an absolutely stunned expression. The alicorn rolled her eyes, scoffing a bit.

“Of *course*, I’m serious,” the Nightmare responded flatly. “Why wouldn’t I be? You have the talent, don’t you?”

“Well, yes!” Rarity responded, slightly offended, though she tried to not let that show through *too* much. “I can create anything you desire, just name it!”

“Very good then!” Nightmare Moon smirked at her. “This should work out just fine then, and... if you’re good enough... perhaps you might even get your own line right here in Canterlot.”

“Well why didn’t you say so, darling?” Rarity said, jumping at the idea. The excitement was visible on her face as the thoughts of fame and fortune settled in her head. “Well I *must* be off, then. There’s no time to waste!” And with that, she sped off to start her designs, the poor guard barely able to keep up with her.

All that was left was Rainbow Dash, and Twilight could most certainly hear her down the halls, becoming louder the closer she came.

The moment the two guards that were needed to subdue the pegasus brought her in, she went quiet. Rainbow glared at Nightmare Moon, trying to pull at her restraints, a pair of chains leading from the guards to a harness holding the pegasus' powerful wings against her sides. "*You!* What have you done with the rest of my friends!? ...and what did you mean that I'm not the best!?"

Nightmare Moon smiled, and Twilight could easily see it was not the kind one from earlier. "I have simply given them jobs to acclimate them to living their new lives beneath my rule, dear Rainbow... Just as I am about to give you yours, whether you like it or not. You see, when I offered for you to be Captain of my Shadowbolts, you *were* the best. But, since you refused, once I returned to Canterlot, I simply found someone *better!*" A shimmer rolled across the corner nearby, a pegasus in a Shadowbolt outfit appearing from the thin air, causing Twilight to start and her heart to race. "Meet Flash Bolt. I assume you know each other?"

Rainbow Dash's jaw dropped open at the sight of the new pegasus, and Twilight swore she could hear the mare saying, "Ohmygoshohmygosh" beneath her breath. However, she seemed to quickly compose herself. "Why!?"

The other pegasus simply smiled, and seemed about to speak when Twilight suddenly burst out, "Do you... know this pony, Rainbow Dash!?" A glare from Nightmare Moon quickly made Twilight shut her mouth.

Rainbow Dash seemed not to see it, though, "Well, yeah! She's my idol! Or *was.*" The rainbow maned mare turned her eyes, which were full of hurt and betrayal toward Flash Bolt. "She is, or was the Captain of the Wonderbolts! I used to dream of flying alongside her!" Then, turning her head toward Flash Bolt, she demanded once again, "So why join the enemy, Flash?"

Flash Bolt raised a hoof and pulled up her goggles, then pulled back the outfit's head to break the spell changing her mane and coat's colors. They faded from the dark blue colors and became her normal dark grey coat and white mane, her eyes a striking gold. "Why?" parroted the pegasus, staring directly at Rainbow Dash. "I didn't have to ask why, kid. I

was retiring from the Wonderbolts when our Queen returned, and she offered me a job: to lead an elite flight of peacekeepers, the Shadowbolts. Call me stupid or whatever you want, but performing for the populace as a stuntpony isn't who I am anymore. It wasn't so much a *choice* as a natural progression of things. My *loyalty* is to whomever sits upon the throne, which is *both* Queen Nightmare Moon and Princess Celestia. The *both* of them rightful rulers of Equestria!"

Each point Flash Bolt made with a powerful stomp of her hoof, causing Rainbow Dash to flinch involuntarily. Before the cyan pegasus could recover, however, Flash continued her speech. "Yes, my dear filly, I have heard of your dreams to join the Wonderbolts, many times over. I know how good you are, which is why when my Queen suggested you as a proper Lieutenant, I jumped at the chance to see how capable you were of this *duty*. To know just how *loyal* you were to Equestria."

For once, it seemed as if Rainbow Dash had been caught off-guard, so Nightmare Moon spoke for her. "Keep in mind, my little pony: If you reject this offer, you reject your chance at ever joining the Wonderbolts. So..." The Nightmare leaned low over her desk and gave a wicked grin, "If you wish to keep your dream, I suggest you do not reject me again."

I believe that went quite well, Nightmare Moon thought to herself as she took one of the deeper tunnels within Canterlot's Castle. Beside her, she could see her pet trailing behind by a few lengths, apparently deep in thought. *I wouldn't put it past her to be thinking of what I may have planned for her.*

As she continued down one corridor, steel doors began to show up to either side of her, and the shielding from up ahead could be felt pushing subtly against her. *No... Not again... This is just like what happened last time...* a voice whispered from the rear of her mind.

Sneering in distaste, Nightmare Moon snarled, "Quiet! It is about time you awoke, but now is *not* the time to distract me!" Behind her, Twilight Sparkle started out of her thoughts and seemed ready to ask a question, but a stamp of the alicorn's hoof and a brisk shake of her head quelled her pet.

As the two continued down the long corridor, a stretch of the wall next to them took Nightmare Moon's attention. Turning to it, the alicorn's eyes darted over the cobblestone surface. "Hrm... This seems oddly..."

...Familiar... Luna's voice completed in her head. I... remember.... something. Something from our past...

An image of a tiny, onyx statue of a pony flashed within Nightmare Moon's mind, a thrum of pressure in her head causing her to sway in dizziness. However, just as quick as it had appeared, it was gone again, the alicorn shaking her head to clear her thoughts.

"A- Are you alright, Nightmare?" Twilight's inquisitive voice called out from behind her.

Planting a hoof against the stone wall, the alicorn peered closely at it before stepping back, "Fine, my pet. Just old, old memories. Nothing more. Come." Twisting her body away from the wall, Nightmare Moon approached a nearby iron-clad door and shoved it open with her magic, revealing the chamber beyond as a bright luminescence radiated out into the corridor.

Beyond the door floated an improbably large multi-faceted crystal that radiated a cool, welcoming light into the alabaster ceramic tiles making up the domed room. It was safe for Nightmare Moon to say that this Core put Everfree's to shame. Looking back, Nightmare chuckled as she noticed that her pet was enraptured with the chamber, its immense beauty having transfixed her completely, rooting her to the spot.

Turning back toward the crystal, the alicorn trotted forth and placed herself directly beneath it. *Please... not again...*

Ignoring the cries of Luna, Nightmare Moon sat upon her haunches, beckoning her student inside. Twilight approached cautiously, as the Nightmare stared down at her. "Now, my pet, before I proceed with your punishment, I have one thing to ask. You knew these ponies for barely a day! How is it exactly that can you call them your friends?"

"They... they were the first ponies I met when I arrived in Ponyville. They welcomed me, and I cast them aside to deal with you, instead, but when we all came out to stop you, I felt... closer to them, as if they were

what I was missing in my life,” Twilight whispered, looking down at the floor as if it were something wrong.

“Indeed...” Nightmare Moon simply replied as she stationed herself below the floating Core. “But eyes on the present. In the meantime, you have a punishment due, and I know the perfect one. After it is given to you, you will have two choices, my dear pet. You can either wallow within yourself and waste your life. Or...” she rose a hoof, “You can accept things for what they are, move on, and make the most of the current situation. The latter brings forth the most ‘freedom’ for you to work with, I assure you.”

As Twilight came up to settle down before Nightmare, she could see the mare shaking before her. “Your punishment will be to see what *could* have been if you and your friends had, somehow remotely, managed to defeat me and live your lives together,” Nightmare Moon chuckled, shooting a lance of power up into the Core.

A party involving all of Ponyville, the two alicorn sisters, Princesses Celestia and Luna reunited in the center while the sun shone high overhead. Twilight Sparkle was given leave to continue her studies of friendship amongst her new ponyfriends.

FLASH!

A boisterous light blue unicorn, boasting to be the most powerful unicorn of all. An Ursa Minor rampaging through Ponyville. Twilight Sparkle taming the beast and sending it back into its home in the Everfree Forest.

FLASH!

Tickets for the Grand Galloping Gala floating before her, and Twilight trying to figure out which of her friends could go. By the end, all her friends decided not to, and then each received a ticket from the Princess regardless.

FLASH!

Her first sleepover. Rarity and Applejack were at each other's throats, but in the end, all three greatly enjoyed themselves.

FLASH!

A ruined fashion show. A ruined designer. Twilight and her friends banded together to finish a dress for Rarity, apologizing for not taking her feelings into consideration. A second show showing off the original designs for their Grand Galloping Gala dresses proved to be more of a success.

FLASH!

Rainbow Dash's audition for the Best Young Flyer Competition. Twilight and her friends showing up to give the pegasus the support of her friends. Rainbow Dash saves Rarity, pulls off a Sonic Rainboom, and wins the competition.

FLASH!

Twilight Sparkle's first Winter Wrap Up in Ponyville. Finding out that while none of the things she tried were her specialty, when it came to logistics and management, there was none better.

FLASH! FLASH! FLASH! FLASH! FLASH!

Scene after scene, the day to day life with her friends, with Spike, the adventures that were had, parties that were attended, and lives that were lived flashed one after another through Twilight's mind. There seemed to be no end to the images and scenes that played through her mind, each one adding to the pile on top of her that wanted to crush her in hopelessness.

And yet... There Nightmare Moon was, watching from a corner of her mind, waiting expectantly.

After what seemed an eternity, the spell ended, leaving the unicorn to collapse upon the marble floor in tears, sobs racking her body. She knew now what Nightmare Moon had tore her away from, and knew what her failure to stop the Queen of the Night had caused.

A gentle wing draping itself over her prone body with a strange affection that could be felt through the tears, and Nightmare Moon's words cut through her depression. "Come, my pet. You've been punished

enough. Tomorrow, I will hear what your answer is. For now, let us retire and rest. You begin your training soon,” the Nightmare’s words were just as soft and gentle as her wing, a far cry from her usual bitter hardness.

It was at that moment Twilight Sparkle chose what she would do.

I will be the best I can possibly be. And nopony will hold me back. I know that’s what my friends would want.

Nightmare Moon sat looking up in the late night sky, unarmored and wearing none of her usual make-up. In fact, she looked less the regal Queen of Equestria and more a lost soul just looking for answers. While her attentions were spread against making the night as beautiful as she could, her thoughts were elsewhere.

It had been over a year since her return and rise to power, and many things had happened in the ensuing months. Her pet was sound asleep within the chambers beyond the balcony upon which Nightmare Moon sat, and the land slumbered quietly across her gaze.

Over the past year, Nightmare Moon had felt herself start to mellow out... to become less angry at everyone and everything. And without that anger... it was almost as if she had lost some direction as well. “Luna...” she asked her always present alter-ego, “What is happening to me?”

Nightmare Moon did not expect much of an answer, though. Luna was mostly silent these days, and every time the Nightmare asked her that question, Luna could not seem to give her a straight answer.

That is because I didn’t have an answer for you, Nightmare. But... after thinking about it for some time, I think I do now, Luna replied, surprising Nightmare Moon.

“Well, what is it, then?”

You’re me. Or, a copy of me, I should say. And you’ve finally received everything that we wanted over a thousand years ago. Our night is appreciated, and looked upon with adoration. We are loved and noticed. We aren’t lonely, not with Twilight always by our side. And soon, Celestia

will be by our side, too, when she finally bows down to us. You can feel it as well as I can, she's tired of fighting against us.

And while this was all true, Nightmare Moon still sat skeptical. "And what does this all have to do with what is happening to me, foal?"

We have what we wanted. Your anger is no longer able to be sustained. You aren't even angry at me anymore. You're... You're becoming more like I am. In fact... Luna seemed to hesitate here, and then her next words shocked the alicorn. I may not be around much longer. I can feel myself merging with you, becoming one again. I can feel the pull. It won't be long now...

"You mean you'll die."

I... I'm not sure, but I don't think so. I just won't be there anymore. Remember, that statue created you. Created a copy of me with my more negative emotions. But without those emotions, well, then you're just me. Or maybe I'm you. I am not sure anymore.

"I... I will miss you."

Twilight Sparkle could not sleep. The bed made for a queen sat beside her own, empty and unused this night. Blinking her eyes wearily in the darkness, the unicorn could see her teacher and owner sitting outside upon the balcony once again, as she often did so late at night nowadays.

As much as Twilight wished to go to her, she was caught in her own thoughts. She noticed how attached she had become to Nightmare Moon now, nigh inseparable. Not in a relationship sense, as Twilight didn't feel as if she could ever be in a relationship with anypony, but more in of knowing that she was an important part of the alicorn's life. Of her mental integrity.

Of course, the unicorn had despised Nightmare Moon at first, especially in the greatly taxing lessons her Queen had begun to teach her. By this point, Twilight knew more ways to kill than she did ways to heal, and the finer points of ruling marched through her thoughts at times. But what of it now? She had come to enjoy Nightmare Moon's company, and even more than that, she had become greatly attached to her. Twilight

knew what that was called, Trotholm Syndrome, but it helped keep her sane in the past, and it had even opened her up to much more freedom along the way.

She had a great friendship with the ponies she met back in Ponyville, and while it was not on the levels it would have been in her alternate life, it had been enough. She even had the freedom, as the Queen's Royal Pet, to be allowed unrestricted access to the Royal Library, the Canterlot Library, and even the Collegium's studies whenever she was not indisposed of. Even Celestia hadn't allowed her such freedom to learn.

Twilight's thoughts turned back to past months. She was amazed at how short a period of time it had taken to restore order to Equestria. Rainbow Dash had easily taken up her position as a Lieutenant of the Shadowbolts, if not too willingly, and under her and Flash Bolt's command, they had quickly, and surprisingly, brought all of Equestria's towns and cities under Nightmare Moon's rule, as well as succeeded in dispensing out her new edicts and laws across the land.

The new laws had surprised Twilight, as they barely changed anything at all, leaving Equestria as it had been beneath Princess Celestia's rule.

Thinking of her former tutor and... Twilight sighed to herself, the one she could only call her adoptive mother made her remember the day scant months ago when Nightmare Moon had returned the Princess from her exile...

"Nightmare, why are we out here doing nothing? While I am appreciative of the break from my studies, I do not recall staring up into Sol being part of our regular routine," Twilight remarked, confusion marking her face.

Nightmare Moon's eyes were narrowed as she stared up into the harsh light of the afternoon sun, concentrating intensely upon it. "You should know it is not, my dear pet," the alicorn replied with a touch of affection. "No, no. I have unfinished business I promised to an old familial relation of ours. The spell I used was excessively complicated, however, and I am taking the time to unravel it."

Twilight's eyes grew wide, and she stammered for a moment before managing to find her voice. "Princess Celestia is returning!? Oh dear, I hope everything looks alright! Is my mane nice? Is my collar straight? Oh dear, I should make sure the chambers are clean!"

"Twilight, my pet, enough!" the Nightmare barked in a stern voice. "This is anything but a formal visit. Oh no, my sister has probably guessed by now what has occurred."

The unicorn bowed her head, saying, "Yes, sorry my Queen. I, erm, get excitable when the Princess is involved."

"Indeed..." muttered Nightmare Moon, her eyes darting to and fro across the sky before she smiled and took several steps back, using a wing to pull Twilight along with her.

The sun flared above them as a large cloud of light floated gently down through the sky, coalescing before them. The mote took shape, revealing the prone form of Princess Celestia collapsed upon the marble floor of the balcony, too weak to stand upon her own hooves.

"Princess!" Twilight cried, running forward to nuzzle against Celestia's cheek, and blocking her from seeing the Nightmare past her.

Groaning, the Princess opened her eyes and managed a weak smile, "Oh, my faithful student. I was not wrong in leaving the Elements in your capable hooves. My sun is shining, and I have returned. Now that my sister's Nightmare has been defeated, we can..." Celestia trailed off, noticing the inhibitor upon Twilight's horn and the breastplate collar around her neck.

Her pupils narrowing to mere pinpoints as the sudden realization hit her, Princess Celestia gasped out, "Tw-Twilight, please tell me Nightmare Moon has been defeated...?"

Sheepishly turning away and taking a step back, her movement revealed Nightmare Moon patiently standing aside.

"No..." Celestia whispered.

*"**Yes**, my dearest sister... Your precious student, now my own Royal Pet and Student, failed you. Equestria is mine, and has been for a year.*

***You** are now mine!” Nightmare Moon triumphantly boasted above her fallen sister while Twilight ashamedly inched herself away from the ordeal.*

“Please! Sister! You can rethink this! You don’t need to be this w-”

*Celestia was cut off as Nightmare Moon planted a shoe’d hoof against the white alicorn’s throat. “You will be **silent**, sister. We were meant to rule together, you and I. And a thousand years ago, it was you who ruled. Now I rule, but I do not intend to rule alone. Twilight is by my side, and soon enough, you will be, too...”*

Nightmare Moon’s mane crept toward Celestia, while the Princess’s cheeks began to dampen with the tears streaming from her eyes, her hooves struggling to get beneath her weakened body and push her away. Celestia’s eyes pleaded for the Nightmare before her to have a mercy of some kind.

Nightmare Moon saw this, and as her mane began to cover Celestia, she whispered, “Do not worry, dearest sister. I have more mercy than I did a thousand years ago. I do not mean to kill you. I mean to make you mine, just as I did with your student...”

Twilight snuggled deep into her covers, pulling them up nearly to her chin. After the Princess had returned, the next time Twilight had been permitted to see her was when her former mentor had been bound and chained deep within Canterlot Castle’s dungeons, adorned by the same objects of power as Twilight. The inhibitor Celestia wore, however, took up most of her horn so as to block her godly powers, while Twilight’s was a mere ring. The Princess’ breastplate had been replaced with a collar, though one more ornate than her own, and the bracelets that were attached around her ankles.

Twilight shuddered when she remembered what those did, when she had first found out their purpose. They acted as magnets, binding her legs to each other and also causing them to go numb with paralysis, preventing their usage. It had been a rather... nasty surprise. Still, for her, at least, such issues were in the past.

Taking one last peek out at the balcony upon which Nightmare Moon sat, Twilight thought one last thing before she faded off to her dreams.

Sleep when you can get it, my Queen. We all have our own trials and tribulations to get through.

The Nightmare focused upon her moon, still deep in thought. Even months later, she was still amazed and relieved at how quickly Equestria had accepted her rule. While her Shadowbolts had indeed been the face that had stretched her wings out over the land, it was back in Canterlot where the real trials were going on.

As Royal Writ had promised, her Cult of the Night had nearly crawled out of the walls to serve her, and had been absolutely instrumental in cementing her seat upon Canterlot's throne. Royal Writ herself had been indispensable, providing advice and information on the current political standings to help ease Nightmare Moon into power. Just the sheer number of political decisions, treaties, and history that the alicorn had to learn would have taken years if not for Royal's help in needing to know what was important at that moment and what could be learned about later.

Now, all who had been within the Cult held some important position ideal to their talents, and Nightmare Moon had made doubly sure they did not feel in the least bit left out as their reward for aiding their Queen.

As Nightmare Moon's thoughts turned elsewhere, a jolt streaked across her temples, startling her from her reverie. Something was pulling at her from deeper within the castle, somewhere near the Core. Grumbling to herself, the alicorn pointedly ignored the feeling, only to have another jolt stagger her. Shaking her head, she glared into the dark and began the long trek down through the palace, encountering not a single soul along the journey.

But, as Nightmare Moon turned down into the corridor that led to the Core, the sight that awaited her made her recoil her head back in disgust.

What stood down the corridor could only be accurately described by her own name. A *nightmare*. It appeared to be another alicorn. Or rather, the remains of one. A dark, dripping mass of flesh and rot, bound together by thick ropes of sinew into a vaguely equine shape, a thick ooze shimmering wetly over its tattered body. It was a *horror*, no other words seeming fit to represent it.

Empty sockets stared back into Nightmare Moon's soul as the abomination began to approach. Its obsidian horn gleamed in the light of the magical torches along the walls, a mane of angry black tendrils coiling and writhing upon its back as it took each haggard step down the corridor toward Nightmare Moon, rotten wings flaring out from its back, leaving a cloud of plumage and dust behind it. Putrid muscle flexed beneath strips of black flesh, pulled taught against necrotic bone, and as it walked, its hooves dragged with them a pool of shadow, smearing the floor behind it with liquid oblivion as it grew closer. The darkness spread out to crawl up the walls around it, reaching up them slowly as if it possessed of the ambition to snuff out the torchlight itself.

Evaluating the situation the alicorn found herself in, she narrowed her eyes and prepared her magic, just in case. "What are you!? Speak if you can, foal, I will not be afraid to destroy you utterly and completely if you do not!" she demanded, her horn an onyx mass of magic ready to be used against the monstrosity.

The horror stopped, and seemed to study Nightmare Moon curiously for a moment, sending a shiver down her spine before it finally spoke. **"I? I am you. I am me. But if a name you seek, then I am Erebus."** Its voice was gravelly and hollow somewhat, as if it called from the depths of the grave.

Without dropping her combat pose, Nightmare Moon replied, "And what is your purpose here, *Erebus*?"

A low rumble came from the horror, which the alicorn took to be laughing. **"To warn you. The Deep Dark comes. And I am its Harbinger. You would do well to abide me, Luna."**

As Nightmare Moon was about to reply, her vision blurred and she stumbled dizzily for a few seconds before recovering her hooves upon the stone floor. When she looked up, however, the horror was gone, as if it had never existed at all.

The next few days crept slowly by for Nightmare Moon as her thoughts were overtaken by the events of her meeting with Erebus. So distracted was she that the days of court, meetings, and talks all went by with only half her attention. This concerned Twilight, as her pet had to pick

up the slack, which the Nightmare was rather grateful for. There were simply more important things at stake right now than territory disputes amongst neighboring ponies, and whether to hire on more servants or not.

In fact, by the time the third night came, Nightmare Moon had to mentally tear her thoughts away from the problem before her to take note of something else. Her sister had finally agreed to bow before her and accept a place at Nightmare Moon's side. On any other day, the alicorn would have rejoiced, but this victory tasted bittersweet within her mouth. She could feel it deep within her bones that something monumental was about to happen.

As she made her way down to the dungeons, Twilight trailed along from behind her, excitement in each of her steps. She seemed so... exuberant. And why shouldn't she be? No matter how her pet felt, however, the Nightmare could not shake the feeling something was about to go so very wrong.

As they entered the dungeon, however, nothing happened other than the two guards who were always placed at Celestia's cell coming forward to tell her that Celestia was indeed ready.

"Stay here," the alicorn commanded to Twilight before moving forward and throwing open the cell door to step inside, her eyes adjusting to notice the form curled against the far wall.

There, Celestia lay chained by her hooves to the stone itself, just enough slack in them to allow her limited access to the large bed lying against one wall and the simple latrine on the other end. Her mane and tail hung limp, as if the constant wind that made them flow had tapered off and died. Around her neck and horn were indeed the collar and inhibitor, though they were hard to distinguish in the harsh darkness of the cell.

"My good sister," Nightmare Moon started. "It is indeed well and good to see that you have finally come to your senses. I have missed your presence by my side, you know." A genuine smile parted the alicorn's face as she took a few more steps to stand near Celestia.

A great sigh heaved through Celestia's body as she turned weary eyes to look up into Nightmare Moon's own. "I can't fight you, Luna, or whoever you are now. Nightmare Moon. I could *try* to fight you, and remain here for the next two millenia. Or I could finally accept my fate and

join you, for whatever time we have. You may not be fully Luna anymore, or even her at all, but you are still my sister, and I still love you..." Celestia's eyes turned aside, as if she had given up.

"How... touching..." Nightmare Moon sarcastically replied, not really having her heart in it. As much as she tried to keep her thoughts on current events, they kept creeping back to Erebus. *How did it know our name?*

Shaking her head clear of such thoughts, the Queen of Equestria sent a pulse of magic through her horn, the shackles around Celestia's hooves falling free, allowing her to stand. "Come, my sister, you'll get a night free of your duties, but tomorrow, during Court, you will bow to me and swear unbreakable oaths." Bumping her nose to her sister's, Nightmare Moon turned away, looking back occasionally to watch the alabaster alicorn following with a lowered head. The scene reminded her so much of her victory a millenia ago, the one that had ended in Celestia's betrayal...

Pushing that to the back of her mind, Nightmare Moon instead thought of the days to come. She would of course have to set Celestia up to rule alongside herself, get her acquainted with all the changes she had brought about, and of course make it known to Equestria that their Princess had returned.

Once Twilight joined them, the three ponies made quite the stately procession through the halls. However, shortly after leaving the dungeons, Nightmare Moon started feeling uneasy. *Something is wrong. I can feel it, a building of tension... Something's coming to a head...*

Nothing happened immediately, but after turning a corner... One second the corridor ahead was lit by the magical torches that lined the walls, and the next, nothing but darkness sat before them. And Erebus. The horrified gasps of both Celestia and Twilight behind her proved that they both saw the abomination, too.

Nightmare Moon spread her wings to either side to block the corridor, then gathered up energy in her horn as she took a battle stance. "And what do I hold the honor of our meeting to this time, Erebus?" the alicorn demanded, Twilight standing to one side of the Nightmare, her horn glowing with just as much power.

“Honor? Meeting? I am not here for you, Luna. I am here for Celestia. Her time has come to serve the greater good of the Deep Dark. You will abide me, Luna,” Erebus coolly explained, not moving from its spot.

“I submit to nopony, Erebus, least of all *you*. Deep Dark or not, this is **my** castle and **my** queendom,” retorted Nightmare, her pupils narrowing to bare slits.

Erebus seemed to twitch, a shudder running down its entire, rotted body. **“You disappoint me. I, after all, helped create your Nightmare. You should be more thankful of my gifts. But it appears you are not, so I shall show you the full extent of that gift you used so mercilessly a thousand years ago.”**

All at once, a thousand whip like tendrils burst from Erebus’ body, turning the horror into an absolute monstrosity! Twin blasts of arcane power struck Erebus dead in the center of its chest, but seemingly ineffective, only causing the abomination to let out a low rumble once more.

“We must flee!” Celestia exclaimed, spurring the two into action as they turned to follow the sun princess, running down the corridor.

“It is a dead end, sister! There is no other way out of the dungeon!” warned Nightmare, her starred mane and tail streaming out behind her.

Twilight was just barely able to keep up, her horn glowing multiple times before fizzling out, “I... I can’t teleport us out either! Something’s bloc-”

At that moment, an immense shadow burst out of the corridor ahead, covering it completely from side to side, and all at once, a wall of tentacles streamed forth to latch themselves to Celestia’s coat while others wrapped themselves around her body, a shriek of pain emitting from alicorn’s mouth.

A rage-filled **“NO!”** left Nightmare Moon’s mouth as she latched onto Celestia’s body with her magic, pulling Celestia away from the wall of shadow ahead. Twilight’s strength soon joined hers, and it seemed for a bare moment as if they were winning the fight, but soon they began to lose precious ground, the thick tendrils dragging the crying Princess further and further into the shadows. Celestia’s hide began to take on a sickening cast, her screams of agony growing weaker with each passing moment.

As if to show the two ponies that their magic was useless, the tendrils entwined themselves together around the elder alicorn and wrenched her bodily off the floor with a horrified scream, their magical hold on her being torn asunder as Celestia was pulled into the shadows completely, disappearing within.

“Princess!” Twilight yelled out in horror, a scream of rage erupting from Nightmare Moon’s throat at the same time. The sounds that shortly came from the congealed darkness could only attest to the horrors within as Celestia’s voice seemed to find new strength. A strength fueled by pure terror. By agony. By the reality of death, presented in a way that not even the War of the Night had managed. They were a pony’s death throes, and soon Celestia’s cries became inundated by revolting, wet noises, causing Nightmare Moon to flinch back visibly.

By this point, Nightmare Moon’s rage was boiling over, her entire body exuding a cloud of shadow around her as her eyes began to glow cyan from the amount of magic she had gathered. All at once and without a single word, Nightmare Moon herself leapt into the shadows that had taken her sister from her, intent on destroying it down to the last molecule. *I am finally happy with life! Truly happy for the first time in over a thousand years, and no loathsome abomination will take that away from me!*

The moment she entered, however, Erebus’ voice boomed out from around her, **“I created your Nightmare, Luna. What makes you think you can fight me so easily?”**

Twilight was in shock, there was no simpler way to put it. Her mouth was agape, yet no sound came from it, but within her mind, she was screaming in absolute distress. She had just seen her adoptive mother and mentor dragged to her death, the alicorn’s screams of agony still playing themselves within the unicorn’s head. Then, shortly afterward, her owner had jumped in as well.

As Twilight watched and listened, Nightmare Moon’s cries of rage quickly became reduced to the same screams of agonizing pain that had erupted from Princess Celestia’s throat not moments before, and eventually, they too died down to be replaced by an awful silence. The

sound of her collar, bracelets, and inhibitor fading away into smoke jarred Twilight from her shock. *Oh Celestia, what do I do!?*

As if reading her thoughts, Erebus' voice boomed out from around her, **"Run, little filly. Run. Know the terror I will bring to Equestria, for I am the Harbinger of the Deep Dark. And we seek to take back what is ours..."**

And so Twilight ran. And so she hid. And all around her, she could hear the sounds of the castle's inhabitants panicking, evacuating, and dying, their agonized screams joining Celestia's and Nightmare's within her head.

Soon, even those died down to a trickle, and then nothing. And then something sounded from the dark of her hiding place.

"Time to play, little filly."

The shadows moved in.

Twilight screamed.

And then there was silence.

CELESTIA'S NOTES:

My faithful student, I knew that eventually, you would be reading this text. Every word of it— everything that happened within its pages was one of many possible conclusions that might have occurred if you and your friends had failed to stop Nightmare Moon. And while it may have been one of many possibilities, it was the most likely of them all. I did not have the heart to write down what happened afterward to my Equestria. To say the least, the Deep Dark, and Erebus, destroyed it down to the last foal.

I have already taken measures to prevent such circumstances from ever happening. After approaching Royal Writ, she admitted that she was indeed part of the Cult of the Night. However, after digging deeper, I found them to be nothing more than a harmless assembly of like-minded ponies who, after hearing that Nightmare Moon was gone for good, quickly abandoned their hopes for her return. I punished none of them, and they

all remain in their stations, however, I did confiscate Check List's original notes.

The corridor in which I hid the statue is under guard every hour of the day, though I must continuously switch out the guards. The auras of so many magical items have strange effects upon the mind, you see, so I make sure the guards have minimal duty there. And if Erebus were to appear, I hope that the Elements, as well as the powers of both Luna and I, will be enough vanquish this threat, if it is not already too late when you receive this tome.

Since delving into the possibility of what may have happened, I have been deep within some of the oldest chronicles we still have, trying to figure out what occurred. So far all my leads have turned up nothing, and we can hope that this preparation ultimately amounts to nothing happening. I can only pray to Sol that our fears are unfounded... And if they are not, then we must prevent this scenario at all costs...

End of

~~WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN~~

DEEP DARK

Chapter 1

Discovery

Hidden deep within Canterlot Castle, home of the ruling body of Equestria and the two Royal Sisters, lay a long stone corridor lined on both sides with heavy steel doors. Beyond each of these doors lay some of the most dangerous artifacts known to ponykind: terrible items, many of them impossible to dispose of safely or destroy. Only the Princesses Celestia and Luna have access to these chambers, the rooms themselves heavily shielded against the powerful items within.

However, even among these, there was one chamber that was decidedly unique. It had no door to speak of, no way in or out, and within lay the most dangerous amongst all the artifacts stored beneath the castle, even if the Royal Sisters did not know it. It was but a simple onyx statuette of an earth pony, harmless in its relative appearance.

Appearances are deceiving, however, and it was a millennium ago, when Celestia and Luna were new to their rule, that that its magics had worked to create the dark queen, Nightmare Moon. This had been the most recent incident. It had not been the first, of course, nor would it be the last, but for right now it was dormant, slowly gathering the necessary power to complete something.

Something *sinister*.

Something **terrible**.

A darkness that has waited and planned while the Nightmare has been imprisoned within the moon.

Outside of the chamber, two guards stood at attention, lacking any knowledge of what lay stirring within... or of what would shortly happen to them.

For them, the duty was just one of many, routine and regular. In fact, it was nearly time for the change of guard, and both were relieved at the chance to head home to their families for the day. However, the corridor remained silent.

Speaking on the job was generally frowned upon, and could easily result in a mark upon one's record unless it was to a citizen who had asked a question. That did not stop these two, who had been chatting with each other for the past couple hours to stave off the boredom, to woefully little effect, and their conversation had trickled back down to nothing.

Behind them, in the silence of the corridor, the cobblestone wall seemed to groan, causing them to twitch their ears in that direction, but when no other sounds came about, their ears swiveled back into an alert position without a second thought. Still, even if both guards had been staring right at the wall, it would not have saved them from what happened next.

What had disturbed the wall vanished, only to be replaced by a nest of writhing, black tendrils that burst forth from the stone wall to latch themselves on to the two unfortunate guards, who yelled loudly in surprise.

They tried to scream. They tried to shout for help or warn somepony, but nothing further came from their mouths, as if they had been stripped of their voices. There was nothing they could do, the pain in their eyes quite evident as the tendrils seemed to dive right through their hides into their bodies before drawing the two guards up to the wall to dangle helplessly.

For them, the pain of the ordeal seemed to last for hours, days, even weeks... Yet, if anypony were to have been watching, they would have seen that the entire scene had actually played out in mere minutes as the tendrils drained the guards dry of life and substance. Their bodies became desiccated and skeletal, so thin and frail that their armor slid off and struck the stone floor with a reverberating clang that echoed through the hall, but fell upon deaf ears.

Finally, when there was nothing left for the bodies to give, the tendrils released their hold on them and vanished back into the wall, leaving the now deceased guards to collapse upon the floor and crumble into dust.

An hour later, the change of guards came to relieve the previous shift, arriving to nothing but an empty corridor. There were no signs of their predecessors. Not a mote of dust or a piece of armor remained from the previous two guards. It was queer... but there was nothing to be done about it.

Later, a report was filed that listed the two guards as having abandoned their posts.

Luna started upright within her bed, breathing heavily as she awoke suddenly from her nightmare she was having. Rubbing the sleep out of her eyes, she peered over at the grandfather clock sitting opposite in the dark of the room. *Barely mid-afternoon... Third night this week I've had that nightmare. Vacation had gone so well, too, and I get to come back to this...*

Pushing the covers off of herself, Luna slipped out of her comfortable bed on to the carpeted floor of her chamber. *Well, I know I'm not going to get back to sleep after **that**, if the past couple days are anything to go by...*

Sighing at the unfairness of it, the alicorn's horn shimmered, causing the heavy velvet and felt curtains to dash open, flooding her room with the afternoon sunlight.

Shutting her eyes at the sudden glare, Luna went about the arduous task of taming her unruly mane and tail, as well as attempting to make herself look a bit more stately in appearance. It wasn't too bad, though, and even by the time she had finished that and settled her breastplate and shoes into place, the sun had barely crept a fraction across the sky.

Shutting her eyes and pushing away the lingering images of her nightmares from the past few days, Luna took a deep breath and slowly let it go it as she opened the doors leading from her chambers and strolled out into the hallways of the castle. She smiled as she remembered the vacation. It had been quite pleasant, and she could have sworn her coat was now a few shades lighter due to the amount of sun she'd gotten. Even Twilight Sparkle's little unannounced visit had been nice, though she didn't

particularly like reliving the few memories she had left of the time before her banishment. At least, not the ones that had involved Nightmare Moon. *It was enjoyable to read what I had been like before then. Though, I still can't remember much... My memories are all clouded...*

Servants and government officials bowed to the princess in the hallways as she passed. Luna let out a soft sigh; things were so different from what they used to be. There was so much to learn, so much to catch up on, and so many new technologies and studies to explore, including one she greatly enjoyed: Astronomy.

To think! A study of *her* sky! Of *her* stars! There was an entire field of science entirely dedicated to **her** and the masterpiece that she cherished so!

Recalling the surprise and delight she felt at discovering this greatly improved the Goddess of the Night's current mood, and she trotted into the throne room whistling under her breath, remembering her own studies of her sky. While it was one thing to be one with the sky, it was another entirely to be able to see everything from a distance through a complicated device of mirrors and lenses. The sheer ingenuity of it had impressed Luna greatly.

A bemused smile sat upon Celestia's face as she watched her sister take the throne next to her while the goings on of the court happened before them. Noticing an upbeat air around her sister, the Day Goddess chuckled to herself and said, "I see you're in a good mood, dearest sister. Has the nightmare you've been having run its course and left you alone?"

At the mention of the nightmare, Luna's ears flattened and her good mood vanished again in a puff of smoke. "Cellyyy!" the midnight blue alicorn complained. "No, it woke me up early... again! I'm never going to get a good day's rest if this keeps up!"

Embarrassed, Celestia bowed her head to her sister, "Oh! I'm so sorry, Luna! But, I can most definitely say that while I know you like bananas, you aren't a female dog, and nor would I ever stuff you into a cannon and launch you to the moon. Though..." Celestia glanced out of the corner of her eye towards a certain unicorn who *claimed* to be her nephew, "I can say for sure that there'd be one pony I certainly would do it to..."

Blueblood. Currently, he was out amidst the other 'highbloods' throwing his snooty nose into the air and acting like a royal pain in the rump... While Prince Blueblood's title was such, it was inherited from a family of ponies the Princess had given said titles to for their extravagant assistance to the crown. The relationship to Celestia was a technicality, at best.

Though he was noticeably larger than other stallions his age, it was more to his draft pony breeding than anything relating to the Princesses. Of course, when confronted by this fact, he had thrown the biggest hissy-fit ever and claimed that in no such way was he related to any sort of country draft pony.

Rolling her eyes and giggling, Luna turned her head away from the court to whisper, "Well, no... It wasn't just that one, Celly..."

Celestia raised an eyebrow in worry and leaned in close, "There are others, Luna? If they're bothering you, then you know that you can tell me about them, my sister."

"Yes. I know... But I'm worried that you'll just scoff at it and not believe me!" Luna replied, her eyes trying their best not to meet her sister's.

"Oh, Luna... I'm not the pony I was a millennium ago, surely you know that by now!" Celestia assured her, slipping a wing over the smaller alicorn. "I learned a long time ago to always listen to you or any problems you may have. Now, my dearest sister, what other nightmares have you been having? Is... She back?"

Luna didn't need the name to know who her sister was talking about... but she shook her head.

"No, not in that way. It's just, sometimes I still dream about her, but it isn't actually her, just a dream. I know the difference between the two. No, Celly, it's... different. In this dream, I'm Nightmare Moon, and yet... Not. I'm still myself, but I have her body and powers, and something keeps *calling* to me. And then, every once in a while, I get to sort of see it..."

Luna swallowed visibly and a shudder passed through her diminutive form. "It calls itself the Harbinger, and while I never get to actually look at it, I can see it out of the corner of my eye. It's... I just can't describe it. It's like some sort of zombie pony... an undead monstrosity straight out of one

of those stories I read. Like a forest wraith, or one of the cursed townsfolk out of *The Story of the Blanks!*”

Celestia’s heart stopped for a moment, and she recalled her look into what could have happened if her sister’s Nightmare had won over her faithful student.

“Are you sure it’s a dream, Luna...?” the alabaster alicorn asked in trepidation.

“As near as I can tell, Celly, yes... It hasn’t started yet, *has* it?” Luna looked up into her sister’s face, fear hiding within her eyes.

“No, it couldn’t have... Else we would have known by now...”

“Spiiiike!” Twilight Sparkle called, scanning her gaze around the study for her diminutive dragon assistant.

“Spiiiike! Where are you!?”

A moment later, the baby dragon came running down the stairs from her bedroom, rubbing at his eyes, appearing as if he had just awoken.

“Arrgh... I was having such a great dream, too! There I was, having dinner with Rarity. There were candles and music and a whole spaghetti dinner, and... anyway! What is it, Twilight?” Spike asked, a little put off but dutiful nonetheless.

Twilight giggled and responded with an exaggerated roll of her eyes, “You can dream about her later, Romeo. Right now, I need you to locate a few books for me. First, I need to find the *Seer’s Standard for Sight, Sound, and Sensations*, and the *Clarovoyent’s Chapter for Characterizing Conjurations*.”

“Wait... aren’t those books about fortune telling? I thought you told me that all of that was just a bunch of old school hocus-pocus gobbledy gook,” Spike retorted, already making his way up one of the small step ladders scattered about the library to peruse a suspect row of tomes.

“Well, not exactly. While there is plenty of that sort of subject in them, there are other things that I found quite useful. But if what Princess Celestia has told me is true, then she has the ability to see events that

might have taken place, had certain situations turned out differently. If that's possible, and my experience with the histories is anything to go by... What I'm going to do is see if I can figure out what spells Princess Celestia used to do it, and maybe look up some other related items in the process. With that knowledge, I might even be able to find out how to see into the past! Or even the future!" The unicorn's eyes lit up at the thought of getting to see historical events unfold first hand, or even explore the various possibilities that the future held!

Spike's voice, however, cut through her thoughts, instead. "Umm, Twi? I don't mean to interrupt your little daydream, but isn't it almost time to meet with the others at the Canter Café? I mean, it'll be the first time in a week you've gotten to see them!" He crossed his arms over his scaled chest and sent her a glare that pretty much told her to "get out and socialize."

"Oh! I almost forgot! Thank you, Spike! Ohhh, where did I put my bags?" the mare asked as she darted her gaze around the room, then quickly ran past Spike up into the bedroom. As she began to frantically dig through her things for her saddlebags, Twilight heard a cough from behind her and turned to see Spike holding them up. Blushing in embarrassment, she hovered them over to her flanks and tied them into place.

"Thanks, Spike," she said with some slight embarrassment. The little dragon just rolled his eyes in return.

Opening the flaps, Twilight made sure she had everything she needed: a bag of bits and various reading materials, including the tome the Princesses had sent her. Closing the bags, she announced, "Alright, ready! Are you coming, Spi-" The mare cut off when she noticed Spike back in his bed with his blanket pulled up tightly around him.

Shaking her head in amusement, Twilight Sparkle made her way down the stairs and took a final look at her surroundings. While it was good to be back home, she missed being with the Princesses during their vacation. *As unexpected as it was, it was rather enjoyable to be around Princess Celestia for such an extended amount of time. And Princess Luna, too! I'd barely gotten to talk to her before then! She seemed honestly amazed at how much I knew about her sky, and jumped at the chance to regale me with all the various tales and myths about it. At least, the ones*

she said she remembered, and the ones she knew from Princess Celestia. The fact that I knew a few that she didn't surprised me by itself!

Stepping out the door, Twilight shielded her eyes from the sun for a moment as they adjusted to the glare, before she stepped out into the warm, summer air. Looking up into the deep blue sky, she started walking down the long path towards the cafe. *I hope the girls don't mind that I was gone for so long, I've just had so much to think about since I got back. That... history of theirs was very informative, but I could tell that not everything that happened was told. Princess Celestia even said it herself! And I know the Princesses are still hiding things. I mean, they are the rulers of Equestria, but... if they can't trust me, then who can they trust?*

Twilight shook her head as she looked around, smiling at the various ponies she knew. Lyra and Bon-Bon sat upon a park bench conversing, Carrot Top was watering her garden, and even Ditzy Doo was flying around, delivering mail in that strange fashion of hers. It truly was a great day to be out and about, and just up ahead, Twilight could see the Canter Cafe and her friends, seated at a couple of the tables, awaiting her arrival.

Grinning broadly, Twilight broke into a gallop to join her friends at the cafe. They were all parked around a pair of tables that had been pushed together so that they all had a place to sit. As she approached, she noticed that Pinkie Pie seemed to be enjoying a cheese and hayfry platter that was considerably more cheese than fry and was making an absolute mess of herself while eating it, with Rarity looking on in horror. Meanwhile, Rainbow Dash and Applejack were having another contest, seeing which one of them could chow down a row of apples the quickest. Fluttershy, on the other hoof, appeared to be studying the migratory habits of a few grains of sand on the ground near her cushion.

"Hey girls! Sorry I'm late!" Twilight exclaimed as she settled between Pinkie Pie and Fluttershy, slipping her saddlebags off and setting them aside.

"Oh, hey Twilight!" Rainbow Dash replied, her response muffled by a mouth full of apple. "Where have *you* been? You're like a half an hour late!"

"Well, to be honest, I had completely forgotten that we were meeting up today! Thank Celestia that Spike reminded me!"

“Well dear, you *have* been gone all week, and without the slightest announcement!” Rarity commented, shaking her mane out of her eyes as she finally drew herself away from the trainwreck that was a certain pink pony’s table manners.

“We were starting to get worried...” Fluttershy said, looking up to Twilight with a little smile, glad to see her friend was indeed alright.

“All that Spike was able to tell us is that you had gone off to see the Princesses! We were all quite curious as to exactly what you had gotten yourself wrapped up in,” Rarity added. “And I believe I speak for all of us when I say that we are just *dying* to hear what sort of strange adventures that you have been ha-”

“Oh! Oh oh oh!” Pinkie Pie interrupted, the cotton candy pony giggling, as she bounced in her seat. “I bet she was off fighting pirate monkeys, or robot pirates, or even robot pirate monkeys! Or maybe she was off exploring the snowy tundra when she was attacked by gryphons that fired exploding beachballs! Ohohoh! What if she was climbing up a mountain in search of an ancient artifact when suddenly a-”

Fortunately, Applejack had decided at that moment to plug Pinkie’s mouth with her hoof, giving a little chuckle as she turned to look back to Twilight.

“Don’t mind her, sugah’cube, though it’s true; we’ve all been mighty curious as to why you’ve been gone fer so long.”

“Well, um...” Twilight chuckled nervously, “It was pretty interesting, though it definitely wasn’t as... exciting, as Pinkie thought.”

Getting rid of the hoof in her mouth, Pinkie’s ears flatten, “Awww, it’s never as exciting as I think. Oh! Maybe I’ll have to go on an adventure sometime to make it that exciting!”

Twilight gave a little giggle in spite of herself, “I wouldn’t doubt you’d be able to manage it, Pinkie.”

“Well... that’s okay if it isn’t... *I’d* still like to hear about it,” muttered Fluttershy, who peeked out from beneath her mane shyly, “I mean, if that’s alright with you...”

“Well, the short and long of it is that I was doing some important research for the Princesses. It was very interesting, and I learned a ton about them that I didn’t know about before. Though, most of it I’m not really allowed to talk about. Sorry girls...”

“Pfft... figures,” Rainbow Dash said, rolling her eyes before tossing another apple into her mouth.

“I know, I know... Oh, but... while I was studying, the Princesses gave me *this*.” Twilight turned and hovered the tome out of her saddlebags, setting it upon the table in front of her. “Princess Celestia said she used her magic to ‘see’ what could have happened if Nightmare Moon had beaten us.”

“Nightmare Moon? Win against us!? Oh pffftthahaha!” Rainbow Dash burst out laughing and tumbled to the ground, causing no few of the other Cafe patrons to look at her curiously. “As if! We totally kicked her flank and everything she sent us! There’s no way that could have ever happened.”

“Yeah... I know,” Twilight gave a slight nod in agreement. “Still... it does make a pony wonder.”

“Well, if ya don’t mind me asking, what happens in that there book, Twi?” Applejack asked, poking at its binding with a hoof.

Twilight looked to the side and then at each of her friends. “Well, I haven’t read it, yet. Call me cautious or trepidatious...”

“Trepidawhatnow?” Applejack asked, raising an eyebrow.

“...*Buuuut* I’ve been trying to look up what spells Princess Celestis used first, and frankly, I’m still a little flabbergasted at everything I learned while with the Princesses.”

“Flabbergasted, you mean like in shock?” Rainbow inquired, planting a hoof upon the tabletop and pulling herself upright. “What did you learn about them that put you so on edge?” She leaned nearly over the entire table to stare straight at Twilight, the pegasus’ eyes narrowing to mere slits. “Are they-”

Pinkie Pie decided to jump up at that moment and interrupt, “Aliens? Vampires? Oh! I know! They’re humans in disguise! Or maybe-”

Pinkie once again found herself with Applejack’s hoof in her mouth, the orange farmmare rolling her eyes at the mention of ‘humans’. “Pinkie, y’all know that there’s no such thing as humans... Now, Twilight’s already said that she can’t tell us nothing about what she did with the Princesses, so let’s stop prying into her business and just have grand ol’ time, alright?” Applejack snorted, glaring a moment at Rainbow before turning and smiling to Twilight.

“Thank you, Applejack,” Twilight replied, hovering the tome back into her saddlebags. “So, what have all of you been up to while I was gone...?”

“Celly! We’ve had no luck in this section! Are you sure that we’ll find *anything* in here?” Luna complained, staring down at the nearly indecipherable writing upon the page. The ledger before her was even older than she was, and it was hard to read at times because of the shifts in language that had happened since then. Not only that, but the spells meant to keep it from falling apart were only barely doing so. “Why don’t we start with the oldest things and move up from there? That would be a far more sensible approach.”

Celestia rubbed her eyes with a hoof and stared blankly at the pile of tomes and notes strewn upon the table in front of her before giving a sigh, “I wish we could, Luna, but if we did that, then we’d have even more to get through than if we started where we are now. Some of those things are from our grandparents, and their parents, and even *their* parents. I think we have around twenty thousand years of history to go through if we’re going to find anything, *if* we’re lucky. The oldest records that we have are naught but bits and pieces anymore.”

The War of the Night had destroyed the Everfree Records and History Room, and much of their family’s past had been lost to the destruction, though Celestia had managed to, with help, unearth the rooms and salvage as many of the tomes as possible.

“You know as well as I do that we’re going to have many long nights before us if we’re to find anything about the Deep Dark, Erebus, or even remotely related to what’s going on,” the Sun Princess shook her head

quietly, rubbing her temples once more. “You’d *think* Sol or Altair would have told us about it.”

Luna sighed at the mention of their parents. She didn’t remember much; the gaps in her memory had given her mere glimpses of them, but from what Celestia had told her, she had loved her father the most. Standing, the Goddess of the Night stretched her legs before heading back into the labyrinth of corridors that composed the resting place of much of their history. “I’m going to look deeper, Celly, maybe we’ll have more of a chance of finding something there.”

A noncommittal chirp came from her sister in return, as Luna descended through the maze to a dusty level containing records from her parents’ time and beyond. Looking up and down the rows and upon rows of shelves, Luna let herself fall deep into thought. *I just wish I could remember... While that book our parents gave us tells me of what I was like after we came into power, I don’t know of much before that except for what Celly has told me. She says I was playful, artistic, and devoted to our father, Altair, but... What if that is just what she says to make me happy...? The one thing I can truly remember is turning into Nightmare Moon. I was so jealous and alone... I let her take over...*

She had wandered into the section devoted to her grandparents now, many of the tomes faded, cracked, torn or in some way damaged from the passing of the ages. Magic could only slow time down so much before it finally caught up. *There are so many other things I can’t remember. So many things I simply don’t know the reasons behind, anyway. I mean, Celestia said I was always the artist and she the thinker, but at times, I’ve came up with things she didn’t, if just because of my unique perspective. At least, that’s what she said... Just how many of my memories are real, I wonder?*

Luna could look in no few of these books and not understand a thing that was going on, it had taken her so long just to be re-educated on what had happened during their lifetime and while she was banished, but then there’s also what happened during the rules of their ancestors. *Oh Nightmare Moon, how I curse you for taking so much of my life away from me, in more ways than one...*

Tears sprang to her eyes a moment before she reached a hoof up and brushed them away. The dust from the floor that came up with it got

into the alicorn's nose, making her sneeze, the noise sounding like an explosion within the lonely corridor. There were few sets of hoofprints within the dust here, and those seemed quite old. This was a restricted section after all, and there were few in the kingdom who were allowed in this deep.

Taking a glance to either side, Luna paused for a moment. *Alright this is... The rule of Event Horizon and Ceres, my great-grandparents... I wish I could just use magic down here, but Celly said that using magic to find a certain thing in a library was highly erratic and unreliable, and may even damage the spells holding many of these books together.* Luna brightened up for a moment before smiling, "Of course, our situation is dire enough to require the aide of it, too!" The alicorn's words echoed around her before she took a deep breath, coughing violently for a moment due to the sheer amount of dust in the air, and then began working upon a spell.

As her horn began to kindle with power, Luna shut her eyes tight and started to work on the specifics of the spell. *Alright, let's see... what if I tried something different? Not a simple search and find spell, but a spell backed by intent, maybe? What if I linked it to my thoughts too, of what I wanted?* As the spell became more and more complex, some of the loose dust on the floor began to levitate into the air and swirl around her from the amount of static charging it. Then, all at once, the spell fizzled and died, leaving the air around Luna choked with dust.

Coughing once again, Luna waved a hoof in front of her face to try to clear the air, frowning. *Too complex... What if I...?* Once again gathering magic into her horn, she began to construct another spell. Simpler, more utilitarian. Alas, upon its completion, this spell too fizzled into nothing, much to Luna's irritation.

Ugh... This isn't going to work... Luna, without giving it a second thought, flopped down upon the dusty floor, throwing up a massive white cloud, and sending her into another coughing fit. *What am I even doing down here?* she asked herself once she managed to blow away the cloud with her wings. *I'm not going to manage to find anything. I barely even know what I'm looking for. Wait... The spells fizzled when I tried to cast them. What if I held it within my horn and simply followed where it took me, rather than actually casting it?* This was certainly worth a try. Standing, Luna grimaced at the amount of dust covering herself. She would have to deal with that later. Concentrating once again, she laid down the

framework of the spell, and then, once that was complete, finally used it to pinpoint where she should go.

The hunt, however, quickly proved Celestia to be right.

An Exploration of the Deep and Dark Regions of Equestria.

Deep and Dark Secrets of Equestrian Nobility.

Viewings of the King and Queen of Equestria by Dark Depths. All manner of findings, and yet, not one that seemed to be what she was looking for.

Then, just as Luna was about to give up hope, she detected more leads further down in the archives. Ignoring the ones that she was sure didn't pertain to the subject at hand, the alicorn eventually made her way to the oldest records in all of Equestria, bare remnants and scraps of what once used to be grand tomes of knowledge. Some of them even dated back to the first recorded histories of alicorns in Equestria.

Perusing the remnants, Luna found it hard to differentiate some of the notes and ledgers from other, more relevant pieces, some were in such bad shape. Frustrated, she just took everything that her horn had pointed her to and floated it up in front of her, the collection of scraps, papers, and barely held together books making but a tiny pile. Once she felt that she had cobbled together a sufficient amount of material, most of which probably wasn't even what she was looking for, Luna began the long walk back to the study.

Celestia rubbed her eyes once again and glared down at the writings before her, wishing they would burst into flame. However, after a moment, she just sighed and turned the page to continue reading. *My Chroniclers would be quite unhappy with me if I damaged these ledgers.* The Princess looked up and around, then raised an eyebrow, thinking, *And where is my sister, anyway? She said she was going deeper into the Archives, but it's been a few hours now. I certainly hope she hasn't gotten lost within them... again...*

Standing up and groaning as her muscles protested from sitting in one spot for so long, Celestia prepared to slip down into the Archive's

corridors in search of her little sister, only to see a glow come into sight. Shortly afterward, Luna appeared out of the dark carrying before her a stack of very sorry looking paper scraps. Settling herself back down, Celestia wearily glanced at the pile of books, notes, and papers that still needed to be gone through. Yet, her body screamed at her to get to bed; it was already the middle of the night.

Luna walked over, and planting the pile gently down upon their table, said, "I found these in the oldest sections of the Archives, also, I really think we should dust that place..."

It was at that moment Celestia noticed that Luna was indeed covered from head to hoof in a fine layer of grey dust. The Goddess had to suppress a snicker at the sight. "I think somepony needs a bit of a dusting herself."

Blinking, Luna looked down at herself and grimaced, "Yes... Well, that can wait until later, when I can have a nice bath. I swear I must have inhaled in most of the dust down there..."

"Regardless, sister, it is nice to have you back... it was getting lonely up here all by myself. Now, let's see what you found," Celestia said, starting with the topmost parchment. Skimming the words, she set it down and started with the next as Luna began upon the pile as well. It wasn't until they were about halfway through the pile before Celestia caught something interesting. While it was immensely hard to read, she managed to translate it with a simple spell.

'Just as the sky has light and darkness, does Equestria also have its darkness to its light. The Deep Dark contains Equestria's other half. No alicorn nor pony knows of what it contains, much less what lives there except for the Champions.' ...Champions? Who are the Champions?

Setting it aside on a part of the table kept clear for anything that had good leads, which had remained empty until that moment, the Princess continued on until a few ledgers later she came upon a *second* reference. Upon reading *this one*, however, one thought came to Celestia's mind.

Oh, dear Sol...

Chapter 2

Implications

Equestria was wrapped tightly in the dark embrace of Luna's night, and the Moon Goddess herself had been outright confused by the night's happenings. She had just come out of the library and was taking the long walk back to her quarters, the implications behind Celestia's actions gnawing at the back of her mind. While Luna had herself found nothing within the parchments that *she* had looked through, her sister seemed to have discovered plenty of things of interest to their search. And yet...

I can understand that she's tired. We've been awake for so long, but... Not only did she tell me that she would 'explain everything to me when it's day again' in reference to what she found, but she also took the findings with her to bed! Why would she do that?

The hallways to the Goddess' chambers were quiet and empty, everypony already in their own beds. For Luna, however, as much as she knew she should sleep, there were other things to do and think about.

Looking down at her gray, dust-covered self, she decided the first thing that she needed was a *long* bath... and the second was something to snack on. Marching up to her chamber doors, she threw them open and slipped in before shutting them behind her. Sitting upon her desk was a small stack of mail awaiting her attention, and ignoring everything else, Luna stared at it for a moment before sighing softly and shaking her head.

I wonder how many of those are actual letters from ponies who adore my night. Usually, all I get are letters from scientists who want to study how different my magic is from my sister's; historians who want to get my point of view on things, even though I can't remember them; and I swear, I must get at least three marriage proposals a week from ponies I don't even know!

Scattering the letters over her usually neat desk, Luna continued to wade deeply through her own thoughts as she half-heartedly looked over the pile. *I must have a hoard of gems and other shiny baubles that would-*

be suitors have sent to me. Wasn't this what I wanted over a thousand years ago?

Ignoring the pile of scattered letters, the Princess turned her back to her desk and glanced out her window at the dark of the night sky, picking out each thread of her woven tapestry. After staring blankly out the window for several long moments without a thought crossing her mind, the alicorn gave another long-winded sigh before shuffling her hooves over to the wash room attached to her chambers, removing her breastplate, shoes, and crown before entering.

As her hooves clinked upon the tiled floor, Luna took notice of her sorry state in the wall-sized mirror across from her, sticking stuck her tongue out in disgust. Not only was her entire body covered in a thick layer of dust, but her eyes seemed to have dark bags under them, her mane and tail were heavily frazzled, and she looked like she had actually lost some weight, which in and of itself wasn't a bad thing, but it had been hard to find time to eat as of late.

Maybe a midnight snack wouldn't hurt after all. It would be nice. I wonder if there's cheesecake. I certainly hope so, I've been trying to stay away from it lately so that my rump wouldn't rival my sister's in size. I had enough trouble with that when I first got back... so many new things to eat and taste!

Giggling softly, the Goddess of the Night... or "of the Dust" at the moment/right now, set about filling her immense bathtub with water, the steam rising from the water making her shiver in anticipation. *Now this I deserve, a time for me to finally relax. My night court has been canceled for the next week to give us time to search the archives, and oh how I do not miss it!*

The depression in the floor housing her bath, which was large enough for not only an alicorn, but also a ruler, filled quickly while Luna was in thought. It was the sound of the water draining down the hole in the side of the bath that prevented the whole thing from overflowing that brought the Princess back to reality.

Oh! Whoops!

With a flick of her horn, she shut the water off and stepped slowly down into it, her whole body shuddering at the luxurious feel of the heat

soaking into her tired limbs. Lowering herself into the water, Luna submerged herself fully once before pulling her head out of the water and settling it upon the tiled floor.

Sighing in relief as she relaxed, the Bringer of Night retreated back into her thoughts as she used her magic to keep the water around her piping hot.

I know Celly trusts me. At least, I think I do... so much has changed since before. She spends so much more time with me, and even stays up late to watch my night. But... What was within those old scraps that she couldn't just tell me outright? Was... Was it really that bad? Was Celly trying to protect me?

Nothing answered her question, which in a way, Luna found to be a relief. The alicorn had once heard that ponies talk to themselves all the time; it was only when you answered back that you had to worry. Of course, if she *had* gotten an answer back, it would have meant that her old friend and enemy wasn't really gone. But... she hadn't heard a single peep from Nightmare Moon in weeks. Luna hadn't even felt a shadow of her presence, so perhaps she was really and truly gone.

Giving yet another sigh, Luna levitated a scrub brush over and went about vigorously getting all of the dust that hadn't washed out of her coat during the soak. It took several long minutes, but as she added a strawberry-scented shampoo she preferred to the mix, she began to feel much better overall.

Amazing what a simple bath can do.

Rinsing herself off, Luna begrudgingly lifted herself out of the water, using her magic to squeeze most of the water out of her coat, mane, and tail. *I learned never take all the water out. An unruly coat and mane is hard to brush when it's dry...*

Stepping out of the large puddle, Luna walked past the various other installations of the washroom to stand in front of the mirror once more, levitating a fancy brush over to herself so that she could begin taming the water-crazed remains of her coat and mane. After several long moments, the Princess set the brush down in satisfaction before walking out of the washroom back into her quarters.

Noticing the time on her old grandfather clock, Luna stepped out onto the balcony to stare down upon the city of Canterlot. There were lights on all over, but they were mostly there for the occasional pony to be able to see the streets upon which they walked. Of course, too, she knew all of the lights that she saw were for that, but still... An entire nightlife lay below her that she couldn't entirely see, but definitely knew was there. Her sister had shown it to her once the diminutive alicorn had finally shown a bit of reason, and left the library after trying to learn everything that had changed in the time that she had been imprisoned within the Moon.

Luna smiled in remembrance of the first time she had entered a nightclub. It had been chock full of ponies of all ages who used her night as a refuge from the labors of the day. They played, sang, danced, and just partied in her glorious dark.

And she had cried.

Cried because this was exactly what she had wanted. For ponies to love her night. There was even an entire branch of the Canterlot University for astronomy now, and she was highly revered, respected, and sought after there.

Shaking her head of the memories, Luna cast her gaze back out across Canterlot and began to touch upon the dreams of those ponies that slept. Dreams of grandeur and glory; of loves wanted, gained, or lost; of fantastic adventures; of....

Oh my... Luna extricated herself from the images of that dream right quickly, a blush upon her face. The perils of dream delving. Eventually, Luna always found ones that were rather... improper...

Maybe I'll just look at wishes for now...

Stretching out her awareness, the Bringer of Night opened her thoughts to those around her and listened, turning her gaze to different portions of Canterlot to hear their wishes. Of course, she heard few, it was the middle of the night after all, but the occasional one did come to her.

I wish I could have a muffin...

I hope that my package will come soon.

Please help my mother get better, Princess Celestia, she's very sick...

... Luna's heart went out to the owner of that wish.

I hope I did well on my test yesterday...

...I wish the night would last forever.

The Goddess' heart stopped within her chest and she took in a sharp breath. It took her a few seconds to realize it wasn't her alter-ego having returned, and just some pony out in the night. Forcing herself to calm her now pounding heart, she thought, *Maybe it's time I slept...*

Coming in off the balcony, she pulled all the drapes shut with her magic. Then sitting on the edge of her bed, she floated two pairs of midnight blue socks out of a nearby dresser and studied them for a moment. She didn't understand what the big deal over socks was. Luna didn't mind them, but she didn't greatly like them, either. They seemed to be rather impractical, to be honest. However, Celestia thought they were adorable, so she wore them for her sister.

Pulling them on over each of her hooves, Luna was about to snuff all the magical torches when a streak of electricity leapt across her temples, causing her to freeze mid-thought.

Oh no... Oh no no no... Not now...

Ignoring it best as she could, she was rocked as a second stronger one hit her, then a third. *No no no no no NO NO...*

"No no no no NO NO NO..." Her mental mantra started coming out of her mouth instead as she continued to be shaken by the hot zaps searing the inside of her head. A pull, something clawing at her mind from somewhere in the deepest depths of the castle. She was screaming at the top of her lungs by the time they ceased, and a moment later her chamber doors burst wide open as the pair of guards stationed outside came to save her from whatever was assailing her.

Recovering quickly, Luna leered over at them and yelled out in an authoritative voice that was quite unlike her, "Get my sister... *now!*"

Princess Celestia galloped out of her room and burst through the doors into her sister's, noticing the guards ringing her sister's bed and Luna herself shuddering beneath her covers. She was not at all prepared to see what was in the room. Which was nothing at all. However, Celestia knew her sister, and she knew this wasn't a false alarm.

Mustering as much authority as she could, she barked a single command to the guards.

"Out!"

The guards saluted with their wings and marched out of Luna's chambers, shutting the door behind them. Staring at the door for a moment, Celestia then turned and crept over to her sister's bed, nudging the lump beneath the blanket with her nose. "My dearest sister, what happened?"

A barely discernible voice greeted Celestia. "What was that, sister?" she asked as she leaned in to hear better. This time, Luna's voice was even lower, and the Goddess of the Day nudged against the lump under the blanket.

Finally Luna replied loud enough for Celestia to hear, making her blood run cold. "It's starting, Celly. I felt its pull. We only have a few days... I'm terrified enough to wet myself..."

Taking a moment to compose herself, Celestia lifted a segment of the blanket and slipped her head beneath it to nuzzle at her little sister, then said to attempt to lighten the mood while her mind worked, "Well don't do that, silly sister. We'd need to have your entire bed cleaned and then you'd have to sleep with me!"

Celestia was instead greeted with such the pitiful whimper from her sister that her heart immediately broke. Shoving the worries of what was coming to the rear of her mind, the Princess nuzzled lovingly at Luna, then said, "How about you sleep by my side tonight, and in the morning, I'll have the chefs bring you one of the cheesecakes for breakfast? I know how much you love those. Then we'll go over what I found out."

The Goddess of the Day was suddenly surprised to find Luna wrapping her legs around her neck and hugging her tight. The wetness upon her shoulder told Celestia everything she needed to know. *She's*

terrified, more terrified than I've ever seen her... I don't blame Luna, I'd like more than anything to fly away from here, but I can't, I mustn't. I have a duty to not only my sister but all of my little ponies to keep them safe. Tomorrow, we will find a way to deal with Erebus.

The Goddess of the Sun took a deep breath as she looked over the various scraps of parchment before her before turning to her sister. *Did mother and father have to deal with this? Figuring out what was going on?*

"Last night, I had discovered several references in the bits and pieces you brought to me," she said, behind her sitting the Princess' writing desk, and strewn over it the decayed remains of the parchments. Celestia, while not happy that Luna had used magic near them, causing them to crumble further, was happy her little sister had discovered the texts.

The two were currently in Celestia's chamber, sitting before the desk. "I... am not entirely sure why we are unable to discover anything after these shards," she admitted, looking back down among them. "From what I could gather and piece together, this isn't the first time... Erebus has shown his face, and from a more recent reference, it seems to happen once every pair of rulers' reigns. It's our turn, dear sister..." Celestia dropped her usually happy facade to show nothing but worry.

Luna glanced to the side, then back at her elder sister and said, "Our turn for what, Celly?"

Luna's sister drooped her head over the younger alicorn's shoulder, nuzzling against Luna's neck, "I don't exactly know what is causing whatever is in the Deep Dark to behave this way. All I know is that we're supposed to be balanced with each other, and yet, we're not. Something disrupted the balance, and the scraps you found don't say what caused it." Celestia sighed and walked away from the writing table and her sister to instead go out upon her balcony to look up into the morning sun.

All of Equestria rests upon our shoulders, the heaviest weight to bear, and it just became all the heavier now that we must protect it from something we know not how to fight, nor why we are fighting it, the Sun Goddess thought to herself, her brilliant orb's harsh light bringing only warmth and power to her body, instead of hurting her eyes. Silently, Luna crept up beside her and leaned against her sister.

Luna's presence caused Celestia to smile. *And yet, together, she and I can repel this threat, and we will see to it that our children, our later heirs will know of this threat and be able to repel it just as we did. If only the previous heir to my throne could be by my side now, but the past is the past, and some things were never meant to be...*

This is something I have to do. I would never put my sister through it, she is way too young. She does not have my experience.

Celestia marched with steadfast determination down the corridors within the bowels of Canterlot Castle, purpose in each of her steps. The sound of her hooves echoed through the corridors around her, past dusty storage chambers and other assorted rooms that rarely, if ever, got to see light. These were not her destination, however.

Continuing down the stairs, level after level, Celestia finally reached the base level that was forbidden to most of the Castle's inhabitants. Turning the corner, the Princess stopped and blinked at the empty hallway. *Where are my guards?* The hallway before her was abandoned, the two guards who were supposed to be at their posts nonexistent.

Cautious now, Celestia walked down the corridor, taking special interest in the doors to either side of her, her hoofsteps sounding eerily loud in the silence of the bowels of the castle. She shortly stopped in front of a portion of the wall she remembered all too well sealing up herself. *Time to confront this Erebus myself, and to get my questions answered. I fell to him, powerless, in that vision, I will not do so now. He will face the full might of the Sun.*

Celestia's horn began to shine, while the wall before her flowed, then opened up as if there had been nothing there to stop her from entering. Stale air, a thousand years old, flowed over the Princess, but did not perturb her. Instead, the scuffed and damaged interior of the chamber did, as there was no presence other than that of a simple, onyx statuette of a pony.

Stepping into the chamber and staring down at the dais, Celestia glared at the offending object before speaking. "If I could without destroying the nation I rule over, or any number of things, I would have cast you into my sun years ago. And yet, this simple design of yours harbors

secrets that could easily destroy Equestria if they are not known. I've come to... talk. And you will answer... Erebus."

For a time, only silence answered back, trying Celestia's patience, though she refused to show it. *It will show itself sooner or later, it must. Last night was the night that it showed itself to Nightmare Moon. And a couple days from now is when it let the Deep Dark into Equestria. I need my questions answered, or to confront this menace and end it.*

Speaking her questions into the dark of the chamber, the Goddess narrowed her eyes as she spoke, "What exactly are you, Erebus, other than the Harbinger of the Deep Dark? Why are you and whatever is in the Deep Dark doing this? How long has this been going on for? Why did you attack my sister so long ago and create Nightmare Moon?" Once again, only silence greeted her, and the statue did nothing. And yet, she still had patience, it did take a thousand years of being patient to get her sister back, after all. "Well? Answer me, less I decide your statue would make a better decoration in a region of the world you can't escape from."

Suddenly, the air around her seemed to take on a chill, and the light dimmed by quite a bit. Without turning, Celestia continued to stare down at the onyx pony and asked, "I presume you are behind me, Erebus? And have blocked off any escape?"

A voice greeted her that she could not prepare herself for, her visions not telling her of just how horrifying it was firsthand. It carried with it eons of death, a grave spanning countless generations, a pit of emptiness growing ever wider. "I am. And I have. Who are you to ask such questions of the Harbinger, one who has existed for far longer than your feeble mind can comprehend?"

Shifting power to her horn, an orb of light formed at its tip, glowing brighter by the second until everything was of two shades, the white of her light, and the black of shadows. Turning slowly around, Celestia noticed plenty more of the darkness. To either side of the hallway lay a wall of pitch darkness, pushed back by the power of her horn, while the monstrosity, made even more so by the personal visit, stood before her.

Standing straight and tall with her head held high, Celestia's voice boomed around her in all the extravagance her power could muster. "I am Princess Celestia, Herald of the Light, Bringer of the Day, and Goddess of

the Sun. This is *my* realm and *my* kingdom you invade, monster. It would be in your best interest to answer my questions.”

If the monstrosity before her was in the least impressed by her showing, it did not reveal such, instead giving a low rumble reminiscent of chuckling. “I see. Titles mean nothing to me, but I will... amuse myself, and you, for a short time. You will know soon who I am. I am a dear friend of many, and the mortal enemy of so many more. My name is very well known under another title given to me by so many. You would do wisely to abide by me, Celestia of Equestria. I am simply a messenger and doorway for the Deep Dark, and an aide, to take back what was stolen so long ago.”

Another low rumble came forth, and the tendrils that made up Erebus’ mane spread outward, as if seeking to latch themselves to Celestia before calming and settling back into place, the eyeless sockets fixed upon Celestia’s own.

“This battle has been going on for lives eternal. Many of your kind has come and gone, and numerous others beyond count of the smaller kind. No victor has stood, no side has fallen. The Champions defend, the Champions fight, and yet, the Champions have no rest. Never shall the eternal rest, nor the eternal reward, touch the Champions for their misdeeds. For their theft.” Erebus took a step forward, then a second, making its way from the far wall toward Celestia.

Noticing its actions, Celestia lowered her horn and pointed the light beholden tip at the nightmare, forcing it back a step. *It fell back, thank Sol, the light works.But why did it seem that it had hesitated for a mere moment in doing so...?*

“That does not answer my question of what you did with my sister, monster! And who are these... Champions? What were their misdeeds?”

“I tire of our talk, Celestia of Equestria. Yield to me, and abide me well, or suffer what awaits you in my shadows.”

Raising an eyebrow, Celestia knew exactly what awaited her if those shadows managed to grab her, and yet, she was never going to yield to this monster and leave Equestria to ruin. “Try it, monster, try and see what will happen to you. I am not like my sister, too young to know the full extent of her powers. You will fight me, and you will face not only me, but the power of Sol along with it. You will be burned out of existence, your

shadows banished and annihilated.” Celestia began to step forward, her horn lowered while she funneled her powers into the light upon the tip.

Step by step, she pushed Erebus back, his tendrils waving around in distress while his bony frame backed up until it was pressed against the wall. *Why does it seem he keeps hesitating? Something’s wrong here, this is too easy. Nightmare Moon was a much more powerful opponent, and he took her out easily enough. What am I missing here?* A low rumbling took Celestia out of her thoughts and made her narrow her eyes at Erebus. “What do you find so amusing at the current situation?”

He had stopped backing up, and instead began to take steps forward once again, ignoring the glare of Celestia’s brilliance. “You. You are such an amusing pony, to think you can stand against me in this form. For countless years, I have had many forms, but never as an alicorn, such power it opens me up to. You can thank your sister Luna for me, I simply turned her into what she should have been. Do you seriously think a little brightness will stop me, Celestia of Equestria? Even Luna of Trelaria could not stand against me. Abide me, Celestia of Equestria, or fall to me,” Erebus boomed, his steps taking him closer to the Goddess, who was the one now on the retreat.

Eyes darting in every direction, the Herald of the Light forced herself to live to the title and forced as much of her power into her horn as she could, creating a miniature sun upon the tip, its heat washing over the alicorn and Erebus alike forcing them into another stalemate. “Luna of Trelaria? What are you talking about, *monster!*? There is no country by that name anywhere within this world! There never has been! My sister is of Equestria.”

“A ruler who does not know their history. This is always to be expected. You, however, forget one thing, Celestia of Equestria... The light does not effect me as much as you may think...”

Suddenly, the shadows darted in, pressing themselves around Celestia, suffocating her with their closeness as the light faded from her horn, absorbed by the darkness around herself. The slow, low rumbling of Erebus greeted Celestia as she fell into shadow.

Chapter 3

Discoveries

“No. No no no!” Princess Luna yelled, slamming her hoof down upon the tabletop and startling the Legislature members nearby, the gathering sitting around the large Solar and Lunar table during one of the many meetings that called for such an arrangement. Her sister was not in attendance for this one, and it was left to Luna to take care of the morning’s business.

“These plans would not work in the slightest, nor would they stay within the budget allocated to the project,” Luna snorted, glaring down at the diagrams spread before her. They looked more like a school filly’s artwork than anything done by a *real* architect. “The materials are more fanciful than practical; they can’t handle the stress that would be required, and I swear the building would look more like a dollhouse than an actual museum. Please, take these back to an *actual* architect and get a quote, as well as some real plans. Would you?”

Luna sighed and ignored the urge to rub at her temples. *At least I don’t have to deal with every little issue that Equestria has. Only the really important ones get this far. By Altair, at times I just wish these problems weren’t so big, and the Legislature so stubborn.* Brushing aside the plans to allow an awaiting servant to carry them off, she lifted the report that listed the day’s agenda.

Various tax changes, done that. The proposition of an expedition into the Everfree Forest by a group of unicorns and pegasus scouts to see if it was possible to re-tame the forest and create a mining town near the base of one of the mountains; that took most of the morning. A proposal for a new museum on the outskirts of Canterlot; that’s finished.

Looking about the room at the Legislature members, Luna swayed as a sudden bout of dizziness struck her. Holding a hoof to her head, she blinked several times, wondering to herself, *What **was** that?*

“Princess? Are you alright?” a unicorn asked, drawing the attention of the rest of the room.

Waving her hoof as the episode passed, the Goddess of the Night nodded before going back to the list once more, scanning her eyes down it. *Alright, a few more things, then I get to go see the Captain of the Guard about increasing recruitment and training so as to replace those guards that have been reported missing. It's no coincidence that they've all been ones who were guarding the chamber Celly showed me and...*

Another wave of dizziness hit, this time strong enough to nearly topple the alicorn. Luna managed not to show anything more than a slight waver, but just as she was coming out of it, a third wave hit her and she toppled over, blacking out like a room that had just had the torch doused.

The Princess wasn't out for more than a minute before she came to again.

The first thing Luna noticed was that she was lying upon her back, having fallen off her cushion. The second was that the ceiling was horribly drab. *Maybe a nice night sky painting would do it wonders...* The third, all the ministers were currently gathered around her with worried looks upon their faces, but not too close, of course. No pony ever laid a hoof upon the Princesses without permission unless it was an utmost emergency. The final thing Luna noticed, or rather heard, was the echo of a cry reverberating within her head. A cry for help from her sister.

*Oh please oh please oh please oh please don't be what I think it is!
Oh Altair, please don't let it be Erebus!*

Luna's thoughts were frantic as she dashed down the halls of Canterlot Castle, causing no few ponies walking down them to jump out of the way of the Princess. Shortly after she had woken up, Luna had given the ministers only a brief explanation that there was trouble brewing before she had run out of the chambers.

*I'm not ready for this! I'm **not** ready for this! But I must be there for Celly, no matter what happens. She can handle Erebus, and I can help!* she thought, eyes frantically darting in every direction. Lighting her horn, the Goddess reached out with her magic and searched for her sister, finding only traces of her as if she were in many places, yet had already left those same places. *What's going on...?*

Unable to lock onto her sister's location, Luna released her magic and galloped in the direction of the lower levels of the castle, not bothering to even take the steps slowly, barrelling down them with reckless abandon. All possible speed was required here, and she had no time to dilly dally watching her step.

Somehow managing to not break her neck, the alicorn turned the corner to find the corridor leading to the various locked chambers and the Core empty, unchanged except that now the hidden chamber was open. Carefully making her way forth, Luna peeked around the corner only to find the chamber empty, without even the statue being present. *This is very bad... Where are th-*

An ominous voice stopped the alicorn mid-thought and sent a chill down her spine. **"Hello, Luna of Trelaria."**

Jumping what felt like the height of Cloudsdale into the air, Luna turned swiftly around and gasped at the sight before her. She had never originally seen what her sister had, only having knowledge of what Celestia had written of and told her directly. Truth be told, the monstrosity before her wasn't as frightening as some of the things she had seen in Nightmare Moon's Slumber, yet having Erebus present, right there in front of her, made it seem all the more terrifying.

Putting on her bravest face, even though she was shaking, Luna glared up at the black abomination of undeath. "And to what do I owe the *pleasure* of your visit, Erebus? Where is my sister!?" she demanded, the alicorn's shaky voice betraying her unease.

Erebus stared... Or rather, Luna guessed he was staring with those eyeless sockets of his... down at her, the telltale rumble of his laugh drifting from his body. **"Celestia is quite strong. She is currently fighting my power. However, she will fall, just as you soon shall. Abide by me, Luna, or suffer your sister's fate. The warmth of day has done much to destroy your line. Such a pity, but it can be easily be rectified once more. Abide by me, Luna of Trelaria, and take your rightful throne once again."**

"My sister will defeat you, monster!" Luna yelled back at Erebus, taking a step back from his presence. However, she was taken aback by what she heard, "M-My rightfu- No! What are you talking about?! I *am* on

my rightful throne! I am of Equestria, not whatever made up nation you're speaking of!"

Erebus spread out his wings, releasing a choking cloud of dust around his body, **"Pity. No pony ever listens to the Harbinger. And thus they die. You too shall die, Luna of Trelaria, unless you abide by me. What is your decision?"** He stepped forward, walking slowly around Luna while keeping his eyeless gaze upon her. His tendrils writhed behind him, at times seeming almost autonomous in their motions.

Luna retreated until she found herself trapped in that small chamber, terrified not just for herself, but also for her sister. Her eyes darted from side to side before she thought of *anything* that might stall the monstrosity.

"C-Can I have time to t-think about it?" Her eyes were as wide as saucers by this point.

Her question, however, seemed to stop Erebus short. His tendrils even stopped moving for a moment before slowly creeping back to life again, reserved, as if they were being cautious. He had obviously never been asked such before. **"...I will allow it, Luna of Trelaria. However, I will not wait for long. Do not disappoint me."** Then, suddenly, he was gone, leaving naught but chilled air behind.

Stepping out of the chamber apprehensively, Luna looked down to either end of the hallway before sprinting down its length. *I cannot **believe** that worked! This is bad. Very bad. But... I know who can help us...*

Meanwhile, in Ponyville, Twilight Sparkle was having a different kind of problem... Locating all her friends. At times, it was easy; at others, it was downright impossible. This time was proving to be one of the latter sort. Twilight knew Rainbow Dash was presumably sleeping upon a cloud somewhere, and it would have been easy to find her if there had been only a lone cloud in the sky. However, the pegasi had scheduled the day to be partly cloudy, so instead there were quite a few.

Applejack was most likely off tending the apple orchards. The very large apple orchards that a pony could search in for days and not find

another soul. Twilight sighed as she made her way out of Sugarcube Corner, which Pinkie Pie had most conspicuously not been in, and gave another searching gaze at the skies before heading back to her library. Rarity hadn't been home either, which was strange. Or rather, it was unusual. However there usually wasn't much that was ordinary when it involved her friends.

Fluttershy wasn't around, either. Wherever could they be? Fluttershy, Rainbow Dash, Rarity, Applejack, and Pinkie Pie? What could you all be doing now that prevents me from finding you? This question plagued the unicorn the entire walk back to her library until she reached the door. Pushing it open, darkness greeted her within as Twilight softly spoke to herself, "I was so looking forward to reading that tome with the girls. It even looks like Spike is asleep, if it's this dar-"

Twilight was immediately interrupted as the lights flickered on and Pinkie Pie dropped in from above yelling, "**Surprise!** I knew you wanted all of us to be here for when you started that book of yours so I thought that you'd be grateful if I gathered everypony for you and then I realized what better time to have a party, too!"

The unicorn was, of course, startled in no small way, having leapt high into the air before coming down upon the wooden floor with her legs splaying out in every direction. Heart pounding in her chest, Twilight gave Pinkie a brief glare, then noticed her friends off to the side gathered around a large table. On the center of the table sat the book they were meant to read together.

Standing back on all four hooves as Pinkie Pie bounced her way back to the group. Twilight raised her eyebrow at the decorations and streamers everywhere, then glanced questioningly at her friends.

"Don' look at us, Sugarcube, this is Pinkie Pie we're dealin' with. Not much we cain do 'bout 'er," Applejack said, shaking her head before smiling over at Twilight.

Rarity laughed softly, then tentatively tapped the book with a single hoof, as if she were afraid to discover what lay within, "It's a good thing though, Twilight. If everything you've told us about what the Princess explained is correct, then we will definitely need some lightheartedness around us."

With a shake of her head, Twilight settled her mane back into place before she took her place at the table. "Well, I can say I am happy about the party, Pinkie, but I don't think we'll need it quite yet. Maybe later once we're done!" Twilight nodded and forced herself to smile. *I almost always look forward to Pinkie's parties, but now is just not the right time for it.*

Grabbing the book before her, Twilight flipped the cover open as she began to speak. "What I was thinking was that I could read it out loud. It's not the most effective way, but it's the best one for us to all know what's going-" Twilight paused for a second and blinked once she actually read what lay beyond the cover. A sheet of parchment had been glued to the inside of the cover.

Twilight Sparkle took a closer look at the parchment and read over the writing, then her face lit up and she smiled broadly at her friends. "Ooor, better yet! Apparently the Princesses saw reason to give me a special spell for this." Lifting the book and turning it around so the girls could see it, Twilight poked at the parchment with her hoof saying, "This is apparently a complex spell that allows me to turn the words from books into a visual representation of what goes on within. I'd love if it worked on any book, but Princess Celestia wrote here that it only works on a few, this being one of them."

*I guess it has something to do with how magical the text is. Either way, this is **so** much better than just reading it aloud! I'm a bit trepidatious about it all, though. The Princess did say that this would not sit well with any of us...*

The unicorn swallowed, then started gathering power in her horn to cast the spell, weaving and stitching it together not unlike Rarity doing the same with a dress. *It's not as hard as I think, just...tedious. Come on, Twilight, you can do this, I can't let my friends down, they're expecting me to complete this spell.*

It took several long moments, all the while Twilight's friends looked on, at first in expectation, then worry. Finally, Twilight released the spell and slouched over in magical exhaustion. The book before her glowed briefly, then reverted back to normal, which caused Rainbow Dash to raise an eyebrow.

“Did it work?” she asked. “I would love to be able to see what other ways we’ve used to kick Nightmare Moon’s flanks!” Standing on her rear hooves, Rainbow shadowboxed the air, then settled back down with a large grin plastered across her face. “Nightmare Moon was never a threat to us! Even Fluttershy could have taken her on with both hooves tied behind her back!”

“I-I’m not so sure about that, Rainbow... Twilight did say this was about how Nightmare Moon had won, not how we beat her again. I’m not sure if I want to see what happens to us...” Fluttershy replied demurely, turning her head aside to stare instead at the floor.

“I’m not sure I wish to either, Fluttershy. The Princesses said before I parted ways with them that it was imperative that I read this. Something about a new threat to Equestria. Why they couldn’t simply tell me about it, I have no idea, but the Princesses do work in mysterious ways,” Twilight gave a half-hearted shrug, then pulled the book closer and opened the cover. As she flipped the first page, she said, “On the other hoof, I can’t wait to see what happens. To know other realms of reali-EEP!”

Everypony let out a loud gasp when, just as Twilight flipped the page, the spell she had cast took effect. A cloud of magic rose from the tome, expanding until a spheroid bubble took up nearly the entire table, forcing the group of ponies to scoot back a short distance. Within, power swirled and formed currents within the sphere before coalescing into an image. Another gasp came from the throats of the ponies, as well as a collective shout, “*Princess Celestia!?*”

Indeed, suspended within the bubble was an image of their beloved Princess. She stood still for a moment before beginning to speak. “*My little ponies, and my beloved and most faithful student, Twilight. If you are watching this now, then I must presume that my student has completed the spell I gave her in an admirable fashion. Few can pull it off, my student, even fewer without having hours of study. Twilight Sparkle, you are everything I could have asked for, everything I wanted, you are like a daughter to me...*”

Once again, Twilight got the feeling that the Princess, even though she was just a recorded image, was hiding something, but that feeling was pushed aside upon being told she was like a daughter to the Princess. Shaking her head at the thought, Twilight continued to watch.

The image of the Princess sighed, and bowed her head, then raised it back up with a stern expression upon her face and a determined look about her. *"I do not know when you are watching this; whether it is weeks, days, or even hours before the time when you must take action, but know, my student, my beloved, that what lies within these pages is a bitter pill to take. What happens in the end, more bitter still. There is a threat to Equestria far greater than Nightmare Moon ever was, and which may in fact have been the reason my sister's Nightmare came to be."* The image of Celestia stamped a hoof, and her expression changed to one of sorrow. *"Twilight Sparkle, my student, what I found will hit you hard, but it hit me far harder for the knowledge I have. We do not have much time, and circumstances may cause you to lose me, or me to lose you, but I believe in you and your friends to be able to help when the time comes, to help repel this new threat. May Erebus understand the full implications of his attack."*

The image of Celestia winked out, and Twilight and her friends stared wide-eyed at each other, chattering amongst themselves.

"Who's Erebus?"

"Twilight, what did she mean about you and her?"

"...Pinkie... Whar did ya get that popcorn?"

"I made it while we were watching the Princess!"

"...I'm scared of what we're about to see..."

"Fluttershy, you need to pony up and take life by the... Ummm... Applejack, does life have horns?"

"How the hay would ah know? Ah just lasso and ride it like every other pony!"

Twilight herself was deep in thought, ignoring her friends around her. *Erebus... The name means Darkness, Shadow, the area between the Light and the Dark, the balance between the two... What did the Princess mean about her and me? She actually seemed worried about me, very worried... What if...*

Yet again Twilight's thoughts were interrupted, this time by the images coming together to show the beginning scenes of what the Princess

had written of the alternate timeline. Nothing could have prepared any of the ponies for what they realized. It was through Nightmare Moon's eyes.

Pinkie Pie commented quite swiftly on the situation, "Oooo, it's getting good already! A movie through Black Snooty's eyes!"

However, as they watched, excitement turned to sadness. The banishment of the Elements of Harmony; the subversion and enslavement of Twilight; even the total conversion of Canterlot's populace. Only Twilight Sparkle amongst them all had read what Nightmare Moon could do; the rest of her friends only knew what Nightmare Moon had done on her return.

Looking around at her friends, Twilight could see that they each were blanched and lighter in color, even Pinkie Pie's poofy mane and tail looked a bit deflated. Turning her attention back to the images, the lavender unicorn swallowed, her mind blank, unsure of what to think. It wasn't as bad as the War of the Night, but this personally involved her.

As time wore on, the group of friends' eyes grew wider, their complexions more pale, and even Pinkie Pie stopped her running commentary halfway through. There was nothing to laugh about, and the fact that they had all managed to dodge *that* crossbow bolt left a sour taste in their mouths. Twilight could not believe just how much could have gone wrong if Nightmare Moon had reached the Elements first.

They had just gotten to the part where Nightmare Moon was reminiscing, months after her takeover when the sound of hooves pounding frantically upon the library doors disrupted the ponies' spellbound attentions. Twilight slammed the book shut, thus terminating the spell, and got up and shook herself from nose to tail. Just as she reached the door, however, it burst open to reveal a pale and panting Princess Luna.

"Princess!" Twilight gasped, bowing low before the alicorn and drawing the attention of the rest of her friends, who all proceeded to bow as well. "Oh dear, oh dear! If I knew you were coming, I'd ha-"

For a third time in the past few hours, Twilight was interrupted. Luna managed to gasp out, "No time for that, Erebus has struck, it's got my sister! **It took Celestia!**"

Twilight could tell that Luna was on the verge of tears, and wouldn't doubt that the Princess was holding them in to look stronger in front of her

subjects. Suddenly terrified, not only for the Princesses, but also for her friends, the unicorn shakily turned around and yelled to them, "Girls! We must all get our Elements to help the Princesses to the greatest possible extent of our capa-"

"There's no time!" Luna interrupted Twilight for the fourth time tonight, which seemed to have become a common occurrence throughout the evening. Everypony turned to stare at the Princess as she dashed into their midst. "That is time we don't have, we must get to the Castle and try to find something there that can help! I have no doubt that my sister hid something in her chambers that should help us against Erebus."

"But it'll take hours for us to reach Cant-" Twilight started, just as Luna's horn glowed brightly. All at once, there was a flash of light, a powerful tugging sensation, and then a discombobulation that the unicorn knew to be teleportation magic. The alicorn had teleported them all straight from Twilight's library to Princess Celestia's bedchambers.

Flattening her ears at being interrupted *again*, Twilight thought, *Oh, why do I bother...*

Chapter 4

Deceit

The disorientation of teleportation passed swiftly, leaving Luna, Twilight, and the rest of the gang recovering within the center of Princess Celestia's bedchambers. Looking around, the Moon Princess could see nothing of note in plain view. The bed was made, and Philomena sat on her perch in the corner, curiously watching the group. The bookcase was in order, and the fire in the fireplace was kept perpetually going, giving the room a toasty feel.

"My sister will probably have words with me over this later, and probably all of you, too, but we need to find something that can help us against Erebus!" Luna spoke loudly to the group of ponies she had teleported with her. "My guess is that while the Elements have great power, they may not be enough to stop him. Twilight, check the bookcase, you know that like the back of your hoof... Rarity, check the bathing chambers... Erm..."

The Princess thought for a moment, *I don't really know the others well enough to tell them where to search...* "The rest of you, spread out, but please do not mess up my sister's bedchambers!" Looking around as the ponies scattered throughout the room and started to turn everything upside down, Luna groaned quietly to herself and slapped a hoof against her face. *Celly's going to kill me... This is for the greater good of Equestria, though, and to save my sister...*

Taking another glance around the room, an idea struck the alicorn. *Alright, whatever would be out of place or hidden would have to be immensely powerful, or at least magical in nature. What if I...* Lowering her horn, Luna ignored the various commotions around her and instead focused upon a simple spell. The spell would display magical sources nearby and allow them to be easily found. The alicorn's horn shimmered subtly before the spell was released, numerous objects around the chamber lighting up to her eyes.

I can ignore most of these objects, and... Oh dear... Is that...? Luna crept closer to her sister's dresser and peered closely at its surface. Sitting

there was something she had not seen in over a millennium. Resting on the dresser was a tiny figurine, obviously well worn and ancient. Luna hadn't known her sister still had it. *That tiny figurine of me she made when we were fillies...* Her eyes teared up as she daintily picked it up in her hooves. It was glowing bright to her eyes, surrounded by numerous spells. Studying the spells, Luna could see it was magic to prevent the toy from degrading over the years.

A flush of happiness surged through the Princess, one of the few memories she still had of that time resurfacing...

"Do you like it, Luna?" Celestia asked, holding up the product of her efforts; a tiny toy alicorn, formed with wood, fabric, and actual hair from Luna's mane. The two fillies were currently enjoying a day off from their training and schooling, using it to instead savor each other's company as well as have a bit of fun with arts and crafts.

Luna, who had been working on a painting the entire time, glanced around her canvas and gasped in astonishment at the unfinished toy Celestia was holding up. Looking over the wooden doll, she noticed something peculiar, "Is... Is that me, Celly?"

Celestia nodded her head enthusiastically, then replied, "Of course it is, silly! I wanted to make something of my bestest sister! ...You're my only sister, but still, I love you just as much!"

The midnight blue alicorn blushed somewhat and looked out shyly from behind her mane, "Th-Thank you, Celly, this means a lot! ...May I paint it for you? I would love to see it finished."

Celestia looked thoughtful for a moment, then a large smile split her face, "Okay, but only if I get to see what you've been working so diligently on for the past few hours, Luna!"

"Well, ummm..." Luna looked away, then smiled and grasped her canvas and easel, turning them in place to reveal to her elder sister the art she'd been working on. "It's not done, yet, but it soon will be, okay!" There, shown to both alicorn sisters was an idyllic portrait of their family. Celestia and Luna were hugging in the foreground, while Altair and Sol framed them lovingly to either side in the back. The portrait spoke volumes of their love for each other...

“Luna...” Celestia started, but paused, tears springing to her eyes. “It’s wonderful... I’m so proud of my little sister. Luna...”

“Princess Luna...”

“Princess Luna?” a voice interrupted, breaking the Moon Goddess out of her reverie. Luna swiftly slipped the toy into her mane and turned to the voice, noticing Twilight Sparkle at the bookcase, nearly all the books now scattered around herself in various organized piles. Around the rest of the room, however, everything was not so neatly torn apart. Ignoring that for now, the Princess rushed over to the bookcase and stared where Twilight was looking.

“I believe I’ve found something, Princess! It may be exactly what we’re looking for. I studied the compartment without opening it and discovered that it must go into the wall behind the bookshelf, specifically placed here to hide something of importance!” Twilight announced to the Princess, proud of her findings.

Indeed, to Luna’s eyes, the entire compartment glowed profusely with magic, as well as several inner glows, indicating several items hidden within. *I would not doubt it, my sister probably has numerous items which we can use to stop Erebus, or for any number of other situations. She’s taken to thinking ahead and planning in advance for many things.*

Using her magic, Luna easily disabled the magical lock keeping the compartment secure, then set the compartment cover aside, holding her breath in anticipation at what she may find within. *They could be anything, really! Maybe something powerful like the Elements of Harmony, or a special weapon that shoots a spray of magical pellets that will pepper Erebus with hot lead! Or, or, maybe it could even be...* She hovered a couple of the items out and looked over them. The shapes were familiar, however, and it took her a moment to realize what they were. Her face blushed fantastically, she glanced over at Twilight, who looked just as red in the face.

“Ummm, Princess?” Twilight said as she flushed a dark red. “I don’t think Princess Celestia would like us... messing with her...” Twilight coughed nervously... “...personal effects, especially those of, erm, that nature...”

“...I agree...” Luna replied quickly, shoving the items unceremoniously back into the compartment and ignoring the PlayColt magazines, and other assorted... reading materials, hidden beside them. “Let us never speak of this again, Twilight.”

“Agreed, Prin-” Twilight started, and then both ponies nearly had heart attacks as Pinkie Pie popped up behind them, glancing over at the open compartment. “Ooooh, did the Princess leave us a surprise? I love surprises! Can I see? Can I Can I Can I?” Pinkie Pie tossed her head to either side with each “Can I”, her bright eyes very nearly catching what lay within.

“NO!” Luna and Twilight yelled in unison, drawing the attention of the other Elements of Harmony before Twilight could hastily recover with, “It’s, erm, a surprise the Princess left that isn’t for us, and we weren’t supposed to see it! And as we weren’t supposed to see it, you’re not permitted to, either!” Immediately afterward, Twilight slammed the compartment closed and began levitating books over, stuffing them back into the bookcase, definitely not in the same order they were removed.

“Okie dokie lokie!” Pinkie replied with a grin, bouncing away, leaving Twilight to walk off, still blushing, to look elsewhere. Luna herself continued using her magesight to study the objects she could see, but they all looked like everyday objects, if enhanced with a bit of magic to be easier to use.

...There’s nothing here, at all... Everything here are things I already know of, everyday things, nothing spectacular! My dear sister, were we really caught so off guard that you had nothing planned? Luna wondered to herself, lowering her head while the room around her continued in its chaos. Determination sprung upon her face and, raising her head high, Luna announced into the room, “Enough of this madness, my little ponies, we must hurry to the throne room. I can feel my sister there right now.”

Ignoring Pinkie Pie’s “Madness? This is Sparta!” comment (Luna really had trouble keeping track of all these new provinces sometimes...), she marched herself out of her elder sister’s bedchambers, vowing to clean them up later once she had taken care of certain events. No matter how scared she may be of said events. *I am glad I do not need to empty my bladder right now... Celly was always the brave one...*

“What do we do now?” Rainbow Dash asked to nopony in particular. The poorly prepared pack of particularly persistent ponies had found to their dismay that both sets of doors leading into the throne room and audience chambers were bolted shut and locked. Of course, this inconvenience would not stop them, as there were still the main palace doors as well as the stained glass windows and skylights of the throne room.

They were currently standing in front of the grand doors of the throne room, after having passed through hallways eerily quiet and empty. Not even the usual guards or maids were seen, which was peculiar in and of itself. *My guess is the guards were killed or fled before Erebus, I would not blame them, and the maids have a fortunate habit of being able to hide until things blow over.* Luna thought as she listened to the conversation behind her as well as tried to figure a way into the throne room. Something, or *things*, in there were radiating an immense amount of magic, and one of them was definitely her sister.

“Panic?” Fluttershy asked in reply, glancing up at the large double doors in trepidation from beneath her pink mane.

“That’s your answer for-” Rainbow stopped, then slapped her forehead with a hoof, realizing that they’d had that conversation before. “Ugh, Princess, is there any way we can get inside?”

“Patience, Rainbow. The Princess knows what she is doing... I hope.” Twilight ventured, batting the marble path with her hoof. “You do know what you’re doing, right?”

Luna was peering at Twilight when she suddenly heard the double doors swing open. Whipping her head around so fast she swore she got whiplash, Luna blinked and her mouth dropped open as a particular pink party pony passed out through the doors. “H-How... How...” Luna stammered.

Bouncing on past the Moon Princess to join her friends, Pinkie Pie’s bubbly reply came, “It was just a hop, skip, and a jump! Anypony could do it, Princess!”

The group of ponies progressed past the Princess, mostly ignoring her flabbergasted look. One in particular, Applejack, Luna recalled, placed a hoof upon her shoulder and shook her head, "Best not ta try to understand 'er, Princess. She's Pinkie Pie." She left the hoof there for a moment before herself proceeding into the open doorway.

The gasp of Twilight and her friends, as well as the collective "Princess Celestia!" broke Luna from her astonishment, breaking into a gallop to enter the audience chambers. Just as she entered, however, the doors slammed shut behind her and, startling her, she let out a loud 'Eeep!' and a magical barrier sprung into place to prevent escape.

The doors were not what had the mixed group of ponies frozen in place. Oh, no, it was the sight of Princess Celestia which stopped them dead in their tracks. Luna's heart wrenched as she stopped to take in the details of the sight before her. Celestia was suspended in midair above the raised throne, held by countless obsidian strands reminiscent of a spider's web. The stygian, tar-like substance nearly covered her entire body in a tenebrous carapace, leaving only her head exposed. Her exposed visage radiated brilliant sunlight as the immense magical energies of the sun coursed through her, and her horn shone several magnitudes brighter than Luna had ever seen it before, an effulgent beacon of light in the oppressive darkness. The celestial alicorn's eyes were open wide, unseeing and coated by a film of the magics flowing through her body.

No... sister... "Celly!" Luna cried out, as she sprinted down the length of the red carpet while the others followed her. She stopped halfway when she noticed Celestia's head move ever so slightly.

"Luna...? Sister? What are you doing here? I am unable to see you... I am doing all I can to hold Erebus back!" Celestia announced weakly into the room, her eyes roaming uselessly behind the film of magic, attempting to see through her blindness.

The chambers immediately grew cold, and Luna swore the light coming through the windows and skylights dimmed, yet somehow Celestia's horn kept the area near her brightly lit. "It is good that you have returned, Luna of Trelaria. And I notice you have brought guests." One moment, the throne was empty, the next, Erebus was sitting upon it.

The midnight blue alicorn was about to answer when a rainbow blur streaked by her, then suddenly stopped in midair, her tail comically stretched out like cotton candy. "Hey! You! Get off our Princess' throne and let her free!" Rainbow Dash shouted at the monstrosity.

Behind her, Applejack had the tip of Rainbow's tail in her teeth with a long suffering look upon her face, mumbling, " 'o 'h ha'e pu mu 'his ere'y 'ime, 'ain'ow?" This sounded suspiciously like, "Do I have to do this every time, Rainbow?"

"I see. I would recognize their power anywhere. You brought the Elements with you." Raising a rancid hoof, Erebus pointed it at the group of ponies. Upon their necks, their Element necklaces sprung into being, while Twilight's crown settled upon her head. "They would never work against their creator. They were created to bring balance, and I am balance incarnate."

"N-No! They followed me, worried for their monarch!" Luna endeavored to bluff. "I still have no clue what I am making a decision for! I have never seen Trelaria in all my life, nor what I am allegedly meant to hold a throne over!" *I certainly hope this works. I can't keep putting things off, I have to find some way to stop Erebus before I run out of time!*

Twilight and the rest of the girls were now staring at her in confusion, but Luna waved them off with a hoof despite this. "Indeed. Then I shall give you a device that will allow you to see what you rule over. I warn you, it is not meant for the living outside of your race, I do not advise bringing your... friends." The abomination's horn darkened, as a dark aura emanated from it. At Luna's hooves, a pitch black sphere appeared, then floated up into the air and slipped into her mane for safe keeping.

"I... shall remember that," the alicorn stammered, looking aside so as to avoid Erebus' gaze.

Lowering its hoof, Erebus' head moved slightly to scan its gaze across the gathered ponies. "I digress. It seems your beloved ruler has been keeping things from her subjects. Including her own dear sister, I should say."

"No..." Celestia managed to get out, "I will not reveal State Secrets to anypony who is not sanctioned to know of them!" Her head began thrashing to and fro, showing she was trying to escape her bindings.

“Have you never wondered why your technology is a conglomerate? Why it seems to have holes where things should be? What about the fact that few non-pony species live in Equestria? Maybe a gryphon here or there, visiting, a dragon sleeping within its borders, but never any actual settlements? Or, that your dear Princess has a...”

Celestia’s movements became frantic, as well as her cries for Erebus to cease, yet it was not to be, as he continued to speak. “...a daughter?”

“*What!?*” Luna cried as the girls around her gasped and mumbled to each other, Twilight herself only looking confused and hurt.

Celestia ceased her struggles, hanging her head and shutting her eyes, muttering, “Please, I do what I must, Equestria comes first, and even what I did for my daughter was for the best... Please do not tell them who it is...”

“You have hidden secrets away for far too long, Celestia of Equestria. Your daughter will know who she is, either by my mouth, or yours. Is that not right, Twilight, Daughter of Celestia? She who was Celestia of Equestria’s heir, and yet is no longer such? A mother will go to extreme lengths to ensure her daughter’s survival, will she not?” Erebus pointedly asked, his head swiveling up to stare at Celestia with empty sockets. The humor in his voice was unmistakable. He was now ignoring Luna and the others’ reactions, focusing entirely upon Celestia. The Princess of the Sun had her head bowed as low as it could go while tears streamed down her face.

Luna, meanwhile, was stunned, her mouth hanging open at the implications of Erebus’ accusations. *I... I have a niece...? When...? How...? Why... is she a unicorn? This cannot be possible...* The Princess forgot about her fear, instead lost entirely in thought about how Twilight could be her sister’s daughter. *It would explain the immense magical prowess, though... but she is nowhere near the strength of an alicorn... I can figure this out, I can do this, I may be the artist, but I also like science, too! Come on, Luna...*

Behind Luna, all of Twilight’s friends were staring at the stunned unicorn with open mouths. Twilight’s pupils were tiny and had a faraway look to them while she could be heard babbling to herself, “I... I’m ...daughter? Princess Celestia... mother? I’m a unicorn! This... can’t be... I

have parents... I'm her faithful student, yes, yes, this is all a dream, or nightmare... Ohhh... I don't know what to think! I'd love to be Celestia's daughter, but... Everything changes!"

Her friends, however, were thrilled and worried in equal shares.

"Oh! I know! We need a party for the new Princess!"

"Sugarcube, are you alright? Ah mean, you're our friend an' all, but ah didn't know you were royalty, Twi-, er... Princess."

"Oh, Darling! This changes everything! A Princess, our friend and in our own town! Oh dear, I'll have to make all sorts of preparations! So many ideas to create! Oh, we'll even have to modify dresses for when you get wings, of course!"

"Wings? You mean she'll get wings!? Yes! I'll teach you how to fly, Twilight! And then you can help me get into the Wonderbolts! This is so *awesome!*"

"Twi-Twilight? A P-Princess? Oh dear, oh dear... I-I'm sorry, Twilight, for not being the best friend I could be... Oh, Fluttershy, you're such a bad friend..."

A soft, yet stern voice broke through everypony's conversation, drawing all eyes to the throne, and the alicorn suspended above it. "...Twilight is not a Princess. I was forced to take that title, and the title of Heir from her many years ago. She may be my daughter, but that is it. I had to make the hardest of decisions a mother and a ruler could ever make..." Celestia's head was still hung low, her eyes tightly shut, and yet, despite seeming helpless in such a position, she still held a commanding presence, enough to keep even her own sister silent while she listened.

"I kept this from everypony for centuries, because I could not face the decisions I had to make, but, I will tell you what happened, now that a certain monstrosity has given you the truth..." Celestia sighed, then continued. "A few centuries ago, I wanted a foal of my own to care for. There were no stallions that I wished to spend my life with, but there was one unicorn, my Captain of the Guard, who I felt would not only give me a pleasurable night, but would allow me to bear a strong foal. I propositioned him, explaining my thoughts and desires, as well as the fact that he would have no responsibility to the foal, nor to me, other than being my Captain.

He accepted. With magic as powerful as mine, I easily made sure I would bear...”

“Please, let me see my foal.” Princess Celestia pleaded to the nurses tending to her after the lengthy and intense labor the alicorn had just gone through. The Princess’ normally billowing and voluptuous mane currently lay disheveled and still over the sides of the hospital bed while her coat shone with a thick sheen of sweat. Celestia’s breathing was hard, for, after all, she had just gone through a few days of labor, and before that, several years of pregnancy. It wasn’t the first time that she cursed an alicorn’s tendency to stretch everything out like a rubber band.

The length of the pregnancy was necessary, however, to allow time for the magical energies an alicorn sustained to accumulate within her unborn foal. While alicorns were also supposed to be resistant to pain, the days-long labor did little to reinforce this notion for the Sun Goddess.

Regardless, Celestia glanced pleadingly over at the nurses, who had immediately taken her foal away to get it cleaned. *I never even got to see my foal, I was in the wrong position to do so. I don’t even know if it is a colt or filly... Please, Sol and Altair, let my foal be healthy...* Celestia currently lay upon her stomach as a nurse dismantled the device that kept Celestia’s tail raised out of the way, while also spreading her rear legs. It was incredibly uncomfortable to be in the birthing position, however, she had done it at the doctors’ behest.

Hissing in still remembered pain as Celestia’s legs were permitted to go back beneath her and a second nurse cleaned her up, the doctor she had asked peered back in the direction they had taken her foal and shook his head. “I am sorry, your Majesty, but your daughter is currently being cleaned and checked for any issues. I am sure they will return her shortly.”

In fact, just as he finished speaking, a pair of nurses came back into the room, one levitating her daughter while the other held a clipboard. *A daughter, I have a daughter! Oh, Sol and Altair, you’re grandparents! If only you could be here right now... And Luna...* Turning onto her side and

suppressing a wince of pain, as there was only so much that magic, immortality, and drugs could do for foalbirth, Celestia reached out with her forelegs as the nurses gently placed her foal within them.

With a wide smile, the nurse nodded to her Princess and giggled, “We congratulate you on your perfectly healthy foal, Princess! Usually, we require the mother to recuperate for a time before we take details down, but I guess you’re not a normal pony, so we can do them now while you’re with your daughter, if you wish.”

Pulling her infant to her chest, Celestia tentatively made use of her magic to pull aside the blanket covering her daughter. Magic had been touch and go for most of the several years of her pregnancy, especially near the time of her labor, and she’d needed varying numbers of attendants to get anything done at times.

The second nurse drew near and began to fill out a form upon the clipboard, then raised her head to stare at the alicorn. “Daughter’s name, please, your Majesty?”

My daughter’s name... Celestia thought, beaming down at her foal with nothing but love. The filly’s lavender coat shone brightly in the austere white confines of the infirmary room, and a patch of pink and violet mane peeked out from under the cowl near the filly’s tiny nub of a horn. *More night than day. The sun has set on my previous life, and now, I have a foal, who brings the dawn to a new day. I shall name her...*

“Twilight. Her name is Twilight.” *Twilight, my beloved daughter...*

A few more days had gone by before the nurses and doctors had given their Princess a clean bill of health and had released her from the infirmary with strict orders to take it easy. For now, Celestia had plenty of time to bond with Twilight while her ministers and Council took care of everything. At the moment, the Sun Princess lay in her plush bed, looking over Twilight’s birth certificate and thinking back to the questions that were asked. Some of course had been necessary, while others were more... personal.

I nearly burst out laughing when I told them there was no father. I told Iron Horn he would not be responsible for any of this, and I will uphold my promise. I swear, by now most of the city thinks I gave immaculate birth. As if! I'm anything but! Even I have my needs. Celestia chuckled inwardly at that thought, then set the certificate aside to instead smile down at the foal curled up against her side. *Why they needed to know if I was going to breast or formula feed her, only a doctor could know. I guess they need to know every detail of how I will care for my foal. I swear half the palace staff has been on hand for me the past day, or trying to give me advice on how to care for her.*

Celestia shook her head, leaning her head down to nuzzle along Twilight's back, the filly shifting in her sleep and making what Celestia thought sounded like a content sound. *I've heard foals were noisy, messy creatures, and yet, not once has my daughter cried, or really been messy. Maybe alicorn foals are different, because I haven't needed to put Twilight in a nappy since we returned. She lets me know when she needs to go...*

Peering curiously down at her daughter, Celestia's gaze exuded nothing but love. She had been gifted with a new life, and all the trouble of the past few years, and the past several days, with the pregnancy and labor melted away as she watched over her slumbering infant.

She will be my Heir, the light of my day, my Sol. She won't fully grow until after I pass the crown to her, of course, like my parents did with us, but she will have plenty of time to enjoy life, to grow to love everypony as I do. I will get to see her grow, to learn and cherish. I will teach her everything I know of magic, of how to fly and the experience of flying.

She will be my everything...

And yet, many things are not meant to be. Life is never fair. Even for the benevolent ruler of a land.

The days, then months passed, and Twilight grew. No longer a newborn, she was still just as much of a hoofful as she had been at birth. However, just like any mother, especially a ruler, Celestia's life had to continue moving on. While she had competent ministers, they were unable

to govern in her stead for lengthy periods of time, forcing Celestia to leave her filly in the care of the castle nursery, a place castle workers could bring their colts and fillies to have designated nannies watch over them.

Celestia did not wish to return to her duties, instead wanting to spend her time with her daughter, but also did not wish to have her in the day care. While Twilight was not a filly prone to crying, except the time or two she managed to get a scrape, she would definitely make her demands known, as any foal does. This left Celestia with little time to sleep, and very tired most days.

In some ways, the return to duty was relaxing, but also stressful in others. The amount of paperwork she needed to go through, the decisions she had to put off as they were not important enough to disturb the new mother, and of course changes that needed to be made, proclamations, meetings with diplomats and various appointments were almost overwhelming. At times, the Princess felt like she would rather deal with several newborns than the day-to-day events of the country.

It was during one of these appointments that she was meeting with her main Advisor regarding the course of the next several events, as well as various things she had asked for. One of which being an examination of Twilight by the leading professors and minds of her School for Gifted Unicorns.

"...quite healthy and normal for a filly of her age. We cannot say as yet what her special talent will be, of course, unless she takes over for you when you step down," he explained while seated upon a large cushion in front of her desk. They were currently ensconced within the Princess' personal study, bookcases lining both of the side walls, while her desk lay in the back near the floor-to-ceiling windows, a nice late-Spring breeze blew in from one of the open windows. The desk in front of her, while ornate and built with care, certainly could not be seen as such, not with the tall stacks of parchment spread to either side of her to be looked over. It was going to be a long week.

"Continuing on, her Magical Aptitude Grade, from the tests that we performed to determine how much power she can be expected to have, is quite astonishing. I believe she may surpass even you, Princess. We can expect many good things out of her when she matures," the advisor droned, reading straight from the paper he was hovering in front of himself.

As boring as Celestia found his report, listening to him drone on about current events, things that needed to be done, and his *stern* disapproval of taking time off to raise her foal, the Sun Princess had to at least act like she was paying attention, until she actually did so upon hearing the news of Twilight.

“That’s quite good news amongst all the bad and mediocre, Quill Pen, thank you for your *terse* explanations. You may leave now.” Celestia said, taking several glances over the work she had yet to do and giving a heartfelt sigh. She missed her daughter. The past several days of her return to being the ruler of Equestria were dull without her around. *Maybe I should bring her with me, as long as she isn’t too much trouble. A foal is quite endearing to many ponies and often brightens the mood, as well as relaxes them. Could be worth a try when I meet some of my next appointments.* In fact, at that moment the Princess imagined the dragon diplomat going ‘Whooshe a kewt widdle pony? You are! YOU are!’

The hours passed and Celestia managed to make a noticeable dent in the piles of paperwork upon her desk. She did not have to worry about daily court, at least not for another week, while a diplomat had canceled his appointment later in the day due to extenuating circumstances involving a pie. *I should at least make an appearance later. To show all my little ponies that I still exist and am quite well,* Celestia thought as she stamped her seal upon a document that had required her reading and approval.

Turning her head, something in the distance caught her eye. The Bringer of Day could see a group of Pegasus Guards drilling in the sky near one of the towers. Daydreaming somewhat, Celestia imagined tutoring Twilight in the ways of flight, at first building up her endurance, then lengthy training flights, and finally, during their free time, entire adventures, showing her daughter the beauty of the world and skies, just like Sol had done with her and Luna.

The desperate pounding and quick opening of her study’s doors drew the Princess out of her daydreaming. Gracefully turning her head, she noticed one of the nannies from the nursery gasping for breath and in an obvious state of panic.

Her eyes widened in shock, as it could only mean one thing; Celestia opened her mouth to ask what was wrong when the nanny gasped out, “Princess, your Majesty, I’m terribly sorry to bother you, but your daughter

has collapsed in the nursery! She's been taken to the infirmary and I was sent to g-"

By that point, Celestia had jumped up and galloped out of her study, the nanny yeeeping in fright and jumping back lest she be bowled over. What she was saying forgotten, the nanny followed the sprinting alicorn as best as she could, but eventually lost too much ground.

Nononononononononono... was the only thought Celestia could hold in her mind, fear for her daughter overriding her other senses as she weaved through shocked ponies walking the castle's halls. Even at her full speed, it took her several minutes to get to the infirmary, bursting into the chambers and immediately heading for the room in which she could sense her daughter's presence.

Various doctors and nurses were moving in and out of the room steadily, some shaking their heads, while others looked confused about the situation. Celestia pushed past a doctor currently exiting, eliciting a glare from him until he realized at whom it was directed; the worried mother dashed straight to her daughter's bedside. Within the bed, Twilight looked like such a tiny speck of color in the sea of white cloth. The poor alicorn foal was shivering beneath the blanket, yet when Celestia laid a hoof upon Twilight's forehead, she could feel the filly's body heat burning her up. That wasn't the most worrying thing, though. Twilight's nub of a horn was also sparking. Not glowing, but *crackling* with unreleased power. *What's wrong with her...* Celestia wondered worriedly.

"What's wrong with her? *What's wrong with my filly!?*" the mother asked, and then demanded, looking frantically around the room as the several doctors and nurses turned their heads away from her gaze, or stared sheepishly at other portions of the most interesting white infirmary room. Celestia was about to raise her voice, something she rarely ever did when a meek cough came from behind her. Turning, with tears streaming down her eyes, she noticed one of the nurses standing behind her with a sheaf of papers under her wing.

"P-Princess, I... We don't know what's wrong with Princess Twilight." The pegasus nurse was visibly shivering in the presence of the distressed alicorn, terrified of what Celestia might do when she heard the news. "W-We have ponies looking through the infirmary archives right now for

anything that might match the symptoms. I'm s-sorry, we just don't know much about alicorns, Highness!"

With a sigh and a forlorn glance at Twilight, the Princess began to speak. Celestia's reply was so soft that the nurse had to lean in to hear what was being said, "Send a message to the Ministers and Council. I declare I am having an emergency and must temporarily defer power to them for the time being while this is sorted out..."

"Yes, Princess."

It was a few days before any sort of answer came to Celestia. The entire time had been spent at Twilight's bedside, with no improvement in her condition. It was also the only time she had seen her daughter cry for an extended period of time, even going so far as to scream from the pain. Everypony in the infirmary was on edge, and doctors from around Equestria had been brought in to see what could be done for her. Sadly, nothing worked, and even pain blocking magics could barely suppress the filly's agony, sleep seeming to be her only refuge from it, and even then, just barely.

The Sun Goddess, not so much so anymore, (she felt more like a powerless pony than the ruler of an entire land and an immortal no less), refused to allow anypony else care for her filly. The Princess herself, no matter how much anypony argued or seemed shocked at her doing such things, fed Twilight, changed her bed-linens, and bathed her. She only allowed the doctors near her daughter when they needed to try a treatment or study her symptoms.

After a few days, however, Celestia's hope was waning, and she was half-draped over Twilight's bed, deep in thought. *This is my punishment for fighting and banishing my own sister... My punishment for the things I've done in my life for Equestria... A ruler must either keep their morals and ruin their country, or encourage their country to prosper while throwing their morals out the window. I try the best I can to be the best pony I can, but even so, I must make decisions for the greater good of Equestria... The life of an immortal, to feel nothing but loss, even with the ones closest to me...*

My friends... My sister... My daughter... Luna will return to me soon, but... Will I lose my daughter to gain Luna?

The door creaked open behind the Princess, though she ignored it, being too immersed in her thoughts and depression to notice. A doctor came into the room, then gently shut the door behind him, hovering several sheets of preserved parchment before him. Noticing the alicorn's position before him, he offered a polite cough, startling Celestia from her thoughts and causing her to turn her head to stare at him.

He bowed low before holding the parchments up into the air in front of her, "We may have found something, Princess, pertaining to the current situation." Celestia took the parchments with her own magic, her tear-stained eyes skimming down the records. "We believe this may be what's called Sorceptobia, an illness that strikes only alicorns."

Celestia stayed silent, keeping her ears open as she read through the medical records, which seemed to involve several dates. "The records indicate that the last recorded case was when your lost sister was a young filly. Sorceptobia is a buildup of the immense magical energies within an alicorn's body. It can be cured within a week simply by constant magical use through the horn. However, from the records, it seems to strike young alicorns only, and it seems that with your Twilight is the youngest that has been struck. Symptoms include an intense fever, chills, overwhelming fatigue, and intense agony. To say the least, the magic's burning her up from the inside out."

The doctor looked saddened, then stepped over to the filly's bed, peering down at her with concern. "She is too young to have use of her still-growing horn, and while I would suggest numerous alternatives to that treatment, such as siphoning off the energies, I am afraid to say that they would either irrevocably damage her still-growing mind and body, or outright kill her... I am sorry, your Majesty, there is nothing we can do for her... We are going to lose her..."

I must be strong, I have to be strong! For Equestria, for me... for Twilight... Celestia demanded of herself as she closed the chamber and settled the decorative tapestry over the entrance. To anypony else, that is

all it would be, a tapestry and white wall. To her, it would be her daughter's prison, or even her tomb with a special spell set into the wall that would only let the Sun Goddess pass through. Within the chamber, Twilight, her daughter and Heir, floated in midair in a time-stopping stasis field, numerous spells having become the filly's only friends.

Staring defiantly at the chamber wall and tapestry, thought still roiled within the Princess' head. *I will find a way to cure you, my beloved, my only daughter. No matter how long it takes, be it days, months, or even years, I will do it, even if it means I have to sacrifice a part of myself to do so.*

And so Celestia set out to find a cure for her ailing and time-locked filly, devoting all her personal time and many sleepless nights to finding a cure for Twilight. In between ruling her lands and spending time talking and reading to Twilight within the chamber, even though she knew the filly couldn't hear her, the alicorn used everything at her disposal.

First, it was days; then weeks passed; months flew by; and finally the time turned into years, decades... centuries. At first, Celestia's hopes were high. She had numerous spells she could potentially use to cure her daughter, but the doctor had been right. Anything she used on such a young foal could or would ultimately disable or even kill her.

After the first decade, Celestia did something she had only done a couple other times. She went to the Core of Canterlot Castle. Not to save her filly, but to make others forget. The constant reminders society gave her were not helping her mental state, and she felt it best, as a grieving mother, to allow everypony to forget. She may not have been in the right state of mind at the time, but what mother would be at the prospect of losing her foal and being reminded everyday of her failures? Using the Core, Celestia concocted the spell. The spell to force Equestria and all lands on this side of the Deep Dark to forget. Ponies and other creatures' minds were wiped of the existence of Twilight, and documentation became illegible, changed, or vanished altogether. A grieving mother's unreasonable decision...

The thousandth Summer Sun Celebration was quickly approaching, as was Luna and her Nightmare's return. Not but a hoofful of years remained, and still Twilight's affliction had not been cured. In fact, Celestia's failure to help her filly was forcing her to consider drastic spells. One in particular seemed the most promising in theory, but was irreversible and would rob the Princess of her heir, of her daughter. Yet, Twilight would live, free and unsickened.

For months after considering the spell, Celestia could only think about two things. Luna's return, and that single spell. All other spells had failed, either failures in and of themselves, or because they would have severely damaged, or even killed her filly. This was unacceptable, and yet, the only spell that could theoretically work would force her to give up her filly.

Several months later, Celestia finally made her decision. With a heavy heart, the alicorn stepped through the tapestry and wall to stare up at her daughter, floating peacefully in eternal slumber until she could be released from her affliction. *Be strong, my heart, one of us has to be strong...* Dropping the spells that had imprisoned her filly for centuries, Celestia choked back a sob. While the chamber was hidden, a curious pony may still come to investigate, and she did not wish that to happen. Grasping Twilight gently with her magic, the Princess deposited her into a pile of linens, and wrapped them around the sickly and sleeping foal.

Then, pushing ahead lest she never be able to let her foal go, Celestia carefully laid the framework of the spell, checking her work several times over. The slightest mistake could instead kill her filly, and she had never performed the spell before. Satisfied with the work, Celestia laid the spell over Twilight, flinching as the alicorn filly stirred in her sleep and made a grimace of pain. *Don't worry, my beloved, you will be well soon...* Once the spell was ready, the Sun Goddess poured her magic into it, silent tears sliding down her cheeks as she felt the filly before her physically changing within the linens. Twilight's wings vanished, along with her Earth Pony and Pegasus characteristics, then followed her magic. The Princess, with a heavy heart, drained the magic from her daughter, allowing her to keep enough to be an exceptional unicorn, as that was all her daughter now was.

A unicorn.

One night. One last night. That is how long Celestia gave herself to be with her filly before she would have to give Twilight up. *Any longer and I risk never letting her go... I wish the same happy, graceful facade I show the world could be applied right now... Twilight will of course need a new set of parents who will love her just as much as I do.* The alicorn stared lovingly, and yet heartbreakingly, down at the sleeping foal curled up against her alabaster coat, sleeping off the worst effects of not only her illness, but also the spell.

I can't just leave her with anypony, she needs a family I can trust, who won't neglect her. I'd raise her myself if it weren't for the political repercussions. There are plenty of things that can and will go wrong if I raise a unicorn filly... Sometimes I despise politics. The Princess sighed and stretched, then curled up tightly around her foal. The night was quiet, even more so within the Princess' bedchambers. Celestia stared into the corner of her room, where a perch sat with a sleeping phoenix upon it. Philomena was a bird she had met a couple centuries ago, helping her keep her grief in check.

No, I know who can adopt you, my dawn, my Twilight. A couple old friends of mine...

The next day, before the noon Court, a unicorn couple was ushered into a private audience chamber to meet their Princess, unsure of what would be taking place. The summons had come out of the blue in the early morning, leaving them little time to get themselves ready for a personal audience. No, whatever it had to be was quite serious for it to be this sudden.

The Princess had her well-practiced facade upon her face, showing a brave and happy demeanor to the two unicorns as they entered the chamber. Smiling to the two unicorns, one of which was Star Sparkle, a mare who had gone to her school and had become, while not a close friend of the Princess, still at least a very well acquainted friend. She was also sterile, or so her records seemed to indicate.

After some general chatting and greetings, while Star Sparkle's husband looked on in confusion, the question and reason for the audience

finally came to light. “Now, I am to understand that you have been looking to adopt, my little ponies?”

The shocked expressions upon the unicorns’ faces not only told Celestia everything, but also managed to amuse her in her grim mood, followed by their slow nodding in confirmation. “I have been looking for a home for a certain filly for a while now. However, I wanted the parents to be ponies I could trust.” Turning her head, Celestia raised a basket from behind her and brought it to the front, showing a bundled and sleeping lavender unicorn infant within.

“Her name is Twilight, and she won’t remember me when she wakes. I care greatly for her, and I want to see her go to a good home,” the Princess explained, barely managing to keep her eyes from tearing up as she spoke.

Star Sparkle looked down at the sleeping filly with astonishment, then confusion. “Is... Is this your daughter, your majesty?” she bewilderingly asked.

Celestia chuckled, even though her heart had stopped, “No, Star Sparkle, alicorns have alicorn foals. Twilight is a unicorn, her parents have her out for adoption, as they are unable to care for her.” *Not a complete lie...*

Lowering her head to their level, Celestia continued her explanation, “I am offering her to the both of you first of all. If you wish to raise her, I will take care of the paperwork and get you a birth certificate. Just one thing, my little ponies. Do not let her know that her parents had to give her up. You conceived and birthed her. You raised her. You are her parents. That is all she needs to know, Mister and Missus Sparkle.”

Star Sparkle stared thoughtfully down at the foal, then turned to her husband, whispering to him in hushed conversation. For several minutes they faintly discussed before turning back to the Princess. Star took the basket in her magic and raised it to her chest, then bent her head down to kiss Twilight upon the forehead. “She will be our Twilight Sparkle.”

Years later, late in a summer afternoon, Celestia was going over her School for Gifted Unicorns' newest report. Graduations, supply requisitions, the usual accident and damage reports. Those were always amusing to read. Most 'accidents' were more pranks than anything. Turning your teacher into a flowerpot, trying a 'love' spell to get the colt or filly your eyes are on. Sometimes even the normal pranks a student will get up to, something she enjoyed hearing about. Anything meant to be vindictive or painful, however, was quickly punished. Another thing she enjoyed reading was the report on all up and coming Entrance Exams, as well as the results of previous exams. The list was short this time, but there were still several names upon it, as well as their written entrance exam results and family history.

Let's see. Noble pony shoving his colt into the school. Horrendous written test scores, plus his attitude seems to show he does not wish to be there. That one will get denied pretty quickly on the final decision. Two more Noble families putting their fillies into the school, promising results. Oh... Oh my... Twi-

"Twilight Sparkle...?" Celestia repeated incredulously. The name on the list was of course one she had expected to eventually see, but which surprised her nonetheless. At first, Star Sparkle had sent her reports of her progress, but those had eventually tapered off and died. Checking the Filly's background, it was in front of her eyes in black and white. Daughter of Star Sparkle. Her written test results were extraordinary, far higher than most fillies and colts her age. *Her personality is one of an avid reader with a studious nature, anti-social, spending all her time in a book. Shows a great aptitude for magic. It's her... It's really her... My daughter has grown up to be a scholar... I think it is time I sat in on another potential student's test. Let's see, the time for Twilight's scheduled test is...In ten minutes!? Alright, I have time, I can get there in time.*

Ten minutes later, however, Princess Celestia wasn't even halfway there, not only had a couple of her ministers stopped her, but she couldn't exactly rush to the School. A Princess must be serene and take her time in the eyes of her ponies. She was already late when she came within sight of the school up ahead. Suddenly, a rainbow arc spread across the sky, accompanied by a sonic boom, startling Celestia. At that moment, a large burst of magical energies shot out of one of the School's tower chambers, and the head of a dragon burst through the roof. *Oh dear... I think it may just be time I did rush!*

Several thoughts coursed through her head as she ran into the school, past numerous startled ponies who gaped at their Princess in such a rush. Ignoring them, she ran up the stairs, wondering if it was another practical joke, a spell gone wrong, or a very angry pony. The moment she entered the room, however, she saw several things. One, the teachers were running one of their magical aptitude tests. Two, the dragon was still a hatchling, albeit a massive one. Three, there were two curious potted plants. And four, amidst it all hovered a lavender unicorn releasing uncontrolled bursts of raw magic.

Celestia's breath caught in her throat and her heart nearly stopped. Twilight looked the same as she had as a foal, though grown into a small filly. Daintily walking over to the floating and distressed unicorn filly, Celestia gently placed a hoof upon her shoulder.

Twilight turned and noticed who was looking down at her, then realized what she was doing. The magic faded from her body and released the filly from its grasp, lowering her back to the floor. Around Celestia, the four previously hovering teachers were set back down upon the floor, the hatchling returned to his normal, and adorable size. And the two potted plants changed back into unicorns the Princess knew so well.

"Twilight Sparkle..." Celestia started.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean..." Twilight interrupted, yet Celestia plowed on ahead with her words.

"You have a very special gift, I don't think I've ever come across a unicorn with your raw abilities," Celestia announced, amazed at how much of her magic Twilight had retained from being an alicorn.

"Huh?" the filly replied, bewildered.

"But you need to learn to tame these abilities through focused study."

"Huh!?"

"Twilight Sparkle, I'd like to make you my own personal protégé here at the school," the Princess offered. *I can have my daughter back, maybe not as such, but I can still teach her magic... I can have my Twilight back...*

"Huh!?"

“Well?” Celestia asked the confused filly, wanting to laugh at the expression upon Twilight’s face.

Twilight turned to look at her parents, who nodded until Celestia swore their necks would break.

“Yeeeeees!”

The entire throne room was silent except for the breathing of the astonished group of ponies on the receiving end of the story. Luna was at a loss for words. *Even my own sister never told me any of this, that she had a daughter, of what happened to that daughter, of... her daughter saving me, not once, but twice...*

At times throughout the story, one or another of the group of ponies had tried to interrupt Celestia, but had been ignored as she continued her explanation. Somehow, once again, Pinkie Pie had managed to produce a tub of popcorn from somewhere, leading Luna to believe that she must secretly be a unicorn to do all the things the Moon Goddess had seen so far. Random teleporting? Conjunction of items? And from Twilight’s letters to Celestia, numerous other things.

“I’m so sorry, my daughter... I did what I had to do...” came the voice of the figure suspended above the throne.

There were so many questions Luna wished to ask of her sister, and she bet Twilight and her friends had just as many. However Erebus seemed to have a different idea. “I do believe it is time for you to leave, Luna of Trelaria. You and your... friends.” He stepped down from Celestia’s throne, slowly making his way toward the group of ponies. “You have so much to pack for, to prepare for. You are, after all, going to Trelaria to see that which you rule over. You will be leaving now.”

“W-What!?” Luna gasped, snapping out of her thoughts. “No! There is still so much I have to discuss with my sister!”

Around her, other protests came from Twilight's friends, but the lavender unicorn herself remained silent. "What in tarnation? Heck no, we came here ta save th' Princess!"

"Oh yeah? I'd like to see you try and send us away!"

"Pffft! You can't do anything to us, big meany mean pants!"

"Twilight...? Darling? Are you alright? I know it's a lot to take in, but we need you right now..."

"...Now means now. I will see you again when you have your answer, Luna of Trelaria." Erebus' horn began to emit a dark aura, and the same aura surrounded the group of ponies, collecting around them before vanishing, taking them along with it.

Even with her head hung as low as it could go, Celestia could just barely see her younger sister, her daughter, and the rest of the Elements of Harmony wink out. Just as she was about to demand to know where they had gone, Erebus spoke to her. "Luna of Trelaria is bluffing for time, Celestia of Equestria. She will soon understand that time ran out ages ago."

Celestia ground her teeth and raised her head, glaring unseeing daggers at the abomination standing within her throne room. "She *will* find a way to defeat you, Erebus! The Champions will come, as they always do. When I am freed from this prison, you will feel the full force of the power of the Sun!"

"Or so you think. Time has run out for you, Celestia. I have enjoyed our little power struggle, but now, I shall make you mine, in place of your sister. You have proven to be a more valuable asset alive than dead." For a moment, Celestia could have sworn she saw Erebus' bony face turn upward in a twisted sort of smile. *That couldn't have happened, his face is only a skull!*

What happened next shocked the alabaster alicorn into a state of paralyzing fear. All at once, the darkness rushed in against her power,

overwhelming her and revealing that Erebus had only been toying with her. The miniature sun upon her horn snuffed out, allowing the shadow to envelop the chamber. The carapace holding her in place flowed over her body, covering her neck, and then her entire head. Celestia managed to take one last breath before she was fully encased by the tar-like substance.

All at once, her body erupted in pain as the ooze began to force itself into every orifice. Nothing was spared, not her ears or eyes, not even her rump or her pores. The pain was excruciating, and Celestia could feel the substance seeping deep into her being. It clawed viciously at the back of her mind, trying to get in. The alicorn fought against it as best as she could, the darkness moving in to surround her last sanctuary, which became ever smaller by the second. Finally, even her mind was consumed.

“Rise, Solar Flare. You will replace Nightmare Moon.”

Chapter 5

Worst Possible Things

The resounding crack of ponies arriving by teleportation, followed by several thuds, bounced around within the Ponyville Library's main chamber. This startled a certain baby dragon nearby who happened to be busy rearranging the library shelves. Turning, Spike saw an accumulation of dazed ponies sprawled upon the center of the floor, with a Princess lying atop the pile.

"There you guys are!" Spike complained, holding a few books in his claws as he glanced past them, noticing Luna, but not fully registering her presence. "I woke up and Twi was nowhere to be found, and when I looked for the rest of you, I couldn't find any of you, either! I- Oh! Hello Princess Luna! ...is everything alright, guys?" Spike asked, finally noticing their stunned expressions and the haphazard way in which they were arranged.

Pinkie Pie was the first of the group to recover, hopping out of the pile in her usual bubbly mood. "Whee! Let's do that again! I think Erebus just needs a good party. Or maybe even the best party!" She gasped excitedly. "I should start making plans and invitations and setting up decorations and-"

"Ah don' think that varmint needs a party, Pinkie, ah think he needs a good kick in th' rump!" Applejack interrupted Pinkie, standing and shaking herself before setting her hat back upon her head. She then went about helping each of the others to their hooves, continuing, "Ah don' know what in tarnation is goin' on, but ah think it has sumthin' ta do with that book of Twilight's."

"I wouldn't disagree, Applejack. First that... *disgusting* monstrosity. Then all that stuff about the Princesses, and then we find out Princess Twilight is Princess Celestia's daughter! It's all so much to take in! And then Princess Celestia! Trapped by that... that *fiend*! Of all the worst things that could happen, this is **the. Worst. Possible. THING!**" Her horn shimmered and a red half-heart fainting couch slid from out of nowhere and

slammed into Fluttershy, who let out a squeak. "Oh! I'm so sorry, Darling! I wasn't thinking when I did that."

"It's alright, Rarity, I was in the way. But I don't think it's me we should be worrying about right now." Fluttershy spoke in a demure tone, peeking out from under her mane at Twilight as she picked herself up off the floor.

Luna was currently helping the lavender unicorn to her hooves, careful of the Element tiara still resting upon her head. Twilight did not seem to notice, though, having a far away look in her eyes and a blank expression on her face. Princess Luna scarcely looked any better, her mane disheveled. Turning to the others, she was about to speak when Spike interrupted and stared up into Twilight's face.

"What happened to Twilight!? What do you mean she's Princess Celestia's daughter!?" asked Spike frantically, his voice becoming high-pitched in worry.

Luna knew she had to do something and turned to him, "Spike, I need you to go to the kitchen and make some tea for us, please. We need to snap her out of this." Keeping an eye on her... niece (it still felt weird thinking of Twilight Sparkle as her niece), Luna announced to the other ponies, who were talking amongst themselves, "Twilight's friends, I require you to hurry to your homes and gather your saddlebags. We will be heading to Trelaria soon to get to the bottom of this, and hopefully find the Champions!"

"Yes ma'am!" Spike saluted, then dashed off into the kitchen, leaving the others to nod in assent and file out of the library with worried expressions upon their faces.

"Take care of 'er, Princess, we'll be back soon," Applejack said as she slipped out the door, followed by Rainbow Dash.

"Yeah! And then we'll be ready to bring the fight to Erebus!"

As soon as the door closed behind them, Luna focused her entire attention on Twilight, and slipped a midnight blue wing over the sitting mare's back. *It's a lot to take in all at once, to know that your teacher was also your mother, and not only that, but that she had to give you up because fate demanded it. I have to snap her out of this, there's too much*

at stake right now. Lowering her head, she sifted just enough power into her horn and then allowed a spark to jump from hers to Twilight's.

The lavender unicorn gasped for breath as if having just been tossed into a lake, then stared up at the alicorn with wide eyes, towards the wing covering her body, then back up at Luna, her mouth working but with no sounds coming out until she seemed to finally find her voice. "P-Princess! Oh... oh dear! I didn't mean to touch you! I-"

A shod hoof delicately pressed against Twilight's mouth and hushed her as Luna began to speak, "I... I've never had another family member other than my parents and Celly." The alicorn ignored Twilight's muffled "Parents?" and continued, "But, even if you're not an alicorn anymore, you're still my niece, if everything is to be believed. I am... unsure of how to deal with this. I think winghugging you is a nice start, though." Luna truly did not know where to take this, as she'd only ever had Altair and Sol, as well as Celestia. *But, if she is truly my niece, I should at least welcome her to my family and treat her as such.*

Twilight froze for a moment, then began to relax against Luna's side, weariness taking its toll on her body. "Thank you, Princ-"

"Call me Aunt Luna, or just Luna; I don't mind either. Besides, you needed this hug. It's a lot for the both of us to hear." *And to bear. Right now, so many things are happening, and yet... the pieces fit more than they did before. I have a niece, a pony who enjoys my night as much as I do. More night than day, as Celly has said in the past,* Luna thought, bowing her head briefly while a smile crossed her face. It quickly vanished when the realities of current circumstances came back to the fore of her mind. Looking around, Luna noticed the odd fainting couch that Rarity had somehow summoned, folded her wing back to her side, then walked over to settle upon it, noting that there was just enough room left for Twilight to take a spot. "Come, we have plenty to talk about, and I think after Spike gets us the tea, he can pack your things... I believe we may be gone a while."

Twilight nodded, then rubbed at her eyes and followed her aunt, settling down beside the alicorn uncomfortably, still tense from the day's events. "I see. Princ- Er, I mean, Luna? There is more I wasn't told, isn't there? I kept getting a feeling from Prin- Celestia... mother! Ohhh, it still feels strange to think of her that way! I keep feeling like she was hiding

more things from me that aren't in either of those books! And I still haven't finished the second!" Twilight lowered herself down onto the crimson cushion and placed her hooves over her eyes as if she feared a headache. "Everything's so confusing and messed up right now, I don't even know where to start."

She noticed. She really is more observant than we both thought. I will have to be careful, Celly even more so. Luna grimaced, not sure of how to approach the subject. Ever since being freed from Nightmare Moon's control, she had been shy and introverted, but the past few weeks had been nothing but action for her, and this day was much the same. The Moon Goddess had to take control of the situation, which she wasn't used to doing. "I... er... well... You're not necessarily wrong, Twilight." Luna explained guiltily.

"Huh!?" Twilight said, twisting her head around fast enough to nearly get whiplash, her eyes wide.

Spike, fortunately or not, returned at that moment carrying two saucers with cups of steaming tea upon them. "Princess, Twi, I made your favorite, chamomile with a touch of mint and lilac. I thought you could use it." Each of the mares magically grasped their teacups, then took a sip to enjoy the taste.

Luna glanced at Twilight, nudging her with a hoof, causing the lavender unicorn to perk up and reply, "Oh... oh thank you! Spike, could you do me a favor and go pack my saddlebags? The Pri- Gah, Luna needs to take me on a trip and I may be gone a while."

"Again? You just got back from a trip! Plus, I have a ton of questions for you, like oh, I don't know, how are you the *Princess' daughter!?*" Spike demanded, narrowing his eyes at Twilight and causing Luna to turn her head away to stare abashedly at one of the library shelves.

"Please, my Number One Assistant? This is very important! I'll need you to watch the Library and keep it running with Owlowiscious' help. This involves matters of life and death for all of Equestria! I think." Twilight turned to stare at Luna, raising an eyebrow, "Right?"

Luna nodded, and took another sip of her tea before speaking, "Very much so. Make sure you pack enough food, as well as camping supplies. I also think you should bring that book Celly gave you." *I hope she sees*

me as calm and collected. I can barely stomach this tea, my stomach is roiling so much!

“Number One Assistant, away! I’ll have your saddlebags packed before you know it, Twi!” Spike announced in a most serious and masculine voice before dashing off up the stairs.

Luna watched his progress from behind the teacup, pretending to sip at the hot beverage before finally speaking. “There is a lot that the rulers of Equestria have to keep from the populace, Twilight. I can’t remember much myself, as my, erm, vacation from Equestria sort of gave me a very bad case of amnesia. I can remember bits and pieces, but that is it. Is the pony I am now who I was a millennium ago? What about everything Celly tells me?” Floating the teacup and saucer over to the table, she set them down, unable to stomach the drink. “Is everything she tells me of how I used to be true? Can I believe her? I only tell you this because, well, from what she and Erebus say, you’re family. And although one is my sister, and the other is our enemy, I have reason to doubt them both.”

Luna turned aside, unable to meet her niece’s eyes, “The forgetfulness spell we have is one that has been handed down for generations. And I know it hasn’t been used on me, because my amnesia is too random. I can remember bits and pieces of everything, and the spell is more precise.” The midnight blue alicorn sighed and hung her head, “I’m terrified, Twilight, of everything right now. I’m a thousand years out of my time. It took me most of the year I’ve been back just to catch up on everything new within the kingdom, and that doesn’t count language shifts, new mannerisms, literature, music, and everything else. I’m an anachronism, and now all this is happening. Celly was always the strong one. I mean, I could barely face some of the things Celly told me my Nightmare had done in that book she gave you.”

Twilight was surprised to see the Princess in such a vulnerable state, her amazement plainly etched upon her face, then hesitantly, she ventured a question. “What did Nightmare Moon do that wasn’t in that book, Princess Luna? Why didn’t Princess Celestia- *mother* write everything?”

Luna turned her head to finally stare into Twilight’s eyes, then shuddered, “I will tell you now, Twilight, that the only reason you were allowed to read our history is because of your connection with Celly, as her student, and more, now that I know what you are. She also knew you’d be

given this one, so she made sure not to record everything.” *Alright, here goes, I hope I don’t snap her mind too much.* “My Nightmare had you as more than just her Royal Pet, you were also her, erm, consort and lover. She trusted nopony else. It was... forced upon you. She never fully went into a relationship with you, but...” Luna cringed back in disgust, then blinked at Twilight’s reaction.

The poor lavender unicorn’s maw was hanging open, her eyes mere pinpoints. Waving a hoof in front of Twilight’s face, Luna shivered, “Oh dear, I think I *did* damage her. Ohhh, Celly’s not going to be happy!” Luna could just imagine it now, her sister towering over her with an enraged expression, yelling “*You broke my daughter! How could you, little sister? And you told her that she had an incestuous relationship with you!? Now she’ll never trust me when I say I want to keep secrets ‘within the family’!*”

Outside, mere seconds later, the treehouse library could be seen violently shaking as a deafening voice screeched, “***I was WHAT to WHO!?***”

Holding her hooves to her ears, Luna peeked out from squinted eyes at the unicorn who had just explo-

“Why does everypony think I am that sort of mare!?”

-exploded twice. “Twilight?” Luna asked. “Calm down, I don’t want to have to restrain you,” she said to the seething unicorn, who looked as if she were about to burst into flames at any second.

As Twilight realized her outburst and seemed about to apologize, Spike ran down the stairs and panted, “Is everything alright!? I heard Twilight shouting! I had to dig myself out from beneath a fallen pile of books that collapsed with her screams, but I got here as fast as I could!”

Flushing, Twilight coughed and looked away from Luna, glaring at a speck of dust as if it were a personal affront, “Just some news from the Princess, Spike. I still think I’m not that kind of mare, I wouldn’t know what to do if such a situation ever came up!”

Before Luna could respond, Spike laughed, “Oh! You mean like that time I found your back massager and you said that same thing?”

The blush upon Twilight's face couldn't get any deeper, and Luna felt it best to defuse the situation as quickly as she could. "Spike, are Twilight's saddlebags all packed?" *Topic change, works every time*

"OH! Yes, ma'am! I'll go get them!" answered Spike, vanishing back up the stairs, presumably to fetch them.

Luna watched him go, and then slid her head next to Twilight's still blushing face and whispered, "We'll talk privately again later. For now, I think we should focus more upon current matters." Luna's horn began to glow, and the Element of Magic tiara floated off Twilight's head, nearly spilling Twilight's still hovering teacup. "You should probably pack this with the rest of your things. We may need it later."

Twilight set her tea next to Luna's as she noticed Spike coming down the stairs carrying not just her saddlebags, which were filled to the brim, but also a large camping backpack that she swore was twice his size. The midnight alicorn's eyes widened at the size of the backpack. "You've never camped before, have you?" she asked.

"Ummm, no, but I have read books on the subject so I always keep a list describing everything I would need!" the lavender unicorn replied. "Everything You've Always Wanted to Know About Camping Trips, but Were Afraid to Ask. It's the sequel!"

"Then I think I'll pack our camping supplies..." Luna said, levitating the camping gear from Spike's grasp and placing it in an out of the way corner.

"Thank you, Princess," Spike said, panting as he set the saddlebags down beside Twilight. "That was really heavy. What do you need all that for, Twi? Spelunking?"

Twilight's face began to turn beet red once again, and she had just started to reply when the door to the library burst wide open and her friends marched in with saddlebags and assorted accessories. She could guess that Pinkie had packed nothing but junk food and party supplies in her own, while Applejack's bags were filled with apples and apple accessories, the same kind she sells. Rainbow Dash? Twilight didn't really know what kinds of things she'd pack, but she knew Fluttershy would bring medicinal and first aid-related items, and Rarity was, well, Rarity. Fashion was foremost of her priorities.

Twilight hopped off the couch and approached her group of friends, relief evident in her face, "Oh, am I glad to see you guys, I'd like to get going as soon as we can and avoid more... embarrassing mishaps."

Rarity raised an inquiring eyebrow from beneath the very stylish hat she was currently wearing, then asked, "Let me guess, Princess Luna talked to you about wanting grandfillies to spoil rotten?"

"*What!?*" both Luna and Twilight cried out at the same time.

"I think a foal of your own would be so adorable, Twilight!" Fluttershy said with a smile, peering out from beneath her mane.

"All you ponies are *crazy!*" Twilight hissed through her teeth.

Rainbow Dash stood proud, her flight goggles hanging about her neck, "I'd like to get going too, I want to see some action, and Twilight? You're just as crazy as the rest of us."

"Erm, Twilight? Ah don' mean to be a spoil sport, but we have tah wait on Princess Luna to pack before we can leave." Applejack pointed out, staring over at Luna, who was still lounging upon the couch.

Luna flinched slightly, suddenly realizing just what she had not had the chance to do. "I forgot to pack! Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear, I have to go back to the castle!"

"Of all the worst possible things that could happen, this is **the. Worst. Possible. THING!**" Rarity rose onto her rear hooves and slapped a forehoof to her forehead, her horn shining to bring the couch, yes, the same couch Luna currently lay upon, over to her, causing a series of mishaps in quick succession. The first ended with Luna being twirled straight off the swiftly moving furniture. The second involved that same couch colliding with Twilight's rear to launch her forth into Fluttershy, who couldn't seem to catch a break from furniture-related incidents.

All eyes turned to glare at Rarity, who was posing on the couch dramatically, while Spike laughed gleefully in the background. A moment of silence passed before Rarity bashfully looked aside, "Okay, maybe I should tone it down, a little."

A certain alicorn wavered slightly as she rose up from behind the offending piece of furniture, "I'm okay, I think I should go get my things, though." Luna held a hoof up to her head and managed to steady herself before teleporting away in a flash of soft moonlight, leaving the ponies to themselves for a short while.

Luna's return to the library was met with silence, the entire place appearing deserted. Luna had her own special pair of saddlebags, along with a camping set enchanted to be easily portable. It was packed as a block of material, but would pop up to be an immense tent, something her sister had called a VARDIS. Volume and Relative Dimensions In Space. *Still not sure where my sister got that name from, just something about some doctor she met a few centuries ago. She didn't even tell me what he was a doctor of! Either way...* Luna glanced around, noticing the eerily quiet surroundings, thinking, *Where is everypony...?*

Thinking she had just heard something from upstairs, she turned and started up them when a very pronounced and perilous pink party pony pounced from her perch onto a perturbed and panicked Princess, yelling **"Surprise!"**

This time, it was the alicorn's turn to vanish, sowing confusion amongst the ponies who descended the stairs to be greeted by an empty room. Or a mostly empty room, at least. A certain Moon Goddess had managed to ensconce herself beneath Twilight's table, holding a hoof to her chest and breathing heavily with a very frazzled mane.

"Princess, are you okay?" Pinkie Pie asked Luna, abruptly popping into view and causing the surprised alicorn to slam her head into the underside of the table.

"Y-Yes, I should be after I manage to piece together the remnants of my exploded heart..." Luna panted, giving the pony a strained smile while her heart pounded within her chest. *Confound these ponies, they will be the death of me!*

Rarity came into view, rolling her eyes at Pinkie's antics, "I am truly sorry, Princess, not just about the couch but also about Pinkie Pie. We all

went upstairs to discuss what we may find in this Trelaria place, wherever it may be, until she heard you return and bade us all to stay quiet.”

“It was fun!” Pinkie added, bouncing away to join the rest of the group while Luna extricated herself from beneath the table.

Once she was free, Rainbow Dash noticed something poking out from her saddlebags, “Princess, what is that?” she asked, pointing it out with a hoof.

“Oh! This?” she said, lifting the saddlebag’s flap to reveal a piece of history. “This is Abacus, he’s been my best friend since I got back.”

“Twi? I think your aunt may be more than just a little nuts,” Rainbow said aside to the lavender unicorn, earning a glare for her efforts.

Luna waved a hoof dismissively, choosing to ignore the comment she could easily hear, instead lighting her horn and levitating the black as night orb from her mane, staring at it with a high level of trepidation. *I just hope Erebus was lying when he said mortal ponies were not to use this orb.* Luna’s mind came up with a reply to that, *Since when has Erebus ever lied to us?*

“Alright, is everypony ready? I need everyone to gather around me!” Luna said aloud as she squelched that thought, her eyes flitting from pony to pony, finally settling on Twilight.

“Yupperroo!”

“Of course! Ready to kick flank and take names!”

“Ah hope so, this Erebus fellow is just all sorts a bad news.”

“Yes, if that is alright with you...”

“Darling, this mare’s been ready for quite a while.”

The assents rolled in as the ponies gathered around their Princess; Luna’s eyes didn’t leave Twilight’s as she awaited her niece’s confirmation.

“Yes, Luna. Let’s do this.”

“Hold on to your flanks,” Luna breathed, clenching her teeth as she linked her magic to the dark orb. All at once, the space around them shifted and warped, then they all stretched thin, as if being drawn to another location. Finally, they hit a barrier that felt like the sudden dip into the first spring’s swim. Suddenly, things went wrong. Pinkie Pie vanished. Then Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy with a scream. Applejack and Rarity disappeared shortly afterward, their cries reverberating within Luna’s mind. Beside her, Twilight’s shrieks drove a dagger into Luna’s heart and seemed to go on for eternity. The monsoon of motion ended with the two of them sprawled out upon the loamy ground in the midst of a forest, the moon high overhead.

The orb fell dead before Luna, rolling to a stop bare inches from her nose. Further than that, Twilight lay unmoving and silent upon the ground, her back to the alicorn. *No... I did this. I brought them along and now they’re gone... what have I done?* the Moon Princess thought hysterically as she scrambled to her hooves and stumbled over to Twilight, nearly touching the ink black orb numerous times.

Still breathing, Luna sighed in relief, then turned to open her saddlebags, levitating the folded-up tent block from one side, then activating the spell that would form the tent. Tossing the block on the ground nearby, an immense tent sprung into being, definitely bigger than what the block would have been able to contain. Gently lifting Twilight with her magic, Luna slipped inside to get the unconscious unicorn settled. *We can’t go anywhere with her like this, not that I would risk it. anyway. We’re going to have to mount a search in the... morning? Oh Altair, we really **are** on the other side of the world now, aren’t we?*

Outside, left alone, the orb of darkness shimmered briefly, and if anypony were near, they would probably have heard demented, triumphant laughter.

Chapter 6

Trelaria

The power of the sun, and more, at my hooftips; more power than I'd ever have been able to safely use before. This must be like the power my weakling sister had at her disposal! Celestia thought... no. Solar Flare, she was called now. *A worthy name. My sun shall be seen across all the land, as Luna once tried to do with her moon. Oh, yes, I will take care of that shortly, among many other things.* Solar Flare stood, glanced about her empty throne chamber. Erebus was long gone, it seemed, as well as her sister and subjects. Silence permeated the castle around her, its inhabitants and workers having fled hours ago. *This will not do, another item on my list to take care of. But first, I must see my new appearance.*

Her horn shone brightly as a tall mirror materialized before the alicorn. *This is what my subjects will gaze fearfully and adoringly to... the image of... Empress Solar Flare.* Standing before it, the transformed Goddess of the Day's face broke into a wide smile. While Celestia's coat had been a pristine white, Solar Flare's was whiter still, even emanating a soft light. Her mane and tail were no longer the auroras flowing in the solar wind, instead now the wild undulations of flames. Around the alicorn, the air shimmered with the intense heat rising off her body, her hooves leaving permanent scorch marks upon the red carpet before her throne. Amber eyes stared back from the mirror with an intense gaze. *Now this, this is a body fit for a Goddess and Queen of all she sees. Now, a demonstration.*

Focusing her power, Solar Flare threw a blast of solar plasma at the mirror in front of her. The aged wood promptly burst into flame before disintegrating into ashes, while the silvered glass flowed downward into an oozing white-hot puddle. *Barely any effort. The Ponies of Equestria will tremble beneath their Righteous Queen.*

Stepping over the remains of the ruined mirror, Solar Flare began her tour of the castle grounds, searching for any signs of life. While she could detect the body heat from numerous sources, they all seemed to be hiding, and it was taking her quite a bit of concentration to acclimate to her new sense. It wasn't until she'd been exploring for half an hour that she finally

discovered two of her royal guards near her chambers. From afar, the new visage of their Princess took the guards by surprise, and even struck fear into their hearts at her new frightening appearance. Even from several feet away, Solar Flare could tell that the pegasi could feel the blistering heat radiating from her body.

Glaring down at the guards before her, Solar Flare commanded, "My castle is understaffed. You *will* find the rest of the guards and servants with all due haste. When I leave my quarters, I had *better* see this castle bustling with workers. **Am I understood?**"

Snapping quick salutes with their hooves, the two guards galloped off as if their tails were on fire. *That will be the least of their worries if they fail me.* Snorting, the Empress magicked open the doors to her chambers, walked inside, and closed them behind her before surveying the mess in the room. Noticing her hooves weren't helping any by leaving scorch marks upon the delicate carpets and rugs, Solar Flare effortlessly toned down the heat she was generating to a level more tolerable for anything nearby.

Gazing about the room, her eyes fell upon Philomena, preening innocently upon her perch in the corner. Stepping cautiously around the objects strewn across the floor, noticing that her bookshelf was the only thing not destroyed (yet in the wrong order), Solar Flare confronted her wayward pet.

"Philomena!" the alicorn hissed. "*What* is the meaning of this? Are *you* the one responsible for destroying my chambers!?" Philomena started and brought her head up from beneath her wing, giving Solar Flare a simple squawk before going back about her business. "No? Then who is, *bird?*" The avian turned her head, giving her owner a searching glance, then twittered and clacked her beak. Solar had long ago learned how to interpret Philomena's speech and mannerisms.

"My sister and her friends! And you did not have the decency to stop them? What *use* are you to me?!" Solar Flare demanded, nearly yelling at the bird now cowering before her. With that last sentence, Philomena let out a shrill screech and took off into the air, flying out into the evening air from the open balcony. *Useless avian. I think my sister's Nightmare had the right idea in making my daughter her pet,* she thought before turning to her room to begin the cleanup. Upon cleaning several parts of the room

Solar Flare noticed a few things of interest. One, her body care products had been tampered with; two, her little figurine of Luna was missing. *Not like I care for that weakling anymore.* And three, most importantly, her stash behind the bookcase had been disturbed! The mess her room had endured, plus the disturbance of several of her items of a more intimate nature, set the Goddess in a foul mood.

Foul enough that, once she left the confines of her chambers, Solar Flare radiated enough heat to make the air around her shimmer, and the ponies who had returned, still too few for her liking, had to cringe back against the walls to escape both the intense heat and her obvious anger. None dared question her new appearance. *As it should be. Now, first thing's first... to make sure the extravagance of Sol is always felt. One of the few things I can thank Luna's Nightmare for, that idea. However, I think I'll keep it in the sky for eternity, rather than allowing it to go down every so often.*

Stepping out onto one of Canterlot Castle's many open air balconies, Solar Flare focused her gaze upon the fiery orb within the sky, and then, using her full will upon it, wrested it from its normal place and drifted it across the heavens until the sun sat at high noon.

Basking in the beginning of her new rule, Solar Flare stood at attention, her eyes piercing into the heavens. What felt like several long minutes passed, though it could have easily been half an hour or more, when a polite cough erupted from a pony's throat behind her. Celestia, of course, could feel the stallion's heat signature, and knew who it was without even needing to turn around. Blueblood.

"Yes, Blueblood?" Solar Flare tested, keeping her back to the stallion.

"*Prince* Blueblood, Aunt, and as your nephew I-" the unicorn started before being interrupted.

Solar Flare whirled about, her hooves stamping upon the white marble beneath them and creating sparks that danced before going out. "-am neither!" the Goddess of the Day finished for him as she menacingly made her way over to tower above the 'Prince', her blistering heat pouring over the surprised stallion. "Loopholes and familial titles neither make you my nephew nor a 'Prince' of anything!"

Blueblood had, until this point, been cowering from the heat roiling off the Empress and her obviously livid demeanor. Once his titles were called into question, however, he stood straight and tall, looked Solar Flare in the eye and retorted, "And what can you do about it, *Princess*? I have already utilized my power to claim these titles, no new law you make can fix that!"

Solar Flare smiled. Yet what lay behind that smile was anything but congenial. The alicorn slowly walked around the 'noble Prince', her smile growing wider and more full of malice with each passing second. "Is that what you think, '*Nephew*'? You would dare defy your Empress? Oh, my dear little pony, I do not think that you..." An intense wave of fire came and went, followed by screams of agony and a unicorn tumbling to the marble floor. Solar Flare gave pause, then finished her sentence, "...have a leg to stand on."

Blueblood's right foreleg was gone, only a cauterized stump remained at his chest. "Oh dear me," Solar Flare continued. "It certainly seems my moral compass is askew, maybe I should take yours, hmmm?" She kicked out with a hoof, the normally pristine and well-pedicured hoof scoring along Blueblood's flank, digging deep into his coat and scraping off half of his cutie mark, eliciting another shriek from his throat. "Oh my, Blueblood. It seems you actually have red blood and not blue, just like any *commoner*!"

Ignoring the sobs of pain from the bleeding mess of a stallion beside her, Solar Flare summoned a wall of flame in the corridor behind them, to prevent any sort of escape for the egotistical unicorn. "Now, let me teach you the finer aspects of magic, *nephew*!" Solar's hoof stomped down, shattering the unicorn's horn. Then, as if to insult further, her magic lifted the broken tip of Blueblood's horn and drove it into his chest, crimson spilling down over his body. "I think you get the *point*!"

This time a wave of plasma erupted from thin air and Blueblood shrieked yet again, a rear leg gone this time. The Goddess stood over her maimed prey, glaring daggers at the pitiful excuse for a pony before her. "I am the rightful ruler of Equestria, and under no circumstances do I delegate my power to anypony else. Celestia's weak reign has ended; thus begins Empress Solar Flare's eternal reign of Daylight!"

Of course, Blueblood was not wont to sit still and accept his fate at the hooves of a clearly demented *mare*. Solar Flare watched his agonized form as he dragged himself over to the railing with his two remaining legs,

leaving a trail of blood in his wake. He was nearly there when, with a flick of her horn, Solar Flare sent a shower of embers down upon his body, causing the stallion to erupt into tall flames. The immense pain as his hide turned from a pristine white to a charcoal black harried the false Prince's movements. The scene of Blueblood pulling himself up over the railing and tumbling off the side of the balcony reminded Solar Flare of one of her favorite fantasy books, *The Lady of the Bracelets*. Stepping up to the railing, the alicorn glanced over the edge at the burning form as it tumbled down before crashing into the courtyard below.

"Long live the Prince..."

Luna awoke with a start, her eyes going wide at what she had felt. *No, it can't be!* After settling the unconscious Twilight into the tent's lavish interior, which Luna *still* could not believe had fit into that tiny block, she had settled down for a nap. What woke her was the feeling of her moon being pushed across the sky. In the entirely wrong direction! Luna scrambled upright and dashed out of the tent into the cool night air. *Night, it shouldn't still be night! It should nearly be dawn by now! What has Erebus done!?* Reaching out with her magic, Luna allowed her consciousness to slip into the night sky, filling the heavens with her being.

No... no! This... this can't be! The power the alicorn felt at work was definitely not that of Erebus, and the signature felt all too familiar. The reason her moon was not setting was her sister. Her sister had forced the sun back into the sky on the other side of the world. *That's not possible! Unless...* A flashback to some of her Nightmare's own words flew through her head. *The night will last forever, her... my own words. Is Celly doing the same?*

Luna grasped hold of her moon and *pushed*. Nothing happened, it was like Applejack trying to push Canterlot Castle off the side of Pandora Mountain. Throwing all her power into it, the alicorn tried again, yet her moon refused to budge, her strength unable to overcome her sister's. Receding back into her body, Luna slumped down upon the loamy earth, unable to understand what could have happened to her elder sister.

I'm not strong enough to move my moon, not against her power. How can I be strong enough, magically and mentally to face my sister if she has fallen prey to the same corruption as I once did? Nightmare Moon was much stronger than me, so if Erebus has overcome Celly, I can only guess at how powerful she's become. Will I have to... no, I don't want to do that. Luna thought, standing up and walking back to the tent. Her hooves tripped over the pitch black orb, returning her muzzle to the soil. But that was the least of her worries.

Something wasn't right. One moment, Luna had been in the forest, the next, she was within an orchard of orange trees. The next thing she noticed was that she was floating in the air. Not flying, but floating, and that below her was a pitch black alicorn. The alicorn looked nothing like Altair, and she could definitely tell that it was a stallion. His mane billowed out behind him as a cloud of darkness, not unlike a starless night. The last thing she noticed was the sky above. It was most certainly full daylight, but nothing like the skies she was used to. High above, the heavens were filled with orbs of light, a lot like her stars but much larger in appearance.

I'll add this to the list of 'things that can't be possible but seem to be so', Luna thought as she discerned something else. The alicorn below wasn't alone. Coming up behind him was a second alicorn, this one a sky blue color with an ethereal, morning mist-like mane and tail billowing out behind her. And a her it was indeed, the bodily structure said as much. *Something isn't right. I should be terrified and fretting over Celly's behavior, yet I can't seem to muster up the feelings. I am way too calm right now.* It was almost as if the presence of the two alicorns was mellowing out the Goddess' mood.

Opening her mouth to speak to the alicorns below, Luna became shocked when nothing came out. *I... I can't speak! What's going on here!?* Tendrils of panic crept across Luna's mind, but were swept away by the same aura of calm, which she now believed the two alicorns below her carried. It was then that the sky blue female began to speak.

Laying a blue feathered wing over the pitch alicorn's body, she said, "**Night**, I can feel it, too. It is nearly time for his return..." There was something strange about her voice. It sounded like a typical alicorn's voice,

as if she were a flock of birds singing in a chorus, but the way she said *Night*, there was something off about it.

Night, as she had called him, turned and gave his... mate, Luna would guess, a sad smile. "Yes, we must prepare for him, and make sure the current rulers know what to expect, warmth of my heart. However, I tire of this eternal struggle against Erebus, to always be confronted by the atrocities we committed in the past. To always know that our friends, whom we defiled, can never rest, can never go to Haven because of our hubris. **Day**, I tire of this battle, and yet I cannot stop fighting him, for if we let him win, then all of Equestria falls. The sins of the parents..."

"...are all to bear witness to and suffer." Day finished for her mate, planting a kiss upon his cheek. Luna realized what the strange tone was when they said each other's names. It was something lost and forgotten, a shield protecting, or preventing what was once known from being remembered.

They don't know their own names, Luna discovered, finally putting two and two together. *What could they have done that they are still suffering for?* The scene shifted around Luna, swirling about before coalescing into a new image. *What's going on!?*

The scene before her now was one she still had bits of memories from. The throne room and audience chambers of Everfree Castle. Before her were once again the two alicorns, Day and Night as they called themselves. Around her, the chambers were decorated differently from what she remembered. Many banners hung from the pillars rising to the stained glass ceiling, while the stained glass windows on the sides of the chambers showed scenes that were unfamiliar to Luna.

Ahead of her, the two alicorns stood in position with their wings spread and stern looks upon their faces, apparently ready for whatever may come at them. Behind Luna, the ceiling-height double doors to the chambers were shut and locked, while above her, through the few clear panes of glass within the stained-glass, Luna could see the night sky. What she could see of the scene was breathtaking. Above her, as much as she could see, the pitch black sky was awash in color. The patterns of color were reminiscent of the Auroras, but instead of ribbons of light in limited patches, they filled the entire sky.

For Luna, it was a great distraction, more so even than the events at hand. Ideas streaked across her mind on ways she could use this to improve her night. Voices buzzed on the edge of her perception from the two alicorns, and it was not until she saw a noticeable decline in the levels of light emanating from the magical lanterns that she began to once again pay attention. Behind her, a mist began to fill the chambers, swiftly dropping the temperature from a warm early fall night to the deepest depths of winter. Even the light from the magical torches dimmed, leaving the throne room eerily in shadow.

The mists came together, merging into what Luna could only describe as... well, a particularly intimidating unicorn, nothing more. What she had been expecting was a monstrosity as terrifying as the form Erebus had taken back in Canterlot. Whenever this was, it was certainly a much different time. Erebus appeared almost normal, other than his unusually large stature and his pitch-black coat. In addition, his horn was longer, and his eyes were a pale white with no pupil or iris to speak of.

The glare he leveled at the two alicorns, however, was all too familiar. **“--- and ---, I see you still stand against me for the transgressions you both committed. When will you give up your foolish fight and truly pay for the atrocities you have wrought? When will you allow me to restore the balance?”** Erebus asked, plain and simple. His fleshed face betraying nothing of his mood. It was as if he were carved from stone.

Luna realized, too, that her hypothesis of Day and Night's names may just have been correct. She could see Erebus' mouth moving to form the words, but she neither heard what came out, nor could read his lips to divine any meaning. The circumstances were absolutely of the strangest quality, and thus far still not the most bizarre of sights she'd witnessed.

“And you know we will continue to fight you to the end of days, Erebus. Buck the balance, it was my choice to welcome the warmth of the sun into my heart, and it was our choice to commit our sins. We will not permit you to take the Son of the Night to that forsaken land!” Night yelled out to the unicorn before him, stomping his forehoof to add effect.

Day looked at Night in admiration before turning her gaze back to Erebus, her mouth opening to speak while her horn began to shimmer a bright white, “Allies we may have been long ago, Erebus, but now enemies forevermore. You rob of us our names, our titles, *our* power, our *future*,

and you expect us to lie low? We think not! We will continue to fight you, no matter the cost to ourselves, so that none shall go back to that land of death.”

Tendrils of shadow began to extrude from Erebus’ coat, wriggling through the air around him as his eyes narrowed to mere slits. **“So be it. I will hold no mercy for your souls.”** The tendrils lashed out to all corners of the room, and nearly entrapped the two alicorns, who ducked beneath their reach.

Day lashed out with her horn, burning the tendrils away with the pure light of her horn, rebutting with, “We have none, not after you placed your judgement upon us! We will forever walk this world, unable to ever fully rest, monster!”

“A balanced price for the atrocities you committed. Several souls will never again see Trelaria. Several souls will never break past the barrier and live out their existence before Ascending. And thus, I deemed the same for you.” Erebus gave no indication that he was in pain from having his tendrils so forcefully destroyed. Luna could only watch the coming battle from her vantage point.

Day and Night both destroyed the tendrils nearest them, making sure no part of their bodies was touched by the thickened shadows. While they were distracted with this, a spear of ebon light lanced through Day’s foreleg, eliciting a shriek of pain from her and causing Night to turn to his mate. Hissing in agony, Day flicked her eyes at the tendrils, bringing Night to nod and return to battle while she lowered her horn and burned away the spear. Her pain was not yet abated though as blood dribbled down her leg, a contrast against her blue coat, and the wound blackened and began to spread.

Grimacing at the pain, Day could see Night guarding her out of the corner of her eye while she took care of her wound. Her teeth clenched, the alicorn lowered her horn to the wound and directed a blast of sunlight into her leg, immediately cauterizing the wound and burning away the corruption. The scent of burnt flesh wafted through the air around her, and Luna could tell that the unknown alicorn would definitely bear a severe limp until her leg healed.

While Day taking care of herself, Erebus was pressing his attack upon Night as Luna watched on in awe. *If Erebus is this powerful as a mere unicorn, how powerful is he as an alicorn?* she wondered, her eyes scanning the battlefield. Everywhere, tendrils of shadow struck at Day and Night from all sides. At the same time, the unicorn faded from sight, while the attacks continued. The pair of alicorns did not seem to notice their foe had vanished amidst the slew of tendrils.

Within a few moments, a great darkness spread across the chambers, surrounding the two alicorns and almost completely hiding the fight from Luna. The Night Goddess had discovered she could maneuver herself around this memory, or image of the past, whatever it may be. She slipped herself into the only lit space, the sphere of light surrounding Day and Night emanating brightly from Day's horn.

Luna nearly had a heart attack when numerous spears of shadow skewered through the orb of light, immediately being vaporized by Day's intense light without doing any damage to the two alicorns within. The Night Goddess swore she had also seen two or three spikes skewer through her own body, with no effect. *It is very disconcerting to find a spear protruding from my chest, and yet nothing is wrong,* she thought.

"Shall we, love?" Night asked his mate, turning his head toward the mare.

Day smiled through the intense luminosity of her horn and replied, "I would follow you to Trelaria and back, Night. Not even Erebus can stop that."

Together, the two alicorns leapt into the shadow and were consumed. *That can't be the end of them. If they're the Guardians, then they'd have had to live until current times!* Luna thought, pushing herself into the shadows to follow. Nothing happened, except for being unable to see or hear a thing. For the longest time, Luna drifted, unable to find her way back to that spot of light.

What felt like half an hour later, the shadow slowly receded, leaving Luna bewildered as to what occurred. This time, she found herself nearly at the glass ceiling of the chambers. Drifting down through the arches and columns, the alicorn laid eyes upon Day and Night, who appeared to be heavily battered from whatever they had encountered within Erebus'

domain. Not only that, but the rapidly disintegrating body of Erebus lay broken and defeated before them.

“And yet, I return. I always return,” a voice said from nowhere, and ultimately everywhere around Luna. The mare threw her head around, looking for the source, while beneath her Day and Night spoke quietly to each other.

Around Luna, the scene shifted. Yet again, the night and day skies were different from what she was used to, and it started again with Erebus' return. A battle he lost.

Shift.

Another battle, another loss.

More shifts, and ever more battles. Luna eventually lost count of the battles the Guardians and Erebus had. As a unicorn, Erebus still was many times more powerful than even Twilight could hope to be, but was still not a match for two full grown alicorns. Two alicorns, or even four could never hope to stand against him now that he had gained an alicorn's body. And with each battle, Erebus' new body became more grotesque and twisted.

It was the last scene that told Luna she was at the end of her journey. The scene of Erebus, as she knew him to be, facing her sister. The goddess cringed inwardly at what unfolded, and Celestia's capture.

“And now, it is your turn. Choose wisely. A war millenia in the making now comes to a head, and the alicorns of Equestria and Trelaria shall bow to the balance, or be wiped off the face of the world.”

Luna drew in a gasp of breath when she felt herself return to reality, scrambling upright off the soft loam beneath her body while attempting to keep from touching the orb of darkness again. *That must be what caused this vision! I... I touched it, and it showed me that!* All at once, the feelings that had been repressed by the visions hit her, and she stumbled in shock, nearly falling against the tent beside her. *Oh Altair, I need to do something! I can't just stand out here watching visions of the past while my sister is in*

trouble and Equestria is endangered! Oh, I wish I were strong enough to do something!

Ignoring the orb, Luna stumbled back into the tent, her mane and tail disheveled. What had started as a slow day had abruptly become very fast-paced. Within the tent, Luna would still be amazed at everything that lay within the magical structure if it weren't for the fact that she was already deep in thought. The plain exterior did not at all hint at the luxurious interior. The tent, while large, had enough room to comfortably house several ponies. Not only were there piles of cushions strewn around for ponies to sit upon, but also a fanciful table in the middle of it all, while along the outer edges of the tent wall, alcoves lay where equines could sleep. There even stood a bookshelf against one wall. It was amazing what magic could do!

*So many things that worry me, Luna thought as she paced, walking past the sleeping Twilight in one of the alcoves. If Celly is now like my Nightmare, then she is definitely more powerful than she was before, in addition to whatever power Erebus allocated to her. The Elements are scattered, and possibly dead, leaving only me who is powerful enough to face my sister **and** Erebus! And I'm nowhere near strong enough to do so!* Luna collapsed onto one of the piles of cushions, staring off into space with a dejected look upon her face. *What have I done? I should have heeded Erebus' warning, and now I get to tell my new niece I may have killed her friends and our possible saviors.*

"Ugh... my head. What happened?" Rainbow Dash asked, rubbing her head and finding herself stuck within the branches of a tree. She blinked and looked up through the canopy at the star speckled sky above. *Night? How long was I out!? And **where** am I?* The rainbow-maned pegasus peered around, noticing only trees around her, not a pony to be seen.

In fact, the forest seemed eerily quiet. Even in the middle of the night, there should have been the sound of insects and night creatures. Instead, the only thing Rainbow heard was silence, aside from the sounds she herself made.

Ookay, getting creeped out now, Rainbow thought, pulling herself entirely onto the branch to perch while her eyes roved warily through the trees. Her ears alert to catch any sound, the pegasus swiveled her head in all directions. At first, she heard nothing, but after a few moments she heard a soft sound coming from a short distance away. Listening closely, it almost sounded as if somepony was whimpering.

Silently launching herself into the air, Rainbow Dash flew toward where she thought she heard the sounds, but could find nothing other than trees, underbrush, and thick bushes. It wasn't until one of the bushes shook that she stopped to investigate, dropping down to the ground and creeping forward to part the brush.

The shriek from Fluttershy that followed evoked a yell of surprise from Rainbow in return, who jumped a few feet into the air with her heart pounding. It took several seconds for the sky blue pegasus to realize what happened, then to hang her head in exasperation. Finally, Rainbow once again parted the brush and peered inside at a huddled Fluttershy. "Jeez, you scaredy pony, it's only me!" she softly said, still wary about the silence in their region.

"Rainbow Dash?" a demure and terrified voice came from the bush as Fluttershy's head popped up and stared wide-eyed at Rainbow. Suddenly, Dash found herself in a choking hug that was surprisingly strong for Fluttershy. "Oh! I was so worried! I couldn't find Princess Luna or anypony else, and I found your goggles and saddlebags but I couldn't find you!"

Pushing herself out of Fluttershy's hug, Rainbow raised an eyebrow, then placed a hoof to her forehead. Nothing. Peering back at her flanks, her saddlebags were also absent. "They must have fallen off after whatever happened to us! I've never experienced pain like that before. Strained wings, a broken leg, concussions, but nothing like that," Rainbow pointed out, on the brink of complaining.

Fluttershy nosed back into the bushes, then emerged a moment later dragging both of their saddlebags, as well as Rainbow's flight goggles. After resettling the packs upon her hips, and the goggles around her neck, Rainbow sat down and crossed her forelegs in a huff. "I bet this was all Luna's fault! I knew we couldn't trust her! She was Nightmare Moon twice, what makes us think she'd ever be more than that?"

“But...” Fluttershy started, then paused before continuing, “...Princess Celestia and Twilight both trust her, why can’t we? I don’t think Princess Luna would ever do such a thing, what if it was Erebus?”

“Yeah? And what if the Princess is working for that overgrown cloud of dust? How do you know that she didn’t just do this to get the Elements separated?” Rainbow Dash stood up and glared at Fluttershy, ready to fly off and face Erebus herself, if she had to.

“I... I don’t know, but I do know that our friends are missing, and we can’t just leave them here! I mean, what if a bear got them? Or a hydra? Or a bear got them and the hydra got the bear!” Fluttershy asked.

Tossing her mane, Rainbow Dash rose onto her rear hooves and shadowboxed the air, “We’re not going to find them sitting here, but if a bear or hydra is attacking them, I’ll take ‘em out and save them!” Pulling her flight goggles over her eyes, Rainbow leapt into the air and was about to dash off when Fluttershy spoke up.

“Wait! We... we don’t even know where they are.” Fluttershy looked to the side, then up at the hovering Rainbow Dash. “What... what if we’re in the middle of nowhere and we’re lost forever?” The yellow pegasus held her hooves to her cheeks in distress, “What if all the others are lost forever, too!?”

Rainbow rolled her eyes. It wasn’t the first time she’d seen one of Fluttershy’s freakouts, but it was certainly one of the rare times she’d talked as much. Settling back down to the ground, the future Wonderbolt wiggled her wings at her partner, “That’s why we have these babies! All we have to do is fly high enough and we’re bound to see a town!” Before Fluttershy could respond, Rainbow launched herself into the air and spiraled up high, her wings flapping furiously to gain height. Around the pegasus, the forest stretched out in all directions, broken by the occasional clearing. Stopping and then hovering, Rainbow put a hoof to her forehead and glanced in all directions.

Trees. Trees. More trees. Clearing. Trees. Clouds. Mountains. Road. Trees. Aha! A road! The road should lead us right to civilization! Marking the direction of the path in her mind, Rainbow dove down, picking up speed before she reached the treeline. Weaving herself through the branches, the pegasus braked and skidded to a halt just as she touched

down upon the ground in front of Fluttershy, startling the pegasus and forcing a soft 'eep' out of her.

"I saw a path to the northwest, a short flight away. If we get to it and follow it, we should be able to fly to wherever it leads in no time at all! It'll be nice to get back amongst other ponies, so let's get going!" As Rainbow was about to take off for a second time, she heard a whimper from behind her and sighed. "What now?" she asked, turning around to see Fluttershy looking to the side and holding out a bandaged wing. Rainbow Dash hadn't noticed the bandages until now.

"I can't fly. I hurt my wing when I fell out of the tree I woke up in. It's not broken, just strained, but..." Fluttershy tightly shut her eyes and daintily folded her wing against her side, shivering from the pain of it.

In a huff, Rainbow kicked a nearby root and exclaimed, "Great, you mean we're going to have to walk the entire way? Or, well, you'll have to walk. I certainly will be flying the entire way!"

"I, ummm, well... yes."

Rarity screamed several times, nearly making her voice hoarse. It was the worst possible thing to have happened! Worse than running out of a certain fabric, much worse than Sweetie Belle's cooking! No, what was worse than those was waking up in a pond covered in mud, muck, and things best not described. Screaming again, Rarity jumped out of the pond and shook herself free of as much of the muck as she could, shivering with abhorrence.

My coiffure! My coat! My... It was at that moment that Rarity noticed two separate but related things. One, her saddlebags were missing, meaning not only would she have to painstakingly groom herself without any of her usual beauty supplies, but fashion was entirely out of the window, too! And two, her friends were missi-

That thought was completely interrupted when Applejack came galloping out of the trees to skid to a halt in front of Rarity, raising an eyebrow at her condition. "Ah was gonna ask what was attackin' ya, but ah

think ah can see what it may be,” she said, giving the unicorn’s pond scum-covered body a quick glance over. “Ah found our bags in a clearing nearby, and ah know how prissy you are about getting clean.”

“Thank you kindly, Applejack. I... think I’ll manage as long as I don’t think too hard on it.” Rarity replied, taking a disgusted look down at her scum-covered body, then walking into the nearby trees in the direction the farmer had come from. *At least we’ve all arrived in one piece, I just can’t imagine what caused that intense pain. As far as I knew, teleporting was only supposed to be disorienting.*

Pushing her soaked mane out of the way, Rarity peered back to see Applejack following her. “Did the others experience that dreadful pain, Applejack?” she asked in concern.

“Well, erm, ah haven’t found the others yet. Ah only found ya when ya screamed bloody murder. Don’t worry,” Applejack replied, smiling at the unicorn. “We’ll find ‘em. They couldn’t ‘ve gone far at all. Ah mean, you weren’t far from the field ah found myself in!”

“Darling,” Rarity responded, “Of course we’ll find them. I’m more worried right now about getting dried, groomed, and settling in for the night.” Rarity stepped around a large root sticking up, sticking her tongue out in disgust at the clumps of dirt sticking to her drenched hooves.

“Sorry ta disappoint, Sugarcube, but the Princess has the tent and the other camping materials, so until we find them, we’re stuck high and dry. Pardon, I will be stuck dry, you’ll still be wet.” Applejack poked fun at Rarity, earning a glare in return. In retaliation, Rarity shook her entire body, sending clumps of mud, plenty of water, as well as pieces of scum over at Applejack, coating her in just as much grime as the unicorn.

“There, now we both shall be left high and drenched!” Rarity taunted, throwing her head up into the air as she stepped into the clearing Applejack must have come from. The clear, full-mooned sky shone down upon the tall grass and the insurmountable number of night-blooming violet colored flowers that glimmered and glistened in the soft light. Rarity’s eyes lit up at the beauty of it all while she scanned her gaze across the field. *Of all places to appear, this has to be the best of them all!*

Applejack came up beside her, her eyes full of amusement. “Very mature of ya, Rarity,” Applejack added, then noticed her gaze. “Very pretty, of course, and they make good eatin’!

“Applejack, how *could* you!?” Rarity demanded, wheeling on the other mare with a glare.

Instead of a reply, Applejack reached over and plucked one of the flowers, and then before Rarity could react, stuffed it into the alabaster unicorn’s mouth.

At first, Rarity was revolted and shocked at the uncouth behaviour of the farmer, but after giving an experimental chew, not only did she forget about the rudeness Applejack showed, but also that she was still dripping wet. The flowers were simply delectable, as if they had come from some noble’s private garden. No, not just some noble, but the Princesses themselves!

Having not eaten all day, and with the amount of time that must have passed, the two ponies proceeded to have an epic meal time. Well, perhaps not epic, but a sizable patch of the flowers did vanish down the gullets of only two ponies. Unfortunately for both ponies, the flowers had some interesting effects. First came about a round of drunken giggling over every little thing, followed by some quite lucid hallucinations, many of which both ponies would later on agree never to speak of again. Except in private, of course.

Intense hunger occurred afterward, causing the two obviously drugged ponies to go about feasting on more flowers, intensifying the effects, until finally, they both simply fell into a sleep-like state of unconsciousness. No pony would ever be envious of what the two ponies will feel when they wake up.

“A new land!” Pinkie Pie exclaimed, bouncing about within a forest, oblivious to the fact that her friends were all missing. Of course she wasn’t worried, it’s all a game of hide and seek, and she was always best at that game, so she’ll easily find them all in no time! Pinkie gasped excitedly, “And that means new ponies to meet, too! Eeee! So many parties I’ll have

to plan. A 'Welcome us to Trelaria' party, a 'Welcome us to Trelaria party' afterparty, and even a 'Hello to everypony in Trelaria' party!"

Pinkie was absolutely giddy with the prospects of all the celebrations she could plan, until a random thought... well, perhaps less random than her usual thoughts popped into her head and made her skid to a halt mid-leap, then sink to the ground. "What if they don't have party decorations?Such a silly filly, every town has decorations somewhere!"

Resuming her bouncing, her saddlebags in tow on her flanks, the pink party pony pranced pretty passionately past plenty of plants while pondering the perils of participating in parties with pitiful proportions of presents and decorations. Once again, Pinkie Pie skidded to a halt, realizing she didn't have a word that started with P for decorations. Shrugging her shoulders, she merrily went back to her important planning duties, barely noticing the quietness of the forest around her.

To any other pony, the silence would be eerie. To her, it wasn't noticable at all, Pinkie Pie was so caught up in her thoughts she began to sing a simple tune. A familiar one, in fact, and a favorite of hers. Giggle at the Ghostie, one her Granny Pie taught to her all those years ago. Pinkie didn't mind that her Granny was long gone, the mare's grandmother having passed on peacefully to that big party place in the sky.

In fact, if Pinkie Pie concentrated, she could almost hear her Granny Pie singing one of her many lullabies to her right now. She used to sing to the young filly to help her sleep on those nights she was afraid of the dust monsters beneath her bed and in her closet. And a night like this would be a perfect one to remember her Granny Pie.

Swiveling her ears, Pinkie paused in her bouncing for a moment and turned her head to the north. "Granny Pie?" she asked into the night air, swearing that she could most certainly hear her long gone family member in that direction. Of course, any direction was as good as any other, and Pinkie Pie could always find her friends after she found whatever may be calling to her.

Twilight shifted as she woke, noticing something strange about her surroundings. She was not in her own bed, which caused her to stiffen in surprise. Peeking at her surroundings, the lavender unicorn was met with the glorious trappings of what appeared to be a large tent, or maybe a small living space reminiscent of some of the tents in Ponyville. Her aunt was also pacing through the interior, mumbling something under her breath with a distant look in her eyes, and a frazzled bodily appearance.

“Princess Luna? Are you alright?” Twilight asked, lifting herself into a sitting position. She probably did not look as well groomed as she usually was, generally getting a bad case of bed-mane, but Twilight guessed that whatever had Luna fatigued had to do with whatever that thing in the castle had been. *Erebus, I think it was.*

Luna froze, her head whipping around to look in Twilight’s direction. The unicorn could see that the Princess’ pupils were mere dots. The next thing she knew, Luna had dashed over and grabbed her up in a hug, whispering, “Thank Altair you’re okay! When everypony started screaming, I knew something had gone wrong with the teleportation! When you started as well, I couldn’t ignore your screaming I was so worried for you! And with everything that went on recently...” It seemed that Luna had barely stopped for a breath, which was more than could be said for Twilight, who couldn’t breathe at all with how tightly she was being hugged.

It wasn’t until Twilight started frantically tapping at Luna’s back with her hooves did Luna realize what was going on and release her. Gasping for breath, the unicorn turned to Luna and managed to get out, “Wha... what are you... talking about? All... I remember is us using... that orb and then waking up here.”

Luna drew away and looked to the side. The guilt on her face could not have been more evident. Twilight rubbed her throat, which she had to admit felt dry and parched, as she stared over at the alicorn. “Luna. What happened to the others?”

The Goddess of the Night started and appeared to try to speak several times, her mouth opening and yet only silence coming forth. The uncomfortable silence persisted for a couple long minutes before Luna found her voice. “Something went horribly wrong during the teleportation. Erebus had warned us it wasn’t for mortal ponies, and... I can still hear the

screams of your friends. They're all gone. Dead, or..." Luna trailed off, unable to look Twilight in the eyes.

The unicorn scholar's mouth hung open, nothing escaping from it but silence. *M-my friends? May be dead? No no no nonono! We always get through everything together! We're all strong together! Through Nightmare Moon, the dragon, the parasprites, too many things to count, we got through it all!* Twilight's gaze hardened as she became resolute in her thoughts. *No, they are out there somewhere, and we will get through this together.*

"No, they are alive, I'd know otherwise. We'll find them, Pri- ...Luna. Or they'll find us. Either way, we will all get through this together! No matter what happens, my friends are always there." The goddess did not seem soothed. "There's more, isn't there?" Twilight had been about to end her short speech, but she noticed that Luna only drew more inward, so she added that last part.

Luna could only nod, still unable to meet Twilight's gaze, then, with a spill of words, she said it. "Celly's become a Nightmare like I did, probably because of Erebus. The sun is high over Equestria right now, even though my internal clock says it should be the middle of the night. I can't fight her, Twilight, I just can't! I am physically, mentally, and magically unable to face my sister!"

Even though her mind was screaming at her not to do it, Twilight climbed down out of the sleeping alcove and walked over to Luna, following what her heart said instead, and wrapped her hooves around the larger alicorn. Luna stiffened and turned her head towards Twilight, her eyes wide in fear. "We will get through this Princess! You'll have all of us to turn your sister back, and then we can take out Erebus!"

Luna stubbornly shook her head and replied, "It is not that easy! Celly has always been the strongest of us two, and now with a thousand years of experience over me, she's many times stronger than I could wish to be at present. When I became Nightmare Moon, my strength intensified to the point that Celly had no way she could ever defeat me. If what I believe happened to her indeed has, then she would outmatch anything we threw against her, and the only two beings that would be able to stand against her would be Erebus and..." Luna paused, then finished her

sentence, hanging her head while Twilight released her. "...Nightmare Moon. I am not her anymore."

Twilight settled back onto a nest of pillows and looked thoughtful for a moment. *The second time the Elements of Harmony were used against her, Nightmare Moon had her power stripped and was thrust into the rear of Luna's mind. It drove the Mare of Darkness mad. The third time, when she returned, Luna said she had accepted that Nightmare Moon was a part of her, and it allowed the Elements to finally join them together.* Looking up at the Goddess of the night, Twilight flattened her ears back at the thoughts that came next. *If we could somehow get Luna to tap into that power without fully becoming Nightmare Moon, she would be able to face her sister and stall her long enough for us to cleanse her with the Elements. Ohhh, this could either go spectacularly or horrendously.*

"Luna?" Twilight tentatively asked, laying a hoof upon the alicorn's shoulder. "Is there any way for you to tap into the power that was once Nightmare Moon's?"

A shudder rippled through the Goddess' body and she shook her head. It was the most vulnerable Twilight had ever seen Luna, and it worried her. "No, not without accepting all that is Nightmare Moon and becoming her once again."

Twilight's thoughts raced as ideas came and went, but one stuck out in her mind. "Wait, we merged the both of you with the Elements, so if you did become her, wouldn't it be a mix of you two? You would of course have her power, but you'd be in control, wouldn't you?"

Scratching a hoof against the pillows below, Luna appeared lost in thought while muttering under her breath. Twilight shifted in position, just barely able to catch what the Princess was saying. "I could open the door, and release what I shoved inside, but what about the... I would still have to deal with that. Plus, the added strain on keeping her in control... I... could possibly do this, yes. But at what cost to myself?" Luna's eyes flicked upward to peer out through the clear ceiling of the tent, up past the boughs of the trees and into her night sky.

Several long moments passed in silence, and Twilight became uncomfortable. Standing, she walked about the large tent, taking notice of the various things within. The several sleeping alcoves, the piles of

cushions strewn about, even a little alcove meant to be a kitchen! Those didn't interest her as much as the bookcase, or the numerous spells encompassing the living quarters. It seemed half the night went by for Twilight while studying the spells and books, when when in reality it was perhaps not more than half an hour until she finally heard from Luna, "...I'll do it."

The suddenness of it all surprised Twilight into clunking her head upon the shelf of the bookcase above her where she had been investigating the titles of the books. Rubbing her head, Twilight turned and beamed, if not happily, then at least in victory. "Really? Then let's hurry so we can go find the oth-"

Luna rounded on Twilight and held up a hoof, signalling for her to stay quiet. Her expression was dire and stern, and she walked as with great purpose "Twilight Sparkle, this may save us, or be the death of us both," Luna said matter-of-factly, moving to stand before her niece. "You only read how terrible my Nightmare really was. I experienced it first hoof. I may be unable to control her, but right now, this is the only thing we... I am able to do." The alicorn took a deep breath and shut her eyes, then slowly released it before opening them once again. "This is our best and only option. Stand back, my niece."

Twilight was speechless, but did as she was told and backpedaled away from the bookshelf. *I certainly hope this works*, Twilight thought as she got a safe distance away, and for good measure, set up a pillow wall in front of herself with magic. *If not, I would hate to see what Nightmare Moon would have planned for me. I was the cause of her downfall, after all. Twice.* The lavender unicorn swallowed and ducked down low behind the wall, so that only her mane, eyes, and horn peeked out over the top.

For several long moments, nothing happened, with only Luna's muttering breaking the silence that not only was within the tent, but also outside of its walls in the eternal night. Even the animals knew something was wrong. No bird sang its song, no animal crept through the trees and underbrush, and not a single insect chirped in the unnatural night.

"I only have to open the door," Twilight heard Luna say several times, before she went silent. Finally, Twilight tired of waiting and edged herself back over to the bookcase, interested in the numerous books she hadn't had time to look at, much less read. *I think I have time to peruse*

through a couple. Maybe I should try the Mystic's Guide to Meaning? Or maybe I should finish that book the Princess... mother gave me. Oh dear, I am never going to get used to thinking of Princess Celestia as my mother. Oh! This book looks good! Using her magic, Twilight Sparkle slipped a book off the shelf, then settled down upon the floor and opened it over her hooves. Within the illumination cast from magical orbs of light hung about the tent, Twilight could clearly see that the book she chose pertained to some of her best interests. Magic.

Time passed, with Twilight firmly engrossed in her book, so much so that farther in the room, the lavender unicorn did not at all notice Luna's transformation. At first, the alicorn only glowed a brilliant white, yet cast little light. Then, her form began to change, becoming more lithe and tall with every passing second. The luminance faded, revealing an alicorn as black as night. Giving her elegant wings a flap, narrowed, turquoise eyes turned to stare at the unicorn reading the book with her back turned.

"Well, well, well. It seems I have you to thank for my return, Twilight Sparkle," the alicorn's regal and intimidating voice came forth as she moved forward to tower over Twilight, lowering her head to glare at the unicorn who had twice defeated her.

The suddenness of the voice caused Twilight to jump, sending the book flying. Trying to calm her pounding heart, the unicorn turned her head to find her eyes staring into the alicorn's own, face to face. Nightmare Moon had returned.

Far away, within a great citadel as dark as the night, a cloaked and hooded unicorn raised his head and stared out a skylight into the eternal night above. For several long moments, that is all he did. Then, he turned his head in another direction to stare at an empty throne nearby, just as black as the night and as fearsome as a nightmare, its entire structure designed to instill fear.

The throne, while kept dust free and clean, radiated an air of having lain dormant and unused for centuries, millenia or even eons, while the rest of the audience chamber saw daily use in the form of petitioners and visitors. Of course, the old stallion knew this would soon shift. The Winds

of Change were on the breeze, and they would soon become a hurricane of proportions unseen for millenia. He knew this world sat on the razor's blade over oblivion, and that coming choices could teeter it off the edge.

Looking at the chess board next to him, the stallion silently grinned to himself. The pieces were in place. The board and setup looked nothing like a normal chess board. Multiple sides, multiple players. Pieces playing multiple sides, some playing no side at all. And others just trying to maintain the balance. Oh yes, everything was coming to a head, and it was only a matter of time before the major players became known.

But one thing he knew, and knew well, as the Winds had brought to him the news.

His Queen had returned.

It was time for the armies of darkness to march forth and wage war upon the light.