

# Past Sins

*What else can you be  
when the world can only see  
a monster?*

By Pen Stroke  
Assisted by Batty Gloom



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Art Done as a Commission By [Valcron](#)

Currently @ Revision 2

**Pages: 552**

**Words: 179,000**

# Table of Contents:

<b>Prelude</b>	<b>Resurrection</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Chapter 1</b>	<b>Everfree Discovery</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Chapter 2</b>	<b>A Secret Between Friends</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>Chapter 3</b>	<b>School Days and Memories</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>Chapter 4</b>	<b>Distant Storm Clouds</b>	<b>90</b>
<b>Chapter 5</b>	<b>Theatrical Trouble</b>	<b>104</b>
<b>Chapter 6</b>	<b>Reunion of the Royal Pony Sisters</b>	<b>123</b>
<b>Chapter 7</b>	<b>Careful Maneuvering</b>	<b>150</b>
<b>Chapter 8</b>	<b>You Can't Hide Magic</b>	<b>168</b>
<b>Chapter 9</b>	<b>Revealing Truths</b>	<b>185</b>
<b>Chapter 10</b>	<b>Treachery</b>	<b>209</b>
<b>Chapter 11</b>	<b>The Castle of Nightmare</b>	<b>236</b>
<b>Chapter 12</b>	<b>Mother of a Nightmare</b>	<b>254</b>
<b>Chapter 13</b>	<b>All Hail the Queen</b>	<b>277</b>
<b>Chapter 14</b>	<b>Once a Crusader</b>	<b>314</b>
<b>Chapter 15</b>	<b>Missing Joy</b>	<b>338</b>
<b>Chapter 16</b>	<b>To Harden a Soft Heart</b>	<b>368</b>
<b>Chapter 17</b>	<b>Tainted Blessing</b>	<b>397</b>
<b>Chapter 18</b>	<b>Mare Against Monsters</b>	<b>420</b>
<b>Chapter 19</b>	<b>Recovery</b>	<b>460</b>
<b>Chapter 20</b>	<b>Judgment</b>	<b>481</b>
<b>Chapter 21</b>	<b>The End of the Nightmare</b>	<b>514</b>

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*Dedicated to my loving aunt.  
Among the first to encourage me to write.  
She passed away while this story was being written.  
She was a 3rd grade teacher, a mother, a wife, and a dear aunt,  
And I will miss her greatly.*

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# Prelude

## Resurrection

Amidst dim candlelight, a single unicorn sat with his head bent down, eyes shut. He sat alone at the edge of the still pond, reflection dancing in the water. The pond was nestled deep within Everfree Forest, the darkened trees and gnarled branches surrounding all sides like silent sentinels.

While most of Equestria had just shifted into spring, Everfree still gripped by clinging bits of winter. Snow covered the ground and there was a lingering chill in the air, the unicorn's hot breath leaving puffs of steam to curl up for a few seconds before disappearing into the night.

For a long while the unicorn had sat in the utter silence on the edge of the pond, only a few nearby candles for company. The light from the tiny, flickering flames fell upon his black coat, though it wasn't his natural color. No, his whole body, mane included, had been dyed the deepest black possible... even his true cutie mark had been covered by the dyes, his flank appearing utterly blank.

Only the small sounds of the forest were audible, the creaking of the trees and shifting of the pond water. It was a scene of peace, what the unicorn needed as he prepared for the task of the evening. Yet, as he took in another deep breath and released it, the sound of hoof steps began to echo across the trees.

"Nexus, we're ready when you are."

The black unicorn, Spell Nexus, took in another breath, turquoise eyes opening as he turned to look at the pony who had approached him from behind. "I will be along shortly."

The pony who had interrupted nodded, disappearing back into the forest. After waiting for the sound of hoof steps to once again fade, Nexus lit his horn, magic flowing. He reached to his side, levitating a number of items into the air.

“Our queen, guide me this night... for it is beneath this full moon that our efforts come to fruition.”

Nexus spoke the words slowly, his voice carrying the tone of a pony well practiced in preaching, whose words could inspire the loyalty of his brothers and sisters. A voice that had drawn great minds and strong bodies to the cause, though at the moment he was speaking only to himself.

“Let me be merely a vessel for your will and strength until the deed is done.”

The levitating items drew close to him, a cape that was a midnight blue with white stars all across its surface. A chest plate comprised of grayish purple metal, with a turquoise crescent moon set in its center. Horseshoes to match the chest piece. An armored plate for the back of his neck. All these bits of metal secured themselves to the unicorn as he spoke.

“Let me bear your mane, both powerful and beautiful, a depiction of the endless sky. Let me stand in uniform, bearing the armor in the image of your greatness. Let me be your agent this night, for it is you I serve above all others.”

The final piece levitated towards Nexus, a helmet made of the same metal as the chest piece. The unicorn guided the armor carefully, bring it down across his horn as it fit snuggling onto his head.

“May your power be with me, for tonight you shall not only breathe again of the cool night air, but you shall look upon the world with eyes of your own, no longer sharing a body with a weak foal. Tonight, you shall be your own mare, and never again to be threatened.”

Nexus stood, looking at his reflection in the pond. He now appeared the ultimate doppelganger of his mistress, an eager acolyte to her power and knowledge. Through his efforts and those of the rest of the group, they would see their queen rise again. Yet it was only he that was allowed to look so much like the queen, to lead the spell that was about to be cast. It was his place of honor, one no pony would steal from him.

“Tonight, Nightmare Moon, your followers shall grant you a life of your own, and the tyrants of sun and moon shall fall.”

Mentally prepared, Nexus turned and began to walk into the forest, following the trail that connected the pond to another part of the Everfree. Another clearing, which came into view quickly and was populated by several unicorns, pegasi, and earth ponies moving about the space as they double and triple checked their work.

The ground in the clearing had been cleared of snow, a few piles left dotted about the space. On both the exposed ground and on top of the piles of snow wooden bowls had been placed and filled with oil soaked powders. Paint had been used upon the ground to draw arcane lines of power, and in the air above cloaked pegasi gathered clouds, pushing them together to hide the clearing from prying, sky bound eyes.

All the ponies Nexus saw wore the simple, black cloak of the order except for three, who stood giving orders. A pair of pegasi and an earth pony, who like Nexus wore the honored armor. Still, they lacked the flowing, star field cloak and the helmet... those were vestments that were worn by Nexus alone.

“How close are we Night Wind?” Nexus asked as he approached the two pegasi and the one earth pony.

“Cloud cover is almost complete and then the pegasi need a few minutes to get their bowls.” The dark purple pegasus answered, staring back at Nexus with her turquoise eyes, a sign of the order. Through the work of a spell Nexus blessed each of the Children of Nightmare, a blessing that carried enlightenment along with eyes to match their queen. Eyes that could be shifted to the regal turquoise color when the order assembled but changed back to normal when in public.

“Good. Stonewall, do you have the items?”

“They have not left my sight since our departure from Canterlot, Nexus.” The earth pony replied, motioning to the bowl that was currently resting on his back.

“And Gray Gale, is our special guest awake?”

“Oh yea, she just woke up.” The gray pegasus of the trio offered, talking far more casually. “And boy is she scared!”

“That’s because *you* told her Stonewall would snap off her horn if she tried to escape.” Night Wind snipped.

“Hey, it kept her from trying anything.” Gray Gale defended.

“She couldn’t try anything even if she wanted to. She’s got an anti-magic brace on her neck.”

“You have all done well,” Nexus spoke, stopping the argument before it could go any further. “But now we must all take our places. Stonewall, take the sacred items to their place in the center of the ritual. Gray Gale, Night Wind, prepare your torches and head to the sky.”

The three nodded, going to their assigned tasks while Nexus turned his attention to one side of the clearing. There, lying on the ground was a pony, hogtied with rope and a cloth bag over her head.

Walking slowly, being careful not to brush against any of the wooden bowls set around, Nexus approached the hogtied pony, and, when he was a few steps away, used his magic to loosen and remove the bag. The unicorn was now fully visible, her violet coat dirty in a few places from the fact she was lying on the ground. Her darker purple mane was a mess as she looked up at Nexus in fear, undoubtedly noticing the resemblance the unicorn had with a certain fallen princess.

“I’m so happy you were able to join us this evening.”

“Who are you? What are you going to do to me?” Twilight inquired, just barely managing to find her voice as she struggled at the ropes around her legs. She would have tried to use her magic to escape, but, along with the rope, a metal brace was secured around Twilight’s neck which blocked unicorn magic. It was something most often seen in dungeons and jails, since without such an item keeping unicorn criminals locked up would be nearly impossible.

“Inquisitive, though I should expect no less from Celestia’s star pupil.” Nexus replied, his horn glowing as he picked Twilight off the ground. With

the unicorn floating in his magic, Nexus turned and began walking back towards the center of the clearing, where the earth pony Stonewall had set up a metal pedestal, upon which he had set the wooden bowl from his back.

“What we have planned for you, Twilight Sparkle, is very simple. As to who we are... well, consider us simply the loyal servants of Equestria’s true queen, her regal majesty Nightmare Moon.”

“Are you *crazy!*?” Twilight asked, twisting a bit as she was carried upside down by Nexus’s magic. “Nightmare Moon is *gone*. How can you serve somepony who is gone?”

“It is much easier than you think, Miss Sparkle. I, however, will not spoil the surprise. For the moment, all you need to know is that your... contribution is appreciated,” Nexus replied as he placed the bag back over Twilight’s head, securing it tightly as well as placing a sound dampening spell across the fabric. The mare continued to protest, even though her words were muffled by the spell infused bag, the fabric blocking sound from getting in or out.

Leaving Twilight hanging in the air, Nexus walked over to the metal pedestal. He examined the contents of the wooden bowl set upon the tall but narrow metal table, eyes glinting in anticipation. Inside the bowl were curled shreds of what looked like paper, but it was a purple color and one of the pieces had a big, turquoise crescent moon its surface.

He then turned his attention to a dagger which had been set beside the bowl, picking it up with his magic. The stallion then looked back at Twilight, who continued to twist, flail, and shout muffled protests. He drew close to Twilight, and, after lowering her a little closer to the ground, Nexus proceeded to give the mare a swift kick in the stomach.

The kick quickly made Twilight stop flailing, the unicorn hanging limply in Nexus’s magic as she recovered and tried to catch the breath that had been knocked out of her lungs. In the moment Twilight hanged motionlessly, Nexus drew the dagger’s blade across part of Twilight’s leg, leaving a very shallow cut. It was no worse than a paper cut, but it brought a muffled whimper of panic from the unicorn.



The wound began to bleed gently, a few drops of blood forming. Nexus used the blade to gather several of these drops before placing both the blood and blade into wooden bowl with Nightmare Moon's remains.

"Yes, the spark of life from one who bears the Element of Magic. May it grant our queen invulnerability against those cursed Elements of Harmony." Nexus whispered, levitating Twilight back to the edge of the clearing, dropping her unceremoniously at the base of a tree while he approached the metal pedestal.

Slowly, Nexus drew in another breath, releasing it and watching the puff of steam escape into the night air. Then, one final deep breath before the unicorn leader looked out across the rest of the Children of Nightmare, his voice echoing across the trees as he preached to his fellows.

"Brothers and Sisters, for months we have toiled in secrecy. We worked behind the back of the guards, of the tyrant princesses, putting our own safety at risk. Personal fortunes have been spent along with many hours to bring us to this point. But now we are ready, the spell is prepared.

"Tonight we, The Children of Nightmare, shall see our queen given life, blood, and form of her own.

"Once, she and Luna were one and the same, but the Elements of Harmony could not destroy what our queen was. No, that power could only peel her away from the weak foal Luna, trap her essence in these precious shreds. It was a horrible fate, but it is because the Elements of Harmony's inability to destroy our queen that we can stand here tonight.

"For tonight, this spell will give the essence of our queen life of its own. She will no longer be shackled to the meek Princess Luna. She shall breathe the cool night air with lungs of her own, see the world with eyes of her own, and with our aid will come to rule over all Equestria within a year of her tragic defeat.

"Now, lend your magic to the spell... for the time of our victory is at hoof! Let Nightmare Moon be born anew!"

All the cult members quickly went about their work. The unicorns formed a circle around the clearing, horns starting to glow as the lines of paint they

had drawn on the forest floor came to life with a blue glow. Stonewall, one of the few earth ponies, walked around the circle, using a torch to light the bowls filled with oil soaked powders. The powders burned with an eerie blue flame, the air in the clearing becoming so thick with magic it almost became tangible.

The cloaked pegasi cult members also held bowls of burning powder, the armored Gray Gale and Night Shade flying around to light the bowls kept aloft above the clearing.

When all the bowls were lit, Nexus used his magic to take the fire from one, gently holding it in the air and keeping the flickering flame alive. He brought the fire over the bowl containing the shreds of Nightmare Moon and the bloodied dagger, and then dropped the flame inside.

The contents burst into flame almost instantly, Nexus quickly retreating to the edge of the spell to join his fellow unicorns. There, they all began to twist and form the magic in the air, working like potters with clay. They shaped the free magic, molded it, and began to force the magic down into the bowl that contained the shreds of Nightmare Moon.

After a few anxious moments, Nexus saw what he had hoped for, the blood soaked dagger starting to float above the fire. The blood was drawn up from the dagger, formed into a single crimson sphere before the dagger itself was launched clear of the spell, its polished metal surface digging into a nearby tree.

The central bowl then began to billow with black smoke, the shreds of Nightmare Moon starting to truly burn. The black smoke began to form and swirl around the large drop of blood. The fires from the wooden bowls began getting drawn in, the flames swirling and orbiting the spell's focal point like water in a whirlpool.

The drop of blood became encased in a black sphere, and that black sphere began to slowly grow. It drew in the fire and smoke, everything, and grew larger with each passing moment.

"Yes... it is working my brothers and sisters. She is beginning to take shape. Our queen shall soon be-"

*KRAC-CROOO-OOOM!*

Every pony jumped probably a foot in the air when a single bolt of lightning raced down from the sky and struck the very center of the spell, hitting the metal podium while causing it, the shreds of Nightmare Moon, and the wooden bowl all to become wrapped in crimson flames.

Eyes turned upward to the source of the lighting, the cloud cover the cult's pegasi had carefully placed blown back as a full battalion of royal guards flew down through the new hole in the cloud.

"FREEZE!! YOU ARE ALL UNDER ARREST!!!" Several of the guards shouted as dozens of other gold armored pegasi landed in the center of the clearing. Still, not a single pony froze, the cultists charging and attacking the armored guards.

Nexus stood flabbergasted, watching as the center of the spell and the precious shreds of Nightmare Moon were destroyed. All their plans, decimated by a single surge of magical lightning... lightning that could only have come from one source.

Turning his eyes skyward, Nexus glared at the next figure to float down through the hole in the clouds, her horn flashing once before all of the cloud cover was brushed away like froth from a cup of hot cocoa.

"Celestia..." Nexus forced out through gritted teeth, his turquoise eyes locked on the sun princess as she floated down amidst the fighting, casting back anypony that dared attack her with barely a flick of her horn. Inside him, a billowing hatred grew. Every fiber of Nexus's being wanted him to attack, to smite down the sun princess for daring to interrupt the ritual, but he knew better.

"Don't think you've won today, Sun Tyrant. You have merely delayed me at best," Nexus hissed, his own horn starting to glow. Gray Gale, Night Wind, Stonewall, and a number of cultists gathered near Nexus as magic flowed from the unicorn's horn. The group then seemed to disappear into thin air, though a number of hoof prints took shape in the soft ground as the now invisible cultists fled into the Everfree Forest.

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“Have you apprehended all involved?”

Celestia currently sat in the Ponyville library. After rescuing Twilight, the princess had taken her student home and sent her straight to bed. Twilight resisted a bit, but, after going through such a stressful situation, it didn't take much to get the unicorn to fall asleep. Celestia had turned the library into a base of operations, keeping guard of her student personally while having her own guards bring their reports to her.

“We have captured a great number of those involved, but we believe some were able to escape by using magic to disguise themselves. We followed tracks but they eventually ended, as if they realized their mistake and then corrected it before we could catch them. Still, we are continuing to search the forest with the aid of the zebra that reported your student's ponynapping.”

“Yes, Zecora. Please make sure that she is properly thanked for all she has done this evening. Also, please extend her an invitation to the palace so that she may join Luna and I for dinner on an evening of her choosing.”

“Of course, Princess. Though, if I may ask, what were these ponies trying to do?”

“I do not know. All we were able to get from the information we gathered prior to this night was that something was going to happen, and Twilight's had her head covered by a thick sack for most of her ponynapping. She doesn't know enough for us to ascertain this group's purpose.”

“What about the spell?”

“The spell is not something I recognize. If it is from a book or ancient scroll, then I have not read of it, but it could just as easily be a new spell. A ritual crafted for a specific purpose... though that purpose still remains to be unearthed. Make sure that the details of the spell itself remained preserved; it will need to be studied.”

“Of course, Princess. We will gather any evidence at the scene and have it taken to the castle until such time it can be examined.”

“Good. I have no doubt the spell’s purpose was dark, and I will not stand for my student being threatened either. I want the truth of this revealed, Captain, with all haste.”

“Of course, Your Majesty.”

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And the area was searched, unicorn guards sweeping over it with their magic to try and detect anything left behind. What remained of the wooden bowls were gathered, the unburnt powder collected together into a single bag. Everything and anything that was not natural to the Everfree forest was taken up from the clearing, though the guards did not extend their search into bordering trees and bushes.

All that was gathered was loaded into a waiting chariot, and once the unicorns were finished, the pegasi, who were hitched to the chariot, took flight. They rose quickly into the sky before banking and flying towards Canterlot, the unicorns below watching their fellow soldiers until they disappeared behind the treetops.

“All right stallions, let’s go join the groups searching the forest for any of the cult members that might have escaped. Give higher priority to any that appear to be unicorns; one of them used some kind of crazy magic to get away and we don’t want that to happen a second time.”

“Sir, shouldn’t some of us remain here?”

“What for?”

“To guard the crime scene, sir.” The younger soldier replied.

“No, we’ve gathered everything of importance.”

“But what if the cultists come back, sir?”

“Listen close, cause I’ll say this only once,” The lieutenant snapped, glaring down the overly vocal soldier. “Any criminal worth his salt will get as far

away from the scene of his crime as possible. These ponies are crazy, but they're not stupid. They won't be coming back.

"Besides that, this isn't the center park in Canterlot. Everfree is dangerous. There are monsters in here that would could eat a pony twice my size in a single gulp, armor and all. This isn't a place where we want to spend any more time than necessary.

"Still," The guard lieutenant said as he turned, "if you want to stay here and guard the scene of the crime, be my guest. Just watch out for the hydras."

With that the gray coated unicorn lieutenant began walking, the rest of the soldiers following behind him as they strode out into the forest to join the search. Only the guard who had spoken up did not move, remaining in the clearing as the others disappeared amongst the trees.

He remained there for a minute at best before the lieutenant's words got to him, the soldier breaking into a gallop as he left the clearing, sprinting to catch up with his comrades.

Still, the magic that lingered in the air like a heavy mist began to shift, sparkling a bit in the cool night air as it was drawn to one side of the clearing. There, hidden away by a bush, a black sphere lay amongst the dirt. A sphere which was cast away from the center of the spell by Celestia's bolt of arcane lighting. A sphere that, at its heart, contained the blood of a certain purple unicorn.

The magic that lingered in the clearing flowed into the sphere, drawn to it like metal to a magnet. As the arcane energy was absorbed the sphere continued to grow, continuing the process begun by the spell Celestia had been interrupted.

# Chapter 1

## Everfree Discovery

“Oh Twilight, I *just* heard the news! Did those ruffians hurt you? Are you okay? Oh, I just can’t *imagine* what it must have been like! I mean, it was probably similar to when I was ponynapped by the Diamond Dogs. Still, that’s just not the same as getting taken by other ponies, and I, for one-”

“Rarity!” Twilight half shouted. The white unicorn had barreled into the library in a huff, catching Twilight in the middle of reading a book. Spike had been organizing the library shelves, though the baby dragon was quickly distracted by Rarity’s arrival.

Grinning stupidly, and with an otherwise smitten look on his face, Spike waved a claw. “Hi Rarity.”

“Good day Spike,” The unicorn offered before she turned her attention back to Twilight. “Now, what is it you wanted to say, Dear?”

“I wanted to tell you to relax. I’m fine.”

“But how can you be fine? After such a *harrowing* ordeal you must be positively *petrified*, and I heard they had you tied up! Oh, you must have *such* horrible rope burns.”

“I’ll admit, it does hurt a little where they had me tied up, but Nurse Redheart already took a look. It’s just a minor irritation that will go away by tomorrow. So, Rarity, believe me when I say I’m fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure,” Twilight replied, voice betraying her minor annoyance. “I appreciate your concern, but everypony has already been here to check on me.”

“Everypony? Even Fluttershy?”

“She was actually the first.”

“Oh, and what a *horrible* friend I must be!” Rarity voiced dramatically, putting a hoof to her head with a pained, practically theatrical expression. “Being the last to arrive to check on you. I would have come earlier, but I was working in my shop *all* day. I only just stepped out to get a late lunch when Rainbow Dash found me and told me everything, and I rushed right over.”

“Rarity it’s okay.”

“No, no it’s *completely* unacceptable. I officially owe you, Twilight Sparkle, a favor.”

“A what now?” Twilight asked as she cocked an eyebrow.

“A favor. Pinkie Pie has her promises, I have my favors. You just come to me if you need anything, and, if I can help, I will do my very best to assist... as long as it doesn’t involve excessive amounts of dirt.”

Twilight giggled a little at Rarity’s usual discomfort with dirt.

“I’ll be sure to keep that in mind, but you don’t have to worry about me, Rarity. I’m fine, really. Yes, getting ponynapped wasn’t exactly how I intended to spend my evening, but everything turned out all right. If anything, I’m just a little annoyed. I’ve been trying to get some reading done all day, but because of *everypony* coming to check on me, I haven’t even gotten past the first page.”

“Then I shan’t take another moment of your time. You just read, *relax*, and recover from your *harrowing* ordeal,” Rarity said as she headed for the door, only to turn back one final time. “And remember, if you need anything, I owe you one favor.”

“I got it.” Twilight replied as she watched her friend leave before finally being able to get to her book. Fluttershy, Pinkie Pie, Applejack, Rainbow Dash, and now Rarity... that was all her closest friends. Maybe now, she could get into the book she was trying to read.

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“Spike?” Twilight called a few hours later, finally a good distance into her book. “Can you bring me that book I had yesterday? Mountain Valley’s *Geographic Guide to Equestria*?”

“Didn’t you have it with you yesterday?”

Twilight looked up from her book, deciding to stare at the ceiling as she tried to think back.

“Well... I didn’t think... but maybe... No, wait... I *did* have it. I put it in my saddle bag so that I could have it when I read this book at the park, but then I realized I had left this book here.

“So I came back... but then Pinkie Pie grabbed me to help decorate for her party... and that took all afternoon. So, the book was still in my saddlebags when I went to the party... and then I left the party to come back here... and then I got ponynapp-”

Twilight quickly twisted her head around as her eyes darted about the library. The unicorn practically jumped to her hooves, galloping around the room in a panic while rummaging through drawers and checking every nook and cranny she could find.

It was only Spike that ended the panic, the baby dragon putting himself in front of Twilight.

“Whoa, easy, Twilight. What’s wrong?”

“My saddlebags! Where are they?”

“How should I know?” The baby dragon asked.

“Oh no! No no no no no no no no no! I had my saddlebags with me when I was ponynapped, and that means that either those cult ponies took them, or I lost them somewhere along the way! No no no no no! I can replace the copy of *Geographic Guide to Equestria*, but I had books in that bag Celestia loaned me from the royal library! I can’t lose those books, I-”

Spike grabbed the sides of the panicking unicorn's head and brought her eyes to his.

"Twilight, *breathe*... and think. Can't you just use your locator spell?"

A smile of relief burst onto the unicorn as she closed her eyes and focused. Twilight's horn shimmered before starting to blink. The locator spell was a charm Twilight put on her saddlebags after leaving them in the library one too many times. It would allow her to find her bags based on some of the same magical principles that Rarity used to find gems. The main difference was that Twilight's spell had a wider range, since it was focused on finding a single item that had already been magically marked.

Twilight waved her head around, watching her horn as it flashed at different rates. She finally found the direction where the flashing was the fastest. The spell was pointing to a window, and beyond that window Twilight could see the Everfree Forest.

"Great... that's *just* great. My bags are in the forest," Twilight grumbled. If it was just a normal bag of books, she would have probably just left them in the forest, considering the dangers involved going into Everfree. But Twilight couldn't keep herself from thinking about the fact that Celestia herself had loaned her some of those books. Even if the Everfree Forest was dangerous, disappointing Celestia was worse. At least, it was worse in Twilight's mind.

After a few seconds of internal debate, Twilight began to trot towards the door, only for Spike to quickly cut her off.

"Nuh-uh, no way Twi. Celestia would have my scales if she found out I let you go back into the Everfree Forest the day after you were ponynapped!"

"Well then, Celestia just won't find out," Twilight replied, moving Spike out of the way with some levitation magic, only for him to run back into her path.

"But what if those crazy ponies are still in the forest? Do you want to get ponynapped again?"

“Celestia’s guards scoured the forest last night with Zecora’s help. I doubt if any of those ponies are still there. Besides I *need* to get those books back! They’re irreplaceable, and I need you to stay here in case somepony comes and needs to checkout a book. This is a library after all, and we can’t just close it up whenever we want.”

Spike was not convinced, crossing his arms and eyeing the unicorn.

“I still don’t like it Twilight. Can’t you find somepony to go with you?”

“Everypony else is busy, especially after they already came by to see me. Besides, I’ve been to Everfree before, Spike; I know how to keep myself out of trouble.”

“Says the pony that got turned to stone by a Cockatrice,” Spike pointed out.

“Okay, I’ll admit, *that* wasn’t one of my better moments. Okay, how about this? If I’m not back in three hours, you can tell Celestia that I left. You can even say that I put you to sleep with a sedation spell so you couldn’t stop me.”

“Twilight, I don’t want you to go because I think it’s *dangerous*, not because I don’t want to get in trouble.”

“Spike, I promise, everything will be fine,” The unicorn argued as she walked around Spike and continued to move towards the door. “Now, just keep doing your chores and I’ll be back before you know it. It’s just after three, so if I’m not back by a little after six in the afternoon *then* you can tell Celestia, but I promise I’ll be back before then.”

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Twilight swallowed nervously, stepping slowly as she kept her head down, following the light of her blinking horn. The threatening trees of Everfree Forest surrounded the unicorn on all sides, their mangled and twisted branches reaching out from the canopy like deadly claws. The silence of the forest was unnerving, Twilight’s ears swiveling constantly to pick up on any trace of sound as goose bumps ran up the unicorn’s spine, either from the tension or chill in the air.

“Okay... maybe it *won't* be fine.” Twilight muttered to herself, finally admitting that maybe she wasn't ready to brave the forest alone. Although the unicorn was 95% sure her mind was just playing tricks on her, she couldn't keep herself from believing every pony-shaped shadow she saw was one of the cult ponies coming to ponynap her again. She even barreled off the forest path a few times, trying to get a jump on a would be assailant, only to discover it was a bush or a tree branch.

The situation was only made worse by the bad weather that was rolling in over the forest; dark, gray, and threatening clouds... Everfree's first spring thunderstorm. Twilight could only imagine how horrible it would be to be caught in one of the infamous wild storms. With winds strong enough to pick a pony off her feet and throw her half way across Equestria and lighting that-

Twilight shook her head, trying to clear away her panicked thoughts. She was getting close to her saddlebags now; the rate at which her horn was flashing was a sure indicator of that. She just needed to get those bags, and then she could just teleport herself back to the library.

“Okay... just hold it together, Twilight. Just hold it together a little longer,” The unicorn whispered to herself in a half-hearted pep talk. A pep-talk Twilight tried to continue as she rounded a bend in the path, only for the words to die in her mouth as she came to a dead stop. Glancing about, the unicorn's eyes shrank to the size of small dots as her breathing quickened.

Her locator spell had led her back to where she had been the night before, the forest clearing where the spell had been cast. The same place where she had been held captive by the cult ponies. For a moment, Twilight had to fight the overpowering urge to teleport back to the library at that very moment and leave her saddlebag to its fate.

That urge, however, ended when Twilight noticed her horn was blinking faster near the very edge of the clearing. After trotting just outside the clearing and rummaging through a few bushes, Twilight found her saddlebag. The cultists had probably tossed it aside once they finished carrying her to the clearing.

Carrying the bag in her magic, Twilight stepped back into the forest clearing. She opened the flaps, breathing a sigh of relief as she checked

inside; none of the rare books were missing. In fact, nothing was missing, even the more common texts she had been carrying. It was a discovery that brought a smile to Twilight's face as she levitated the bags over her head and settled them down on her back.

"Perfect; now to just teleport myself back to the library, and-"

*RUSTLE*

Twilight froze, eyes narrow as her ears stood erect.

*RUSTLE RUSTLE*

She turned her head, focusing on the source of the noise. It was a single bush, located on the edge of the clearing. The leaves were rustling, something moving around inside the foliage just out of sight. Almost instantly, Twilight's mind began to jump to the worst case scenario, much like it had done when Fluttershy had taken Celestia's pet, Philomena.

It could be a cultist, lingering there in the darkness. A cultist ready to jump Twilight, hogtie her again, and this time, when they cut her, they would do something far worse than what felt like a paper cut. They might use a knife, or a dagger, or a sword, or-

Twilight shook her head hard. No, she couldn't think like that. That... that bush was too small to hide a full grown pony. It's probably just an animal. Yes, it's just a rabbit or something. She'd just get a little closer, and the little furry creature would pop out and scamper off, and she could finally breathe.

Unless it was a snake... oh, if it was a snake, she was going to scream.

Inching closer to the bush, Twilight made each hoof step as silent as possible, straining her eyes to try and see inside the darkness of the bush. The branches rustled again, but still whatever animal was inside had yet to jump free.

*FLASH... KRAC-CROOO-OOOM!*

Twilight leapt a foot in the air, and quickly galloped in the exact opposite direction of the bush, before she dove behind a tree on the far side of the clearing. Her heart was pounding so hard it felt like it could burst out of her chest, the unicorn putting a hoof over top of it to try and calm the thumping vital organ while she breathed deeply.

“It was just the storm...” Twilight told herself, looking up at the threatening sky above the forest. “It was just thunder... it was just thunder... thunder that scared me *half to death*... but it was just thunder.”

As the unicorn tried to calm herself, she began to hear something over the sound of her own breathing. It was soft at first, but, as Twilight managed to slow and quiet her breathing, she began to hear the sound more clearly. It was... crying. Somepony nearby was crying, and, from the sounds of the voice, it was a young filly.

“Hello?” Twilight called out, her ears swiveling as she tried to pinpoint the sound. “Is somepony there?”

The crying quickly fell quiet, like the voice's owner was trying to hide. Still, Twilight had been able to figure out the general direction the voice was coming from, moving back into the forest clearing as she continued to listen.

“It’s okay, I’m not going to hurt you.” Twilight offered as she looked around. Still, she heard nothing, or at least she didn’t hear any voice calling back. Maybe her imagination was really getting the best of her. Sighing once, Twilight began to gather magic in her horn, preparing to teleport back to the library.

*FLASH... KRAC-CROOO-OOOM!*

Again, the storm caught Twilight by surprise. It was not as bad as the first time; Twilight able to keep herself standing in the center of the clearing instead of galloping off to hide. Instead, she looked up at the clouds and threw them an annoyed glare for startling her twice.

Still, the thunder had also brought back another sound, the crying Twilight had heard earlier, and it was close. Deciding it would be better to not try and call out for the pony, Twilight swiveled her ears forward and listened.

The sound was now accompanied by some rustling, and it took Twilight only a few moments to pinpoint its source. It was the bush from earlier, the one Twilight had feared hid some horrible danger.

More concerned about the other pony than the possibility of being attacked, Twilight crept over to the bush as quietly as possible. As she drew close, the unicorn stretched out her magic and began to carefully grasp at the branches. If whatever inside the bush decided to run away, Twilight wanted to at least be sure she got a good look at it before it escaped. She would move the branches away quickly, and launch her own surprise attack.

With a single nervous swallow, and Twilight braced herself. Her magic shoved the branches away and the unicorn shut her eyes tight, a small part of her still expecting some pony in a cloak to jump out. When that didn't happen, Twilight opened her eyes and took a look at the interior of the bush.

What Twilight found, however, was nothing she could have expected. A filly, as young or even a little younger than Apple Bloom, was tangled up in the thorny branches. She had nicks and scratches in a number of places, caused by the thorns as the filly struggled to free herself. Her mane was also tangled amongst the branches, and it looked like she had been there for at least a few hours, if not longer.

If it was any normal filly, Twilight would have reached out to help immediately... but the unicorn found herself frozen, mind locking up as she tried to process the filly's appearance. Her coat was a regal black. She possessed a rich purple mane, with a shine that was comparable to Rarity's, despite the fact the long strands were tangled in the bush's thorny branches. And, finally, the filly had not only a pair of pegasus wings but a unicorn horn, making her an alicorn.

Twilight then looked to the filly's eyes, which were locked on the young adult unicorn. They were filled with fear. The filly looked upon Twilight as if she was one of the nasty monsters of the Everfree, as if the unicorn would strike out at any moment and gobble her up.

Those fear-filled eyes, however, were not shaped like any normal pony's. The turquoise orbs, which should have had round pupils, instead resembled a dragon's eyes, with dagger shaped pupils. The whites of the

eyes were also off. Instead of being white, they were a lighter color that closely resembled the color of the irises.

Above all, they were eyes Twilight had seen before. They were the eyes of Nightmare Moon.

Twilight felt her breathing quicken a bit, her memories slipping back to the night before. The cult said they were the servants of Nightmare Moon... and they were obviously trying to cast some kind of spell. She might not have gotten a great look at the clearing the night before, but she did see arcane lines, bowls with powders, and-

The spell they were attempting... it wasn't some simple bit of magic. To need that much setup, the spell had to be powerful, the most powerful spell Twilight had ever seen. On top of that, they said they were servants of Nightmare Moon.

Yet, there was more to it than that. When they started to cast the spell, Twilight could feel it in her horn. The air became saturated with arcane energy, and as the spell began to progress the magic began to change, began to feel more familiar. It was a kind of magic she hadn't felt since... since...

Twilight's pupils narrowed into fine points from the horror of the idea she formulated. What if... the spell cast... was supposed to bring back Nightmare Moon? And what if it worked?!

It was insane; it was something that shouldn't work, but why else did she felt such a strong aura of magic in the air? Why else would a filly she never seen before, an *alicorn* filly no less, be in the same clearing with such a strong resemblance to the infamous Mare in the Moon?

Was that their goal? To recreate Nightmare Moon? Did it work? *Had* the cult succeeded in bringing back Nightmare Moon? Was *this* Nightmare Moon?

It had to be. There wasn't any other explanation for what was going on, for the intensity of the spell and the appearance of this filly. That crazy cult had actually brought back Nightmare Moon... and she had to warn somepony, tell somepony... she had to write Celestia immediately.



Or better yet, she had to confront this... *thing* before she could get away and hurt somepony. Even if she was the size of a filly, Nightmare Moon was a master of deception and trickery. As far as Twilight knew, this was all just a trick. The alicorn could have simply been attempting to lure somepony in a trap, lying in wait for somepony to get close before attacking.

Twilight bristled, furrowing her eyebrows as she glared at the filly. "I know-," Twilight began harshly, only to stop abruptly. With just those two words, the filly shrunk away, whimpering and shutting her eyes as the bush's thorns left fresh cuts and scrapes on the little pony's body.

When the filly finally dared to open her eyes again, Twilight lifted her hoof and tried to reach out as slowly as possible. Still, the filly whimpered and tried to get away, though she only succeeded in injuring herself even more on the bush's thorns.

It was a reaction of pure fear.

Twilight's brain did a flip-flop trying to process this. Nightmare Moon was the greatest threat to Equestria. She was a monster that tried to, at best, scare Twilight and her new friends away, and, at worst, tried to get them killed. She was supposed to be the worst part of Luna's own psyche brought to life. At least, that's what Twilight thought the insane cult was trying to do.

Yet here she was, just a filly, tangled in a thorn brush, and Twilight was unable to look away. Those dragon eyes that had once looked down on all ponies as if they were nothing but lowly insects... were now filled to the brim with fear and pain. Some of the scratches from the bush's thorns were bleeding. The filly was terrified, was hurt... and she needed help.

"It's okay; I won't hurt you," Twilight soothed shakily, not even really thinking about what she was doing as she just did it. Her magic began to take hold of the bush, carefully snapping away branches piece by piece as she worked to free the filly. There were a couple times the filly winced, any small movement leading to a thorn pricking her, but still she kept her eyes locked on Twilight. The filly's eyes were filled with fear but behind that fear

was a flicker of hope. Hope that the unicorn who had appeared was not a monster she needed to fear.

A few minutes later, with a final snap, enough branches were cleared away for Twilight to gently levitate the filly out of the bush. She brought the filly Nightmare Moon out from the edge of the clearing, setting her down in the dead center where the pair proceeded to just stare at each other.

Twilight's mind was spinning at a million miles an hour while not really going anywhere. She kept just circling around the same thoughts over and over again. Was this really Nightmare Moon? Was that the purpose of the spell last night? Did it work? How did it work? How could there be a Nightmare Moon without Luna? Weren't they one and the same? Why was Nightmare Moon so small? Did the spell not work? Was Nightmare Moon just trying to trick her into taking her back to Ponyville? Was she only pretending to be so small and helpless? Was she dangerous? Was this really Nightmare Moon?

Round and around the thoughts circled, Twilight unable to stop herself. It was the thunderstorm that finally managed to break the endless loop. Another crack of thunder cut through the air and snapped Twilight back to reality, and just as quickly the unicorn noticed that the filly had rushed up to her. Trembling like a leaf, the filly practically clung to Twilight's leg, eyes shut tight.

She was scared of the thunderstorm... would Nightmare Moon ever be scared of a thunderstorm? Could she just be playing a trick, trying to lull the unicorn into a false sense of security? Twilight, however, just couldn't be sure. Her mind was telling her that the filly couldn't be trusted. That she just needed to leave her in the forest, tell Celestia, and let the princess deal with it.

But, at the same time, Twilight knew she couldn't just leave the filly there. Nightmare Moon or not, she looked terrified. As stupid as it sounded, she just couldn't in good conscience abandon the little pony.

"Um... would you like to come home with me?" Twilight asked, unable to think of a better way to phrase the question. While the filly remained silent, her eyes spoke her reply. She shakily nodded her head, clinging even closer to Twilight as the filly now looked upon the unicorn like she was

some grand savior from a story book. Twilight might have smiled at this sight if it wasn't for the raindrops that were starting to fall on her head.

"Oh... *great*..." Twilight muttered, flinching a bit as the rain started to get thicker. The storm wasn't going to break up anytime soon, and she wouldn't be able to teleport back to the library with the filly. She wasn't very good with multi-pony teleportation spells. The one time she had been able to pull it off, she and Spike both were pretty badly singed, and that was the last thing the filly needed after being stuck in the thorny bush.

So, Twilight did the only thing she could. Horn glowing, the unicorn picked up the filly and set her down on her back, nestled between the saddle bags. Twilight then turned her magic above her head, projecting a transparent barrier. Just in time too, because the rain suddenly got even worse. It would be a long, muddy walk back out of the forest. At the moment, however, Twilight just hoped she could get back to the library before Spike panicked and sent a letter to Celestia.

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Spike anxiously finished writing the letter to Celestia, glancing at the clock as each minute ticked by. Twilight had been gone for two hours and fifty-nine minutes. Twilight had one minute, just one minute, to get back to the library before he called in the cavalry. There wasn't a second hoof on the clock, but still Spike watched it anxiously... rolling the scroll as he prepared to set it on fire.

The baby dragon glanced outside at the raging thunderstorm. Dash came by the library to warn Twilight that the weather team was letting a storm from Everfree Forest roll over Ponyville. The storm wasn't scheduled, but the weather team had decided to let it roll over to save themselves the trouble of preparing a storm just two days later.

It made sense, but the storm was still pretty nasty. Thunder, lightning... the whole nine yards, and Twilight was out in that storm, possibly hurt or ponynapped.

Spike glanced at the clock again, seeing the minute hand click to the next slot. It was official; it had been three hours and Twilight hadn't been back.

Spike began breathing in, the message to Celestia mere moments from being sent magically to Canterlot when the door suddenly swung open.

“Spike! Don’t you *dare* breathe out!” Twilight yelled, pointing an accusing hoof at the baby dragon. She had mud and gunk up to her neck, little leaves and sticks caught in her mane, and a tired expression on her face. Still, Spike couldn’t help but smile, tossing the carefully prepared note aside before running up to Twilight.

“Where were you?” Spike asked. He would have hugged the unicorn’s leg, but he took notice of how muddy she was.

“In Everfree Forest, like I told you. It just took longer to find my bags than I expected and then I had to walk back in the storm.” Twilight said, doing her best to wipe her hooves clean on the welcome mat before stepping inside.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine. Nothing happened... unless you count the storm. All I need is a bath and some dinner.” The unicorn answered, her horn glowing as she opened her saddle bags and removed the thankfully dry books, though the bags themselves were damp and splattered with mud.

“Well then, you go straight upstairs and take a bath. I’ll make some dinner. How about some soup and sandwiches?”

“You make that celery soup and daffodil sandwiches, and it will be perfect.”

“Celery soup and daffodil sandwiches coming right up... after I get these books put away.” Spike offered as he gathered the retrieved books, beginning the quick task of putting the tomes back on the library shelves. While the baby dragon went about his work, Twilight headed to the second floor of the library, crossing her bedroom and entering the bathroom. It was a small, cozy room with a bathtub that could also be a shower and all the basic amenities. Nothing fancy, but it got the job done.

Twilight got all the way in before she used her magic to shut and lock the door, breathing a sigh of relief before looking back over her shoulder. Still lying on her back, nestled between her saddle bags, was the filly Nightmare Moon. She had curled up and fallen asleep half way back to the library,

and, thankfully, Spike hadn't noticed the breathing black mass that was partially hidden by Twilight's mane and her saddlebags.

For the moment Twilight just let the filly sleep, using her magic to turn on the bathtub faucets. As the tub started to fill with hot water, the unicorn opened up the medicine cabinet, gathering up some first aid supplies. While most of the injuries the filly had from the thorn bush were very minor there were a couple Twilight wanted to bandage to keep them from bleeding and getting infected.

Twilight waited until the tub was almost full before shutting off the faucets, the perfectly warm water gently steaming in the cool bathroom air. At this point Twilight turned her head back, lowering down as she gently nudged the filly Nightmare Moon with her nose. It took a few nudges, but little black coated pony finally began to wake up.

Her dragon like eyes looked about the room, the filly taking in her surroundings before looking at Twilight, the unicorn offering a gentle smile.

"Don't worry, you're safe here. This is where I live, and you don't have to worry about the storm or anything here," Twilight offered. "Still, after walking around in that storm, I need to get cleaned up. Would you mind getting off my back while I take a quick bath?"

The filly shook her head once and only once, very carefully and cautiously standing up on Twilight's back before jumping off, using her wings to slow her fall to the floor. When her hooves were on the ground the filly laid right back down again on the semi-soft bathroom mat, curling back up into a tiny black coated ball.

Twilight found the behavior a little bit strange, but she just guessed that the filly was tired and wanted to go back to sleep. The unicorn was now able to levitate her mud splattered saddle bags off and climb into the bathtub, the warm water feeling wonderful as she used a brush to get the mud off her body.

It was destined to be a quick bath, Twilight more worried about getting clean than enjoying the water. Once the mud was gone and all the little sticks and leaves were out of her mane, Twilight climbed out and magically towed herself off while she let the tub drain. When the dirty water was

gone, she then began filling the tub again, but this time only to about quarter of the way full.

It was a very shallow bath, but it would be perfect for the small filly. Twilight was able to levitate the miniature Nightmare Moon into the water, the little pony offering no protest but a few wincing as the warm water touched some of her scratches. Twilight then made use of the brush, cleaning some of the mud that had managed to splatter up onto the filly, despite riding the whole way to the library on the unicorn's back.

With the filly clean, Twilight proceeded to lift her out of the tub, towel her off, and then use the first aid kit to put some bandages on the worst of her cuts and scrapes. All the while, the unicorn was amazed with how cooperative the filly was being, albeit acting sad and tired.

Would Nightmare Moon really allow herself to be bathed and bandaged without protest? Sure, such a regal and royal pony might expect to be waited on by servants, but that wasn't what Twilight was doing. She was cleaning the filly more like a caretaker or parent. In a way, she was treating her like a foal.

The real Nightmare Moon wouldn't accept being treated like a foal, no matter how small she actually was. This once again raised the question of whether this filly really was Nightmare Moon. Twilight was becoming less and less sure. The resemblance was undeniable. All the little pony was missing was the flowing, magical hair that was dotted with stars and she'd looked exactly like the Mare in the Moon.

Besides arguments of age, this filly just wasn't acting like the Nightmare Moon the unicorn would have expected. She didn't talk down to Twilight, threatened her...she didn't even say anything to Twilight since she found her. She barely moved once Twilight got her out of the thorn bush.

And if she didn't act like Nightmare Moon, that raised another question. If she was not Nightmare Moon, then who was she?

Twilight couldn't focus too much on that train of thought, a knock coming at the bathroom door just as she was putting the last bandage on the filly.

"Hey Twilight, I've got your dinner."

“Thank you Spike, but... you know, I’m *really* hungry after hiking through Everfree Forest and the storm. Would you mind making me another sandwich and filling another bowl of soup?”

“No problem; I made a big batch of the celery soup and we have plenty of stuff for sandwiches. I could probably make five servings of this meal.”

“That’s wonderful Spike, but I only need one more.”

“You got it, Twi.” The baby dragon replied from the other side of the bathroom door before he departed. Twilight listened for the baby dragon’s footsteps to reach the bottom of the stairs before she opened the door. She checked the bedroom, making sure Spike really had left before she stepped out. The filly followed, staying close to Twilight as the unicorn crossed the room and moved towards her bed.

The meal Spike had brought in was sitting on her bedside table. It looked good and the unicorn was starving, but instead of digging in herself, she levitated the filly up onto her bed and then set the food out in front of her.

“Here, you go ahead and eat this. I’m going to go downstairs and talk with Spike.” Twilight said, her words coming with a comforting smile. The filly, again, didn’t offer more than a simple nod in reply. She then leaned forward, taking a bite from the sandwich... a bite that was quickly followed by another as the filly began to devour the food.

It was the first real sign of life Twilight had seen from the Nightmare Moon look-a-like, and it was encouraging to say the least. For now, however, the unicorn had to leave the filly alone to her meal. She had to go downstairs and tell Spike the truth, before the baby dragon discovered the filly for himself, assumed the worse, and sent a letter to Celestia.

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It had taken a couple hours to finally convince Spike not to write Celestia and tell her about the filly. He, like Twilight had at first, assumed she was Nightmare Moon reborn and that Celestia had to be told. He had even written up a letter and was about to send it before Twilight snatched it away and threw it in the garbage.

Twilight's arguments were weak. All she could really say was that the filly really didn't seem to act like Nightmare Moon. In her logical mind, Twilight knew that Spike was probably right. They needed to tell Celestia, but once again the unicorn's imagination began to betray her. Celestia had banished Nightmare Moon to the moon for a thousand years, and Twilight feared she would do the same to the little pony.. and that just didn't seem like something the filly deserved.

In the end, Twilight had only gotten Spike to agree to the silence by promising she'd go buy him a large sapphire from Rarity as a bribe. It wasn't *how* she would have wanted to obtain his silence, but Spike had Pinkie Pie promised that, if she got him the gem in the morning, he would keep quiet about the filly until Twilight wanted to tell Celestia.

Having eaten her own dinner during the negotiations, Twilight made her way back up to the bedroom. She was a little worried what she would find, that maybe in the past two hours the filly had grown into an adult Nightmare Moon and was ready to attack. Still, after she opened the bedroom door, Twilight saw that the filly was still sitting on her bed, the sandwich and soup eaten.

"Well, looks like you were hungry." Twilight joked as she trotted over. "Are you feeling better?"

The filly nodded her head once.

"That's good." Twilight replied, sitting down beside the bed. "So... uh... do you know where you are?"

The filly shook her head.

"Do you remember where you were before I found you?"

The filly shook her head, the first of many such replies as Twilight then began a longer chain of questions, asking the filly what she did remember, what she knew, and all such things.

There were a few nods here and there, but most of the questions were met with a shake of the filly's head, her eyes slowly tearing up. Upon the last



question, when Twilight asked the filly if she remembered her name, the little black pony broke down and began crying. It wasn't wailing or outright sobbing, but it was a quiet cry, the filly sniffing as tears poured down her cheeks.

Twilight now began to understand why the little pony had been so quiet and secluded; she was scared and confused. The only memories she must have had were the ones of the past several hours, of waking up in that thorny bush and then being rescued by Twilight. She had no memories of her own, and yet possessed some common knowledge, like an understanding of Equestrian language.

Twilight found it difficult to even imagine having so few memories, to wake up in a place like the Everfree Forest, to be stuck in a thorny bush, and be unable to remember anything before that. It did, however, support Twilight's theory that this little filly had been produced by the spell cast by the cult. It would make sense for her to only have a few hours of memory, because the spell had only been cast the night before.

Again, the question of whether or not the filly was Nightmare Moon reared its ugly head. The spell's purpose was to resurrect Nightmare Moon, and it had been working until Celestia and the Royal Guard intervened. The spell was interrupted, and that meant that the filly was a product of an incomplete spell, and there was often no way to predict what effects an incomplete spell would have.

It was a question Twilight chose to shelf in her mind for later as she crawled up onto the bed. She laid down beside the filly, doing her best to comfort her while the little black pony continued to cry, letting out the pent up fear and anxiety that had been building for the past several hours. Nightmare Moon or not, Twilight couldn't in good conscience not try to comfort a scared little filly.

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It took about half an hour for the filly to finally calm down, crying herself dry. The tears, however, seemed to have a good effect as the filly looked less scared than she had been. She laid right next to Twilight, with her head leaned against the unicorn's shoulder as she tried to dry her eyes.

“Feeling better?”

“Y-yes.” The filly shakily replied, the first word Twilight had heard her say the entire night. The voice had a musical quality, but a fragility to it as well. It reminded Twilight of one time she had seen an earth pony playing [crystal juice glasses filled with water](#). It was a feat made easier by the special horseshoes the pony had on, but still it was impressive to watch and listen to. A voice like a [Glass Harp](#).... certainly not the voice of an evil, fallen princess bent on creating an eternal night.

“That’s good, but we’ve both had a long day. How about we get some sleep?”

“I can stay here?”

Twilight nodded.

“Yes you can, but how about I make it so we’re both more comfortable?”

With that the unicorn’s horn lit up as she shifted a few things around. Within a few moments Twilight was under the covers of her blanket while the filly still lay on top of the covers with her own blanket and pillow, resting next to Twilight’s side.

It was comfortable enough, both Twilight and the filly having to stifle yawns as the long day began to take its toll on them. It was still relatively early, barely getting close to nine o’clock... but Twilight was more than willing to call it a night. Another yawn gripped the unicorn as her eyes started to droop a little.

“Miss unicorn?”

Twilight was drawn back from the edge of sleep as her eyes met the filly’s dragon-like eyes.

“I’m sorry, I guess I never introduced myself. My name’s Twilight Sparkle.”

“Okay... Miss Sparkle?”

“Yes?”

“Do you want me to leave in the morning?”

“What makes you think I’d make you leave?”

The filly bit her lip for a second before talking.

“You seemed mad when you first saw me... I just felt like you wouldn’t want me around.”

“It’s not your fault; I just thought you were somepony else for a minute. No, you don’t have to leave in the morning. You can stay here as long as you want.”

The filly smiled at this, the first honest smile she offered all evening. With that concern put to rest, the filly yawned and closed her eyes. Within minutes she had drifted off to sleep, Twilight following soon after.

# Chapter 2

## A Secret Between Friends

Twilight yawned as she made her way down the steps to the library's main floor, her mane freshly brushed, but the unicorn herself still not completely awake. She had been up late the night before, doing research and making some plans, and had not gotten to bed until well past midnight.

Still, an empty belly can be a powerful motivation to get out of bed, the unicorn stepping into the kitchen.

"Morning Twilight," Spike offered, the baby dragon working at the stove.

"Hey Spike," The unicorn replied, before having to yawn again as she made making her way to the table. This had been the pair's usual morning ever since they had moved to Ponyville, and even for a time before that. One of them would get up semi-early and make breakfast while the other would stumbled into the kitchen sometime later. Who made breakfast largely depended on who went to bed first the night before, and the previous evening it had been Spike.

Yet, for the past few days, there had been an addition to the routine, a little black filly alicorn who currently sat and waited patiently for her breakfast.

Twilight had come to call the filly Nyx, an old name from a storybook Twilight remembered from her own fillyhood. Nyx, as the old stories went, was a pony that basked in Luna's night before she became Nightmare Moon. A black coated mare who stood guard of her home against the creatures that lingered in the dark, protecting those she cared about while they slept.

Nyx had been one of Twilight's favorite storybook characters growing up, her parents reading some of the old stories to her at bedtime. The name just seemed to fit the filly, and it was far better than calling her Nightmare Moon.

And, in truth, the filly had become the focus of Twilight's efforts for the past few days. All of her research and time she could spare studying was devoted to trying to researching the possibilities of resurrection spells.

Such magic, however, wasn't exactly something a pony ran across on daily basis. None of her library books had any direct information on resurrection spell, and what information she could find was deep in purely theoretical magic. Her library was insufficient, but Twilight knew that the princess had unicorns in Canterlot working on the spell. They had to have more information, and she had asked Celestia if she could possibly read some of the same books or be kept in the loop on the research.

Celestia, however, had refused the request, wishing Twilight to not concern herself with it.

But Twilight couldn't stop herself, not just because of her own curiosity but because of Nyx. While she couldn't really believe the scared little filly was Nightmare Moon reborn, the threat and danger of that truth lingered constantly on the fringes of the unicorn's mind. She needed to be absolutely sure, and the only way to be absolutely sure was to understand the spell that was being cast, and what could have happened when the spell was interrupted.

But that wasn't what had kept Twilight up late the night before. No, her efforts of the previous evening was in planning. Over the past few days, Nyx had become a little more open, though she was still quite nervous and quiet. She had even started helping Spike with his chores, slowly winning over the skeptical baby dragon.

She had also demonstrated an interest in learning, or at least an interest in reading. The past few nights, Twilight had read Nyx one or two bedtime stories to help her sleep. The filly seemed to be literate, but she paid close attention to Twilight all the same, trying to absorb everything the unicorn said as if it was the most sacred knowledge.

Her curiosity, however, was not going to be constrained by the library for long. If there was one thing that Nyx did that Twilight found annoying, it was that she asked questions; a *lot* of questions. Most of them were things that Twilight could easily answer from the top of her head, but it was still

enough of a distraction that the unicorn found her normal amount of study time greatly reduced.

Even worse, however, was that Nyx had seen the many ponies walk past the library windows, seen some fillies and colts her own age playing. While she seemed scared of the other ponies, she eagerly looked at everything else she could see and had asked more than once if she could go outside. Now that she was no longer in the scary Everfree Forest, she wanted to see the outside, to see the parks and trees and grass and everything else just beyond the library windows.

Twilight, of course, had to refuse the request. Even if Nyx didn't look like a certain Mare in the Moon, she was an alicorn, and that alone would raise a lot of suspicion. Thankfully, Nyx didn't resist, and was willing to accept her confinement in the library... at least for the moment.

Still, Twilight knew that she couldn't keep Nyx hidden in the library forever. Even if she could... she didn't want to. The library wasn't a jail, she wasn't a warden, and Nyx wasn't a prisoner. The filly deserved to be able to go outside and enjoy the sunshine... but if she did it on her own, without any preparation, it would have been disastrous.

So the previous evening had been spent making a plan. Twilight was going to pass off Nyx as a cousin who was going to stay with the unicorn indefinitely as a sort of student. Much like how Twilight had started living at Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns when she became the princess' private pupil. It might not have been the greatest of plans, but Twilight never really told anypony in Ponyville about her family so there was a chance they would probably buy it.

It was a plan that could work, buy her the time she needed to be sure whether or not the filly was Nightmare Moon. But it would require a number of things to work. The first of which Twilight was going to try and tackle that very morning.

It was time to cash in on Rarity's favor.

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It took some precise movements and careful hiding, but Twilight was able to lead Nyx across Ponyville to the Carousel Boutique without anypony really getting a good glimpse of them. The front door to the shop was thankfully open, the little bell ringing as Twilight let Nyx get inside before the unicorn herself slipped in unnoticed by anypony passing on the street.

While Nyx had been excited to finally go outside, the filly clung close to Twilight the entire trip over and still lingered nearby now that they were in the shop, just as scared of running into another pony as Twilight was but apparently for different reasons. Yet her cautiousness was slowly being overridden by curiosity as the filly looked about the room, taking in the shop's beautiful interior and the elegant dresses on display.

"Rarity, are you home?" Twilight called out as she levitated her saddle bags off and set them by the door.

"Yes Dear, just a moment!" Rarity called back, the white unicorn coming out from the boutique's back room with several spools of thread floating behind her. She had on her red glasses, a sign that Rarity was in the middle of sewing something together. Reading glasses, Rarity once told Twilight, that she only needed to work and, well, read.

"Twilight, *Darling*, I haven't seen coat nor hair of you in days. Where *have* you been hiding?"

"In the library, where else?"

"Where else indeed. You know, all those dusty old books *can't* be good for your complexion. You should come with Fluttershy and I on our weekly spa outing. You had *such* fun the last time you joined us that I was actually hoping the three of us could make it a regular thing."

"I'm sorry Rarity, I would like to, really, but sometimes I just can't pull myself away from a book."

"A fact I am well aware of," Rarity replied, setting the spools of fabric down as well as levitating her glasses off and setting them on her workbench.

"Still, I guess hearing that you've been studying your little head off is a good thing. It means you've recovered from your *traumatic* ponynapping as well as anypony could hope. Now, just what brings you by the boutique?"

"I need some casual day-wear."

"Casual day-wear? Now *that* is a request I don't get too often. Most ponies are just satisfied strolling about without a thread of fabric on, but personally I feel some ponies would look just *fabulous* with the right vest or day dress.

"Personally though, I think you're one of those ponies that doesn't need casual wear but I can't say for certain until we try on some designs. So, Twilight, what were you looking for in particular?"

Twilight smiled nervously. "Okay, so... here's the thing... it really isn't for me."

"Well, who is it for then?"

"It's for her."

At this Twilight stepped to one side, leaving Nyx standing in clear view of Rarity. When Nyx realized that she was exposed and in clear view of Rarity, the filly hung her head and stepped back behind Twilight, trying to remain hidden. It took Twilight whispering some reassuring words to the filly to finally coax Nyx back into plain view, though Nyx chose to keep her head lowered and avoid direct eye contact.

"Rarity, I'd like you to meet Nyx. Nyx, this is my good friend, Rarity. Say hello, Nyx."

"Um... H-Hello, Miss Rarity," Nyx offered very quietly. It was a good thing Nyx kept her eyes turned down at the floor, for it kept the filly from noticing that Rarity was staring, dumbstruck, at her. The white unicorn was focused on the dragon-like eyes that looked all too familiar... eyes Rarity had gotten a *very* close look at during the last Summer Sun Celebration.

The white unicorn, however, managed to put on a uneasy smile as she turned her attention to Twilight.

"Well...of course... Dear. I just need you to... uh... come in back with me and....pick out a fabric. Uh... Nyx, was it? Would you mind being a *dear* and



staying here? I just need to speak with Twilight for a few moments in private.”

“T-Twilight?” Nyx whimpered, looking at the purple unicorn as if she would never see her again.

“It will be all right, Nyx,” The unicorn reassured. “Just go look at some of the dresses Rarity’s made. We’ll be right back.”

The little black pony slowly nodded before she turned and headed towards one of the display mannequins to look at an outfit, the same jumpsuit Fluttershy had worn when Rarity was trying to impress Photo Finish.

As soon as the filly’s back was turned, Twilight felt herself wrapped in magic. Specifically Rarity’s magic, the white unicorn dragging Twilight into the back room of her shop. Rarity had the self-control to gently shut the door, as to not draw too much attention, but the moment that backroom door was closed her eyes locked Twilight.

“Twilight. Who. Is. *That?*” Rarity stressed.

“I take it you noticed she looks kind of like-”

“Nightmare Moon!” Rarity whispered, though she still spoke loudly enough that it was clear she would have rather shout. “Yes, Dear, I *did* notice! Now, would you care explain?!”

“Well, do you want the long or short version? Or maybe the medium version? I suppose I could-”

“Twilight, just *tell me!*” Rarity pressed.

“Okay, short version. She might, and I mean *might*... be Nightmare Moon reborn. That crazy cult that ponynapped me cast some weird spell, and while Celestia kept the spell from being completed, it still... well... I *think* it created her. I found her in the Everfree Forest, alone and scared, and-”

“And you brought her to Ponyville?!” The fashion designer half-shouted.

“Rarity, calm down before she hears you! Look, she doesn’t remember anything that happened before I found her, and she acts nothing like Nightmare Moon. She’s...just a sweet, if a bit nervous, little filly. To be honest... I am having trouble believing she could be Nightmare Moon at all.”

“And did it ever cross your mind what would happen if she really *was* Nightmare Moon? That monster could have attacked you in your sleep!”

“Rarity, she isn’t a monster, I promise. She’s just-”

“Twilight, Dear, I think your ponynapping has rattled your senses! You *have* to tell Celestia about this! If there is even a small chance that filly is Nightmare Moon the princess needs to know before-”

“But I’m afraid that if Celestia finds out she’ll banish Nyx to the moon! Look, you saw how she acted when she first met you. She’s more terrified of you than you are of her. She really doesn’t know who Nightmare Moon is or anything that happened at the last Summer Sun Celebration.”

“And have you ever thought what might happened if she *did* start to remember?”

“I’ve thought about it, yes... but-”

“No buts! If that filly was produced by a spell and that spell was supposed to bring back Nightmare Moon then-”

“Rarity, *please*, you’re the only other pony I’ve told, and I *need* you to keep this a secret.” Twilight pleaded, “I’m afraid that if Celestia finds out she’ll banish Nyx to the moon, and I don’t think a filly deserves that, even if she *was* created by a spell meant to bring back Nightmare Moon.

“Right now, I want to try to pass her off as my cousin, at least until I can figure out if she really is Nightmare Moon or if she just looks like her. But I can’t just keep her locked in the library all the time. If I’m going to pass her off as a normal unicorn, she needs to be able to go outside, but... she needs a disguise.”

“Twilight, I *really* think you should tell Celestia,” Rarity nervously stressed.

“Rarity, I need you to keep this a secret. Consider this the favor you owe me.”

Rarity pushed her lips together, realizing that Twilight had just called in the one favor the unicorn owed her and that she *did* not like the nature of the favor.

“And you want to use your favor like this?”

“Yes,” Twilight replied firmly.

“Are you absolutely sure?”

“Yes.”

“Are you absolutely, *positively*—”

“Rarity, I’m sure,” Twilight snipped.

“... \*sigh\* Very well, Twilight. Your secret is safe with me, but that *still* leaves me wondering just *why* you’ve brought her to my boutique.”

“I need you to make something, anything, Nyx can wear on a daily basis to hide her wings.”

“Her wings?”

“Didn’t you notice? Nyx is an alicorn.”

“Well of course I noticed, but why would you want to hide her wings? Wings are so in style right now. *All* the best boutiques in Canterlot are using pegasus models this season. Makes me wish I could talk Fluttershy into stepping back onto the stage, that or I could convince Rainbow Dash. She could have *such* a beautiful mane if she would just brush it out once in a while and—”

“Rarity, focus!” Twilight interrupted, bringing the fashion designer back to reality. “I can’t let Nyx go outside if ponies can see she is an alicorn, and

it's a whole lot easier to hide a pair of wings than it is to try and hide a horn."

"True, wings are a feature more readily hidden," Rarity admitted, "and... I'll that filly *does* have such a wonderful black coat. It's like obsidian the way it shines in the light. And her mane... it's almost as beautiful as mine, and with a little care... Hmmmm..."

At that Rarity shut her eyes, gently tapping her chin with her hoof as the gears in her mind turned before a smile sprang onto the unicorn's lips.

"Oh... iiiiddddddeeeaaaa~!" Rarity sang, her horn lighting up as she opened the door to the backroom. And with that, the fashion designer was off, calling Nyx over as spools of fabric began to float around the room.

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"Okay, Nyx, you've been an absolute darling, and I'm almost done. Just hold still for a few more seconds," Rarity said an hour later. The little black filly had a pained expression on her face, like she was tired of standing still in the same place. Still, as Nyx had proved to Twilight, she was naturally well behaved, if timid, and did her best to keep still as Rarity touched up a few things.

Rarity had worked her usual magic, creating a perfect bit of casual wear for the little filly. A simple purple vest, similar in design to the vests worn by everypony in town during Winter Wrap-Up. Rarity, however, had modified the design in a few places so that Nyx's wings could hide comfortably beneath the fabric and not be readily visible from the outside. Rarity had also worked to stylize the vest a little bit, putting some black bits here and there to blend with Nyx's natural coat color.

The final thing Rarity was working on was Nyx's hair, the unicorn trying a number of different styles with it. She had tried styling it up like her own mane as well as giving it more body like Fluttershy's, but neither style seemed to please Rarity.

"Oh, what to do? What to do?" Rarity worried, letting Nyx's hair drop. "Most ponies have their mane styled to leave a little something in the front, but you just look so... *elegant* with your mane pulled back, and it shows off

more of your adorable little face. Yes, I definitely need to keep the pulled back style... but it just *needs* something... ”

Rarity's horn glowed, the unicorn levitating a few ribbons and hair bands from her private collection. Her eyes moved over each, tossing some away while other lingered in the air, waiting to be judged by the fashion designer's meticulous eye. Then, Rarity's eyes lit up.

“Of course! Aloe and Lotus,” The unicorn proclaimed.

“Who and what now?” Twilight asked.

“Aloe and Lotus; they are the ponies who run the spa. They style their manes back like this and, oh, that style would look absolutely *perfect* on little Nyx here.”

With that Rarity was off, running a brush through Nyx's hair until every strand fell perfectly straight. Then, as a final touch, Rarity settled a head band just above Nyx's horn, a turquoise color with some designs on the sides that really brought out Nyx's eyes.

“There, perfect... oh Dear, you really *do* have the mane to pull this off. Your hair falls so wonderfully and has such a shine when its brushed. With your face... I dare say it gives you an air of sophistication and class.”

“Am I done now?” Nyx asked, not trying to sound bored but even the well behaved filly was at her wits' end.

“Yes Dear, you are done and you look *wonderful*. Here, why don't you go take a look in the mirror?”

The filly nodded, jumping down from the table she had been standing on while Rarity worked. It wasn't hard to find a mirror; the front of Rarity's shop littered with mirrors of varying sizes. Nyx moved to the nearest one, examining her reflection.

“It's perfect Rarity; if I didn't know better I'd say she was just a normal unicorn.”

“Oh, Twilight, must you *always* think of function over form? Yes, it hides her wings, but she also looks *fabulous*, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Yes, she looks amazing, Rarity.”

The white unicorn batted at a bit of her hair.

“Try not to sound so surprised, Darling. After all, I was the one that made your wonderful Gala dress.”

“Now all Nyx needs are her glasses,” Twilight said with a smile.

“Glasses? Heavens, Dear, what would that little filly need glasses for? Her eyesight seems fine.”

“These aren’t correctional glasses. It took a lot of research but I’ve finally found an illusion spell and enchanted them so that they can disguise Nyx’s eyes, make them look... well... more common.”

“Oh, but it will be such a travesty against fashion to hide those beautiful orbs! Those slits of irises give Nyx an air of mystery about her. What other pony can say they have eyes like a dragon?”

“None, but that’s the point. There is only one other mare who has ever had dragon shaped eyes, and that was... you know who.”

Rarity frowned.

“True... and it *was* because of those eyes I was really able to notice the resemblance. *Oooohhh*... but it’s such a shame to hide them! At least tell me you got some fashionable frames.”

“Well, I *thought* they would be fine,” Twilight admitted. Turning her head, the unicorn’s horn began to glow as her saddle bags, which had been left by the door, flipped open. From inside Twilight extracted a pair of glasses, levitating them across the room before presenting them to Rarity.

“Twilight, *please* tell me this is some kind of cruel joke!” Rarity said as she shied away from the glasses, as if they were an angry snake.

“Why do you say that; what’s wrong?”

“Those glasses, Dear. They are in every way wrong. Those thick frames, and that black color! Oh, they utterly clash with Nyx’s entire outfit!”

“But... she’s got a black coat. How can black frames clash with a black coat?”

“It’s so much more than just the *color*, Twilight. I mean, look at these glasses! They’re matte, with no shine whatsoever, while Nyx’s coat has just the slightest, natural sheen. And don’t get me *started* with the thickness.

“No, these just won’t do,” Rarity snipped matter of factually.

“But-”

“No buts!” Rarity said, getting behind Twilight and starting to push her towards the door. “I will *not* have you ruin this poor filly’s fashionable attire with some random frames you picked out just because you’d thought they’d ‘be fine’. As you surely remember, Twilight, I’ve seen your definition of fine... and it was embodied in that *horrible* excuse of a dress you were going to wear to the Gala. Not only was it old, the red and yellow colors were a *horrible* match for your mane, coat, eyes... it clashed with *everything*.”

“But-,” Twilight tried to defend, only to get cut off again.

“Now, I *want* you to gallop down to wherever you purchased these atrocities and get them exchanged. Pick up something midnight purple with a slight, and I mean *slight*, gloss and make sure the frames are also at least half as thin as these... these... *things*.” Rarity replied, setting the offending glasses on Twilight’s forehead.

“But what about Nyx?”

“She will be fine here with me until you come back with those new frames. Now, *off* with you.” Rarity ordered, shoving Twilight outside the shop before shutting the front door abruptly behind the purple unicorn.

“Twilight I swear, sometimes you *try* to be unfashionable on *purpose*,” Rarity huffed, turning away from the door and trotting away from the door. “I do apologize for that outburst, Nyx, but I just couldn’t let Twilight make you wear those awful glasses. They would have just been a travesty against fashion, a simple *travesty*.”

“Were the glasses really that bad?” Nyx asked as she turned away from the mirror.

“Oh, yes they were. Honestly, I wouldn’t make my worst enemy, some pony I truly hated, wear those glasses. They are, in all honesty, the very *definition* of a fashion *don’t*.”

At that Rarity turned, quickly busying herself as she cleaned up the bits and pieces left behind after making the vest. For a time, the unicorn went about her work happily, humming a melody to herself as she cleaned and put her material away. Yet, as Rarity worked she began to hear something, a quiet sniffing. Caught a bit off guard by the sound, Rarity turned to look at its source.

Nyx had plopped down in the middle of the shop floor and looked like she was on the verge of sobbing.

Dealing with Nyx while making the vest had already taken away most of Rarity’s doubts about whether the filly was as harmless and timid as Twilight promised, but seeing her about to cry completely dispelled any lingering worries. The seamstress’ only concern at the moment being making the filly feel better.

“Oh... oh Dear, what in the world is the matter?”

“T-Twilight doesn’t like me... ,” Nyx blubbered with a whine, struggling to not cry outright.

“Now just what makes you think that?”

“Y-you said that you wouldn’t m-make anypony wear those glasses, e-even some pony you really hate... b-but Twilight wanted me to wear those glasses, s-so she must hate me and... and...”



“Oh... oh Nyx, no,” Rarity reassured, trotting over beside the foal. Using one hoof to raise the filly's chin, Rarity used her other hoof to wipe away Nyx's tears while she looked into turquoise, dragon-like eyes.

“Twilight does not hate you.”

“But... you said...”

“Allow me to clarify. I wouldn't make anypony wear those glasses, but I also have a better sense of fashion than Twilight Sparkle. She just doesn't realize how ugly those glasses were; she's *a/ways* more concerned with function at the expense of form. Honestly, if she needed to, she'd probably wear those glasses herself, and I know Twilight doesn't hate herself.”

“Are you sure?”

“I am absolutely positive,” Rarity said, her voice ringing with authority. “Twilight Sparkle does not hate you in the least, and I don't want you to ever think otherwise.”

“O... okay Miss Rarity.”

“Please, Dear, it's just Rarity,” The white unicorn corrected, heading for the stairs that lead to the upper level of the shop, where the unicorn lived.

“Now, why don't we go and have ourselves a late morning tea while we wait for Twilight? I also think I have some leftover pieces of cake from one of Pinkie Pie's many parties. I'd say you deserve to have a slice after behaving so well this morning.”

Nyx perked up at the thought of getting a slice of cake, and eagerly followed Rarity to the boutique's kitchen. With an elegant flick of her horn, Rarity set several things in motion about the kitchen, the fashion designer well-practiced at levitating a number of items around a room at the same time. The very definition of an efficient multi-tasker.

“Go ahead and sit there,” Rarity said, motioning to the small kitchen table. “The tea will be ready in a jiffy.”

Nyx complied as she jumped up into one of the seats, though it quickly became apparent that the seats were a little too big for the foal, her eyes

barely breaking even with the top of the table. A stack of books quickly alleviated that, and, within minutes, Rarity had poured the tea and served both herself and Nyx a slice of cake.

It was a pleasant late morning tea, but Rarity had another purpose for the impromptu sit down. To say the least, the designer was still curious about the Nightmare Moon look-a-like. A curiosity she was now going to work to satisfy while Twilight was away.

“So, tell me a little about yourself, Nyx. Twilight has managed to keep you a secret for the past three days, but now I want to know everything.”

“Well, I’ve been staying with Twilight. She’s a really nice unicorn, and Spike is nice too. She also has an owl named-”

“Dear, you’re telling me about Twilight Sparkle, and I *know* Twilight. She is, after all, one of my closest friends. That and, if you recall, you and Twilight told me all about what you’ve been doing the past three days while I was working on your vest. No, I want to know more about *you*. Oh, and I’d drink your tea before it starts getting cold.”

Nyx nodded, looking down at the small cup she had been served. The filly alicorn first leaned in to take a sip, but quickly froze up and cringed when Rarity began to speak.

“Oh, Dear, please tell me Twilight has at *least* taught you how to have tea correctly.”

“There’s... a proper way to have tea?”

“But of course,” Rarity replied, giving her hair a toss as she liked to when making a point. “Especially when you have a unicorn horn. The only proper way for a unicorn to have tea is to levitate the cup to your mouth and take a very delicate sip, and, above all, a proper mare shouldn’t spill a drop or slurp.”

As if to give an example, Rarity did just that. She expertly sipped from the cup of tea without making a single noise before levitating it back down to its coaster.

“You mean... like this?” Nyx replied, her own horn starting to glow... only for her cup of tea to sky rocket up into the ceiling, smashing to pieces as drops of tea rained across the room.

“My word...”

“Rarity, I'm sorry! I'm so sorry! Please don't be mad, I-I-I didn't mean to do it! It was an accident! Please don't be mad! I'm so sorry, please don't hate me! I.... I...”

“Nyx, Nyx, please! Relax, it was just an accident; I'm not going to hate you for something so trivial,” Rarity replied, her own horn glowing as she took a few dish rags and began cleaning up the spilled tea and shattered tea cup. “Though, if I were to venture a guess, that was your first time trying to levitate something.”

The black coated filly replied with a nod.

“Well, I don't want you to worry. No unicorn gets levitation right on the first try. Though, most colts and fillies your age have trouble lifting things, where as your trouble seems to be that you have a natural ability for magic. You just put a little too much energy into it.

“Now,” Rarity continued, her magic cleaning up the last pieces of the mess while, at the same time, pouring Nyx a fresh cup of tea. “I want you to try again, but be very gentle this time.”

“But... what if I break another cup?”

“Then I'll just clean it up and we'll try again until I'm out of cups,” Rarity answered, though she would secretly keep some of her cups hidden away. She was willing to help a filly learn, but she wouldn't risk her best china being destroyed.

The bode of confidence, however, brought a smile to Nyx's face as her horn glowed again. This time, the cup of tea very gently levitated off the saucer, wobbling around a bit in the air but staying level enough that it didn't spill. Nyx opened her mouth far wider than she probably needed to, bringing the cup close until she could bring her lips together and take a very gentle sip of tea.

Then, she levitated the cup down, intending to set it gently down on the saucer. Nyx, however, released her magic a little too early, and the cup clattered down onto the waiting saucer. The cup, however, did not break or spill.

"Oh, that was marvelous, Darling, simply marvelous!" Rarity said, happy to see that the filly had succeeded and that her tea cup had survived. "I can tell, you have the makings and natural talent to really be a proper mare and a talented magic user... with the right instruction, of course."

"There is more to being a proper mare than sipping tea?"

"But of course! You have to be able to walk with the right posture, have to be able to keep up pleasant conversation, oh... and any proper mare must--"

"Can you teach me something else, Rarity?" Nyx asked eagerly. "Please?"

"Oh, now if only Sweetie Belle was so eager," Rarity mused with a smile. "But yes, I can teach you. We can get started right now, as a matter of fact. Starting with the proper way to eat a cake."

=====

Twilight galloped, grumbling under her breath about the pony at the shop where she had bought the frames. It had taken much longer than it should have to find the right glasses, and it was no fault of Twilight's. The stallion who ran the store understood Rarity's very specific specifications, but what had taken forever was him *finding* those glasses. The stallion had no organization skills, and they ended up looking through half the boxes he had in storage for that one pair of glasses.

Still, Twilight had the glasses in question and was happy to see she was getting close to Carousel Boutique. She galloped in the door, looking around the front room for Rarity and Nyx. A small surge of panic went through the unicorn seeing the front room empty, but before starting to get worked up in worry, Twilight called out.

"Rarity?"

“OH! Twilight! You’re back,” Rarity called. “Come on into the kitchen.”

Following her friend’s voice, Twilight nosed open the door to the kitchen and was a bit surprised at what she found. Both Nyx and Rarity were standing in the kitchen, the white unicorn balancing a stack of three book on her head while Nyx had a single fairly thin book on hers. The filly was watching the book, squirming a little as she tried to keep the book balanced.

“What... are you two doing?”

“Why, I’m just giving Nyx a few lessons in being a proper mare.”

“Yea, she taught me how to sip tea, how to eat cake, and now she’s showing me how to have proper posture,” Nyx chirped, all too excited by the prospect of learning... well, anything.

“There’s a way to eat cake?” Twilight couldn’t help but ask while raising an eyebrow.

“But *of course*, Twilight; at least there is a *proper* way to do it. Still, I assume you have the new glasses for Nyx?”

“Yep, I’ve got them right here,” Twilight said, levitating the frames off her forehead and over to Rarity. The white unicorn took the glasses into her own levitation magic, turning them around a number of times as she examined them, scrutinizing every detail.

“These are... better. Not *ideal*, mind you, but still better than the last set of frames. Have you already enchanted them?”

“Yes, I did it on my way over here.”

“Well then, Nyx, Dear, try them on,” Rarity said, passing the glasses to the little filly. The effect was immediate as soon as he glasses where on the bridge of the filly’s nose; Nyx’s dragon-shaped eyes now looking round and normal. Her irises were still turquoise, but more importantly the whites of her eyes actually white.

“While I still say your real eyes are far better, you still look absolutely darling, and those midnight purple frames go perfectly with your new vest. Yes, I officially declare you to be fabulous, Nyx.”

“Twilight, why do I have to wear a vest and glasses?” Nyx asked, her curiosity about the clothes reaching its limits. Twilight bit her lip for a minute, trying to think of something but failing. Thankfully, Rarity seemed to pick up on Twilight’s nerves.

“Well, Twilight’s just trying to protect you, Dear.”

“Protect me? From what?”

“Why, from making other ponies jealous, of course! Most ponies either have wings or a horn, if they even have either at all, but you have both. Not only that, but you have one of the most unique eyes I’ve ever seen, and you wouldn’t want to make anypony jealous, would you?”

“No, I guess I don’t...”

“Now, why don’t you go finish your cake while I talk with Twilight for a moment? Oh, but *do* remember to practice eating it properly.”

“I will, Rarity,” Nyx chirped, moving back to the table while Rarity guided Twilight to the far corner of the room, where they could talk quietly without being overheard.

“So, I take it you two have been getting along,” Twilight offered in a hushed voice.

“Oh Twilight, she is a little angel! I can see why you were so adamant earlier that she only *looks* like Nightmare Moon.”

“I’m glad to hear you think so.”

“Though I did notice a couple things that you may want to be aware of.”

“Like what?”

“Firstly, that little filly has a *lot* of magic. As you can see, she’s already able to levitate a tea cup. Well, actually, the first cup she tried to lift flew straight into the ceiling and was smashed to bits, like she put too much effort into it.”

“Well, she *is* an alicorn,” Twilight pointed out. “Celestia and Luna are able to move the sun and moon, so moving a cup is probably something that comes quite easily to an alicorn.”

“Secondly,” Rarity continued, not even registering Twilight quick comment. “Be very, and I do mean *very*, careful what you say around her. I’ve found out the hard way that little Nyx here is a very sensitive pony and tends to cry at the drop of a hat. I accidentally said something in passing that made her think you hated her... and the poor dear was absolutely heartbroken! In fact, I dare say she is actually *worse* than our dear Fluttershy.”

“To be fair, Fluttershy has gotten more sociable since I’ve started to know her. I’m sure that Nyx will grow out of it eventually... or at least I hope so.”

“Well, still be careful what you say. It wouldn’t take much to hurt her feelings.”

“Don’t worry Rarity,” Twilight replied with a reassuring smile. “I may not know as much about fashion as you do, but I do know that you have to be careful what you say to some ponies because it just may hurt their feelings.”

“One of your lessons on friendship, I would imagine,” Rarity said with a smile. “So, what *do* you have planned for the rest of the afternoon?”

“I was actually planning to show Nyx around Ponyville and see how well her disguise holds up. Take her to see the rest of our friends.”

“Very clever of you, Twilight. In case the disguise isn’t enough, you’d only be introducing her to our friends, ponies who we can trust to keep a secret.”

“Exactly, though... I think for right now I’d like to just keep the real truth between you and me.”

"It would be for the best, wouldn't it? While Fluttershy and Pinkie Pie may take well to Nyx, I can only imagine that convincing Applejack and Rainbow Dash that she isn't Nightmare Moon would be *much* more difficult, considering how stubborn those two ponies are."

"That and the fewer ponies that know the truth the better, at least until I can figure out if she really *is* Nightmare Moon or just happens to look like her. Still, you promise to keep this just between us?"

"Cross my heart, hope to fly, stick a cupcake in my eye," Rarity quickly chanted, making the appropriate body movements in tune with the Pinkie Pie promise.

"Thank you Rarity... and thanks again for helping with Nyx's disguise."

"It was my pleasure Twilight, really," Rarity replied, she and Twilight moving back to the table now that the sensitive part of their conversation was done. "But just promise me one thing."

"What's that?"

"I want you to let Nyx come over to see me once in a while. I won't let you keep this little sweetheart all to yourself."

Twilight giggled a little, but nodded her head all the same.

"I promise."

=====

The next few hours were spent with Twilight showing Nyx to her other friends, and, just like her friends, their responses to and from Nyx were vastly different, the only constant being that none of them could see through the expertly crafted disguise.

Rainbow Dash was actually the very first to run into Twilight... literally run *into* Twilight. It was enough to make Nyx start bawling, afraid that the first pony to show her any kindness was seriously hurt or worse. Twilight, however, already used to acting like a living crash site more than once, was



no more worse for the wear, and got Nyx to settle down once she showed the crying filly that she was fine.

Rainbow Dash, on the other hoof, wasn't too impressed with Twilight's "cousin". In her own words, Dash pointed out that Nyx was kind of a crybaby, and that she could stand a bit of toughening up. A lot of toughing up, actually. Like, she needed to be way more than just 20% tougher. It was the kind of harsh honesty Dash was known for, though Twilight didn't appreciate it at the moment. After those not so gentle words, Nyx practically hid behind Twilight until Rainbow dashed off. Nyx admitted she didn't like Dash much as Rarity, but Twilight assured her that while she was a little abrasive, Dash was a pony Nyx could always trust and count on.

The next pony Twilight introduced Nyx to was Applejack. At first, Nyx seemed frightened of Applejack, seeing her buck apple trees with the greatest of ease. Still, Nyx changed her tune when Applejack showed the filly some good old fashioned Southern hospitality, offering a smile and free apple juice. It wasn't long before the young filly was asking Applejack all kinds of questions about the care and harvesting of apples. Questions Applejack was more than willing to answer proudly, the farm pony impressing not only Nyx but Twilight with her extensive knowledge of her livelihood.

There was no doubt about it. If apple farming was a field of study, Applejack would have a PhD.

Fluttershy was also another pony that Nyx got along well with, though if the filly couldn't get along with the Bearer of the Element of Kindness, Twilight seriously doubted that Nyx could ever get along with anypony else. Fluttershy was all over with how adorable she thought Nyx was, quickly pulling Nyx out of her shell. The yellow pegasus then introduced Nyx to as many of her animal friends she could, happily handling Nyx's constant stream of questions about the many cute and cuddly creatures.

Now Twilight and Nyx were walking down the street of Ponyville, their destination looming closer. While Twilight had a feeling all her friends would have accepted Nyx eventually anyway, even if she had told them the truth, it was safer for Nyx if fewer ponies knew where she came from. She just needed time to study the crazy cult's spell, to figure out what had happened when the spell was interrupted. Once she knew for sure what occurred, she would tell everypony the truth.

But, for the moment, Rarity would be the only one Twilight would let in on the secret... that's *if* the disguise held up against its most difficult opponent. An energetic pink earth pony that had a happy outlook on life but, more importantly, a strange sixth sense about the future, among other things.

The disguise would have to stand up against Pinkie Pie.

Twilight winced when she heard the little bell above the shop's door ring, announcing her and Nyx's arrival. She was understandably nervous. She knew she could make Pinkie Pie promise to keep the truth a secret if she saw through the disguise. If any pony was going to keep a Pinkie Pie promise, it was the pony the promise was named after. Still, if the disguise could fool the pink earth pony, then it meant that almost any regular pony would be fooled.

"Hey, welcome to Sugar Cube Corner where everything is super tasty, super sugary, and just super super. OH, hey Twilight!" The pink earth pony said as she bounced out from the kitchen. "Here for an afternoon snack?"

"Actually, I'm here to introduce you to my cousin. She's going to be staying here in Ponyville with me for a while, and-"

Twilight found herself quickly knocked out of the way as Pinkie Pie zipped up, bringing her face within inches of Nyx, who could only crane her neck back and took a few nervous steps back in of shock at how quickly the earth pony had crossed the room.

"OH YEA! I love meeting new ponies! I'm Pinkie Pie. What's your name?"

"I'm... I'm... I'm... ," Nyx stammered, starting to get scared from the crazy pink pony with the manic blue eyes staring at her.

"Oh, I know! Let me guess! I'm *great* at guessing games," Pinkie Pie chirped, bringing her head back and actually giving Nyx a bit of her personal space back. "Um... Little Shadow? No... how about Night Shade? Oh, I know! Black Snooty, Black Snooty!"

Pinkie Pie froze up at this, as did Twilight. The unicorn's mind slipped back to the morning of the last Summer Sun Celebration. When Nightmare Moon

first appeared Pinkie tried to guess her name, and one of the names she guessed was Black Snooty. Was that a sign Pinkie Pie saw the resemblance? Was she able to see through Nyx's disguise?

"Oh, I'm sorry, that was mean of me," Pinkie then finally offered, ending the silence that had fallen on the room. "I know your coat is black but I don't know enough about you to call you snooty, and even if I did, I wouldn't say it to you like this. That would just make me a rude rudy rude pants. Still, I wonder why I thought that would be your name?"

"Well," Twilight interrupted, not wanting to give Pinkie Pie time to think about it. "In any case, her name is Nyx."

"Oh, that's a cool name. Nyx... Nyx... **Nyx**... oh yea, that is a *really* cool name. So, Nyxie, how long have you been in Ponyville?"

"Just a few days," Twilight answered for Nyx, the black filly having taken the time that Pinkie stepped back to hide behind the unicorn.

"WHAT?!!!" Pinkie Pie half shouted, the earth pony glaring angrily at Twilight, the unicorn taking an anxious step back from Pinkie Pie while Nyx darted behind Twilight, covering her eyes in fear.

"She's been here for *that* long and you didn't tell me?!"

"Well, I was just giving her a chance to settle in. See, she's very-."

"Twilight, nothing helps a pony settle in better than one of my famous Pinkie Pie Welcome Parties, and now I'm late! I'm going to have to make this party extra, super duper special to make up for it! Oh, I'm going to need streamers, balloons, and you know what else?"

"No... ," Twilight replied, slightly afraid of what the answer would be.

"I'm going to need... a piñata! That's the only thing that can make up for the fact I'm this late for with Nyx's 'Welcome to Ponyville' party!" Pinkie Pie announced, as if the strange unwritten laws of Pinkie Pie's parties were common knowledge to anypony. "Now, we'll have the party at the library tonight and I'll invite everypony! Oh, it will be such fun, but I'm going to

need help if I'm going to pull it off. Oh, I wonder if I can find Rainbow Dash?"

With that Pinkie Pie was off, leaving a very scared and confused Nyx in her wake. Twilight, however, was mostly relieved. Pinkie Pie was acting like Pinkie Pie, which meant she hadn't recognized Nyx, at least consciously. The unicorn couldn't help but worry that Pinkie Pie might have subconsciously recognized Nyx, which is why she brought up the name Black Snooty. Still, as long as that recognition stayed in the pink pony's subconscious, they would be fine.

Still, with Pinkie Pie off to pull together a welcome party, Twilight turned her attention to Nyx. The filly was still stunned, as some ponies were when they first met the very energetic earth pony.

"Twilight, i-is she always like that?" Nyx asked as she began to recover from meeting Pinkie Pie, just barely finding the courage to come out from her hiding place behind Twilight.

"Not always... but she does get like this whenever she meets a new pony."

Nyx took this answer silently, turning her attention to the door Pinkie Pie had bounced out of a few moments earlier.

"And... is she really going to throw me a party?"

"Yep. Pinkie Pie throws a party for every new pony who comes to Ponyville, even ponies who may only be staying here for a few days. She just... really likes throwing parties and making ponies smile."

"That's nice, but... please don't hate me for saying this but... she's kind of weird..."

Twilight laughed a little.

"Yep, that's Pinkie Pie. She's on a different wavelength than anypony else. But don't worry; she's one of the nicest ponies in Ponyville. Still, if she's going to throw you a party, I'm going to have to let you know what to expect. Don't want you to get overloaded like I did at my welcome party."

“Pinkie Pie threw you a welcome party? What was that like?”

Twilight bit her lip, the welcome party being on the night just before Nightmare Moon returned. She was on the verge of asking Nyx to drop the question, but then she looked into the filly’s eyes. Eyes that said that, while Nyx would have accepted no as an answer, she would be very disappointed if her question wasn’t answered.

Well, she did just asked what the *party* was like. Twilight didn’t have to mention the Summer Sun Celebration...

“Well, it’s sort like this. I had just moved to Ponyville with Spike, when he told me to try to talk to some of the ponies in town. The first pony we ran into was Pinkie Pie, and...”

# Chapter 3

## School Days and Memories

Nyx stood near Twilight, close to the mare's front leg as she looked ahead. Before the pair was a building, painted in rich, welcoming, red colors, set amongst a lush green yard. The building was decorated with festive hearts, even the weather vane on the top of the bell tower featured a heart, looking almost like a Cupid arrow. A playground was visible out behind the building, while a flag pole and a hedge sculpture stood in front. The hedge sculpture was of a pony wearing a square, flat-topped hat with a tassel.

An utterly welcoming sight to most young ponies in the community, and a place of fond memories to many of Ponyville's resident. A place of learning, where ponies studied for a bright future and made good friends. Ponyville Elementary School house, where the mulberry-colored earth pony Cheerilee granted the gift of knowledge to her students.

It was a place that utterly scared Nyx.

"Do I really have to go?" The black coated filly asked, trying her best to hide behind Twilight's leg.

"Yes," Twilight replied.

"For how long?"

"You're signed up for the morning class, so you'll be done around lunchtime. I'll come back to pick you up then," Twilight answered.

"But... I didn't have to go to school before. Why do I have to go now?"

"It's important for you to get a good education," Twilight replied, though it wasn't the whole truth. Yes, she felt it was important for Nyx to go to school, but it was also part of her disguise. If she was going to school it would be more easy for ponies to believe that she was just an average unicorn filly and really was Twilight's cousin.

Nyx was also becoming just a little *too* clingy at the library. She had a thirst for knowledge that was almost insatiable, and Twilight hadn't been able to get much research done into the cult's spell. She found Nyx's curiosity wonderful, and wanted to encourage it, but she needed to be able to get to her own studies as well... and maybe have a few hours to herself.

"Do I really have to?"

"The whole point of school is to learn new things. You've been learning everything you can from me and Rarity, and you've been having a lot of fun. Now, you're just going to learn from Cheerilee instead, and actually be in a class with other fillies and colts."

"But I know you and your friends... I don't know Cheerilee. What if she's mean?"

"Don't worry, Cheerilee is very nice. Just pay attention in class and remember to follow the rules. That means both Cheerilee's rules and my rules, which are?"

"I can't take off my vest, I can't take off my glasses, and I should try not to use my magic unless I'm writing something down."

"And try to make some friends," Twilight added, rubbing a hoof against the little filly's head in a playful noogie. Nyx looked up at Twilight with curiosity gleaming in them after Twilight stopped.

"Are friends really that important?"

"Trust me, nothing is more important than having good friends," Twilight said, taking a step forward as the school bell began to ring. "Now, come on. If we just keep standing here you're going to be late."

=====

"Good morning class," Cheerilee half sang, standing at the front of the room.

“Good morning Cheerilee,” The class echoed back, some honestly meaning it while others were just saying it because, if they didn’t, they’d have to say it again.

“Now, before we get started, I have a small announcement. We have a new student joining us today. Her name is Nyx, and I expect you all to welcome her as you would any new student,” Cheerilee said, motioning to the black coated filly standing next to her.

“Now, go ahead and find your seat Nyx. You can take any open desk you like.”

Nyx nodded gently before she looked out across the dozen desks. The school house had only nine desks the day before, but, in preparation for having a new student, Cheerilee had brought out another three desks from storage. The room was now laid out with four columns of three desks each.

The rest of the class was sitting to one side of the room, leaving an entire column of empty desks on the right side of the room, when one was looking from the teacher’s desk. Nyx looked at each seat. Twilight had told her to sit as close to the front as possible, but at the same time Nyx didn’t feel brave enough to sit in the very front, at least not on the first day. With only three rows of desk to choose from, that only left one desk that really worked.

Nyx walked to the middle desk, setting down the saddle bag Twilight had packed for her that morning before taking a seat. Directly to her right was an earth pony with a grayish magenta coat, and a mane that was a mixture of white and violet. Nyx couldn’t help but glance up to the top of the filly’s head, where she wore a tiara very similar to the tiara she had for a cutie mark.

It was only then that Nyx realized the pony she was staring at was staring back, and not in a good way. The tiara wearing pony wore an expression of annoyance, like Nyx’s very presence was something of an offence to her. Nyx shank away from the other filly, not sure what to do... but then she remembered what Twilight told her.

Gathering what courage she could, Nyx gave a very sheepish smile and gently waved her hoof, but the tiara wearing pony just humphed and turned



her head away, lifting her nose a little. It was an action that made Nyx slump down in her seat, turning her attention to the front of the room where Cheerilee was writing something on the board.

School was not going to be fun at all.

=====

School was *amazing!*

Nyx could only smile, horn shimmering as she took notes feverishly. Cheerilee had started the day's lesson with some history, talking about the founding of Ponyville by earth ponies and why the town honored some of the traditions they did. Specifically, she focused on the town's seasonal traditions, giving simple explanations as to why the traditions were done and why they were so important.

"Now, are there any questions before we go to recess?" Cheerilee asked, not expecting to see a hoof in the air since her students were always more interested in taking their recess. Still, the teacher couldn't help but smile when she saw a particular black hoof in the air, one that had been raised several times already, the sign of an eager student.

"Yes Nyx, what's your question?"

"How was Winter Wrap Up done before there were pegasus ponies in Ponyville?"

"That is a very good question Nyx. While it is tradition that magic isn't used to clean up winter, few ponies realized that back when the tradition started that there weren't pegasi around."

"So how *did* they clean up the clouds and get the birds back?"

"Well, if you don't mind getting to recess a little later than usual, I can tell you that originally the earth ponies in town-"

And Cheerilee was off, going much deeper into her lecture. Nyx was happy, already jotting down fresh notes. Her note taking, however, was interrupted as Nyx felt something hit the side of her head. Looking down at the floor,

she saw it was a piece of paper, and upon looking up she saw a number of her classmates were glaring at her fairly coldly for delaying recess.

It was enough to make the filly turn away, sinking into her desk and whimpering a little, wondering what she had done wrong. She had just asked a question... she was just curious.

=====

“Boy, am I glad to get outside,” Apple Bloom said about fifteen minutes later, when Cheerilee had finished talking about how earth ponies cleared the clouds. “I’m just glad Cheerilee didn’t cancel recess because of the question that new filly asked.”

“But it was pretty cool hearing how earth ponies were able to clear the skies and bring back the southern birds before there were pegasi in town,” Twist offered as she and Apple Bloom walked down the outside steps of the school house, heading into the playground area.

“Yea, it was kind of cool, but I’d still rather have recess. So, what do you want to do?”

“You want to take turns on the swing?” Twist asked, pointing at the swing in question.

“Sure!” Apple Bloom replied, the pair jogging over. Twist arrived first, jumping on the wooden swing as she began to put her weight into swinging. Apple Bloom stood back, watching as her friend got pretty high, not the highest the farm filly had seen, but respectable.

“Hey!” Twist called, as she reached the top of her forward swing.

“What is it?”

“I think... Silver Spoon... and... Diamond... Tiara... are talking... to... the new... filly,” Twist said, saying a few bits of her sentence each time she swung by Apple Bloom. The farm filly turned her head, seeing that the two school bullies had caught the new filly just as she came outside for recess, the three of them talking on the school house steps.

“What do... you think... they’re... talking... about?”

“Nothin’ good if I know those two,” Apple Bloom said, before turning in that direction. “Twist, you stay here a sec. I’ll be right back.”

“O... kay!” Twist called, continuing to swing, but watching as her yellow, earth pony friend made her way across the playground. Thankfully, Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon had their backs to the rest of the playground, so they couldn’t see Apple Bloom coming up. This allowed the yellow filly to listen in and hear what the two bullies were saying.

“So, like, we don’t appreciate *nerds* like you making us almost miss recess,” Diamond Tiara said, pointing an accusing hoof.

“That class is already soooo boring without you asking a bunch of questions,” Silver Spoon added. “We get enough of that from Twist.”

“But at least Twist is bearable. That and she doesn’t have ugly coat, like yours.”

Nyx cringed, lowering her head as her ears flattened, tears forming in her eyes. “It-it’s...U...ugly?” she barely sniffled out.

The two earth ponies looked at each other with malicious smirks before they turned their attention back to Nyx.

“Yeah, it is. The absolute worst color. I would just *die* if I had a black coat.”

“Me too; not only is black, like, so ugly but it’s creepy too. Only things like spiders, bats, and ticks are supposed to be black. Not ponies. It just isn’t natural.”

“She probably actually *likes* bugs. Why, I bet she’s covered in ticks this very moment.”

“Ewww... ,” Silver Spoon replied, sticking out her tongue before the two fillies began to chant evilly together.

“Nyx has Ticks, Nyx has Ticks, Nyx has Ticks.”

"I... I do n-not... ," Nyx whimpered out, trying to defend herself, but lacking the courage or conviction needed to get the bullies to stop. Tears were already flowing from her eyes, only fueling the sadistic mood of the two class bullies.

"Awww, what's the matter?" Diamond Tiara mocked with faked sympathy. "Are you going to cry like a little foal?"

"I bet she is; she's been teary eyed the whole time we've been talking to her. You are, like, *such* a crybaby."

Nyx couldn't stand it anymore. She collapsed on the ground and proceeded to wail, making the two earth ponies laugh, not noticing a yellow filly sneaking behind them.

"So, like, is crying supposed to be your special talent or something?"

"Nah, she doesn't even have a cutie mark," Silver Spoon noted, pointing to Nyx's blank flanks.

"Wow, I so didn't notice that before! So she's a nerd, a creep, a crybaby, *and* a blank flank! She's, like, the biggest loser in the whole school!"

"More like the biggest loser in Ponyville," Silver Spoon corrected, making Nyx only cry even harder as the two bullies laughed. Or, at least, they did laugh until Diamond Tiara was suddenly shoved to the ground, namesake tiara falling off her head and into the dirt.

"Oh my gosh, Tiara!" Silver Spoon exclaimed, eyes darting until she saw a furious Apple Bloom standing just a few feet away. Silver Spoon quickly connected the dots and glared at the yellow farm filly. "Like, you're going to be in so much trouble now."

"My tiara!" Diamond Tiara cried out, turning and glaring daggers at Apple Bloom. "You got dirt on my tiara! I'm telling the Cheerilee!"

"Fine!" Apple Bloom challenged. "If you do that, then I'll tell her that you were bein' mean to Nyx when she told us to be nice to her."

"Oh, what, and you think she'll believe you?"

“Nyx is cryin’ and my friend Twist is watchin’ the whole thing.”

“Is not!” Diamond Tiara protested. Apple Bloom, however, just smirked and pointed a hoof behind her, where Twist, while still on the swings, was watching the whole thing.

Silver Spoon grabbed Diamond Tiara’s tiara, doing her best to wipe the dirt of the treasured crown.

“Come on, Diamond Tiara, this is, like, not worth our time getting in trouble for.”

“Hmph. Fine. You win this round, Blank Flank. Have fun with your new friend and all of her ticks. Let’s get out of here, Silver Spoon.”

With that, the pair turned to make tactical retreat, Apple Bloom watching the pair leave before huffing and scrapping her hoof on the ground.

“Someday I’d like to buck some sense into those two, just like my big sister would. *She* never got teased in school... but then again she got in trouble for fighin’,” Apple Bloom grumbled before turning around. “You okay?”

Nyx nodded, still crying, but beginning to calm down. She carefully removed her glasses to rub the tears from her eyes. Nyx kept her eyes closed the entire time her glasses were off, not wanting to get teased for her dragon eyes, and did not open her eyes again until the glasses were back where they belonged, perched on the filly’s nose.

“W-why are those two so mean?”

“Personally, I think it’s their special talents, and that they should have bully cutie marks. But I guess it’s kind of like havin’ a special talent for arguin’. There just isn’t a cutie mark that really makes sense for being a bully. I’m Apple Bloom by the way,” The yellow filly chirped as she put out a hoof.

The disguised alicorn looked at the hoof for a bit before shakily offering up her own in a rather weak hoof shake.

“Nyx.”

=====

“Well howdy Twilight; what brings you round these here parts?” Applejack greeted, trotting up to the purple unicorn.

“Oh, hey Applejack. I’m just on my way to the schoolhouse,” Twilight replied, the two friends starting to walk alongside each other down the path.

“Well, that’s just where I’m headin’. I’m pickin’ up Apple Bloom from school today. Need her help runnin’ some errands in town. What about yerself?”

“I’m picking up Nyx.”

“Nyx? That cousin of yours? Since when did that little filly start goin’ to school?”

“Today was her first day actually.”

“First day of school is never easy, ‘specially when you just moved to a new place.”

“Yea, I remember the first day I transferred from my old school to Celestia’s School for Gifted Unicorns. It was scary, but I really didn’t have to deal with a lot of other students, being Celestia’s private pupil and all. Still, doesn’t this mean Apple Bloom and Nyx are in class together?”

“I reckon it does. You think they’ve met?” Applejack asked as the pair rounded a bend in the path, the school coming into view.

Twilight smiled, taking notice of a couple of fillies playing just outside the schoolhouse.

“I’d say they’ve more than just met.”

The pair stopped at this, deciding to watch from a distance as Nyx chased Apple Bloom around, probably in a game of tag though Twilight couldn’t be sure, both due to the distance and because sometimes it’s just hard to tell what little fillies and colts were doing.

The pair of young mares watched the fillies play for a few moments before resuming their approach, Applejack calling out to her little sister and causing both Apple Bloom and Nyx to run in their direction.

“Hey Apple Bloom, how was school today?” Applejack asked once the fillies were within ear shot.

“It was really fun, and I’ve made a new friend,” Apple Bloom said with a smile.

“And would this be her?”

“Yep. Applejack, this is Nyx. Nyx, this is my big sister Applejack.”

“Wait... your big sister is Applejack?” Nyx asked.

“You already know my big sister?”

“She should,” The orange farm pony interrupted. “Twilight brought Nyx around to see me and all our other friends.”

“Why would she do that?”

“Because, Nyx is my cousin. And she’s staying with me at the library,” Twilight answered with her simple but effective lie.

“Whoa, that’s cool!” Apple Bloom offered excitedly. “Did you know Twilight once beat an Ursa Minor all by herself?”

Nyx eyes went wide, looking at the purple unicorn with awe and admiration. “You did?”

“Well... yes, but I wouldn’t really call what I did beating it. The Ursa Minor was just cranky from being woken up, so I gave it some milk and rocked it to sleep.”

“But it was still really cool,” Apple Bloom offered.

“So, did anything else happen at school today?” Twilight asked, trying to steer the conversation away from her defeat of the Ursa Minor.

“Well... some of the other fillies in class were mean to me... OH! And Cheerilee wanted me to give you something,” Nyx said, horn glowing as her saddle bag clicked open. The note in question floated into the air, passing from Nyx’s magic to Twilight’s as the unicorn read.

“What does it say? Did Nyx do something bad?” Apple Bloom asked, her only experience with teacher’s notes being when she had misbehaved at school. Nyx couldn’t help but look at Apple Bloom with mild panic, being afraid that she did something wrong on her very first day of school.

“No, it’s just Cheerilee asking me to make sure Nyx knows about some subjects, since she’s starting partway through the school year.”

Applejack whistled, reading the note over Twilight’s shoulder.

“That ain’t just *some* subjects Twi; that’s a lot of book learnin’ Nyx has to catch up on.”

“Yes... but with my help I’m sure we’ll get through it really quickly. We’ll, of course, start right away. We could probably get through the basic mathematics this afternoon if we really hit it hard.”

“Awww... ,” Apple Bloom muttered in disappointment.

“What’s the matter Sugarcube?”

“I wanted to ask Nyx if she wanted to join the Cutie Mark Crusaders. I’m meeting Scootaloo and Sweetie Belle after they get out from the afternoon class so we can try and find our cutie marks, and Nyx doesn’t have hers either.”

“Well, them two friends of yers don’t get out of class until mid-afternoon and you and I got errands to run. So how about you let Nyx go get some learnin’ done with Twilight, and then you and your friends can go find her at the library later?

“That is, ‘course, if it’s okay with Twilight.”



Before the unicorn could even answer, both Apple Bloom and Nyx were giving her the biggest, most pleading puppy dog eyes and begging smiles they could muster. It was enough to make Twilight giggle, nodding her head.

“Of course. Nyx may need to study, but she also needs to have time to play with new friends.”

=====

Diamond Tiara groaned as she dropped her face into her open book. She glared coldly at the letters on the page, even though she'd rather be setting her glare on a certain black filly. Nyx had just asked *another* question, right before recess, and now Cheerilee was continuing to lecture past the time they were supposed to go outside.

Thankfully, the answer to Nyx's question was short, and the fillies and colts of the school were soon free to run and play outside. Nyx rushed out with Apple Bloom and Twist, the three rushing off to play on a bit of playground equipment. Diamond Tiara watched the black filly from across the playground with a glare, waiting for Silver Spoon to get outside.

“Hey there, Diamond Tiara. How boring was *that* lesson?”

“Totally boring, and Nyx just couldn't keep her mouth shut and had to ask another one of her dumb questions. Seriously, I don't know what's wrong with her. It's like she actually *likes* school.”

“A total egghead,” Silver Spoon agreed.

“She's been like this since she started class two weeks ago. I don't know why she keeps doing it. Like, everypony else hates it. Her only friends are those three blank flanks and that other nerd Twist. Somepony needs to teach her a lesson about being so... nerdy.”

“Oh yea. Hey, you want to put gum on her chair?”

“No, that won't do it. It might make her cry but that'll be it. If we're going to prank her, it needs to be a prank that teaches her to not be so curious,”

Diamond Tiara said, shifting her gaze away from the black filly, and to the forest trees in the distance. It was at this point the bully began to smile.

“Oh... that is *too* perfect.”

“What is it?”

Diamond Tiara motioned for Silver Spoon to get close before she started whispering in her friend's ear.

Silver Spoon also began smiling, nodding her head in approval. “Oh, Diamond Tiara, that will teach her.”

“Bump! Bump! Sugar-lump, rump!” The pair said in unison, doing their very strange special hoofshake before they laughed and began strolling off to set their plans in motion.

=====

*KNOCK... KNOCK... KNOCK*

“Coming,” Twilight announced, strolling towards the door. She and Nyx were in the middle of the filly’s extra afternoon lessons, where she and Twilight worked to catch Nyx up with the rest of her class. Nyx was currently working on some math problems Twilight had written out for her when the unicorn went to answer the door.

“Nyx?” Twilight called from the door.

“Yeah?”

“There are a couple of your friends from school here. You want to take a break and go play with them?”

Nyx was at the door in the flash, expecting Apple Bloom or Twist... but her smile turned into a frown when she saw Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon standing there.

“Hey Nyx, we were just going to Sugarcube Corner to get a snack. You want to come with?” Diamond Tiara offered, putting on a smile.

"I... I really shouldn't," Nyx said. "I've got a lot of studying to do."

"Oh, nonsense," Twilight said, using a leg to push Nyx out the door. She then fetched the black filly's saddle bags and puts a few bits into the right bag. "Go have a break with your friends. That, and can you bring me back a sugar cookie? Pinkie Pie was bragging that the sugar cookies she made this morning are her best ever, and I was hoping to try one."

"But, but..." Nyx stammered, the unicorn not quite picking up Nyx's lack of excitement. Before she knew it, she was already outside, with Twilight expecting her to buy snacks for both herself and for the little fillies. Nyx lowered her head, and looked at the two other fillies in fear, afraid of what other mean things they would say to emotionally cut her. Instead, the two continued to smile... and... they were pretty nice smiles.

"So Silver Spoon and I just wanted to apologize for being so mean."

"You... you do?" Nyx asked as she raised her head, utterly surprised to hear those words; it was the last thing she would have expected them to say.

"Yeah, like, we thought about what we did, and we're so sorry we did it. It's not easy being the new kid in town, and it was wrong of us to be mean to you like that."

"O-oh, um... that's okay. I forgive you," Nyx offered with a shy smile.

"Aw, thanks a lot, Nyx! We thought that maybe you were a nice pony, and we're right as always! In fact, let's be friends."

"R-really?!" Nyx asked with a grin, unable to hide her enthusiasm at having more friends.

"Oh yea. We can, like, be total BFF's."

"What's that?" Nyx asked, as she began to walk with the other two fillies.

"BFF's... Best Friends Forever," Diamond Tiara explained. "Oh, and just so you know, black is so totally cool."

“It is?”

“Like, coolest color *ever*. It makes you unique, even if you don’t have a cutie mark yet.” Silver Spoon assured.

“Totally cool,” Diamond Tiara agreed.

“Well, thanks. I’m glad we can be friends,” Nyx said, smiling. Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon smiled as well, winking at each other behind Nyx’s back before laughing a bit.

“What’s so funny?”

“Oh, nothing, just thinking of a joke Silver Spoon told me. Now, let’s go get those sweets.”

=====

“Really?” Nyx asked in disbelief as she sat with Silver Spoon and Diamond Tiara just outside Sugarcube Corner, the three eating their snacks. Nyx was using her horn to levitate the food to her mouth, doing her best to remember all the lessons on being a proper mare Rarity had taught her since Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon seemed to be the kind of mares to care.

“Oh yes, the Everfree Forest really is *amazing* once you go deep enough inside.” Diamond Tiara reassured. She and Silver Spoon had just spent the last half hour telling Nyx that while the Everfree Forest was scary on the outside it an amazing place when you got deep enough. A beautiful place with all sorts of gentle animals and babbling brooks and huge fields of flowers. To Nyx, it sounded like the best place ever.

“But... I’ve been in the Everfree Forest with Twilight, and I never saw anything like that.”

“You must not have gone deep enough,” Silver Spoon answered quickly, brushing off Nyx’s comment.

“Still, you don’t know what you’re missing. It is, like, so beautiful,” Diamond Tiara said before perking up with a smile. “Hey, we should all go together.”

“I...I don’t know...” Nyx said nervously. “I’ve been in there and it’s really scary... and Twilight told me to never go back in there because of all the monsters.”

“Look, there’s nothing to be afraid of,” Diamond Tiara insisted. “The main path is, like, enchanted or something. You stay on it and the monsters will leave you alone.”

“Oh, well... that’s good, but... Twilight’s expecting me back at the library.”

“Oh, don’t worry. Silver Spoon and I will go tell her where we’re going.” Diamond replied, reaching into her saddle bag and pulling out a map, one which she had drawn a dotted red line. “Just follow this map with the path marked, and you’ll get to the really beautiful part of the Everfree Forest. We’ll be right behind you.”

Nyx eyed the pair for a second, and then looked down at the map, biting her lower lip like she did when she was nervous. Still, when she looked up and saw the very gentle and excited looks on Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon, she couldn’t help but smile. Nyx picked up the map with her magic, and stuck it into her saddle bag. She then took out some of the bits Twilight had given her.

“Well, okay, I’ll see you there. But... please remember to take Twilight a sugar cookie when you go to tell her. “

“Of course,” Silver Spoon said, taking the bits and standing up from the table. “I’ll go buy the cookie right now.”

“Yea, we’ll go tell Twilight. You just go on ahead, BFF.”

Nyx nodded, jumping down from the table and trotting off in the direction of the forest. Diamond Tiara smiled, watching the black filly until she had rounded a corner before bursting out in laughter. Diamond Tiara laughed until Silver Spoon came back out of Sugar Cube Corner, carrying two freshly purchased cookies.

“Oh... that was *too* easy.”

Silver Spoon nodded, offering one of the cookies to Diamond Tiara.

“Yea, and we, like, got free cookies out of the deal.”

“This, Silver Spoon, was our Best. Prank. Ever.”

“Totally,” The gray earth pony replied, the pair high hoofing before digging into their ill gotten cookies.

=====

Twilight trotted through the streets of Ponyville as she anxiously looked around. She hadn't seen Nyx in two hours and was starting to worry. She hadn't been able to find the filly or the two friends that had come to play with her, but at the moment, she was willing to believe they had just gotten caught up in playing and lost track of time.

The unicorn trotted into the market and looked around, but saw no sign of Nyx. She did, however, catch sight of Applejack. The farm pony was tending the market stand while, at the same time, keeping an eye on Apple Bloom, Scootaloo, and Sweetie Belle, the Cutie Mark Crusaders trying to balance on top of each other. It was another attempt in getting their cutie marks, but one Twilight didn't have time to try and figure out.

“Hey, Applejack!”

“Hey there, Sugarcube. What can I do ya for? Want some red delicious, gala, or maybe some granny smith apples?”

“Applejack, you haven't seen Nyx have you?”

“Nyx? Why no, I haven't. Is she missin'?”

“I... I don't know! Two fillies from her class came by to see if she could play, but that was two hours ago and I'm starting to worry.”

“Oh, Twilight, I'm sure you got nothin' to worry yourself about. They're probably just off playin'.”

"I know, but... but it has been two hours."

"What two fillies came to play with Nyx?" Apple Bloom asked as she and her friends walked up to the mares, having overheard the conversation.

"I don't know their names. One was gray with a spoon cutie mark and a braid in her mane. The other had a swirled mane and a tiara."

"Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon?! Nyx went to play with *them*?!" Apple Bloom said, her voice carrying undertones of concern.

"Yes... is that bad?"

"Twilight, those two are bullies! Don't you remember how they made fun of me, called me a blank flank at the Cute-ceañera?"

Twilight's eyes narrowed as she remembered that day and the two fillies who teased Apple Bloom. She hadn't recognized them when they came to play with Nyx because they didn't have their party dresses on.

"Girls," Applejack began, getting the attention of the three fillies. "I reckon you three better help Twilight find those two. Do you know where they like to hang out?"

"I know where Diamond Tiara lives; her dad owns the jewelry shop here in town," Sweetie Belle offered. "My big sister Rarity is good friends with her father. Whenever I go over to the shop with her, I usually see Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon doing their homework at this time of day."

"Take me there." Twilight ordered, the three fillies quickly snapping into stiff salutes before galloping off, the concerned unicorn following in their wake.

=====

Nyx shakily took out the map Diamond Tiara had given her, looking it over before looking up at the dark, foreboding path ahead. She didn't know how far along the path she was, but the line on the paper said she still had to keep going.

The line crossed a river, and Nyx could hear the babbling of a stream just ahead of her. Still, after she rounded a corner, Nyx froze up, eyes focusing on a large purple serpent that was splashing around in the water. Ducking behind a tree, Nyx watched as the purple sea serpent with strangely well styled orange hair ate his lunch, some rough gemstones he had gathered from the river bed.

Nyx was certain the serpent wouldn't turn down his gemstones to eat a little pony, so she decided to stay hidden and wait until he had left.

=====

Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon weren't at the jewelry store, and Twilight was officially starting to panic. The Cutie Mark Crusaders had split up, each going to fetch help. Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle ran to get their big sisters, Applejack and Rarity respectively, while Scootaloo used her scooter to quickly race out of Ponyville to where Rainbow Dash was practicing tricks.

That left Twilight to continue to run around Ponyville, trying to find the two fillies who had last been with Nyx. She began asking anypony she came across, growing more frantic as more time passed. Where were they? Where was Nyx?

"TWILIGHT!"

The unicorn turned skyward, seeing Rainbow Dash circling above her.

"I've found them, this way!" With that the pegasus banked, flying off to another part of Ponyville. Twilight galloped as fast as her hooves could carry her. It was a few blocks of running, but, after rounding a corner, Twilight saw Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon.

"How you want to do this?" Rainbow Dash asked.

"Go find the others and have them meet in the town square, just in case we have to go and try to find Nyx. I'll deal with these two."

"You got it, Twi," Rainbow Dash said as she sped off to gather all the others. Twilight watched her friend leave for a moment before turning her



eyes on the park bench, eyebrows furrowing as she approached the two fillies.

“Hey, you two!” Twilight snapped, making the two fillies jump. Still, the shock was short lived as the pair’s expressions shifted to annoyance and disinterest.

“Oh look, Silver Spoon, it’s the town librarian. What, trying to find ponies that have overdue books?” Diamond Tiara teased.

*“Where is Nyx?”*

“Who is that? We don’t know a Nyx, do we Silver Spoon?”

“Doesn’t ring a bell,” Silver Spoon said behind a giggle. Diamond Tiara would have joined in the giggle, but the laughter died in her chest as her eyes fell on Twilight Sparkle.

While reports of such things are rare, especially magically inclined unicorns were said to be able to perform a rage shift, where their anger feeds into their magic and causes a physical change to their bodies. Twilight had experienced one such rage shift when she was trying to understand Pinkie Pie’s sixth sense, and today would be the second occurrence.

Mane and tail set ablaze by her rage driven magic, eyes glowing red, and her coat a bright, angry white, Twilight glared down at Diamond Tiara like a fiery unicorn of doom.

“Unless you want me to turn you into a cactus you *will* tell me where Nyx is RIGHT NOW!”

“She’s in the Everfree Forest!” Diamond Tiara squeaked out in fear. “We... we told her that the forest got really nice if you go deep enough and gave her a map. She left from Sugarcube Corner and that’s the last we saw of her!”

Twilight’s rage shift ended, her mane, tail, coat, and eyes returning to normal as her eyes narrowed into pin points. Without another word, Twilight spun on her hooves and galloped back towards the center of Ponyville,

where Rainbow Dash would be gathering her friends. It would be getting dark soon, and the Everfree Forest only got more dangerous in the dark.

=====

Nyx trembled, just barely keeping herself moving and not crying, if only so she didn't attract the attention of any monsters. It had gotten dark, and the forest had gotten very, very scary. The little filly looked around the path anxiously, looking at the many long shadows... seeing things that looked like scary monsters. It was only by some miracle that the moon was three fourths full, providing plenty of light to see the path ahead.

Nyx had given up trying to find the nice part of the forest, just trying to get back to Ponyville. But she had lost her map when something startled her, and she ran, leaving the map behind. Now she was wandering around aimlessly, but what else could she do?

She tried to follow the paths that were familiar, ones she thought looked like parts of the forest she had seen before. Still, she hadn't even crossed the river again, the one landmark Nyx was desperately hoping to see, even if the sea serpent was back.

Rounding a corner in the path, Nyx came to a stop as her eyes fell on aged and worn stone. A creaky rope bridge hung over a deep expanse, shifting gently from side to side. On the far side was the ruins of an ancient castle, long forgotten and partially overtaken by the Everfree Forest.

It was something Nyx knew she hadn't passed by on her way into the forest, and yet... it was strangely familiar. Curiosity starting to replace fear, Nyx carefully stepped out onto the bridge, crossing the expanse. Thankfully, none of the wooden planks gave away, so Nyx able to cross to the other side without incident.

Still, as the filly looked up the long forgotten castle... she began to remember something, a memory rising to the surface. It wasn't like she was trying to remember, but the memory just wouldn't go away. It forced itself to the front of Nyx's mind, the voices and blurry images from the memory playing in her head.

*Oh, my beloved subjects. It's been so long since I've seen your precious little sun-loving faces.*

*What did you do with our Princess?*

*Whoa there, Nelly!*

*Why, am I not royal enough for you? Don't you know who I am?*

*Ooh! Ooh! More guessing games! Um... Hokey Smokes! How about Queen Meanie? No! Black Snooty, Black Snooty!*

*Does my crown no longer count, now that I have been imprisoned for a thousand years? Did you not recall the legend? Did you not see the signs?*

*I did, and I know who you are. You're the Mare in the Moon. Nightmare Moon.*

*Well well well, somepony who remembers me. Then you also know why I'm here.*

*You're here to... to...*

*Remember this day, little ponies, for it was your last. From this moment forth, the night will last forever! AH HAHHAHAHAHAHAH!*

Nyx shook her head, finally managing to banish the blurred thought that had overtaken her mind. She had recognized some of the voices; she had heard Twilight's voice... but there was a voice she shouldn't have recognized, but did. The voice of the older mare, the one who laughed in the end. It was a voice that Nyx felt she kind of remembered, but she couldn't remember who it belonged to.

Putting the strange occurrence out of her mind, the filly began climbing the steps to the castle. She didn't know why, but she *had* to see the inside, no matter how scary the Everfree Forest was, as if the castle was calling out to her. She climbed steps, navigated old hallways, and eventually climbed to the one remaining tower. Despite its age, Nyx couldn't help but shake the thought from her head that she had just entered the palace's old throne room... like she had been there before.

The little filly stepped into the center of the room, looking up at the broken glass windows at the far end. She then winced in pain, a memory coming to the surface of her mind again. This memory, however, was far more aggressive. It would not be ignored; it shoved all other thoughts out of the way, demanding attention.

Nyx could remember standing at the far end of the room, looking down across it. She was looking down at a small purple unicorn... a unicorn she knew... Twilight.

*You little foal! Thinking you could defeat me? Now you will never see your princess, or your sun! The night will last forever!*

Nyx could remember herself saying those words. She could remember thinking them, but even worse... she could remember the feelings behind those thoughts. She wanted to hurt Twilight, to punish the unicorn for trying to usurp her. She was thinking about banishing her, imprisoning her... even torturing her.

Nyx struggled against the memory. No, she wouldn't want to hurt Twilight. Twilight was the kindest pony she knew. It was Twilight who took care of her, who taught her, who read her to sleep at night with story books. It was Twilight that had found her in the forest. She didn't want to hurt Twilight!

Dark shadows shifted around the room, dispelled magic that had laid dormant being awoken by Nyx's presence. Trails of indigo smoke began to creep towards Nyx, and as the magic began to seep into her, the memory continued, despite how much Nyx wanted it to stop.

She saw Twilight with her friends, the unicorn giving a long speech about elements... and then there was a bright light. A light so bright that it hurt to look at it, that she had to shield herself from it with her wing. And then... then there was a rainbow... but not a nice, pretty rainbow.

No, the rainbow lunged at her like an angry snake, encircling her. It... it burned. It was burning her away, tearing her away from something else. It was like a savage animal with razor sharp claws, tearing her to ribbons despite her cries.

Nyx collapsed on the floor of the castle, panting heavily as the memory finally relented. Despite the cool feel of the castle stone floor, the filly could still feel the burning pain of the rainbow, how it had cut and tore at her.

Other thoughts began to bubble to the surface as more and more of the indigo smoke began to draw in from the room and feed into Nyx. The thoughts were desires... hateful desires. Desires to hurt ponies, to make them pay for ignoring her. Memories of being scorned and ignored, memories of jealousy and anguish.

Amongst these thoughts a few began to stand out. Thoughts that mingled with Nyx's latest memories of her friends, of Twilight. They began to poison those memories, filling them with hatred. She wanted to hurt Twilight. She wanted to make her suffer, wanted to torture her. These were thoughts that Nyx didn't want to have, the little filly clapping her hooves against the side of her head.

"NO!!!" Nyx tried to argue, shouting to the silence of the castle as if to chase the thoughts away. "I don't want to hurt Twilight! She takes care of me, teaches me things, let's me go to school! I don't want to hurt her!"

Yet the thoughts continued, unrelenting. Thoughts of how she would hurt Twilight. How she would torture the unicorn. Snap off her horn, keep her locked into a dungeon, horrible thoughts that started to make Nyx physically ill.

"NO!" Nyx cried to the silence. "I don't want to hurt Twilight! I don't want to!"

The thoughts were reaching a boil. As Nyx tried to push some away, more rose in their place. Thoughts of how she'd hurt Twilight's friends to make the unicorn suffer. How she'd go after Twilight's family. Of all the ways she could break the unicorn's spirit.

"NO! NO NO NO NO NO **NOOOO!!!**"

With that final scream something sparked to life inside Nyx, the filly alicorn's eyes glowing white. The creeping tendrils of indigo smoke suddenly shifted, swirling faster and faster as they were sucked down into the filly like water in a whirlpool. At the same time the dark desires began to fade, ebbing away and leaving as Nyx floated up into the air.

When the last traces of the indigo cloud was gone, Nyx's horn sparked, a crack of lightning lancing up from her horn and into the sky with a thunderous boom.

=====

Celestia bolted up in bed and turned her eyes to her window, through which she could see the distant Ponyville and the Everfree Forest. Her breathing was still, the alicorn trying to stretch out her magic and senses. For a moment, it felt like... but that was impossible. She could sense Luna in castle, in the main hall... but this presence.

It was short lived, but she had sensed her presence... a presence the sun princess hoped to never sense again.

=====

In another part of Canterlot, a dark blue unicorn with turquoise eyes, who was sitting in his study, also looked out his window. His eyes remained focus on the window for a time, looking out beyond it on the distant Everfree Forest. He shut the book he had been reading, a complex spell book on theoretical resurrection magic.

The figure quickly moved to the door of his study, opening it and calling out into the hallways of the stately manor.

"Proper Etiquette!?"

"You called Sir?" The butler pony replied, quickly zipping up. He was an all white unicorn with a collar and tie around his neck and a monocle over his right eye, his eyes turquoise as well.

"Have messages sent to Miss Gray Gale, Miss Night Wind, and Mr. Stonewall. I need to speak them right away: this evening, if possible."

"Of course, Sir. I will have them summoned immediately."

=====

“AAHHHH!!!” Twilight cried out in pain, tripping over her own hooves. She and her friends had been racing through the Everfree forest when a arcane bolt of lightning launched itself up into the sky. Twilight tumbled on the ground, landing in a heap on the side of the path. Rarity and Fluttershy quickly galloped up while the others were transfixed skyward, where they had just seen the bolt of magic.

“WHOA!!! Did you see that!?” Dash asked, the pegasus pointing skyward.

“Sure did Sugarcube. Where do you reckon it came from?”

“Oh, the Everfree Forest!” Pinkie Pie chirped.

“Well, no duh Pinkie Pie,” Rainbow Dash pointed out. “We’re kind of *in* the Everfree Forest.”

“Of course, Silly! That’s how I knew that lightning bolt came from here.”

Dash could only face hoof while Twilight struggled to her hooves.

“Twilight, Dear, what happened?” Rarity asked. “You were running just fine and then you... you just crashed. Did you trip on your own hooves?”

“No... I just... it felt like a big surge of magic was just released. It... it came from the old castle... and I think Nyx is there.”

“But why would she be there?” Rarity asked as Twilight got to her hooves.

“I don’t know... but I have to get to her now,” Twilight said, her horn starting to glow. Before any of her friends could protest, the unicorn was enveloped in light, teleporting away.

=====

Twilight reappeared, looking around the room she had not been in since the last Summer Sun Celebration. The throne room in the Ancient Castle of the Royal Pony Sisters, where she and her friends had defeated Nightmare Moon. The room was just as Twilight remembered it, except for a single small detail.

Lying in the center of the room, bawling her eyes out, was Nyx. Twilight rushed over to the filly, getting down on the floor beside her, the unicorn trying her best to embrace and comfort the little pony.

“Shhhh... it’s okay. It’s okay,” Twilight reassured, Nyx trembling in her hooves. Still, as Twilight looked down at the filly, she took notice of something that made her heart skip a beat.

Nyx’s mane and tail had changed, becoming a swirling, mystical cloud of indigo dotted with stars. It was the “hair” of Nightmare Moon. Still, even as Twilight was trying to process the existence of the mystical mane and tail they began to fade and change, reverting back to the purple hair Nyx normally had.

Even as Nyx returned to normal, Twilight found herself hugging the filly even tighter, her mind trying to find some way to explain what she had just seen.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry! Please don’t hate me! Please!” Nyx wailed, burying her head in Twilight’s chest.

“It’s okay, it’s okay. I’m not mad. I know Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon tricked you into coming here.”

“No... I’m... I’m sorry I wanted to hurt you!”

“When did you-?”

“I... I don’t know! I came in here and then... and then I remembered looking down on you. We were both here, and you looked so scared, and I was happy to see you were scared... and-and I wanted to hurt you, b-because you tried to stop me from doing s-something... but I d-don’t *want* to hurt you, Twilight! Please... please don’t hate me! I don’t want to hurt you!”

“I know you don’t,” Twilight reassured. “It’s okay, I know you don’t.”

Still, the unicorn couldn’t help but look up at the far end of the throne room, where the true Nightmare Moon had stood on the night of her defeat as Nyx continued to cry.



There was only one pony Twilight had ever really stopped, a pony whose plan she had thwarted. That pony had been defeated in that very room, and it was possibly the room itself that triggered these memories in Nyx.

It sent a chill down Twilight's spine, and she hugged Nyx as tightly as she could without hurting the filly. If she remembered this place... if she had memories of that night... then... then there was a chance she really *was* Nightmare Moon.

Twilight shook her head, feeling herself tear up. No... it couldn't be true. She wouldn't believe it. She didn't care what anypony said. Nyx wasn't Nightmare Moon, she just wasn't.

It just couldn't be true... could it?

# Chapter 4

## Distant Storm Clouds

Twilight stepped down the stairs of the library, having just tucked Nyx into bed. The filly was exhausted, falling asleep as soon as her head had hit the pillow. Down in the library's main floor, all of Twilight's friends, Spike, and the Cutie Mark Crusaders waited to hear how Nyx was doing. Twilight was touched by how worried everypony had been, and she offered them a gentle smile once she got downstairs.

"She's okay, just tired. I just put her to bed."

The breath that was being held by everypony was exhaled at once, the tension in the room dissipating. Twilight embodied this release in tension by dropping to her haunches and just sitting there for a moment. It had been a long several hours... but Nyx was back and safe. No worse for wear... mostly.

"Well, this has been fun, but I am exhausted," Rarity offered. "I hope you don't mind, Twilight, but I'm going to take Sweetie Belle home."

"No, I don't mind. I know you are all tired, and Nyx is safe now. You should all go home and get some rest."

"You sure you don't want some of us to stay?"

"No, I couldn't ask you to do that. You all dropped everything to help me find Nyx... I couldn't make you stay now that she's safe."

"Well shoot, Sugarcube, that's what friends are for. You'd do the same if Apple Bloom went missing."

"Or Sweetie Belle."

"Or Gummy!"

"I know. Still, I can't thank you all enough. I was... I was really worried about her."

"It wouldn't be right if you *weren't* concerned; you obviously care about that cousin of yours," Applejack said, starting to head for the door. "Still, Twi's right. We all should be in bed, includin' three certain fillies that have school in the morning."

"Awww.... but we want to stay and make sure Nyx is okay," Apple Bloom whined.

"No dice, Apple Bloom. You got school in the mornin'. You can come and check on Nyx after class."

"The same goes for *you*, Sweetie Belle," Rarity added, looking at the smaller white unicorn. "We need to get you home and into bed."

"And I know your mother's got to be worried too, Scootaloo." Twilight remarked.

"Oh no! My mom is going to flip!" The orange pegasus realized.

"Hey, don't worry, Kid, I've got you covered," Rainbow Dash said, giving Scootaloo a noogie. "I know your mom. How about I fly you home and explain everything?"

"Wow, you'd really do that?"

"Hey, you stayed here just to make sure Nyx got home safe. That's a kind of loyalty I can appreciate," Dash explained as she landed on the ground and motioned for Scootaloo to get on her back. "Now, get up here."

Scootaloo grinned ear to ear, more than eager to accept Dash's offer of a flight home. With that, the mass of ponies filtered out of the room, Twilight offering 'good night's and 'thank you's as she watched everypony leave. The unicorn then shut the door to the library, letting out an exhausted sigh as she began to head for the stairs. She was dead tired and starving, but she was too tired to eat. She'd just wait and have a big breakfast in the morning.

*KNOCK... KNOCK... KNOCK...*

Twilight turned, eyeing her front door as she debated opening it. She really, *really* just wanted to go to bed, but her more courteous nature got the better of her. The unicorn turned and walked towards the door as she opened it magically.

“That’s her, Daddy.”

Twilight’s eyes hardened as she saw Diamond Tiara standing on her doorstep, this time accompanied by an older stallion. He had a grayish violet mane and a complementary grayed red tone for his coat. He was substantially sized, not as big as Big Macintosh but substantial. He had a cutie mark of a jeweled necklace and jeweler’s eyepiece. His azure eyes were turned down in a hard glare set directly upon a certain purple unicorn.

“Can I help you?” Twilight asked, trying to be as pleasant as possible.

“You must certainly can! My daughter says you threatened to turn her into a cactus! I will *not* stand to have my child threatened. I expect a full apology, or I’m going to the authorities!”

Twilight’s eyebrow furrowed, the unicorn stepping so she was directly in front of the stallion, her eyes locked on his as she glared him down.

“*Your* daughter sent Nyx into the Everfree Forest alone, into a place where she could have gotten hurt, lost, or eaten!”

“It isn’t *my* fault this *Nyx* doesn’t know any better. I’ve made sure my daughter knows how dangerous the forest was; maybe *you* should consider doing the same.”

“Nyx *does* know how dangerous the Everfree Forest is!” Twilight exploded, stamping a hoof as she yelled in the stallion’s face. “Diamond Tiara intentionally put Nyx in danger, told her that there was an enchanted path through the Everfree Forest, and even gave Nyx a map so she would get lost in the deepest part of the forest!”

“A likely story. Let me guess: Nyx told you that. Well, she is lying. My little angel wouldn’t do anything to endanger one of her fellow classmates.”

“Nyx has *no* reason to lie to me, unlike your daughter who has *every* motivation to not tell the truth. On top of that, from what I’ve heard, your daughter is nothing but a bully, and you are doing no favors protecting her from the consequence of her actions.

“So, let me make this crystal clear,” Twilight continued, her voice getting low as she stood on the tips of her hooves, trying to make her eyes as level with the stallions as possible. “If she does *anything* like this to Nyx again, being turned into a cactus will be the *least* of her concerns.”

“Who do you think you are, threatening my family like this? I am a respected member of this community!”

“And I’m the unicorn that beat a Ursa Minor bare-hoofed, and also the unicorn who is Princess Celestia’s private pupil! So, if you really want to push your luck, I’d be happy to take this outside. Otherwise, *get out of my library!*”

The stallion swallowed at this, his conviction wavering. There was a tense moment where Twilight began to worry she might have to actually “take this outside”, but the stallion buckled, taking a step back in defeat.

“Da... Daddy, what are you doing?”

“We’re going home, Diamond Tiara, and when we get there, you are grounded.”

“What!? For how long?”

“Indefinitely!” The father snapped back, he and the young bully walking down the street. Twilight slammed the door of the library shut, a final punctuation to her angry rant, before taking a few deep breaths to calm herself. Finally, her anger broke, and Twilight felt a cool wave of calmness flow over her, allowing the unicorn to regain her composure.

“Whoa... that was pretty scary, Twilight,” Spike admitted, the baby dragon having stood at the back of the library to keep out of the fight. “I’ve never heard you pull rank like that, using your position as Celestia’s student to threaten somepony.”

“Yeah... and Celestia wouldn’t be happy if she found out I did. So...”

“Hey, my lips are sealed. Personally, I think you should have turned him into a cactus just to prove a point.”

“No... that wouldn’t have helped at all. Still, I can’t believe that little filly actually sent Nyx into the Everfree Forest. I mean, what was she *thinking?*”

“Couldn’t tell you; I don’t make it a habit trying to understand bullies,” Spike replied, yawning as he glanced at the clock. “Well, it’s late. I’m surprised Owlowiscious hasn’t come in yet. He’s usual-”

“Hoo.”

Spike jumped, spinning around to see the horned owl was sitting on top of a nearby book shelf.

“Seriously, we need to tie a bell on you. You’re like a ninja owl or something.”

“Hoo,” The owl replied in his usual fashion.

“You.”

“Hoo.”

“You, I’m talking about you!”

“Hoo.”

“I’m... you know what, *no*... I’m not getting into that with you,” Spike said, heading towards the staircase. “I’m going to bed. Night Twilight.”

“Good night, Spike,” The unicorn replied, watching her assistant climb the steps. She then turned to look at Owlowiscious, the owl titling his head a little bit expectantly.

“Sorry Owlowiscious, but I’m really tired; it’s been a long day. I hope you don’t mind if I just go to bed too.”

“Hoo,” Was all the owl replied, taking flight. He swooped around the room, grabbing a book off a shelf. He then dropped the book on a reading table, the pages flipping open as the owl too landed, bending over as he began to read. This made Twilight giggle a little, happy to see the owl was able to keep himself busy at night, even when the unicorn wasn’t up late studying.

Leaving Owlowsious to his reading, Twilight climbed her way to the library's second floor. Spike had already curled up in bed and shut off the lamps, the only light in the room coming from the moon through the window. It was enough light for Twilight to cross the room without any trouble.

Next to Twilight’s larger bed was a smaller bed, which she had purchased for Nyx. Still, the filly was not there, instead curled up on top the covers of Twilight’s bed. The unicorn had been trying to encourage Nyx to sleep in her own bed, but, after the day they both had, Twilight was more than happy to share her bed.

Being sure not to wake Nyx, who was sleeping on top of the blanket, Twilight slipped herself slowly beneath the covers. She then used her magic to levitate the blanket off Nyx’s bed, using it to cover the sleeping filly.

Despite being asleep, Nyx managed to sense Twilight’s presence. She woke up just barely, in a sort of sleep walking like state. With her blanket hanging of her little body, she moved over beside Twilight and laid back down right beside the unicorn in the bed, her little head resting in the crook of Twilight’s neck.

It was something that brought a smile to Twilight as she gently nuzzled the sleeping Nyx. Yet, memories of what she had seen in at the ruined castle still lingered in Twilight’s mind. Particularly , the memory of the moment she had seen Nyx with the magically infused mane of Nightmare Moon. She didn’t know what that meant, but that could wait until morning.

At the moment, the pair had both had a long day... and deserved a simple, peaceful night sleep.

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*KNOCK... KNOCK... KNOCK*

A white coated unicorn with a perfectly trimmed and slicked back black mane moved towards the door of a stately manor, magically undoing the locks and cracking open the large, elegant doors. Just beyond the doorway was a sleeping Canterlot, the manor nestled in a part of the capitol populated by the elite of Equestria. Celebrities, politicians, and anypony else that was widely known and very well paid.

The butler pony who answered the door, Proper Etiquette, looked out at the three figures now standing in front of the manor. Two pegasi and an earth pony, who currently were dressed very casually... meaning they had nothing on. The very definition of pony casual.

"Yes?" Proper Etiquette asked, looking over the three guests. "May I help you?"

"Just open the freaking door!" The gray pegasus snapped. She was one of those rarer ponies that had a mane color very similar to her coat color, the hairs just a few shades darker. Her cutie mark was that of a dark gray, swirling tornado.

"Of course Miss Gale," The butler replied, stepping back as he opened the door wide. The three ponies stepped in. The other pegasi was a dark purple colored mare with a black mane and a pair of black feathered wings and some swirling wind lines for a cutie mark. The sole earth pony was a dull clay-red colored stallion with a tall build. His blond mane was cut very short and his cutie mark was a stone wall that looked like castle battlements.

"Sir Spell Nexus is in his study. I believe you know the way," Proper Etiquette offered as he shut the manor's front door.

"Yeah yeah, we know the way," Gray Gale said, jumping into the air. "But Nexus *better* have a good reason for calling us like this."

"Yes," Night Wind, the purple pegasi agreed. "Not only is it late, but we are trying to lie low after that grand failure in the Everfree Forest. The town



guard is much more alert, and is stopping ponies on the street if they run across them this late at night.”

“I do not know why Sir Spell Nexus called for you as he did,” Proper Etiquette assured as she began to walk away. “But I do believe you will find it difficult to get an answer unless you go and speak with him. Now, I must be off to the kitchen; Sir Spell Nexus does not like to host company without refreshment.”

“Seriously, that pony takes his job *way* too seriously,” Gray Gale mumbled to herself as the three ponies made their way through the elegant manor. After climbing a flight of stairs and passing down a lavishly furnished hallway, they arrived at a door they all knew quite well. Moving inside, they entered the manor’s study.

The study was a cozy little room with very large windows and a fireplace. One wall was lined with book shelves, properly filled with either books or small nick-knacks and pictures. The windows looked out over the elegant cityscape of Canterlot, a view that the manor’s owner had been complimented on a number of times.

The final detail was an oil painting above the fireplace, a regal portrait of the manor’s owner. The painting depicted a dark blue unicorn with a light gray mane, sitting behind a very elegant looking desk, a few papers spread around as the unicorn in the painting offered a gentle smile. A metal plate at the bottom of the portrait was engraved with beautiful, cursive writing.

*Sir Spell Nexus  
Headmaster of Celestia’s School for Gifted Unicorns  
Mystical Advisor to the Royal Court*

The pony from the portrait was standing in front of the fireplace, its fires reflecting in his turquoise eyes. He did not turn to look at the three ponies who had entered his study, instead motioning with a hoof to some chairs.

“Please, have a seat.”

“What’s this about Nexus?” Gale asked. “Even *you* don’t send messengers for us in the middle of the night.”

"It is strange, Nexus," Night Wind agreed. "You are the one that is always telling us to keep our movements subtle and hidden, and this is far from subtle *or* hidden."

"And not all of us have cushy jobs like *you* do," Stonewall grumbled. "The commander is already suspicious why I was late reporting in after what happened in Everfree. I'm skating on thin ice with the Town Guard."

"Yes, I apologize for the late hour, my sisters and brother, but there has been an... interesting turn of events."

"It *better* be interesting."

"I assure you, it is," Nexus said, turning away from the fire, and walking towards the three seated ponies. "It would seem that our efforts on the past full moon were not wasted."

"How were they 'not wasted'? A large chunk of our brothers and sisters were arrested by the guards, Celestia interrupted the spell, and we've lost the remains of Nightmare Moon!" Gray Gale ranted.

"Yes, but all that is no longer needed... for Nightmare Moon *lives*."

There was a dead silence in the room, the earth pony and pegasi looking at each other in disbelief.

"Wait... wait wait wait," Gray Gale began, pointing a hoof at Nexus. "Are you saying the spell *worked*?"

"I did not dare to hope so, but in part... yes."

"And just how do you know that Nightmare Moon lives? I mean, wouldn't she have overthrown Celestia by now?"

"It is true, if our queen was at full strength, Equestria would already be bathed in the glory of a night eternal and we would have received our just rewards as loyal servants to Nightmare Moon. Still, I cannot deny what I sensed and saw. Early this evening, a brilliant bolt of arcane lighting shot up from Everfree Forest, and in that moment I sensed her. I sensed our queen in all her power and glory. Something inside me shifted, and... and I

felt positively giddy for a moment. It took all my will power to keep myself from racing to the forest.

“Yes, it was a brief, brilliant flame of our queen’s magic that then faded back into the cool of the night.”

“While it’s nice to hear we weren’t wasting our time with that spell, just what are we supposed to do now?” Stonewall asked.

“Brother... sisters, we must find our queen. I believe her form, like the spell we cast that night, is incomplete... but it is something that can be completed. I believe she is in hiding, either amongst the trees of Everfree or in some area close to that. It is our duty, as Children of Nightmare, to seek her out and aid her however we can.”

“And just how are we supposed to do that? It’s not like we can just drop what we’re doing and take a week long stroll through Everfree.”

“This is true, but thankfully not all our brothers and sisters were arrested in Celestia’s interruption. Gray Gale, in the morning you will find I’ve contracted out your services as a pair of wings for hire to deliver important letters to a number of individuals around Ponyville. Some of these letters are simple letters from Celestia’s School for Gifted Unicorns, but a few of those letters are notes to our brothers and sisters, telling them to keep an eye out for our queen.”

“Will I know who is who?”

“No, their anonymity must be preserved; it is how we’ve been able to function so long without detection. Only I truly know all those who stand with the Children of Nightmare.”

“Which, as I’ve said before, is *really* creepy,” Gray Gale remarked, only to get elbowed in the side by Night Wind.

“And what about us Nexus?” Stonewall asked.

“Stonewall, you must simply continue your duties with the Town Guard. Night Wind, however, has a greater responsibility.”

“And that is?”

“I have little doubt that Celestia will have sensed Nightmare Moon, and this will undoubtedly cause her to step up the research team she has working on deciphering our spell. Through my efforts and our brothers and sisters, you were placed as a guard for that team. If Celestia speaks with them tomorrow I want you to tell me *exactly* what she says. We must discern how much Celestia knows.”

“Eavesdropping is easy for guards. Most of those we guard see us as little more than statues, though, considering how still we stand at times, I am inclined to agree with them.”

“Then continue as the silent statue, but keep your ears open,” Nexus advised. “Celestia was able to stop us once, but fate has given us another chance to see our queen rise... and I will not see it slip through our hooves. For the Night Eternal.”

“For Equestria’s True Queen,” The three ponies chimed back.

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*KNOCK... KNOCK... KNOCK...*

“Just one moment,” A light blue unicorn stallion called, pulling himself out of bed. [Bastion Yorsets](#) glanced at the clock, grumbling at the late hour as he began to head to the front door. His eggshell white mane and tail were a wreck but he didn’t have any desire to try and make himself presentable for anypony who would come knocking at such an hour.

Horn glowing, Bastion opened his front door, intending to chew out whoever thought to disturb him so late at night, only to freeze still as a statue when he saw Princess Celestia standing on the door step.

“Your... Y-your Highness!” Bastion stuttered out, Princess Celestia standing on his doorstep.

“I do apologize for the late hour Bastion, but may I come in?”

“Of.. of course... please, make yourself at home. I'll be with you in a moment,” The stallion then galloped off to his bedroom. [Bastion Yorsets](#) was a teacher at Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns, and had even been there when the young Twilight Sparkle revealed her immense aptitude for magic. He was among the senior teaching staff, but recently he was also the unicorn that was leading the team of ponies studying the spell created and cast by the cult ponies who had ponynapped Twilight Sparkle.

Within a few minutes of the princess' arrival, Bastion re-emerged from his bedroom far more presentable, his mane and tail brushed. He had even slipped into his normal work attire, a collared shirt, and light brown sweater vest. The ensemble was finished off by his thin, black tie.

“My apologies for making you wait, Your Highness,” Bastion offered as he entered his living room, where the princess had laid down on his couch.

“You need not apologize, Bastion,” Celestia offered as the stallion sat down in a nearby chair. “I would not normally disturb you at your home, or at such a late hour... but I was curious how things were going deciphering the spell.”

“It is progressing, but slowly. The unicorns were making use of several very old forms of magic of which there are few records. The oil soaked powders they were burning came from zebra magic, and while there are records of unicorns using arcane designs to direct the flow of magic, there are no actual books describing how such magical lines work. It's information lost.”

“Well... purposefully hidden may be the more accurate phrase.”

“Princess?”

“Bastion, in the morning I want you to move your team out of the library and into the royal archives. I have already arranged with the guards for your team to have full access to anything in the archives.”

“Princess... those... those books are hundreds of years old!”

“Yes, but that is the point. The tomes in that collection are the final copies of books and knowledge that I wished to have preserved, but not available to all of Equestria. There are very powerful magic in some of those books,

spells that, if attempted by ponies who do not fully understand them, could have dire consequences. Some of those books, however, describe such ancient arts as the diagrams made use in the cult's spell."

"We will make our move to the archives first thing in the morning."

"Good, but one other thing Bastion."

"Yes Your Highness?"

"While I want your team to figure out what the spell was *supposed* to do, I now need you to find out something else. I need to know what the spell *did*."

"Pardon?"

"The spell was started when I arrived with the royal guards and I interrupted it. I need to know if the spell did anything, even though it did not get cast to completion."

"That is a very theoretical branch of magic, Princess. Incomplete spells have been known to do a variety of things, some never doing the same thing twice."

"I have every faith in you, Bastion. You are the greatest theoretical magic mind at the school."

Bastion couldn't help but blush, bowing his head.

"You flatter me, Princess."

"I make no habit of flattering, Bastion, I only offer the compliments ponies deserve," Celestia replied, getting up from the couch. "Now, I'd best depart. I wouldn't want to impose."

"You are never an imposition, Princess... though, none of this seems terribly pressing. Might I ask why you felt I needed to hear all this now?"

Celestia paused at the door, having already put one hoof outside, when she turned back to look at Bastion.

“I have simply realized that I have not been providing your team with the materials it needed to decipher this spell quickly, and... I have also come to realize this evening that swiftness in this matter is of the utmost importance.”

# Chapter 5

## Theatrical Trouble

Nyx sat on the sole swing outside the Ponyville Elementary Schoolhouse. It had been about a week since Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon's prank gone bad. Twilight had let Nyx skip a few days of school, but wouldn't let the disguised alicorn hide in the library for the rest of her life.

The black coated filly stared at the ground with tears in her eyes, the swing rocking back and forth just a few inches. Despite the fact all her classmates were laughing, giggling, and playing, Nyx couldn't bring herself to smile. In truth, she was trying her hardest to keep herself from sobbing.

And two certain fillies weren't helping the situation at all. Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon had become unbearable since Nyx returned to school, Diamond Tiara enacting her vengeance for getting grounded because of what happened. They had spread nasty rumors around the school, picked on Nyx openly, and even tried to framed Nyx for putting a tack on Cheerilee's desk chair.

Thankfully, the teacher had seen through the ruse. Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon were now missing recess, sitting at their desks as punishment for the tack. It gave Nyx her first peaceful recess in days, though it did little to raise the filly's spirits. While Twilight had forgiven her, and said it was all right, Nyx still felt horrible. She... she had wanted to hurt Twilight at some point in time. She didn't know when she had or why... but the memory lingered in Nyx's mind.

How could she have ever wanted to hurt Twilight? She was such a nice pony. It was Twilight that had found her in the forest, had taken her in her home, and had been taking care of her. It was Twilight who was helped her catch up in school, and read her bedtime stories. How could she want to hurt somepony who was willing to do all that?

"Hey Nyx, how are you doing?"



Nyx jumped a little, having not noticed somepony come up beside her. Looking up, she saw Apple Bloom and Twist standing near the swing. Still, after realizing it was her friends, Nyx looked back down, resuming her staring contest with the ground.

"I'm okay," she lied, tears glistening at the edges of her eyes.

"You don't sound okay... or look okay either..." Twist pointed out.

Nyx sniffled, rubbing a hoof across her nose.

"Can... can I tell you two a secret?"

"Of course," Apple Bloom reassured.

"And you promise not to tell any pony else?"

"Cross my heart, hope to fly, stick a cupcake in my eye," Apple Bloom rattled off.

"What was that?" Twist asked, confused by the sudden movement and rhymes.

"It was a Pinkie Pie Promise."

"There is a promise named after Pinkie Pie?" Twist asked, a little stunned.

"Oh yeah, it's a promise between friends that you have to keep forever."

"Forever?" Twist echoed.

"Fooorreeevvveerrr!"

Nyx, Apple Bloom, and Twist jumped, turning to look towards the path that went by the school. Standing on the other side of the fence that surrounded the playground was Pinkie Pie, the earth pony eyeing the three fillies. She was carrying a tray of cupcakes on her back, and her saddle bags were loaded down with assorted goodies.

"Uh, hey Pinkie Pie," Apple Bloom said, giving the earth pony a weak wave.

The serious expression on Pinkie Pie's face quickly shifted back to its normal, cheerful nature.

"Hey girls! I was just taking some sweets to a party. Well, I'd better get going. You have fun."

"Uh... okay, see ya," Apple Bloom replied, the three watching Pinkie Pie bounce down the path.

"That... was weird," Twist offered, once she was sure Pinkie Pie was out of ear shot.

"It's Pinkie Pie being Pinkie Pie, that's just how she is," Apple Bloom replied. "Still, a Pinkie Pie promise is a promise you have to keep, since losing a friend's trust is the fastest way to lose a friend forever."

"FOOOOREEEEEVVEEEEEER!"

The three fillies jumped again, turning their heads. Pinkie Pie was a long ways down the path, almost out of sight of the school, but at the moment she was staring down the three fillies, as if she was able to hear their conversation, despite the distance. It was either that or her strange Pinkie Pie Sense let the earth pony know when somepony was talking about her Pinkie Pie Promises.

It was a tense moment, Pinkie Pie eyeing the three fillies. But just as quickly as she had spoken out, Pinkie Pie returned to her normal perky nature, turning and bouncing around a bend in the path as she continued on her task of delivering food for a party.

"If it's okay with you, Apple Bloom, I think I'll just use a normal promise," Twist said, the yellow farm filly offering no protest.

"So, what did you want to tell us, Nyx?" Apple Bloom asked.

"W-well... when I was in the forest... I-I remembered things. Or... it *felt* like they were memories, even though I don't think they are... and... and, in some of those memories... I wanted to h-hurt Twilight."

“Why would you ever want to hurt Twilight?”

“I... I don’t know!” Nyx blubbered, the tears she had been trying to hold back streaming down her face. “But I wanted to. I really wanted to... but I don’t know why. And I don’t want to hurt Twilight now, because she’s so nice... but... but...”

“Whoa, easy, Nyx,” Apple Bloom said, seeing her friend was starting hyperventilate. “Is that why you’ve been so sad, because you thought you wanted to hurt Twilight?”

Nyx nodded, trying to dry her eyes.

“I’m not even sure when it happened or why, but... I remember wanting to hurt her before. We were both standing in some old castle ruins, and I was really tall, and when I spoke, my voice was all strange, but I remember wanting to hurt her... and I don’t know why.”

“Are ya sure you weren’t just dreamin’?” Apple Bloom asked.

“D-dreaming?” Nyx echoed.

“Yeah, dreamin’. I mean, Twilight said you were way out in the Everfree Forest. Maybe you just got tired and passed out, and dreamed the whole thing up. You just didn’t know it because of how scared you were. I mean, you ain’t exactly taller than Twilight, are ya?”

“Well... no... but even if it was just a dream, I still feel bad about it.”

“Have you told Twilight about this?” Twist asked.

“Yes...”

“And did you apologize?”

“Yes, I apologized, and she said it was all right.”

“Well then why are you worryin’ about it, you silly filly?” Apple Bloom asked, smiling gently. “Like you said, you don’t *really* want to hurt Twilight and it

sounds like she's already forgiven you. As my big sister would say, it's all water under a bridge now."

"What does a bridge have to do with any of this?" Twist asked.

"No, you see, it's an expression."

"What does it mean?"

"Well... it kind of... look, I don't know for sure, but I know it does mean somethin' like that once you apologized for doing somethin' and somepony has forgiven you, then it's okay just to forget about it."

"Oh, so since Twilight's forgiven Nyx for thinking she ever wanted to hurt her, they can both just forget about it and go back to being happy?"

"Exactly!" Apple Bloom said with a smile.

"But... I may have wanted to hurt Twilight for real, and I don't know why! What if I want to hurt her again... I don't want to hurt her!"

"Okay, we're going in circles, time for an Apple family remedy," Apple Bloom said, walking behind Nyx.

"Apple family remedy? What is- WHOA!"

Nyx went wide-eyed. Apple Bloom, putting her practice apple bucking to use, turned and bucked at the swing. This sent Nyx swinging skyward, her purple mane flowing behind her as the filly grabbed tightly to the chains. The swing reached its peak and began swooping back. Apple Bloom had already gotten out of the way when Nyx swung by, she and Twist laughing at Nyx's panicked face.

"Come on, go higher!" Apple Bloom encouraged.

"Yea! Higher!" Twist added in her nasally tone.

Nyx gulped a little. She was already swinging higher than she ever had before, but Twist and Apple Bloom's cheers filled the filly's head. Taking a deep breath, Nyx began to throw her weight into the swing, causing the

swing to reach higher and higher. Eventually, the filly even reached the point where the swing began to hang loose at the top of its arc, a few moments of free fall before the chains snapped taut again.

Nyx swung back and forth a number of times before her courage ran out and she let the swing slow down. But when she did stop, she was smiling and laughing right along with Apple Bloom and Twist, who quickly moved up beside her.

“See? Apple family remedy works every time.”

“What’s the remedy? Swinging on a swing?” Nyx asked.

“No, havin’ fun. Nothin’ can get a pony feeling better like havin’ a little fun. Now scootch over, it’s my turn,” Apple Bloom replied. Nyx gladly obliged, relinquishing the swing to her friend and even using her magic to push the farm filly, so she could reach a similar height on the swing.

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Twilight smiled gently as she looked at the calendar on the wall, striking off another day. It had been about a month and a half since Nyx’s arrival, and Twilight was happy to say that the little black filly was doing well.

She had gotten caught up in school, so now instead of spending afternoons studying Nyx was able to go out and play with her friends. There were, however, still days where Nyx chose to come back to the library, wanting Twilight to teach her more about something she learned in school.

The alicorn’s curiosity was, at times, insatiable.

School itself had been going better as well. After Twilight’s confrontation with Diamond Tiara’s dad and a few other altercations between the fillies at school, Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon started to going to Cheerilee’s afternoon class, which in turn let two fillies in particular join the morning class. Those two fillies were Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo. Add that to Twist and Apple Bloom, and Nyx had four solid friends... more than Twilight could say she had at that age, thanks to her excessive studying.

Moving away from the calendar, Twilight began to shuffle and clean up books around the library. Spike was over at Rarity's place helping her, Owlloviscious was asleep, and Nyx was at school. All in all, it gave Twilight a quiet morning to clean up the library, a mess caused by her usual study practices.

Putting the books back on the shelves, Twilight glanced at some of the titles, thinking about whether or not she had read them. At this point, most of the books in the library had been read by the unicorn, but she still at times came across books she hadn't read. Some books she hadn't read by choice, others because they hadn't passed in front of her yet.

All the books Twilight put away were ones she had read, but the unicorn lingered on the last book. It was brown, with golden clasps on the corners and a gold unicorn on the cover surrounded by six golden gemstones. It was a book of folklore, old stories from Equestria's past. It was, in fact, from that book that Twilight had read about the Elements of Harmony, which lead her to discover that Nightmare Moon was going to return.

Without even thinking about it, Twilight opened the book to the folktale in question, her eyes glancing over the beautiful illustrations before reaching the first line.

*Once upon a time, in the magical land of Equestria, there were two regal sisters who ruled together and created harmony for all the land. To do this, the eldest-*

"I'm home!"

Twilight smiled, setting the book down on the reading table as Nyx came running into the library, quickly moving over to and nuzzling up against Twilight.

"Hey there, Nyx, how was school today?"

"Great!" The filly chirped. "Cheerilee told us that we're going to be putting on a play."

"Really?"

“Yep! She says every spring the school puts on a play for the Ponyville Spring Festival. It’s this really cool thing where a bunch of musicians, artists, and entertainers come to Ponyville and every pony has a lot of fun.”

“The Spring Festival...” Twilight repeated as she thought for a moment. “If I remember correctly it was started by a traveling group of musicians that came to Ponyville every year around this time as they toured Equestria. Eventually, other musicians started showing up at the same time, and after a few years it grew into a festival.”

“Yea, that’s what Cheerilee said,” Nyx replied. “And she says we can pick what the play will be about and that we’ll all have something to do.”

“Well doesn’t that sound fun? Do you have any ideas?”

“I... was kind of hoping I’d find a good story in one of the library books.”

Twilight smiled. “That’s a great idea. Books have some of the best stories, but just remember that it’s meant to be a school play, so try to pick a story that’s short and one that all your friends will like.”

“Okay,” Nyx agreed, about to open her mouth and ask for Twilight’s help further. Still, the filly was interrupted as the door to the library opened, Applejack running in.

“Twi, there you are! I need your help with somethin’ fierce!”

“What’s wrong Applejack?”

“Some nasty plant showed up in Sweet Apple Acres; it’s a vine and it’s startin’ to grow up around some of the trees. You got any books in here that can tell us what it is?”

Twilight nodded, her horn glowing as she grabbed a number of [phytopathology](#) books from the shelves and her saddle bag. The books flew into the bags, the bags settling on Twilight back as the unicorn looked over her shoulder.

“Nyx, I’ve got to go help Applejack. Will you be okay by yourself for a little while?”

“Sure, I’ll just try and find a story for my school play.”

Twilight nodded. “Good. Now, if you need help, Spike is at Rarity’s and Owlowiscious is asleep in the bedroom upstairs. I’ll be back soon.”

“Okay, Twilight.”

“Thanks again, Sugarcube,” Applejack offered as she and Twilight galloped out the door. “I don’t know what that nasty plant is, but I know it ain’t good on my apple trees.”

At that, the door to the library shut under Twilight’s magic, leaving little Nyx to her studies. The disguised alicorn looked about the room for a few minutes, just mindlessly perusing the books on the shelves for something that looked like a story book before she took notice of one book that was left setting out.

Trotting over, Nyx looked into the book and its beautiful illustrations, beginning to read the first line.

*Once upon a time, in the magical land of Equestria, there were two regal sisters who ruled together and created harmony for all the land. To do this, the eldest-*

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“So, do you know what the play is supposed to be about?” Twilight asked as she walked with Rarity in the direction of the Ponyville Elementary School. The pair of unicorns had volunteered to help the students prepare the show, though all the actual work was going to be done by the fillies and colts. It was a chance for the students to find their cutie marks, and, in truth, it was a similar school play event that helped Rarity discover her special talent in fashion and clothes making.

“I’ve asked Sweetie Belle, but she’s refused to tell me; says we’ll find out today. She seems really excited though.”

“Is she going to be acting in the play or is she helping some other way?”



“My sister wanted to help with the costumes but... after she mentioned to Cheerilee that *she* was the one that made the costumes for the Crusaders’ appearance in the talent show, Cheerilee *encouraged* Sweetie Belle to take on one of the acting parts... a part with singing.”

“Oh, that’s good. Sweetie Belle has such an amazing voice, so it will be nice to hear her sing.”

“Yes, it will. Personally, I’d bet that she’s destined to be a great singer... but we just can’t be sure until that little cutie mark of hers appears, can we?”

Twilight shook her head as the pair began getting close to the school house. While the school and its playground were set up on one side of the path, the school’s outdoor stage was set up on the opposite side of the road. The one and only permanent stage in Ponyville, unless one considered the town hall stage.

Cheerilee was standing in the center of the many colts and fillies, giving directions to the eagerly listening young ponies. After all, doing the play meant they got out of normal school work for at least part of the day. Still, when Cheerilee saw Twilight and Rarity approaching, the teacher decided to let the students slip off to recess a little earlier than scheduled, so she could talk with the two unicorns.

“You two have excellent timing,” Cheerilee greeted as the children ran off to play, Nyx giving a wave to Twilight before running off with her friends. “I was just telling the class how you were kind enough to volunteer your time to help us make this play.”

“Glad to help Cheerilee, though we still haven’t been told just what the play is supposed to be about.”

“Oh, of course. Here,” Cheerilee replied, using a hoof to push a few scripts across the ground. Twilight picked up the one on top, Rarity looking over the purple unicorn’s shoulder as they read the title on the script.

“*Reunion of the Royal Pony Sisters*,” Twilight read aloud.

“Yes, it was Nyx’s idea. She found an old fairy tale about how Celestia and Luna kept the world in balance, and then how Luna became the frightful

Nightmare Moon. Apple Bloom then had the idea to incorporate the adventure you and your friends had where you beat Nightmare Moon and restored Princess Luna back to normal.”

“Wow, that’s actually not a bad story. A wonderful little tale for a little school play. Much better than the usual fair,” Rarity mused.

“What are the plays usually about?”

“Well, at least when I was a filly, our Spring Festival play was about a pony picnic that got stolen by ants. It was... *cute*... but not exactly what you would call great theater, though it was because of that particular play that I got my Cutie Mark. This, however, looks far more interesting.” Rarity praised, flipping through a copy of the script. “Oh, and look here; you have Pinkie Pie’s song in here.”

“You mean the song she sang in Everfree Forest, when she was telling us to giggle at the ghosties and crack up at the creepy?” Twilight asked, flipping to the same page in the script.

“The very one. Oh, I can only *imagine* how Pinkie Pie will react when she hears them singing it. We won’t be able to stop her from bouncing for days.”

Twilight giggled, picturing Pinkie Pie’s reaction.

“Yea, she’ll probably start singing along right there in the audience. Still, this looks fun.”

“Oh yes, it’s going to be one of the best plays the school has ever put on!” Cheerilee energetically agreed. “I’ve actually pulled together both classes because there are just so many parts to play and things to be done. And we’ve already got all the character’s casted. You can see who is who on the first page.”

Twilight and Rarity nodded, flipping to the first page of the script.

*Reunion of the Royal Pony Sisters*  
*A Ponyville Elementary School Production*

*Written By Cheerilee  
Music Composed By Lyra*

*Narrator.....Zecora*

*Twilight Sparkle.....Dinky Doo  
Applejack.....Apple Bloom  
Rarity.....Sweetie Belle  
Rainbow Dash.....Scootaloo  
Fluttershy.....[Cotton Cloudy](#)  
Pinkie Pie.....[Sunny Days](#)  
The Mayor.....[Little Hoof](#)  
Sea Serpent.....[Tornado Bolt](#)  
Manticore.....[Archer](#)  
Princess Celestia.....Diamond Tiara  
Princess Luna.....Silver Spoon  
Nightmare Moon.....Nyx*

*Ponyville Residents & Everfree Forest Trees  
Hot Rod, Berry Pinch, Paradise, Tootsie Flute,  
White Lightning, Peachy Pie, Lily Dache*

*Set Design  
Berry Pinch, Paradise, Peachy Pie*

*Costumes  
Sunny Days, Tootsie Flute, Lily Dache*

*Stage Hooves  
Hot Rod & White Lightning*

“Zecora... I’m surprised you were able to get her to be the narrator,” Rarity said, glancing up from the page.

“It was Apple Bloom that actually convinced her. From what I hear, she has an exceptional voice.”

“Oh yes, her voice is *perfect* for a story of this kind of genre, narrating an epic tale. Yet, I’d suggest you let her come up with her own lines.”

“Why is that?”

“Zecora speaks in rhymes *very* naturally, and having a rhyming narrator would just give the whole play a very old world fairy tale appeal. That, and I can’t imagine what her voice would sound like if she *didn’t* rhyme as she does.”

“I’ll be sure to sit down with her then and work on the script.”

Rarity smiled with a nod, reading further down the page.

“Well, would you look at that. Sweetie Belle is going to be playing me. Though, I supposed that does make sense; she has my wonderful white coat. Oh, and Scootaloo gets to be Rainbow Dash! She must be positively ecstatic!”

“Oh yes.” Cheerilee agreed. “Scootaloo was practically begging for the chance to play Rainbow Dash the moment realized she’d be a character in a play. It is also a character that suits her, since she talks so much like Rainbow Dash.”

“Yes, Scootaloo is definitely a filly who you hear saying ‘awesome’ just about as much as Dash.” Rarity agreed, continuing to read down the page. “Let’s see, don’t know her, or her, or her... wait, Sea Serpent? Do you mean Steven Magnet?”

“Who?”

“Steven Magnet, that’s the name of the sea serpent we met on our way to find the Elements of Harmony. Oh, I *do* hope you are portraying him well. Such a well groomed and polite sea serpent shouldn’t be relegated to a role of a simple monster. Wouldn’t you agree Twilight?..... Twilight?”

Rarity and Cheerilee turned to look at Twilight, the unicorn stiff as a statue and a few shades paler than she normally was.

“Twilight, Dear, what’s wrong?” Rarity asked, noticing the unicorn’s eyes were focused on the page. Returning to her own copy of the script, Rarity read down a few more lines and then froze up too, eyes narrowing.

“Is... is something wrong?” Cheerilee asked, concerned why the two unicorns were acting so strangely.

“Oh... oh, of course not, Dear,” Rarity replied, regaining her composure. “I was just curious about some of your casting. For example, what makes you feel Nyx will play a good Nightmare Moon? Besides the fact that she’s an absolute sweetheart, she’s also very timid and sensitive. Nightmare Moon, on the other hoof, was... well...”

“That’s the point of acting, Rarity, to be characters we usually aren’t. Besides, it was Scootaloo that suggested it, and everypony in class agreed that Nyx would do the best Nightmare Moon, if only because she has a black coat. I asked Nyx if she was okay with that, and she didn’t seem to mind at all. ”

“Oh, well, I suppose that if Nyx agreed to the role...”

“I think she’ll be just fine,” Cheerilee assured. “Nyx is a smart filly, which is good because Nightmare Moon is one of the characters that has a lot of lines. Not as much as, say, your character, Twilight, but still a significant amount of lines. I have little doubt Nyx will be able to memorize what she needs to say.”

“Of course, I’m sure she’ll be a *perfect* Nightmare Moon. Don’t you agree Twilight?” Rarity said, elbowing the purple unicorn in the side, snapping Twilight out of her shock.

“Oh... oh yes of course. Perfect,” Twilight said with a forced grin.

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“But WHY!?”

“I’m sorry Nyx, you just... you can’t be in the play.”

“But... but that isn’t fair!” The black filly whined angrily. “The play’s tomorrow and... and... and they won’t be able to perform without me!”

Twilight frowned, feeling her heart twist in her chest. It had been a few weeks since the unicorn found out the little filly was going to be Nightmare Moon in the play, and over those two weeks Twilight had agonized over what to do. Whether to let Nyx participate in the play or to make up an excuse and keep her at the library.

Twilight had actually started leaning towards letting Nyx be in the play, considering how much fun she seemed to be having. Two things, however, quickly changed Twilight’s mind. The first was the announcement that Celestia and Luna were going to be attending the Spring Festival, having heard that the Ponyville School was going to be telling the story of Luna’s return, the first stage performance of the story.

Twilight knew Nyx’s disguise could fool common ponies, but she couldn’t expect it to fool Celestia and Luna. Luna had *been* Nightmare Moon, and Celestia was arguably just as familiar with the Mare in the Moon. They would surely notice Nyx’s resemblance, and Twilight feared Nyx would be banished on the spot.

The other thing that that had swayed Twilight was when she finally got to see Nyx’s costume. The armor was made of stiff fabric and wire, the wings were fake, and the sparkling mane was obviously just indigo fabric with sparkles... but it was enough that Nyx looked just too much like Nightmare Moon, especially with the moon cutie mark painted on her flank. Sure, some ponies in Ponyville might just think the costume was wonderful, but Twilight feared others would draw unwanted connections.

“I’m... I’m sorry, Nyx, but they’ll just have to do the play without you,” Twilight assured.

“NO! It’s not fair! I’ve worked really hard, and I learned all my lines!” Nyx yelled as she threw her first official temper tantrum. It was honestly something Twilight had expected to deal with sooner, but it still wasn’t a good time for Nyx to have her first.

“Nyx...”

“IT’S NOT FAIR!!!” The filly screamed.

“NYX!” Twilight barked, forcing the filly to fall silent as she looked at Twilight, still very angry.

“I’m sorry, I really am, but this is just how it has to be! Now, I want you to go upstairs and take that costume off.”

“But-”

“Upstairs!” Twilight said, stamping her hoof. Nyx met Twilight’s hard gaze, trying to glare down the unicorn... but when that failed, the filly broke down. Nyx bolted up upstairs, wailing the whole way before she slammed the bedroom door shut behind her.

“Twilight, don’t you think you could just let her be in the play?” Spike asked. “I mean, she was really looking forward to it.”

“I know she was, Spike, and I *want* to let her, but... it’s just too risky. If Celestia and Luna were to figure out the truth, that she was made by the spell those cultists were casting... they’d banish her to the moon... take her away. I... I can’t let that happen.”

“Do you really think Celestia would just do that? I mean, she trusts you completely. I’m sure you could convince her that Nyx isn’t Nightmare Moon.”

“I’m glad you think so Spike... but I just can’t risk it.”

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“Now, Spike and I have to meet with the princesses this evening. Celestia expects me and him to be there to watch the evening performances with her and Luna,” Twilight said, talking to Nyx, the filly dressed in her normal, everyday clothes. “Owlowski will be keeping an eye on you, and I expect you to behave for him.”

“Yes *Ma’am*,” Nyx said, the tone of disappointment thick in her voice. It unnerved Twilight, because it was the first time that Nyx was truly angry with her before. Still, this was for the best.

"I am sorry Nyx, and I promise I'll make this up to you," Twilight promised as she turned to leave. "Now, try not to think about it. Spike and I will be back soon."

"Okay..."

With that Twilight stepped out the door, closing it tightly behind her. Owlowiscious then flew across the room, taking the key from the door lock in his talons before landing on the edge of Twilight's writing desk.

Nyx's eye brows furrowed once Twilight was gone, the little filly kicking at some books on the floor as she stomped around the floor and sniffled just a bit.

"It isn't fair... it isn't *fair*! Cheerilee is expecting me to be there, they're all counting on me! And I practiced so hard! It isn't fair..."

"Hoo."

Nyx looked over at Owlowiscious, the horned owl watching her. Nyx then went wide eyed, quickly scampering over to the owl.

"Please, Owlowiscious, let me go to the play! Everypony is counting on me! They won't be able to do it without me! I'm supposed to be Nightmare Moon and you can't tell the story without Nightmare Moon."

"Hoo?"

"Nightmare Moon, the bad mare! Please, Owlowiscious... Please please please please PLEEAASSEEE," Nyx begged.

The owl's gaze met Nyx's, the filly looking up at him with the biggest, most pleading eyes she could muster. She was even doing a trick Sweetie Belle taught her, the filly pushing out her bottom lip in a pout.

Owlowiscious, however, only continued to stare back, his beady eyes and non-expressive beak a perfect poker face, crafted by nature itself. Owlowiscious wasn't moved, only holding more tightly to the door key.



Nyx, however, had one more trick. She began to add her own touch to her carefully crafted begging. Letting her eyes water, a few pitiful tears began to streak down the filly's cheeks. She really *could* cry at the drop of a hat and, with the Royal Pony Sisters as her witness, she *was* going to take advantage of that strange ability.

"Hoo... ," The owl hooted in defeat, Nyx's begging too much to bear. Taking off, Owlowsious flew across the room and expertly placed the key in the door lock. He then circled around, making another pass as he turned the key and opened the door.

"OH! Thank you, Owlowsious! Thank you, thank you, thank you!!!" Nyx said with several bounces before running upstairs. In a flash the filly alicorn got out of her vest and tossed off her glasses before pulling out her costume. With a single leap, Nyx landed in all four of the costume shoes and began putting on other bits of fake armor.

Cheerilee would paint on the fake cutie mark once Nyx got to the performance, but first she needed to get on her fake wings. While it seemed pointless, since the filly alicorn already had wings, Twilight insisted that if she was going to be in the play that she had to wear the fake wings that went with the costume and keep her wings hidden underneath.

The fake wings, however, were difficult to get on. The one part of the costume that wasn't very well designed and usually needed to be put on before the helmet, which Nyx was already wearing. Still, not wanting to waste time taking off the helmet, Nyx struggled to just get the wings on.

She was making progress after fumbling with the wings for a few minutes, but then Nyx tripped over her own hooves. The filly began to fall to one side, the wings dropping off her back. The wings hit the floor and Nyx landed right on top of them, the fall punctuated by the sound of splintering wood.

"No... no!" Nyx cried, now starting to shed genuine tears while looking at the horribly bent wings. The filly nudged at them with her hoof, which only caused one of the fake wings to snap in half and flop on the floor. Nyx might have started to wail if she hadn't glanced back at where the fake wings would have been... and took notice of the real wings that were already there.

“Well... \*sniff\* If... if I keep them straight all night... that might work,” Nyx said, smiling as she extended her little wings vertically. The filly knew she was going to be in so much trouble with Twilight once she got home, not only for sneaking out to the play but going out with her real wings visible.

Still, at the moment, she was less afraid of being punished by Twilight than she was disappointing the rest of her class. Not only did she not want to let down her few friends, she was already unpopular enough as it was. Everypony in class, except her friends, either thought of her as a crybaby, a teacher’s pet, or both; ruining the play would only make things worse.

Determination flaring, Nyx made sure the rest of her costume was secured and in good shape. Sure she wasn’t missing anything, Nyx galloped back downstairs and out the front door, racing towards the Spring Festival. She doubled back only once, poking her head in the library door to offer a final, loud “Thank you!” to Owliscious before running off towards the center of Ponyville.

# Chapter 6

## Reunion of the Royal Pony Sisters

Twilight, along with the rest of the audience, applauded as the preceding performance ended. All of Ponyville, as well as a number of ponies from other towns, were sitting in the city's central square, which had been transformed into an outdoor theater for the Spring Festival.

A large stage, with all the bells and whistles of proper lighting and the like, had been set up on one side of the plaza that surrounded the town hall. The area was packed with ponies, all eagerly standing and waiting to see the many performances. Twilight, however, wasn't among the ponies below, but instead was seated up on a balcony of the town hall. She, Spike, and her friends had been invited to sit with Princess Celestia and Luna in what was being called the VIP section, for Very Important Ponies.

"Oh, that was a funny one! I loved the one part where they threw a pie!" Pinkie Pie cheered as she bounced on her seat cushion.

"Yeah," Rainbow Dash agreed, "That was pretty sweet."

"Total laugh riot," Spike added excitedly.

"The humor was low brow... but enjoyable," Rarity remarked, not as impressed as her friends. "Though I particularly liked the joke about blues music."

"Really? 'Cause that one was kind of stupid if you ask me," Applejack argued.

"It must have simply gone over your head."

"Really? Then wouldn't it have hit her hat?" Pinkie Pie asked, a question that made Rainbow Dash snort.

"Oh... oh geeze, somepony should tell those stallions that one; that's a joke that should be in a play."

The others were giggling right along with Dash, including Celestia and Luna. While the group of ponies had been a little tense around the royal sisters at first, a few good performances and Celestia cracking a particularly witty joke let everypony feel more at ease.

“So, what’s next on the program, Sister?” Luna asked, the moon princess obviously eager to see the next performance.

“Let’s see... the *Reunion of the Royal Pony Sisters*, by the Ponyville Elementary School.”

“Oh yeah, *this* is the one I’ve been waiting for,” Dash said eagerly, sitting up on her cushion. “This is the one about *us*!”

“Personally, I just hope Apple Bloom don’t make me look like a foal,” Applejack admitted. “Don’t need no ponies snickerin’ behind my back because of this.”

“I’m sure Apple Bloom will do fine,” Fluttershy reassured. “After all, she actually knows you. I don’t even know the pony who’s going to be playing me.”

“Yea, I guess yer right. Hey, says here in this program they got Nyx to play Nightmare Moon.”

“Really? Huh, I... I guess that’s kind of cool. I mean, sure, she’s got the right coat color... but she’s kind of a crybaby.”

“Rainbow Dash, that’s mean!” Fluttershy scolded.

“Hey, I just call it as I see it.”

“Well, I... I wouldn’t get your hopes up, Girls. Nyx wasn’t feeling well earlier,” Twilight lied.

“Oh, the poor thing; did she have a stomach ache?” Fluttershy asked.

“Oh yes, really nasty tummy ache. I actually left her back at the library with Owlowliscious. I doubt she’ll be able to make it.”

"Twilight, it sounds like this little filly is living with you," Celestia pointed out, looking at her student. "I'm surprised you haven't told me."

"Oh... really? Ha ha... I... thought I'd told you about her back when she first arrived. She's my cousin... half-cousin, really ... but yea, she's been staying with me for a while now." Twilight answered, trying to keep as casual as possible, but unable to stop herself from putting on a stupid, forced smile before quickly changing the subject. "So... uh... Luna, are you going to be okay? I mean, this play is kind of about-"

"Don't worry Twilight," Luna offered with a smile. "I... I think I'll be okay. Besides, it's a play by elementary school children. If anything, it will make ponies laugh at Nightmare Moon... and I think it would nice to see that particular part of past portrayed comically, but thank you for asking."

"Oh, you're welcome Princess," Twilight said, smiling that her redirection of the conversation had worked. It was just a few minutes later that the mayor, Ivory Scroll, walked out into the center of the stage, the politician pony acting as the Spring Festival's Master of Ceremonies.

"Ladies and Gentlecolts," Ivory began with her usual flare. "I am now proud to present the Ponyville Elementary School's original play, *The Reunion of the Royal Pony Sisters*."

The crowd applauded, the parents in the crowd particularly loud as the mayor stepped off the stage and the curtains opened. Some smoke began to curl out from the stage, a few dark set pieces looming in the sea of mist. The only light came from the stars and moon above, and for a moment all things were quiet.

"Beware... Beware you pony folk, for the tale I am about to tell is no joke. A story begun in days, months, and years gone by, about the pony sisters who, in harmony, ruled the sky."

At this one of the set pieces on the stage moved, causing a number of ponies in the audience to jump a little, a few even gasping. The moving set piece turned out to be a figure, who moved to the center of the stage as a light clicked on. Zecora stood for a moment in her cloak, eyes glowing

beneath the hood as she looked out across crowd. The zebra then lifted a hoof, lowering her hood and offering a smile.

“The eldest did guide the sun when it woke up, raising it up at the dawn. The other brought the moon when the day had ended, and the sun to bed had gone.”

At this, two more lights clicked on stage, Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon standing on either side the stage in their Luna and Celestia costumes. As Zecora stepped off to one side of the stage where she would narrate the rest of the play, the two little fillies climbed up some steps hidden behind the backdrop of the play, standing on the backs of the painted wooden mountains while a number of the other students came out and began to dance and play on stage.

“The two sisters brought harmony to the world as they brought balance to the moon and sun, and beneath their guidance all different ponies lived, laughed, and had fun.”

“Wow, Zecora is doing a really good job with the whole narrator thing,” Dash whispered to Applejack, the pair sitting next to each other.

“You got that right, Sugarcube.”

“But not all would be well in Equestria as the younger sister grew resentful; her actions set to make the future of the land quite eventful. The ponies of the land did frolic and play, lived much of their lives under the sun’s golden rays. Yet they slept through the night and its majesty. Something, in truth, that was a horrible tragedy.”

As Zecora narrated, the fillies and colts on stage performed out the scene. Diamond Tiara, dressed as Celestia, stood proud as the ponies on stage played and laughed, but then when she hid and Silver Spoon came out as Luna, the other ponies on stage all quickly fell asleep, some playfully snoring.

“In time, it all became too much for the younger to bear, to have her night ignored... to feel as if nopony cared. One fateful night she did protest, refusing to lower the moon in the west. All of this in spite of the elder sister’s distress.”

“Luna, why won’t you lower the moon? It’s time for the sun to come up,” Diamond Tiara said, over extending the words as she gave a very forced regal tone to her voice. She and Silver Spoon were on the raised steps behind the plywood mountains again, calling to each other from either side of the stage, while the other little actors and actresses continued to pretend to sleep.

“I am tired of no pony seeing my night. I work so hard on it and all they do is sleep through it. It’s beautiful but nopony ever sees it but me.”

“Well... well...”

“Looks like *somepony* forgotten her lines,” Rarity whispered. “Personally, I don’t think it could have happened to a nastier filly. Did you know how she used to tease Apple Bloom?”

“Well... what else are ponies supposed to do? It’s too dark to work at night and, like, it’s too bright to sleep during the day,” Diamond Tiara finally answered. This caused some chuckles to go through the audience, Luna herself snorting. Diamond Tiara, in her moment of panic, had reverted to her normal, snotty way of speaking, a voice comically inappropriate for a filly that was supposed to be portraying the sun princess.

Celestia took it in good humor, chuckling a little as well.

“I don’t care!” Silver Spoon yelled, able to remember her lines better than Diamond Tiara. “I won’t have my work be ignored anymore! They are going to see the majesty of my night, whether they want to or not.”

“But Sister... ,” Diamond Tiara called, only for her voice to fall silence as the light on Silver Spoon grew dark and Zecora began narrating again.

“But it was too late for kind words to soothe the younger’s heart, too deeply had she been hurt by the ponies who ignored her sky-bound art. The bitterness inside her did twist, writhe, and contort, to the point that even the princess’ exterior did distort.

“Gone was her gentle visage in the emotional monsoon, behind all that was left was the dreadful Nightmare Moon!”

The light on the right side of the stage clicked on again, and gasps cut through the audience. Silver Spoon had been replaced by another little filly, with supposedly fake wings stretched high and perfectly still and an all black coat. On her flank was a fairly well painted crescent moon cutie mark, and the fake armor looked rather convincing from a distance. The final touch was the filly's eyes, which appeared to be shaped like dragon eyes, a brilliant turquoise while the whites of the eyes were a lighter, blue/green color.

"Hey look, Nyx made it!" Applejack whisper-cheered. "Sweet apples, that little filly *does* pull off a convincin' Nightmare Moon."

"Oh... oh yes, of course," Rarity agreed, glancing nervously at Twilight. "She's... positively a doppelganger."

"And it's good to see she's over her tummy ache. Must have just been pre-show butterflies." Celestia offered as she leaned over to whisper towards Twilight.

"Uh... uh yeah... butterflies," Twilight half answered, the unicorn suddenly feeling like she was about to lose her dinner.

Nyx looked over at the audience, the realization that she would be in front of this many ponies at once finally sinking in. She instinctively closed her eyes and started to wince, feeling the temptation to fall on her knees and try to hide. She had been so excited about the play, so excited to do the story and maybe make some new friends, she hadn't realized or been told there were going to be so many ponies watching her.

Still, Nyx licked her lips and swallowed, thinking about her friends. She had just gotten herself in deep trouble with Twilight for them, and she wasn't going to let them down now. She just had to get through her lines, and she had practiced and memorized those lines so many times she could recite them in her sleep. She just need to take a breath and say the lines, say them outloud.

"N-Never again will the ponies of Equestria see the sun! I do hereby decree that this night shall last forever! MUWAHAHAHA!!!" Nyx boasted, faking the evil laugh at the end which brought a small round of laughter from the



crowd. It was kind laughter, supportive laughter... laughter that gave Nyx a little more courage. She could do this, and she would do it... because she was already going to get in trouble for it anyway.

Yet, while the laughter gave Nyx courage, the reaction of the crowd baffled Twilight.

Why hadn't an angry mob formed? Nyx looked too much like Nightmare Moon, but.. no pony seemed to take the resemblance seriously. Twilight was baffled. Did they all just think that Nyx's costume was just that good? The unicorn couldn't contemplate the thought for long as Zecora's voice drew her attention back to the stage.

"And night did last across the pony lands, despite the elder sister's pleas and demands. In the end, with no other choice to be made, the elder sister had to take up the crusade. With the Elements of Harmony, a power beyond all measure, the elder banished her sister... an act in which she took no pleasure."

The lights on the stage began to flicker on and off in a rainbow of colors as Nyx offered faked cries of anger and pain. When the lights returned to normal Nyx had disappeared from view and, in her place, a plywood moon had been lowered down into view on which was painted the visage of the Mare in the Moon.

"To the moon was the younger was then sent, so that the ponies of Equestria she would never again torment. The elder took on duties two fold, tending both the moon silver and the sun gold. Harmony was returned, the elder's actions many did commend. And for a thousand years all was good... but this story is not at its end."

With that the curtains quickly shut, the first act of the play ending to an appropriate round of applause. There was really only one pony who didn't applaud. Luna, while having enjoyed the children's performance, had sank down into her seat a little when the filly playing Nightmare Moon appeared on stage.

The moon princess hung her head, staring at her hooves as memories of that particular moment in her life came back like angry spirits. Yet, before Luna could get to lost in her own thoughts, she felt a very gentle touch.

Looking to the touch, the moon princess saw a large white wing gently draped over her shoulder.

“Are you going to be okay?” Celestia asked very quietly, using her wing to gently hug Luna to her side.

“Yes... yes, I’ll be alright,” Luna offered, resting her head on Celestia’s shoulder. “Thanks Tia.”

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While the play had the level of professionalism that you’d expect from something put on by colts and fillies, the crowd as a whole was enjoying it, even those who weren’t parents. After the first scene ended, the next part of the play was Twilight meeting up with her friends and Nightmare Moon’s return. The third act was Twilight and her friends going through the Everfree Forest, and facing the trials within.

And, of the crowd, Twilight’s friends seemed to be enjoying it the most. Dash was thrilled to see how awesome she was being portrayed by Scootaloo while Applejack and Rarity were satisfied by how well their little sisters were acting. Dinky Doo was pulling off a pretty darn good Twilight, though the little filly tripped on her lines occasionally, and Pinkie Pie was still grinning ear to ear from hearing her song about ghosties and giggling being sung on stage.

It was something they were all enjoying, even Twilight. Nyx had appeared on stage a number of times more. Well, not exactly *on* stage. She had stood on some steps in the background during the town hall scene and, during the forest scenes, she was lowered down on a rope, saying a few lines about what she had planned next for the little ponies before being raised back up.

The unicorn was furious that Nyx had disobeyed her... but she didn’t dare risk running off to speak with Nyx in the middle of the show; that would have drawn too much attention. That and Celestia and Luna were just sitting there, smiling. They didn’t seem at all phased with how much Nyx resembled Nightmare Moon, even though the filly’s true dragon-like eyes were visible to everypony.

Twilight needed to figure out a way to explain that before the play ended, but she couldn't focus on that too much. The fourth act was about to start, each act respectably short, but now it was the climax... the part of the play Twilight was worried about the most. The fourth act was set to occur against the backdrop of the old castle... and the unicorn feared this scene might dredge up unwanted memories in Nyx.

"And with the final trial passed the ponies did arrive, to the resting place of the elements they hoped to revive," Zecora narrated, the zebra's part in the play becoming smaller after the first act. The six ponies playing Twilight and her friends stepped onto the stage, drawing close to the wooden pedestals that held the fake Elements of Harmony.

"The Elements of Harmony, we've found them," Dinky Doo chimed out, the unicorn cast to play the role of Twilight. Unlike the real elements, the fake ones were set on pedestals low enough to the ground that the little colts and fillies were able to get them down without actually having to fly or lift them with magic.

"One, two, three, four... There's only five!" The pony playing Pinkie Pie chimed out.

"*Squeee!*" Pinkie Pie whispered, trying to keep her voice down but finding it difficult. "I said that... I said that! This is so cool! They got everything just right."

"That's mostly because of you, Sugarcube, since you somehow remembered everything we exactly said."

"Oh, that was easy. I just read the transcript."

"You read the *what* now?"

"Shhh! I'm trying to watch!" Dash grumbled, knowing her character had a line coming up.

"Where's the sixth?" Scootaloo asked, she and the other fillies looking around while Dinky Doo stepped forward to the five fake elements.

“The book said when the five are present, a spark will cause the sixth Element to be revealed.”

“What the hay is that supposed to mean?” Apple Bloom asked, pulling off her sister’s thicker accent fairly well.

“I’m not sure, but I have an idea. Stand back, I don’t know what will happen.”

“Come on now, y’all. She needs to concentrate,” Apple Bloom ordered, ushering the others fillies off the stage, leaving only Dinky Doo alone with the fake elements. The little unicorn knelt down beside the painted, round props and made her horn glow. She was not actually attempting to cast a spell, but merely making her horn glow for the effect.

The stage, however, began to get enveloped by smoke, fog machines in the back casting out the thick white clouds as indigo lights shown on the mist. A few of the students, who had slipped out of costume, used some ropes to pull the fake pedestal that had held the elements back, out of the middle of the stage.

Then other students working backstage pulled on some fishing string. The fishing string was attached to the fake elements of harmony, causing them to slide away from Dinky Doo and then hang in the air above the right side of the stage while Nyx stepped into view.

“The Elements!” Dinky cried out, reaching out a hoof. Nyx only replied to this with a laugh, the lights flickering on stage while students smashed pots and pans together in the background to simulate thunder and lightning. Still, despite Nyx’s laughter, Dinky did as the real Twilight Sparkle did. She lowered her head, and beat her hoof at the ground aggressively.

“You’re kidding. You’re kidding, right?”

Dinky, however, charged at Nyx, the black filly doing the same. Just as the two were about to cross paths the stage lights went pitch black. When the lights came back on Nyx was still in the center of the stage, but Dinky Doo was over by the fake elements, her horn glowing. Some students began flashing flashlights on the painted props, trying to make it look like they were starting to activate.

Nyx raced across the stage, but before she could reach Dinky Doo the stage lights flashed a bright white, a number of them turned out on the audience to blind them as well. When the blinding effect was gone, Dinky Doo was on the far side of the stage, looking like she had been thrown back while Nyx stood in the center of the fake Elements of Harmony, the students around her still flicking flashlights on and off and waving them around as if the elements were about to activate.

“No, no!” Nyx snapped, shrinking back in fear of the fake elements, but as in reality the elements did not activate, the students playing with the flashlights stopping while Dinky Doo put on an overly large expression of shock.

“But... where's the sixth Element?!”

Nyx, however, only broke out her playful, evil laughter as she stomped on the fake Elements of Harmony, causing some of the more invested crowd members to gasp. Twilight, however, was holding her breath. This was the moment, this was the part of the play she had worried about the most.

Nyx finished stomping on the last of the elements, turning about to face Dinky Doo on the far side of the stage. The filly put on the wickedest smile she could manage, lifting a hoof to point at Dinky.

“You little foal! Thinking you could defeat me!?” Nyx exclaimed, her voice turning very dark, very serious, and very convincing. “Now you will never see your princess, or your sun!”

“The *night* will last *forever!*” Nyx finished before letting out an evil laugh, the most convincing evil laugh the audience had heard from the filly all evening. It sent a shiver down Twilight’s spine, as she had heard the real Nightmare Moon say those very same words and in a very similar way. It made the unicorn swallow nervously, looking over at Celestia and Luna. The princesses still seemed to be just enjoying the play... but Twilight still couldn’t shake the thought from her mind.

Nyx had said those last lines too well.

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“And thus the night again became ruled over by the younger, banished from her body the vengeful hunger. And from this story may a lesson you firmly grip, there is nothing stronger than the power of friendship.”

With those last lines from Zecora, the stage curtains fell shut, and the audience broke into a roaring round of applause. A few moments later the curtains opened, Cheerilee stepping onto the stage and offer a few quick bows and waves.

“Thank you all!” The teacher offered. “I’m happy to see you all enjoyed the play. The students worked really hard and, because of their efforts, this became one of the best plays ever put on by Ponyville Elementary School. Now, let’s have a round of applause for these colts and fillies who did such an excellent job! First, a round of applause for the colts and fillies who played our story’s heroes. First, Dinky Doo!”

The crowd complied, stomping hooves as the students began to stream onto stage. Cheerilee introduced every filly and colt by name as they came out, doing her best to shout above the applause of her crowd. The first to come out, doing so one by one, were the fillies who played the parts of Twilight and her friends. Applejack gave out an extra loud holler when Apple Bloom came on stage, and Rarity put her hooves together and whistled when it was Sweetie Belle turn to step out and bow.

“Next, we have the fillies who portrayed our dearest Princess Celestia and Princess Luna, who grace us with their presence this evening. Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon.”

Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon were the next to come out, acting like proper divas as they smirked and bowed in their Luna and Celestia costumes. They lingered on the stage for a little longer than they should, soaking in the appropriate and proper amount of applause. It took Cheerilee motioning towards them to get the two fillies to back up and stand in line with the others.

“And now, playing the wicked and dastardly Nightmare Moon, give a big round of applause for Nyx!”

Twilight was shocked when the crowd cheered very, very loudly as Nyx nervously walked onto stage, cheering as loud as the applause had been for Dinky Doo and the other fillies who played the main characters in the play. Applause that was also a whole lot louder than what Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon had received, and, by the looks on their faces, the two snooty fillies knew it.

Twilight couldn't keep herself from applauding either, even though Nyx was still in SO much trouble. Twilight even heard a whistle come from her side, Celestia putting a hoof to her lips and offering a very loud, very supportive cheer whistle for Nyx. Even Luna was applauding, despite the fact Nyx had been portraying something that Luna probably only wished to forget. Did the two princesses really just believe Nyx was in costume?

It was a saving grace Twilight would never have believed possible.

Nyx shakily bowed just a few times before stepping back to stand with the others, the rest of the fillies and colts who had played parts in the play taking the stage and bowing. Some of the colts and fillies then stepped forward again as they were given credit for the costumes and set construction. The final two ponies invited up were Lyra and Zecora. The mint green unicorn had composed the background music and Zecora, of course, deserved a round of applause for her expert narration, which had really kicked the play up to the next level.

Cheerilee was last to bow, since she was the one that took the stories and transcribed them for the kids to perform. After that, with a final bow from the group, the stage's curtains closed, the performances of the Spring Festival taking an hour intermission so ponies could stretch and get dinner if they wanted.

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"Mommy!" Dinky Doo chirped as she ran up to a gray coated and blond maned pegasus. "Did I do good?"

"You were wonderful, Muffin," Ditzzy Doo replied, giving her little filly a nuzzle and a hug. Twilight passed by the warm scene with Rarity, Applejack, and Rainbow Dash as they moved backstage to where the students were getting out of their costumes.

It didn't take long for the quartet to find the fillies they were looking for. Apple Bloom, Scootaloo, Sweetie Belle, and Nyx were drinking some water from paper cups. Three of the fillies had already gotten out of most of their costumes, while Nyx was still completely in hers.

"Darlings, that was positively *fabulous*!" Rarity chimed, alerting the four fillies to the group's approach. Apple Bloom, Scootaloo, and Sweetie Belle all quickly turned and ran over, grinning ear to ear. Nyx, however, hung back, trying not to meet Twilight's gaze.

"Really, was it good?" Sweetie Belle asked.

"Positively *pitch* perfect," Rarity assured.

"Yea, big props, Scootaloo, you got me down pat."

"ohmygoshohmygoshohmygoshohmygosh," Scootaloo rattled off, overwhelmed by the fact that she was getting such a compliment from her personal hero Rainbow Dash.

"How about me, Big Sis?"

"It was like lookin' in a mirror, Sugarcube," Applejack praised, giving Apple Bloom a little noogie. "Y'all did a great job, didn't they Twilight?"

"Yes, they all did an amazing job," Twilight agreed. It was the first time since the unicorn arrived that Nyx chanced looking up, her currently undisguised dragon eyes meeting Twilight's eyes. In that silent moment Nyx was able to smile, seeing that Twilight wasn't glaring at her with disappointment or anger.

"E-even me?" Nyx nervously ventured.

"Well shoot, of course Nyx," Applejack reassured. "Especially that last Nightmare Moon laugh. Whoa nelly, sent a shiver down my spine."

"Wow, nice work on her eyes, Twilight," Dash said, the pegasus fluttering over and inspecting Nyx's dragon eyes more closely. "I didn't know you knew a spell for this."



"Oh, uh, j-just something I found in one of my spell books," Twilight nervously smiled, thankful that Rainbow Dash had assumed it was a spell. That was going to be Twilight's cover story anyway. After all, she did know a spell like that... only it was for a pair of glasses.

"That is so awesome. I got to try it."

"Say what now?"

"Come on Twilight," Dash said, landing and using a hoof to motion towards her eyes. "I want to see what I look like with dragon eyes."

Twilight forced a smile, having not realized that she might actually be asked to perform the spell. Still, there was no going back now. She'd have to try, at least once, and if she failed then she could tell Dash she'd do it tomorrow. And then she'd hope that Dash would forget or that she could figure out the spell before then.

Still, maybe she could pull it off. It would just be an illusion spell, like the one she put on Nyx's glasses... she'd just have to apply it straight to Dash's eyes. No big deal... she just had to use it on a live pony... with the opposite effect... and do it all without blinding Rainbow Dash.

But she could do it... maybe.

Closing her own eyes, the purple unicorn focused her magic as her horn glowed. She gritted her teeth, concentrating, and then she felt the flash of the spell going off. For a moment the unicorn didn't dare to look, fearing she had done something horrible to Dash. Blinding a pony, now that was probably a real quick way to ruin a friendship.

But "awwws" of amazement from the other ponies encouraged Twilight to look at Dash's eyes. The orbs had been transformed, now looking very dragon like. A strong pink center, with dagger shaped pupil. Even the whites of the pegasus' eyes had been tinted, now a light pink that complimented the iris color.

"Whoa... this is so awesome!" Dash said, catching her reflection in a nearby wall mirror. "I am, like, 20% cooler... at least."

“Well, don’t get used to it. The illusion spell will wear off quickly,” Twilight lectured, having purposefully worked the magic so Dash’s eyes would only last for a few hours at best.

“Still, I’m going to enjoy this while it lasts. After we’re done here we got to find Pinkie Pie. She is so going to freak out when she sees this.”

“Yea, I reckon all you little fillies have worked up quite the appetite with all this here acting. How about we catch up with Fluttershy and Pinkie and then all go get dinner together?”

“YEA!!!” The fillies cheered out in unison.

“Sounds good,” Twilight agreed. “Why don’t you go on ahead and find us a place to eat? I need to help Nyx out of her costume.”

The others offered nods in agreement, heading off the stage and leaving Twilight and Nyx alone. When their friends were out of sight, Twilight turned her gaze down on Nyx, raising an eyebrow as she tapped a hoof expectantly.

“Am... am I in trouble?” The filly asked, trying not to tear up.

“Yes... yes you are, Nyx. You did disobey me,” Twilight replied, but she soon smiled and raised Nyx’s chin with a gentle hoof. “But... you were right. It wasn’t fair of me to try and keep you from the play, and you did an *amazing* job.”

“R-Really?”

“Yes, really,” Twilight reassured as she nuzzled the filly. “Though, would you mind telling me why I can see your real wings and why you don’t have your glasses?”

“Well, when I was trying to get my costume on, I kind of... broke the costume wings. But, I’ve been keeping my wings up like this all night so nopony has been able to tell the difference.”

“And the glasses?”

"I... forgot them. Cheerilee thought you must have cast a spell on my eyes since you're so good with magic."

"Well, if there was a night to forget your glasses this was it," Twilight said with a chuckle. "Now why don't you get on top of my back. The library isn't too far away. If I gallop, we can get back there real quick, get your glasses and vest, and then we'll come back so we can eat dinner with the others."

"Really? You... you aren't going to make me stay at the library?"

"Kind of pointless now that the play is over. So, no, you can come back with me and have dinner with everypony."

"T-Thank you, Twilight!"

"And then we'll discuss your punishment in the morning."

"...oh..."

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"But *Daddy*, how could they cheer louder for *her*? She was the bad mare, and *I* was Princess Celestia!"

"Diamond Tiara, please be quiet and eat your dinner," The filly's mother scolded. Diamond Tiara's and Silver Spoon's families were seated together at one of Ponyville's cafes. The restaurant was a fair distance from the Spring Festival, so it wasn't too crowded. The parents had chatted lightly about the performance, but had long since gone onto other topics despite Diamond Tiara's continued desire to keep whining about what had happened.

The worst of it was Diamond Tiara hadn't been able to escape Nyx either. Within twenty minutes of her family's arrival at the restaurant, Nyx had arrived with a large group of ponies, and were now laughing and having fun at the far end of the restaurant.

"Oh, look Honey," Diamond Tiara's mother whispered, drawing the father's attention as well Diamond Tiara's. The whole restaurant, in fact, had turned

their heads, watching as Celestia and Luna not only approached but then walked into the restaurant.

"I wonder what brings them to this quaint little eatery. It's not exactly what I would consider royal class," Silver Spoon's mother whispered.

"Well, isn't it obvious? They were so enamored by our daughters' performances that they came looking for them. Now, everypony, look your best," Diamond's father assured, and soon the four adults and two fillies were doing just that, quickly primping and preparing themselves as the princesses began to walk in their direction. Still, despite Diamond Tiara's wide grin, the princesses strolled right on by as if they weren't even there.

"Where are they going?" Diamond Tiara whispered harshly. "No, they aren't... they are! They're sitting with those losers!"

"Diamond Tiara, hush. It's isn't our place to judge who the princesses sit with."

"But it isn't fair! I actually had to dress up and put on a real costume to look like Celestia. Nyx didn't have to do *anything* but put on some fake wings to look like Nightmare Moon."

Diamond Tiara's father opened his mouth to tell his daughter to be quiet, but as he did, he looked over his shoulder and got a glance of the foal in question. "She does look a great deal like Nightmare Moon, doesn't she?"

"Like, totally. She didn't have to even dye her coat or mane or anything. Those are her natural colors. It isn't even fair."

Diamond Tiara's father just kept staring, his azure eyes flashing a bit before he turned back to the table. "Yes, the natural resemblance is uncanny."

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"Well... that was a long night," Twilight yawned, door opening to the library as she strode inside. Both Spike and Nyx were sleeping soundly, sprawled across the unicorn's back; a cute scene, but one that wore Twilight out since she had to carry them all the way back to the library. Owlowiscious

offered a welcoming hoot, which Twilight returned with a nod as she carried Spike and Nyx up to the bedroom.

Spike was the first to get tucked into bed, the dragon mumbling something about Rarity and donuts as he turned over and snuggled into his blanket. Nyx was next, Twilight slipping the filly out of her vest and glasses before putting her under the covers.

With the two tucked away, Twilight turned to head down stairs, only to hear a small voice call out to her.

“Twilight?”

“Oh, sorry Nyx. I didn’t mean to wake you up,” Twilight apologized, turning back to see Nyx’s bright turquoise eyes staring at her in the dark.

“It’s okay. Thank you for letting me go to dinner with everypony.”

“Well, you’re welcome. Now, you should get some sleep. You’ve had a long day,” The unicorn replied, making sure Nyx was properly tucked into bed.

“Okay... but, Twilight?”

“Yes?”

“You remember what happened in the forest... that thing I remembered or dreamed about in the castle... how I wanted to hurt you?”

“Yes, I remember.”

“Was... was that Nightmare Moon’s memory?”

“What... what makes you ask that?” Twilight said, swallowing nervously.

“When I was on stage... when I was saying my last lines... I remember that I heard those same words in that nasty memory. And I then started saying them just like the nasty voice I heard did... like I had really said them before. Was... what I acted out in the play... was it really the same thing Nightmare Moon did?”

Twilight froze up a moment, debating how to answer the question. She had been striving to try and protect Nyx from the truth... but, after the long day, Twilight didn't have the mental strength to try and contrive some new lie to shield Nyx. And Nyx was too smart for anything overly simple.

In the end, Twilight could only nod.

"Yes..."

"And... when I went to the play... every... everypony kept telling me that I... that I looked just like Nightmare Moon... They said my eyes were perfect and so were my wings... They thought they were fake but... they're not. And... and I don't know of anypony else who's an alicorn like me either... and... and before the play started, I saw that book again and looked at the picture... and... and after hearing what everypony else said, I..."

Twilight's heart skipped a beat as Nyx tried to brush away some tears that formed, the unicorn fearing what the filly might have asked next.

"Twilight... is the reason... is the reason I remember that night... remember you... remember wanting to hurt you... is the reason that I look like Nightmare Moon... i-is it because I'm... am I... am I somehow?"

"No," Twilight said firmly but comfortingly. "You are *not* Nightmare Moon."

"But, what about-"

Twilight gently shushed Nyx, the mare sitting down beside the small bed before gathering her thoughts.

"Nyx... I know you're little, and you may not understand all of this... but... I think you deserve to know the truth... or at least, what I think the truth is. You remember where I found you, in the Everfree Forest? How, at the time, you didn't have any memories before then? How you didn't even have a name?"

"Yes."

"Well, I think that is because that was where you were born... or made... and that you only came into existence a few hours before I arrived. You

weren't even a pony until that first moment you woke up tangled in that bush.

"What... what do you meant?"

"Nyx... I believe you were created by a spell."

"A... spell?"

Twilight nodded.

"You see, there were some very mean, very evil ponies who I believe were trying to bring Nightmare Moon back."

"Why... why would they do that?" Nyx asked, sitting up in bed and pulling the covers a little closer to her neck.

"I don't know, but that's what I think they were trying to do. They ponynapped me and, while I wasn't able to really see or hear what was going, I know what I felt. When they started casting the spell, I felt powerful magic... magic I have only sensed once before, when I was in the presence of the real Nightmare Moon.

"So, if my theory is right, they were trying to bring Nightmare Moon back, and they were actually able to start the spell. They cast the spell... but then Celestia arrived and stopped the mean ponies. She interrupted the spell, rescued me, and her guards arrested all the mean, evil ponies involved.

"And that's where I came from?"

"The thing about magic is that, if you interrupt a spell, you can't really be sure what you'll get. The spell they cast wasn't complete when it was interrupted, and... I think you're the result. I found you right next to the same clearing where the spell was cast. The whole reason I was there was because the mean ponies had taken my saddle bags and left them in that part of the Everfree Forest."

At this, Nyx began to sniffle, tears already starting to stream down her face as she bit her lower lip.

“But... but that means... I am Nightmare Moon.”

“No! No, Nyx, you’re not.”

“But-but you said that I came from that spell!” Nyx blubbered, her crying turning into full-fledged sobbing. “A-and you said that spell was supposed to bring b-back Nightmare Moon! If that spell made me, and I I-look like Nightmare Moon, and I have her memories, then I must *be* Nightmare Moon!”

Nyx let out a wail, not even trying to wipe the tears from her eyes.

“I’m Nightmare Moon! I was the one that banished Celestia to the sun! I was the one who tried to hurt you and your friends! I’m a monster! I’m a bad pony! I’m-”

Before Nyx could continue her breakdown, Twilight brought her head close, nuzzling the filly’s neck and using a hoof to gently rub Nyx’s back. The filly responded by hooking her little front legs around the unicorn’s neck, hugging her tightly while she continued to sob.

“Nyx, you are *not* Nightmare Moon,” Twilight assured, being both comforting and firm.

“B-but-”

“You do look like her, and... and you do seem to have some of her memories... but Nyx, you are *not* Nightmare Moon. What you are is a perfectly normal, wonderful, little filly,” Twilight reassured. “A sweet little filly who has four really great friends. A filly that likes going to school, and was willing to get in *big* trouble just so she didn’t let her classmates down.

“Nightmare Moon wouldn’t do any of that; she wouldn’t even *have* friends. Nightmare Moon was a bitter, vengeance driven mare who was willing to doom Equestria to eternal night, just because ponies didn’t stay up at night to look at the stars.

“And that isn’t you. You aren’t the same pony. You are *not* Nightmare Moon, and you will never be her.”



“\*sniff\* You... you promise?”

“I promise.”

Nyx smiled, but it was a moment of happiness doomed to die quickly as a fresh frown and new tears appeared on Nyx's face.

“Hey, what’s wrong?”

“I-if I was created by a spell, then... then that means I don’t have a mom and dad... I... I don’t have a family like my friends... I... I...”

Twilight soon cursed herself, realizing too late that Nyx figured out more than the unicorn wanted her to. She had to think fast; Twilight didn’t want Nyx to have to go to sleep with the knowledge she was born from a spell in the forest *and* that she had no real family. That was just too much to put on the little filly, at least all at once.

“Nyx, just because you weren’t born like a normal pony doesn’t mean you don’t have a family.”

“\*sniff\* It... it doesn’t?”

“No. You have all the family you could want right there in Ponyville,” Twilight reassured. “Family is more than just the ponies you’re related to. Family can also be your friends and the ponies who care about you. After all, don’t you have four really great friends?”

“I... I do.”

“And not just them, there are plenty of others who care about you. I mean, just look at Owlowiscious and Spike. They’re practically your brothers.”

“But... but Owlowiscious is an owl and Spike is a dragon; how can they be my brothers?”

“Owlowiscious keeps an eye on you when I can’t, and he brings you those little flowers and other presents once in a while. He’s also helped you with your homework when I don’t have the time, and, like some big brothers,

he's gotten himself in trouble to make you happy by letting you go to the play.

"And Spike, well... he's your crazy older brother. He looks after you too and, while he sometimes gives you a hard time, he really appreciates it when you help him around the library. Both he and Owlowiscious would be among the first to jump up and help you if you were ever in trouble.

"So, even though Owlowiscious is an owl and Spike is a dragon, they both treat you like their little sister. They take care of you, and would rather see themselves get hurt before seeing you get put in any danger."

"So... if Owlowiscious and Spike are like my older brothers... what does that make you?"

Twilight felt the air catch in her lungs at this, looking down at the little filly. What was she to Nyx? What was Nyx to her? She could easily say she was just an older sister, like Owlowiscious and Spike were brothers, but... that didn't feel right.

Applejack was the older sister to Apple Bloom, and while Applejack had to take some responsibility raising the little filly, they still had a sisterly relationship. Apple Bloom got on Applejack's nerves from time to time, and the orange farm filly sometimes had to reign in her little sister once in a while like a big sister would.

But... that wasn't the kind of relationship she had with Nyx. Twilight began to think of all the things she had done for Nyx since the little filly's arrival. She had sent her to school, read bedtime stories to her, made her meals from time to time. She helped Nyx catch up to the rest of her class and tended to the filly when she was hurt.

Most of all, Twilight thought of the day Nyx got lost in the Everfree Forest because of Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon. Twilight had never been so furious or worried. She was really on the verge of turning that spoiled little brat into a cactus, and then her father came by the library wanting an apology. Oh, Twilight could have strangled him right there, just wrung his pompous neck right there.

And yes, one could argue that was anything a big sister would do. Applejack would have probably beaten the tar out of that father stallion for trying to defend what his daughter had done. But... sister just didn't seem to fit. Twilight... Twilight felt Nyx was more to her than a sister. Nyx depended on her and, if it weren't for Twilight, could have easily died in the Everfree Forest.

No... Twilight was no older sister to Nyx... but there was another name that seemed to fit... one that slowly floated to the top of the unicorn's mind.

"Well... Nyx... if I was really honest... I'd say... ," Twilight had to swallow, the words getting caught on the knot in her throat. "That... I'm like... well... your mother."

There was a moment of silence, Twilight watching Nyx to see the filly's reaction. It shifted through a number of expressions in this order: first shock, then disbelief, and finally, a weak but honest smile.

"You'd r-really want to be my mom?"

"I'd love to be your mother... if.. you'd... let me?" Twilight asked, leaning her head in close so she was eye to eye with Nyx.

Nyx's answer was not in word, but in gesture, the filly sitting up in her bed. Before Twilight knew it, she was once again being hugged by the filly, Nyx nuzzling the side of the unicorn's head while her front legs hooked around Twilight's neck.

"I... I would love to have you as mom! You're the best mom ever!"

"Oh... oh Nyx," Twilight whispered, eyes starting to tear up, even though she was smiling ear to ear. The pair sat in the moment for a time, Twilight nuzzling Nyx while the filly continued hugging her neck.

"Twilight?" Nyx asked a few minutes later, still holding tightly to the unicorn's neck.

"Yes, Nyx?"

"Thank you... for everything. I love you."

"I... I love you too Nyx," Twilight replied, tears starting to roll down her cheek. The unicorn very gently pulled herself away, quickly rubbing the tears off her face with her forelegs before using her magic to tuck Nyx back into bed. "Now, it's time to go to sleep. It's late and you've had a long day."

"Okay," The filly alicorn replied, yawning as she snuggled into her bed. Twilight offered a gentle smile, and, thinking of her own mother, the unicorn bent forward and gave Nyx the gentlest kiss on the forehead. This seemed to be the final trick, Nyx drifting off to sleep.

Stepping back from the bed on the tips of her hooves, Twilight began moving towards the door. It wasn't what the unicorn expected, being called mom for the first time. She had always thought she'd want a filly of her own some day... it just never occurred to Twilight that Nyx could really be that filly. And she'd have to convince Nyx to keep calling her cousin around Ponyville, since that was how every pony else thought they were related.

Still, Twilight realized that she had really been acting like Nyx's mom for a long time, considering how she had been taking care of the filly. Reading her to bed at night, and making sure she went to school... Running out to find her when she got lost and being on the verge of turning Diamond Tiara into a cactus for the bully filly's cruel prank...

Yeah... she'd been acting like it, but it was a whole other bucket of hay actually being *called* mom. Still, Twilight would think about that in a minute. First, she needed to go have a word with Owlowiscious about why the owl had let Nyx sneak out to the play. Yet, just before Twilight could reach the door, a voice whispered to her.

"Hey, why am I just 'the older brother'? Can't I be her uncle or something?"

The unicorn turned, smiling gently as she saw Spike was sitting up in his bed, hands on his hips as he eyed Twilight from across the room.

"Spike, I was the one who hatched you and raised you before you could talk and look after yourself. And, technically speaking, you're still a baby dragon. So, if anything, I'm sort of a mother to you too."

“Pfft. Whatever, I still say I’d make a better uncle. Especially if you let me have back that awesome mustache. No uncle is complete without a mustache.”

“Sorry Spike, but no mustache. Now you should get some sleep.”

“Yeah yeah, I heard you the first time ‘*Mom*,’” Spike scoffed before he laid back down and threw the blanket back over himself, snuggling into his bed. The baby dragon was back to sleep almost instantly, making Twilight giggle quietly before she crept out of the bedroom, heading down stairs.

“Owlowiscious, can I have a word with you?”

“Hoo hoo.”

“Uh-oh is right, Mister,” Twilight firmly assured, needing have a word with the owl of why he let Nyx leave, despite her direct orders.

# Chapter 7

## Careful Maneuvering

*Dear Revered Brother Nexus - High Prophet of The True Queen*

*I write in regards to the assignment you gave me several weeks past. As chosen Prophet of Ponyville, I received your orders that we were to search the Everfree Forest for our queen, that she may have survived the sun tyrant's interference in our resurrection spell.*

*And, as I reported to you just last week, our searches of the forest have proved fruitless. Those amongst us that are unicorns have not been able to find traces of our queen's magic anywhere in the forest. Even the traces that once remained at the ancient castle have now dissipated.*

*Yet, this past evening, I believe I have spotted our queen, or at least one who bears a striking resemblance to her. A filly, who is currently in the care of Twilight Sparkle. Yes, the same Twilight Sparkle to which we are all so familiar. I first saw her in an elementary school play, and then once again later in the evening when she shared a meal with Twilight Sparkle, Celestia, Luna, and a number of other local mares and fillies.*

*Upon speaking with my own daughter, who shared a class with the filly for a number of weeks, I've come to discover the filly was admitted as a new student to Ponyville Elementary around the same time our spell was cast, near the beginning of spring.*

*I have been unable to ascertain any further information, due to an altercation I had previously with Twilight Sparkle, which has put us at odds. My daughter, who might have proved useful in this matter, has also made herself just as unwelcome around the Ponyville Library.*

*I request your guidance in this matter in how you wish for me to proceed, and patiently await your reply.*

*For the Night Eternal  
For Equestria's True Queen*

### *Honored Brother Regal Cut - Prophet of Ponyville.*

The scroll, which had been hoof delivered to the manor, lay across the desk in Spell Nexus's study. The dark blue unicorn was standing near one of his windows, horn glowing as he held a glass of fine orange juice. He gently swished the glass, the contents dancing under the gentle motions. His turquoise eyes focused on the moon, which was a beautiful crescent shape in the sky.

"A filly..." Nexus whispered to himself before sipping from the glass. "A filly who attends school, who lives with Twilight Sparkle, who was seen in the presence of Princess Celestia, no less. Who participated in a school play, of all things. A filly... it is not what I would have expected."

"What are your plans; what are your schemes?" Nexus asked, as if posing his questions to the moon itself. "Do you act to keep your enemies close? Do you seek to find a weakness to exploit? Do you bide your time until you can overcome the Elements of Harmony and the ponies who wield them?"

Nexus drank from the orange juice again, draining every drop. The glow about his horn grew just a bit brighter as the unicorn took hold of a large, elegant pitcher on the nearby table. From the pitcher, he refilled his cup with the fruit juice, giving it a gentle swirl before setting the pitcher back down and turning from the window.

"Perhaps you are merely waiting for us, your children, to discover you. To prove ourselves capable and deserving of your grace." Nexus mused, crossing the room. "Though... I assume much taking Regal Cut at his word. This filly may *resemble* Nightmare Moon, but a resemblance is not enough. No doppelganger will do."

"In any case, this warrants further investigation," Nexus surmised as he neared his reading table. In the bookshelves on the nearby wall, a book floated out from the shelves, gripped by Nexus's levitation magic. Yet the book the unicorn sought was tucked behind the other. A small black book floated into view, crossing the room and setting itself down on the writing desk, the other book was slipping back onto the shelf.

Nexus turned open the book, seeing in it names etched out in his own hoof-writing. The only true record of Children of Nightmare; the only record of all

the ponies who had sworn strength, magic, and life to the return of Equestria's true queen. It was his duty alone to guard such precious information, for if such a list were to be found by Celestia all hope would be lost.

The unicorn's turquoise eyes read across the names and the notes accompanying them. He would need agents, ponies that could travel to the small town of Ponyville and verify Regal Cut's reports. Ones he trusted: ones like Gray Gale, Night Wind, and Stonewall, who had proven their loyalty to Nightmare Moon. Ponies who were not just honored brothers and sisters, but ponies among the Exalted. Those who were just below him in the order. Him, the one and only Revered brother of the Children of Nightmare.

Other books began to make their way off the shelves, cradled by levitation magic as Nexus began checking information. Every move made by the Children of Nightmare had to be planned with such care, for his opponent in the high-stakes game of chess was none other than Celestia herself. A mare with a thousand years of rule and wisdom behind her, who had stumbled across less thoroughly thought out plans during the cult's infancy.

He'd have to spread his agents like a fine powder, sprinkle them amongst ponies that the filly would be brought to interact with. Ones to simply watch her, others to try and examine her more closely, and others still to simply ensure all went smoothly.

"Sir?"

Nexus looked up from his work, Proper Etiquette having poked his nose in the study doorway.

"Yes?"

"There is another letter for you, sir." Etiquette replied, holding up said scroll with his magic. It was bound shut with a purple ribbon and a silver, crescent moon metal seal.

"Thank you, Etiquette," Nexus replied, taking the letter with his own magic.

"Will you be needing anything else, Sir?"



“No, not at the moment.”

“Very good, Sir,” The butler pony said before removing himself from the room.

Nexus carefully set down the many books he had been levitating, leaving them propped open on the floor so he could return to his place once the letter was written. A purple ribbon with silver seal: it was a sign of a letter from a brother and sister, and the full moon on the seal indicated it was of the utmost importance.

*Dear Revered Brother Nexus - High Prophet of The True Queen*

*This is a written report on the coming and going of the unicorns assigned by Celestia to study and understand the nature of the resurrection spell we attempted to cast in the forest.*

*I realize this report comes fairly quickly after my last, and that you did not expect another from me for another several days. There has been, however, a few developments I believe you would want to know about without delay.*

*First, with the research team moved to the royal archives, their endeavors in understanding our spell are starting to make steady headway. They are beginning to decipher the arcane lines we used to augment and focus the magic in the Everfree Forest clearing. While I will act, as I have, to try and stall their efforts, I can, at this point, only slow their progress. They will, in time, decipher the spell.*

*Secondly, Celestia came to the to the research team this morning to check on the progress. They reported to her exactly as I have reported to you, that their progress has now become steady and dependable.*

*Bastion Yorsets and Celestia then began to chat casually, the princess talking about the Spring Festival she attended yesterday evening with her sister in Ponyville. She spoke highly of many of the performances, offering particular praise for a play put on by the town's elementary school.*

*She then, at this point, divulged to Bastion Yorsets that her student, Twilight Sparkle, was now taking care of a young filly by the name of Nyx. The only description she offered was that the filly was a black coated unicorn, and that the filly was a half-cousin.*

*I would have dismissed this as idle chatter if Bastion Yorsets hadn't made a very interesting comment. He divulged that he had grown up knowing Twilight's father, and had been the one to invite Twilight to take the entrance exam for Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns.*

*In his comments, Bastion admitted it was strange that Twilight had called Nyx a half cousin. He revealed that, while Twilight's father has siblings, her mother is an only child. He further pointed out that Twilight's father and his siblings all share the same two parents, making it impossible for the unicorn to have any half cousins.*

*Celestia simply offered that Twilight must have misspoken when introducing Nyx, or that she had a misunderstanding of what a half cousin was. Bastion accepted this answer, and soon their meeting was over.*

*Again, I would have believed this as nothing but idle chatter. Yet, later that day in the barracks, I overheard Celestia's private guards talking. The two pegasi were discussing the princess' day, and, after eavesdropping for a time, I discovered that the princess made an unscheduled stop on her daily routine. She went to the Equestria Central Records Office, during what was supposed to be her lunch hour for the day. From the ponies there she requested that family records pertaining to Twilight Sparkle and her parents be delivered to her royal chambers this evening.*

*I was unable to discover more, since my shift had ended, and I dare not risk lingering around the castle after work. That is all I have to report at this time. I will continue my observation of the research team, and will alert you if I discover anything pressing.*

*I will submit my next regular report at the scheduled time.*

*For the Night Eternal  
For Equestria's True Queen  
Exalted Sister Night Wind*

Nexus licked his lips, his mouth having gone dry. The situation had become much more perilous. Celestia's gaze was now turned upon the same black coated filly, her interest spurred by the blabber mouth, Bastion Yorsets. He would *have* to have been a childhood friend of Twilight's father.

Taking up the orange juice glass, Nexus tilted the glass up to his mouth. With a few swift gulps he emptied the glass, shaking his head after he had finished. The perfectly chilled juice was delicious, but when drunk quickly it gave the unicorn a momentary brain freeze.

There was now a need for both subtly and some haste, to ascertain who the filly truly was before Celestia could act in a way to make such investigation impossible.

The books that had been left on the floor moved back into the air, carried by Nexus's magic as he drew out a feather pen and several pieces of parchment. Feverishly, he began to work, his eyes moving between the little black record book of the Children of Nightmare and to the many other tomes that now encircled the unicorn. He would get no sleep that night, as, in more ways than one, Nexus was racing against the sun and its master.

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Twilight yawned, making no effort to control or stifle it as she walked down the path to Ponyville Elementary. The sun was still rising from the horizon, the sunrise's tapestry of colors just starting to fade to the constant blue of midday. Normally, it would have taken an important research trip to make Twilight get out of bed this early. That was, however, before Nyx came into her life.

So, it was not an expedition to some a far-off archaeological site or a rare celestial event that drew Twilight from her warm bed covers. Though, to a certain little, black filly, it was nearly as important.

A few days after the Spring Festival, Cheerilee announced that she wanted to try something new for the school. A Saturday where students would set up educational exhibits and the school would host food and games: something Cheerilee was playful calling the "Learn and Play Day". It was an event that had quickly grown, Ponyville's schools for older colts and fillies getting in on the event as well.

And, due to the fact that the event had grown so quickly, Cheerilee had called on Twilight, Ponyville's number one organizer, to help get everything in order. The purple unicorn had been working alongside the teacher for the past two weeks to organize the event while the students had been researching and building their educational exhibits. It had turned into quite a bit of work, but... Twilight had accepted it. Nyx had been so excited about the event the moment she heard about it, Twilight wanted to be sure it went off well.

Approaching the schoolhouse, Twilight walked around the brightly painted building and to the open field behind it. There, Cheerilee was working with a few other volunteers to get everything set up.

"Good Morning, everypony," Twilight offered, trying to put on a smile only to yawn another time.

"Not much for mornings, Twilight?" Cheerilee asked, as she walked over to meet the unicorn.

"Not usually, no."

"Well, thank you for offering to come out and give everything one final check-over before the big day. Everypony seems so excited! This little weekend may turn into a new Ponyville tradition if it goes off right."

"Well, let's get through today first before we start planning for next year," Twilight said, her saddle bags opening at the beckon call of the unicorn's magic, a checklist and pencil floating into the air in front of Twilight.

"Now, let's see. Are the exhibit tables set up?"

Cheerilee nodded, pointing a hoof to the area behind the school. Several circular tables had been borrowed or rented from a number of ponies around Ponyville and covered in white tablecloths to form a veritable sea of tables. Each table had two little signs on it with numbers.

"Thirty round tables with tablecloths, with sixty numbered exhibit signs on yellow paper."

“Perfect.” Twilight replied, making a check on her list, starting to look around the area the pair were standing in. “What about food?”

“We’re just about to finish setting up the tables for our little food court. Big Macintosh has brought in a food cart from Sweet Apple Acres. That just leaves Danver and the Cakes, who need to arrive and set up their food stalls.”

“Danver?”

“His family owns and runs the carrot farm next to Sweet Apple Acres.”

“Oh.” Twilight said, lifting a hoof to giggle. “Let me guess: Danver is a type of carrot.”

“You’d be guessing right,” Cheerilee replied with a chuckle of her own.

“I’d say the food and eating area is all taken care of,” Twilight said, checking off the next item on the list. “That just leaves the afternoon activities. Still, I doubt we’ll be able to check that one off just yet.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Well, we put Rainbow Dash in charge of that. She’s reliable, but she kind of likes to procrastinate a little. I wouldn’t be surprised if she was still back at home, snoozing away the morning.”

“Boo!”

Twilight quickly turned her head to the side, a little startled by the sudden third voice in the conversation. It was only then that she took notice of the sky blue pegasus that was hovering in the air near her head. Cheerilee had to cover her mouth to keep herself from laughing, Rainbow Dash looking at Twilight with a smug grin.

“Back at home snoozing, huh?”

“Heh heh...” Twilight laughed nervously, forcing a smile. “Rainbow Dash, I... didn’t expect you to be here this early.”

The pegasus just chuckled, landing next to Twilight and folding her wings.

“Relax, Twilight; on any normal day, I *would* still be asleep. But *this* is just going to be *too awesome!* I just had to get up early, not only to clear the skies, but to make sure all my awesome sporting events were ready.”

“What all do you have planned?” Cheerilee asked.

“Oh, tons of stuff. I actually went and checked out a book with a whole bunch of killer ideas.”

“It was one of the few times she came into the library *without* crashing.” Twilight offered, though Rainbow Dash ignored the unicorn and kept going.

“We’ve got something for everypony. Got things for just the kids to do, things for kids to do with their parents, and things for the parents to do so the kids can cheer them on. We’ve got games for pegasi, for earth ponies, for unicorns, and games where you get to mix it up. It is all just going to be *so awesome!*”

“Wow, that... sounds like a lot.”

“Like a lot of *fun*, you mean.” Rainbow Dash corrected as she lifted a hoof, gently brushing it against her chest. “Yea, I pretty much outdid myself.”

“And, since we got so many ponies to volunteer their time and things for free,” Cheerilee said with a chirp, reaching under a nearby table and pulling out a box. “I actually was able to spend the last of the budget on some prizes for your events.”

“You got *prizes*? Oh boy, *nothing* is better than having prizes!” Dash cheered, the pegasus already digging through the prize box as she took stock of what all Cheerilee had bought.

“Cool, you got yo-yo’s in here.” Dash eventually offered, pulling her head out of the box with one of the said yo-yo’s. In a flash, the pegasus had the yo-yo string around her hoof. Giving it a flick, she sent the little plastic disk down and up the string in a smooth motion. Another flick, and the yo-yo was in a simple sleeper trick, where the yo-yo stayed at the bottom of the string but continued spinning.

“Heh, I used to be pretty good at this,” Dash admitted, a flick of her hoof bringing the yo-yo out of the sleeper trick. A few more flicks to build up speed, and then Dash quickly wrapped some of the string around her hooves, resulting in the yo-yo swinging back and forth inside a triangle of string.

“This here is called ‘The Pendulum’.”

“That’s great Dash, but shouldn’t you leave the prizes for the ponies who actually win them?”

“Sure, just one more trick. You heard of ‘Around the World’? Well, this is my super, double loop, around the sun trick.” With that, Dash gave the yo-yo a firm flick, the pegasus jumping into the air as she used her wings to spin herself. Still, a few seconds after starting the trick, Dash flopped to the ground, Cheerilee and Twilight laughing out loud as Dash had managed to hog-tie her legs and wings with yo-yo string.

“Oh, wow Dash, that was *really* something,” Twilight prodded.

“Yeah yeah... laugh it up. Now, are you going to stand there giggling or are you going to lend me a hoof?”

=====

The Learn and Play Day was in full swing the moment it opened to the public at 9:00 that morning. The students had already arrived and set up their exhibits, each having done a project on something that interested them. There were exhibits about farming techniques, about history, about how weather was made, and dozens of other little topics where the students tried to show off their work.

That was the “Learn” part of the “Learn and Play Day”. The students learned more about subjects they wanted to know more about, and some parents and other ponies in the community had a chance to learn as well.

“Isn’t this so super duper fun, Fluttershy?!” Pinkie Pie chirped, bouncing along between the student exhibits while Fluttershy walked calmly beside her. “I mean, I knew Cotton Candy was good, and I knew how to make it.

Still, I never knew how little pieces of sugar turned into stringy sweet goodness.”

“Yes, that was a really interesting display.”

“Which one’s been your favorite so far?”

“Well... um...I liked the one about how caterpillars become butterflies. I already know about that, but the student did such a wonderful job explaining it.”

“All the kids did a really good job. Oh, I wish I could have an exhibit! I’d do one about parties!”

“Parties?”

“Parties aren’t as easy as everypony thinks. There are lots of rules I have to follow for my parties: the Pinkie Pie Party rules,” The pink pony stated as a matter of fact.

“Really?” Fluttershy asked in disbelief. “I would never imagine you actually had rules for your parties.”

“Of course! How do you think they turn out so good? I have rules I can never ever ever ever never ever break. As long as anypony else doesn’t break them, then the party is a guaranteed success. Like, Rule #1: - Every party must has decorations, or Rule #157: If the ratio of fillies and colts to mares and stallions is at least two to one, there must be a piñata.”

Fluttershy couldn’t help but tilt her head to one side, confusion across her face.

“Rule #157? How many rules are there?”

“376.”

“Oh... oh my... that’s... that’s a lot of rules.”



“Hey, throwing parties is my special talent, and it is serious business to make them seriously fun. OH! Hey, there’s Nyx’s booth! We should go see what she did.”

With that Pinkie Pie bounded ahead, forcing Fluttershy to break into a quick trot just to catch up. A group of stallions and mares were just stepping away from Nyx’s booth when the pink earth pony and yellow pegasus came up, the black filly offering them a smile.

“Hi Fluttershy! Oh...um...h-hi Pinkie Pie.”

“Hey there, Nyx.” Pinkie Pie chirped. “What super cool, amazing thing did you do for your exhibit? Give us the whole rundown.”

“If you don’t mind, that is.” Fluttershy offered, trying to curb Pinkie Pie’s enthusiasm.

“O-of course not, it’s-” Nyx stated, before she coughed into her hoof to clear her throat. “I chose to make my Exhibit about Transfiguration Magic.”

“Tranafigurwhatiewhat?”

“Transfiguration. It’s the magic that focuses on turning one thing into another.” At that, the filly pointed to a number of pictures she had set up on the backdrop of her exhibit. “Transfiguration Magic can be used to transform practically anything into anything else. Like a stick into a fancy walking cane. Or a stone into a hat. Or even an apple into a horse drawn carriage.

“Transfiguration Magic is only limited by the skill and the ability of the pony casting it. Skilled unicorns, such as Rarity, can use Transfiguration to turn fabric into a dress. And Twilight Sparkle is able to transfigure four common mice into four full sized horses.”

“Hey, I remember that!” Pinkie Pie said with a giggle. “They didn’t exactly *look* like horses.”

“A-and that leads me to the next part of my exhibit. The limits of Transfiguration Magic. Transfiguration magic is always temporary. Everything transfigured will eventually turn back to normal. This is why

anything that needs to be permanent is still hoof made, like houses and clothing, since Transfiguration magic only lasts for so long. Otherwise, there wouldn't be a need for construction workers, carpenters, or any other ponies that make things.

"And, as a final part of my exhibit, I-I would like to provide a live demonstration of Transfiguration Magic."

Nyx pointed to the rock setting on the table in the center of her exhibit. The black filly then shut her eyes, her horn and the rock beginning to glow. Eventually, with a small pop, the rock turned into a potted flower.

"Oooooooooooooooooo..." Pinkie Pie said, leaning in and sniffing the floor. "It even *smells* real."

"So any, um, questions?"

"No, none at all. That was *very* well done, Nyx. You should be-" Fluttershy began to say, only for Pinkie Pie to put her head between the pegasus and filly.

"OH, I got a question! Have you tried changing anything bigger than a rock? Oh, do you take requests?"

"W-well... no, but I guess I could try. Um... what did you have in mind?"

"Turn that grass into cotton candy! No, wait, turn that into a candy apple! No, wait, you should turn that stallion's bowtie into a squirty flower! OH! No no no no! I know what you should try to do!" Pinkie Pie smiled, pointing a hoof at Fluttershy. "Turn her into a tree!"

"A... a tree?" Nyx asked, lowering her head a little, both from confusion and because of Pinkie Pie's manic behavior.

"Yea! Turn Fluttershy into a tree."

"W-why?"

"Because, this one time, on a train, I got talking with Rainbow Dash and Twilight, and, for some strange reason, Dash thought Fluttershy was a tree,

even though she obviously isn't. But then Fluttershy said she'd *like* to be a tree, so can you turn her into a tree? "

"I don't know...."

"Oh come on, just give it a try. You never know unless you try," Pinkie Pie encouraged.

"Well...are you okay with this Fluttershy?"

"Well, it won't hurt, will it?" The pegasus asked quietly.

"It... it shouldn't.... I hope..."

"And it won't be permanent?"

"No, Transfiguration Magic is always temporary." Nyx assured. "That and... well, the first spell Twilight made me learn when I started this project was how to break a Transfiguration spell... in case I made a mistake."

"Well... I *am* kind of curious what it would be like..."

"See? It will be so much fun!" Pinkie Pie half shouted, bouncing a little in excitement. Nyx could only swallow hard, having been literally put on the spot by the pink earth pony as some others in the crowd had gathered. Taking a deep breath, Nyx shut her eyes as her horn began to glow. First a single level of glow, then another took shape as the filly focused on her magic.

=====

"Man, some of these booths are really cool!" Rainbow Dash exclaimed, she and Twilight trotting amongst them. "I mean, did you see what Scootaloo did? She actually explained how my Sonic Rainboom works! I didn't even really *know* how it worked, besides the fact I was breaking the sound barrier."

"Yes, all the students have really done-"Twilight began, only to be silenced as the ground shook and a loud noise cut through the air.

ssssrrrr-RRRRUUUUGGGGHHHH-RRRUUUUGGGGHHH-frrggggh.....

Trrrssss-sssstthhh-stttshh...

“What was *that*?” Twilight asked, regaining her footing from what had felt like a minor earthquake. When she got no answer, Twilight turned to look at Dash, who was staring narrowed-eyed in the opposite direction. Following the pegasus' gaze, Twilight nearly choked on the air in her own lungs at what she saw.

A large, leafy tree had appeared in the center of the exhibits. It was as tall as the school house, with a trunk as thick as a pony was long. It was a weeping willow tree, its long, hanging branches and leaves draping over the nearby exhibits. The tree, however, was very unusual. Its bark was a bright yellow, and all of its leaves were a light, frilly pink.

“Oh my gosh! You did it!” Pinkie Pie's voice burst out above the crowd, drawing Rainbow Dash and Twilight out of their stupor. The two quickly raced through the network of tables to the base of the tree. Pinkie Pie had climbed up into the branches, maneuvering through the limbs around with speed and agility that would make a monkey proud.

“Pinkie Pie, where the hay did this tree come from?” Dash asked, the pegasus taking flight as she caught up to Pinkie Pie in the tree's crown.

“It was *amazing*! Nyx did it with her magic!”

“Nyx did?” Twilight said, the unicorn looking up and down the tree in disbelief before her eyes narrowed. “Wait, where is Nyx?”

Twilight's question was answered with a whimper. When Twilight lifted the table cloth of a nearby table, the filly was shaking, her head in her hooves, and a few tears pulling at her eyes.

“Tw-Twilight, I'm sorry! I-I didn't mean to! I.... well, I... I meant to, but Pinkie Pie asked me to and Fluttershy said it was okay, and I didn't think I would be able to do it....”

“Do what?” Twilight asked.

“She turned Fluttershy into a tree!” Pinkie Pie cheered as she hung from one of the branches.

“Wait... wait wait wait, hold on a sec.” Dash began, pointing a hoof at the yellow and pink weeping willow. “This, this tree right here. *This* tree is Fluttershy.”

“Well *duh*. Of course it is! I just *told* you that Nyx turned Fluttershy into a tree. Seriously Dash, I’d think you’d be happy. After all, *you* were the one that thought Fluttershy was a tree when we were on our way to Appleloosa.”

“I did not! I was being sarcastic.”

“Sarcastic?”

As Dash tried again to explain to Pinkie Pie why she had once called Fluttershy a tree, Twilight began to glance nervously around the steadily growing crowd of ponies. They were all murmuring and whispering about Nyx, considering a filly had just done something that even she wouldn’t have been able to do without a lot of practice.

Nyx seemed to have picked up on this, the anxious filly having hid under the table shortly after she had successfully cast the larger transfiguration spell.

“I... I did something bad, didn’t I?” Nyx sniffled, trying not to cry, but finding it hard with everypony watching.

“No, no, Nyx, Sweetie, it’s okay,” Twilight whispered, leaning into the little black filly. “Just remember the first spell I taught you when you started the project, okay?”

Nyx nodded her head, wiped her eyes, and then shut them. The filly’s horn glowed again, reaching the same brilliance it had when first casting the transfiguration spell. Twilight watched and observed the glow around Nyx’s horn, and how far it radiated out, a sign of how hard a unicorn was straining their natural magical ability.

The glow got about twice as bright and large as when Nyx was usually using her horn, before the tree imploded in on itself, its roots being pulled out of the ground. Dash grabbed Pinkie Pie before she could drop out of the air, the blue pegasus setting the earth pony down just as a resounding pop filled the air. With that pop Fluttershy reappeared, the pegasus dropping to the ground with a small thud.

"Fluttershy, are you okay?" Twilight asked, quickly rushing up to help her friend back to her hooves.

"Ye... yes, I'm...I'm fine."

"Oh, what was it like? What was it like?" Pinkie Pie asked, bouncing in excitement.

"It was....." Fluttershy began, pausing a moment to collect her thoughts. Not only did Pinkie Pie and Dash lean in to hear the answer, but any ponies nearby who had witnessed the feat of magic leaned in as well, eager to hear the first hoof account of what it was like to be a tree.

"Nice," Fluttershy finally concluded. Dash's disappointment in the answer was reflected on the faces of most ponies who had watched. Hearing that being turned into a tree was "nice" wasn't exactly the kind of answer they had been hoping for.

Pinkie Pie was, as usual, unfazed.

"Oh, now I want to be turned into something! A rose bush... no, a balloon! NO! Turn me into a cake, turn me into a-"

"Wow, would you look at that! It's almost lunch time." Twilight interrupted, putting a hoof against Pinkie Pie's mouth while she put on a forced smile. "Personally, I'm starved. Aren't you starved, Nyx? Of course you are, you just turned a pony into a tree. That kind of thing must really work up an appetite. Why don't we go get something to eat?"

Not even waiting for an answer from the black filly, Twilight grabbed up Nyx with a levitation spell and galloped out of the crowd of ponies.

“Aw... but I wanted to be a cake...” Pinkie Pie, her voice ringing with a twinge of disappointment. The pink pony then quickly perked up, eyes darting around as she scratched at her neck.

“What’s wrong, Pinkie Pie?”

“Itchy Neck, Itchy Neck.” The pony replied.

“Itchy neck... wait, like Twitchy Tail?” Dash asked.

“No, Silly. Twitchy Tail is when something is about to fall.”

“Then what does Itchy Neck mean?” Fluttershy asked.

“Somepony is watching us.” Pinkie Pie replied, eyes moving around the now dispersing crowd of ponies.

“Pinkie Pie, Fluttershy just got turned into a tree. *Everypony* was watching us.” Dash pointed out.

“No no no no no! That was an innocent ‘wow that’s a really cool thing that happened’ watching us. No, Itchy Neck is *bad* kind of watching.”

“Bad kind of watching? What the hay is bad watching?”

“*Ssssspyyyyyying*.” Pinkie Pie replied with a hush. “And the spy is... that way!”

Without another word the pink pony was off, galloping at a full sprint leaving a very confused Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash.

“Ugh... she is so random.”

# Chapter 8

## You Can't Hide Magic

Twilight looked on in a half-daze, watching as Nyx gingerly ate an apple. The pair were sitting on the grass behind the apple stand, currently being worked by Big Macintosh. The red stallion, in a simple but very appreciated act of kindness, allowed the pair to hide away from the crowds after the tree incident.

The unicorn was in full-on panic mode, though she was doing her best to keep up a calm facade. She didn't want to make Nyx feel any worse, the filly already feeling alienated when everypony was looking at her funny.

Still, Twilight's mind was spinning faster than Dash could fly.

Dragon shaped eyes could be hidden with glasses, wings with a vest, but... but Nyx had practically blown her disguise right out of the water with that display of magic. Every pony at the Learn and Play Day had to be talking about what happened. A tree, as tall as the school house, had popped up out of nowhere, and just as quickly turned back into a yellow pegasus.

Twilight wasn't even sure *she* could pull off that kind of magic, and she was one of the most gifted unicorns in Equestria. Her special talent was magic itself; if anypony could do something like that, it would be her. Yet, that feat of magic had been done by Nyx... a normal filly.

No, despite what Twilight told herself and everypony, Nyx wasn't entirely normal. She was an alicorn, and there were only two other alicorns Twilight knew: Luna and Celestia. Those two had the magical power to move the sun and moon. They were immortal princesses...

Was... was Nyx the same way? She wasn't Nightmare Moon, Twilight was dead sure of that. But... she *had* come from the spell *meant* for Nightmare Moon, and she was an alicorn. Had the filly somehow inherited a gift of immortality? Would she, when she was older, be able to move the sun and moon or other heavenly bodies? Would she become as grand and regal as Celestia?



The full weight of parenthood came crushing down on Twilight at this moment. What was she getting herself into? She was taking care of this filly like a daughter, like she was Nyx's mother... and she was barely an adult herself. And, for all the unicorn knew, she was raising a filly that could someday sit beside Luna and Celestia as another immortal princess.

And how long would she be able to keep the truth hidden? Dragon shaped eyes could be hidden, wings could be hidden, but... that kind of magical power; how much longer would it be before Celestia heard of this prodigy in Ponyville. Even if the hiccup with turning Fluttershy into a tree was a one-time thing, what would happen as Nyx got older?

Would Nyx's magic get more powerful? How big was the filly going to get? Luna, after all, was only a little bigger than the average pony, but she was still the younger sister. Luna could easily get bigger in time, just like her older sister.

Thinking about Celestia.... what if Nyx got to be as big as her? You can't hide a pony that big. And what about her mane? What if Nyx's mane started to turn magical, started to turn into a swirling cloud of indigo magic with stars, like the real Nightmare Moon's mane? She could dress Nyx in a full body suit and that mane would still give her away.

And what would ponies think when they began to realize what Nyx was? That she had some connection with Nightmare Moon? How long before the torches and pitchforks came out? How long before the royal guard was hunting Nyx down? How long before Celestia would banish Nyx to the moon? Nyx didn't deserve any of that. She wasn't Nightmare Moon, she just wasn't. She just *looked* like her... and had her power...and some of her memories...but she wasn't-

"Twilight, you okay? Yer lookin' a might pale."

The unicorn was snapped out of her spiraling thoughts as she looked up at Big Macintosh, who had a moment free from customers to check on the pair.

"Oh... yes, sorry... I'm fine. Just... just a little light headed."

“You want another apple?”

“No, no thank you, Big Macintosh.” The unicorn replied. “Uh, have they started the afternoon activities?”

“Don’t think so, but I reckon’ it’s going to start right soon. Saw Applejack and Apple Bloom headin’ in that direction.”

“Are... are we still going to that, even after what happened?” Nyx asked, a bit surprised.

“Yes. You didn’t do anything wrong and I know you’ve been looking forward to it, since all of your friends would be there.” Twilight replied, getting to her hooves. Those were two valid reasons for them to stay and participate in the afternoon activities. The greater and unspoken reason, however, was that Twilight was worried about what would happen if they left.

The two leaving abruptly would seem out of the ordinary, which would make her friends worry. They would then come looking for her and Nyx, expecting an explanation why they left and why Nyx was able to turn Fluttershy into a tree.

Leaving would invite more unwanted attention.

But if they stayed, then they could try and act like what had happened was nothing out of the ordinary. Twilight could act like she wasn’t at all surprised that Nyx was able to turn Fluttershy into a tree, that it was perfectly normal. This was the farthest from the truth, but Twilight was hoping that maybe, just maybe, ponies would think Nyx was just a very, very gifted little unicorn.

For the moment, however, they would continue to hide behind the apple stand, if only to give Nyx a few more minutes to eat in peace.

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“I know you’re here somewhere, Spy Spyerton McSpy.” Pinkie Pie whispered to herself, eyes focused in a hard glare as she surveyed the crowd of ponies moving about the lunch area and the exhibits. Whoever

had been watching her, Dash, and Fluttershy had slipped away once, but now Pinkie Pie knew the spy was there, and she would find him or her.

*Itchy Neck...*

Pinkie Pie's head snapped to the right, her eyes zipping through the crowd to meet a pair of brown-gray eyes. Her eyes remained fixed on those eyes for a moment. The pony who owned those eyes finally seemed to realize Pinkie Pie was looking right at him, and he quickly ducked around a corner.

*Creaky Knee...*

"*Gotcha...*" Pinkie Pie whispered with a slightly devilish grin, starting to gallop. Creaky Knee was one of her twitches that told her somepony was trying to get away from her. More importantly, the knee closest to the pony was the one that got creaky. All together, it meant she could track the spy.

Rounding a corner the spy had just disappeared around, Pinkie Pie maneuvered through the crowd in hot pursuit. She caught small glances of somepony at a full gallop just ahead of her, trying to lose her around corners. The spy knew she was onto him, but that wouldn't stop her. No pony went about being a nasty Spy Spyerton McSpy, especially around her and her friends.

*Creaky Knee Front Left... Creaky Knee Front Right... Creaky Knee Front Right... Creaky Knee Back Left... Creaky Knee Front Right... Twingy Ankle...*

Pinkie Pie put all four of her hooves to the ground, breaking hard and sliding to a stop. Twingy Ankle... now the spy wasn't running, the spy was *hiding*. Pinkie Pie's eyes narrowed, the pony finding herself on one side of the food court area that had been set up for the Learn and Play Day. There were ponies at almost every table, eating their lunches while other ponies mingled about, talking and laughing.

"Oh, he's *good*, but Hide and Seek is one of my favorite games. " Pinkie Pie whispered, before taking in a deep breath and shouting, "YOU HEAR THAT?! I'LL FIND YOU!!!"

All the ponies who had been eating their meals and chatting turned to look at Pinkie Pie, most quite startled by the pink pony's sudden and very loud proclamation. Still, Pinkie Pie ignored the confused stares as her eyes scanned the crowd, eventually taking sight of a pony sitting alone at a table who had not turned around, her eyes falling on the back of his slicked-back navy blue mane.

"Gotcha... again." Pinkie Pie offered with a menacing grin. The pink pony moved across the food court slowly, stepping between ponies as she did her best to approach the spy from behind. She was within a few tables when a face popped in front of her.

"Oh, there you are Pinkie Pie. I was worried when you ran off." Dash said, hovering just in front of the pink earth pony. "It's almost time to start the afternoon sports and games. You still want to help?"

"No... I don't... because... I'm tracking... a pony and..." Pinkie Pie replied, trying to strain her neck to look around Rainbow Dash. Eventually, the earth pony gently pushed the hovering pegasus out of the way, only to find the pony she had been creeping up on had vanished. The pink pony grunted in aggravation, turning and giving an accusing glare to Rainbow Dash.

"And *you* let him get away!"

"Whoa... sorry, I didn't mean to mess up... whatever it is you're doing."

*Creaky Knee Front Right...*

Pinkie Pie's frown quickly turned back to a sinister smile, her head snapping in another direction.

"Don't worry about it, Dashie; now the spy is trying to run away from me again, and nopony can run away from Pinkamena Diane Pie."

"Wait, you're still chasing this imaginary spy?"

Pinkie Pie, however, offered no answer as she galloped across the food court. She caught sight of a navy-blue tail ducking behind the front door of the school house, and the earth pony broke into a full sprint to catch up.

She leaped around the corner, eyes darting about to see where the pony went.

*Creaky Knee Front Right... Twingy Ankle...*

“Oh, you silly spy. You thought you could hide in the school house, but nopony can hide from Pinkie Pie.”

The pink earth pony moved to the school’s front door, taking a moment to gather herself before bursting through the doorway and jumping up onto her back hooves, pulling a few karate poses as she shouted into the dark.

“Come on out now, Spy Spyerton McSpy! I know you’re in here, and you’re going to tell me why you’re being a big meanie and spying on me and my friends!”

“Enough of this,” A voice offered from the back of the dark room. Pinkie Pie turned, her eyes meeting the same brown-gray eyes she had seen among the exhibits. The eyes closed, and then, upon reopening, had turned a brilliant turquoise.

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“All right, ponies!” Rainbow Dash half-shouted over the remaining crowd. “It’s time for the last awesome event of the day: the Tug of War Tournament.”

The parents and other ponies who had come out for the Learn and Play Day all cheered, having formed into a sizable audience around three different colored tug of war ropes.

“So, here’s how it’s going to happen. There are teams of four, and each team has been placed on our tournament roster. There are also three age groups and teams will fit into the age group of its oldest member. The last teams standing in each age group will get prizes, and then we’ll let the top teams tug it out to see which one is the Tug of War Champions of the day.

“Now teams, report to the colored rope you were assigned to and let’s get tugging.”

The fillies and colts, some younger and some on the verge of being mares and stallions, cheered and filtered to one of the three ropes. At the red rope, for the youngest age group, Rarity stood with a clipboard levitating gently in front of her. Cheerilee had the middle age group, and Applejack was keeping the oldest ponies in line.

“All right.” Rarity half sang above the sizable crowd of little fillies and colts that had crowded around her. “First up are the Cutie Mark Crusaders vs. The Carrot Clan. Those two teams, get to your sides of the rope, and everypony else stand back, please.”

The young ponies followed the directions. On one side of the rope were three colts and a filly, all of them with some form of a carrot themed cutie mark, who took up the rope in their teeth. On the other side of the rope, the four fillies wearing bright red Cutie Mark Crusader capes got into line. Sweetie Belle was in the front, Scootaloo behind her. Nyx, who had been officially inducted into the Cutie Mark Crusaders just after the Spring Festival, took up the third position. Apple Bloom was at the end, acting as the team’s anchor.

“Now, while I suggested that having a rope to pull across a line would have been much cleaner and safer, Rainbow Dash saw fit to use mud pit rules; something about it being easier to keep track of winners. The goal is to pull all members of the other team into the mud pit. Everypony understand?” Rarity asked, motioning towards the mud pit on the ground. The two teams nodded their heads in agreement, already starting to pull the rope taut between them.

“And remember, there is a wash station set up if you lose, but... well, everypony just try their best and have fun, okay?”

The two teams both stared at each other, ready to begin. Able to notice the eagerness in the team, Rarity didn’t waste another moment.

“Ready... Set... GO!”

The two teams tightened their jaws and began to pull on the rope, struggling to drag the other team far enough to get the other team in the mud pit. For a moment, the Carrot Clan team began to get the advantage, the four earth ponies managing to pull the Crusaders a few steps forward.

Still, the tides turned back as Scootaloo began flapping her wings, much like when she was riding on her scooter. The added force let the Crusaders regain their footing, and soon, with a few hard pulls and four splashes from the other team, they had won the first match.

“YAY! Cutie Mark Crusader Tug of War Champions!” The four cheered in unison before stepping away from their side of the rope, letting the next two teams approach.

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Due to the tournament ladder, the Cutie Mark Crusaders had two more rounds of tug of war before they reached their age group’s final match, and the Crusaders couldn’t be happier who they were facing.

Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon had gotten two of the strongest colts in the age group on their team, and they had gotten to the final match by basically relying on those two strong colts. Still, the Crusaders weren’t about to lose to fillies who liked to call them blank flanks on a regular basis. That, and Nyx still had a bit of a personal score to settle with Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon for the whole Everfree Forest prank.

“Ready... Set... Go!” Rarity shouted, the two teams quickly pulling the rope taut. Almost immediately the Cutie Mark Crusaders began to lose ground, the two colts on the other team starting to drag the three fillies back. They were colts just barely in the youngest age groups; one of them literally had a birthday within a week.

“Come on!” Apple Bloom grunted through the rope in her mouth. “Pull!”

“We are!” Scootaloo grunted back. “But our hooves are slipping!”

“Ha ha ha! Looks like you four are going to be losers *and* blank flanks.” Diamond Tiara called, actually taking her mouth off the rope since the two older colts on her team were doing all the work.

“Oh... It. Is. On!” Sweetie Belle snapped, the unicorn in the front digging her hooves into the ground, and finally managing to halt the team’s slow defeat, just barely able to keep herself from falling in the mud.

“Everypony.” Nyx mumbled out. “Pull hard together. Ready... PULL!”

The four Crusaders put their weight into their unified tug, and actually managed to regain some ground, each taking a single step back. Nyx made the “Ready... PULL!” again, and again the fillies were able to reclaim a single step, slowly dragging back the older stallions.

Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon tried for the first time in the tournament to really help pull, not wanting to see the Crusaders win. Still, Nyx’s strategy was working, enough that they were able to get the rope back to where it had started.

At that point, however, Diamond Tiara’s team figured out a counter strategy for the Cutie Mark Crusaders’ tactics, the four of them leaning hard into the rope whenever Nyx called out pull. It lead to a tense stalemate.

“My jaw is starting to hurt,” Sweetie Belle mumbled out.

“Just hold on, we can win this,” Scootaloo countered, trying to pep up the team as she beat her wings like mad.

“We can’t over-power them,” Nyx grunted, as the Crusaders began to lose a little of their hard earned ground. “We have to out-think them.”

“And just how are we supposed to do that?” Apple Bloom asked, only for Nyx to start whispering. Her voice just loud enough for her friends to hear, and when the plan had been conferred, Nyx began to count.

“Ready... PULL!” Nyx shouted out through the rope in her teeth. Diamond Tiara’s team, hearing this, quickly pulled, trying to counter act the tug the Crusaders were about to perform. The crusaders, however, did not pull back. They instead let Diamond Tiara’s team have some of the slack.

The sudden lack of opposition threw off Diamond Tiara’s team, causing the stallion they had in the back to trip over his own hooves and fall into the mud pit. This was what the Crusaders had been hoping for, as Nyx shouted out another “PULL” and the four fillies took back all the slack they had given and then some.



“Match over; the Cutie Mark Crusaders win!” Rarity sung out to the cheers of the crowd and the defeated shouts and whines of Diamond Tiara, who was not only upset at losing but also because she and her tiara were now covered in mud.

Diamond Tiara's minor tantrum was properly ignored as the four Cutie Mark Crusaders high-hoofed, and went over to where Dash was hovering to wait for the other age groups to finish.

=====

“All right, it’s time for our awesome championship round,” Dash announced, only one tug of war rope remaining. “It’s going to be between the Cutie Mark Crusaders and The Boulders.”

Apple Bloom, Sweetie Belle, Scootaloo, and Nyx all looked wide-eyed at their opponents. By some luck they had managed to beat the middle age group champion team, but now the four little fillies were facing a team of four colts that were arguably full grown stallions, or very close to being considered young adults.

“Now, since one team has an obvious advantage,” Dash said, motioning towards the four earth ponies of The Boulders. “We’ll allow the Cutie Mark Crusaders to have an advantage. They can either add another pony to their team, have one unicorn be allowed to use magic, or they can pick a pony from The Boulders to sit out.”

The Crusaders quickly huddled up, Apple Bloom quickly offering her opinion.

“We should ask my big sister to join our team, no, wait! ... we should ask Big Macintosh to be on our team! I bet he could beat those four big ponies all by himself.”

“No, I want to beat these colts ourselves. I say we take the biggest and make him sit out. It’ll be four vs. three,” Scootaloo argued.

“What about magic? I’m not that good at it, but Nyx is *really* good at magic. She turned Fluttershy into a tree!” Sweetie Belle pointed out.

“You heard about that?” Nyx asked, a bit embarrassed.

“Hard not to, considering everypony here saw the tree. Still, I think Sweetie Belle is right. Nyx is wicked awesome at magic, and just think how cool it would be to beat those big ponies without help from anypony else.”

“I don’t know.” Apple Bloom admitted. “Nyx, do you think you have enough magic?”

“I... I don’t know... maybe, I guess...”

“All right, it’s decided then. Nyx will be our anchor and use her magic.” Scootaloo concluded, the Crusaders ending their huddle and telling Rainbow Dash their choice. The pegasus echoed their choice to the crowd, most of the ponies cheering while one particular purple unicorn looked a little anxious.

The four nearly full grown stallions on the other team took the rope in their mouths, smiling like they had already won. Sweetie Belle, Apple Bloom, and Scootaloo took the rope up as well, biting down hard as they prepared for what was going to be a very hard match to win. Nyx stood at the end, gripping the very end of the rope while her horn glowed. At the moment, the plan was that she would use her magic to help keep the team’s hooves from sliding.

“All right, is everypony ready?” Dash asked, looking ta the two teams. Every pony gave a nod, and with a smile Dash lifted a hoof high into the air.

“Ready... Set... GO!”

*SPLASH!!!*

Sweetie Belle was in the mud pit within moments of the match starting, the big stallions on the other team just having to give a sound tug to drag the little white unicorn into the mud. The other three fillies did their best to pull back, but, even with Nyx trying to bewitch their hooves to hold tighter to the ground, The Boulders were able to drag them.

*SPLASH!!!*

Scootaloo was next, Sweetie Belle just barely able to get out of the way before the orange pegasus joined her in the mud pit.

*SPLASH!!!*

The older kids weren't even trying that hard, practically just dragging the Crusaders into the mud. Nyx was the last left, the filly's hooves sliding across the ground as she was inched closer and closer to the mud pit.

"Come on NYX!" Apple Bloom called out, the farm filly already out of the mud. "Use more magic!"

"Yea, don't let them beat you!" Scootaloo offered, stomping a hoof.

The black filly glanced at them, knowing they were right. All she had that might have been stronger than the other team was her magic, but how could she use it? She couldn't do anything too complex, otherwise she'd lose concentration and be pulled off her hooves, and she couldn't just pull harder, because her hooves were sliding across the ground.

What she needed was traction and strength, and one of the spells had to be something she could cast and forget because she wouldn't be able to concentrate on more than one spell at a time. The mud pit was drawing closer, the older colts playing with Nyx as they inched her closer and closer to the pit without even really trying. That was the first thing she needed was to them from pulling her closer to the pit.

Nyx's horn began to glow a little brighter, and with a flash her hooves became rooted to the ground, no longer sliding. The older colts were caught off guard by the sudden stop, but didn't get to process what was going on before Nyx began to shift her magic.

She began to just pour the mystic energy into herself, bending the magic from her horn down into her legs and muscles and jaw. When ponies are directly exposed to magic, it can have a profound effect. Celestia's hair was a constant example, the magic that naturally flowed from the sun princess giving her the amazing, regal mane. Fill a pony with magic, and their body will use the energy to make itself better until the magic is gone.

And Nyx could feel it working, feel herself getting just a little stronger. Her jaw was no longer hurting, and she was able to bite down harder on the rope. The black filly lifted one of her hooves, revealing the fact that her first spell had transfigured some of the dirt on the ground into horseshoes with long spikes, the perfect thing to keep Nyx from sliding.

Magic flowing through her body and her eyes shut tight in concentration, Nyx took a step back and began to pull, and the rope gave a little. Not much, but just a little. It was enough to tell Nyx what she was doing was working and all she needed was more magic.

Calling on her horn, Nyx began pouring as much magic as she could into her little body, feeling it giving her strength. It also made her mane and tail feel weird, but the filly couldn't focus on that. She had to focus on her legs, taking one step after another. The other team offered valiant resistance, and at times they were able to stop Nyx's advance. Still, the match had become very one sided, and soon Nyx's ears were greeted with four sounds.

*SPLASH... SPLASH... SPLASH... SPLASH...*

The moment Nyx heard the fourth splash, she dropped the rope and released her magic, panting heavily as she stared at the grass. The magic began to evaporate from the filly, her body releasing the high concentration of arcane energies that had been poured into it. Nyx began to feel sore all over, her jaw especially tender, but she was still smiling.

She had beat the big kids, all by herself. Maybe... maybe now everypony wouldn't just think of her as the coward, the crybaby, or the teacher's pet. Maybe... maybe they would start cheering her and wouldn't think she was a loser anymore. She'd get a first place ribbon, just like her friends, and...

It was at this moment Nyx noticed how very quiet it was.

Looking up, the black filly was surprised to see everypony that had been watching the match was staring at her, many with their jaws hanging open. Nyx even caught sight of Twilight, the unicorn looking like she was about to faint, her narrow eyes darting about the crowd like it could turn into something very dangerous very quickly.

The silence wasn't pleasant at all, Nyx starting to feel like she had done something wrong. The black filly shrunk back a bit, already starting to tear up and sniffle. She desperately tried to find somepony, anypony, who wasn't looking at her like she was weird.

Thankfully, before she could start sobbing, she did find three such ponies who didn't think she was weird in the least. It was her friends, the other Cutie Mark Crusaders slowly coming to terms that their friend just beat four big colts at a game of tug of war all by herself. And, when that realization hit them, the three fillies raced towards Nyx in their excitement.

"That was awesome!"

"You did it! You did it!"

"I don't think even my big sis could have beat all those colts by herself!"

The cheers and admiration from the Crusaders snapped the crowd out of their stupor. Some of them began to applaud as well, some offering very well meant cheers. Some were just stomping their hooves on the ground since it was what was expected. Others didn't applaud at all, whispering to each other quietly.

Amongst those who applauded was one pony with brown-gray eyes and a blue, slicked back mane. He applauded with a gentle smile on his lips, eyes focused on the little black filly.

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"Boy, that was *crazy*," Rainbow Dash stated as she fluttered in the air, carrying a box in her hooves. "I mean, little Nyx beating that whole team of older colts; I didn't think the crybaby had it in her. What are the chances?"

"It really was amazing," Fluttershy replied, the pegasus pony walking along the ground. She, too, was carrying a box on her back, the pair taking some of the leftover prizes and other things into the school house, helping to clean up from the Learn and Play Day. "To do all that, Nyx has to have as much magic as Twilight."

“Or more!” Dash added, the pegasus pushing open the door and into the darkened school house. Still, before the pegasus could get two feet into the door, she ran into something. The blue pegasus jumped a little, quickly flying backwards as she tried to register what she had run into.

“Pi... Pinkie Pie?” The cyan pegasus eventually mumbled, she and Fluttershy setting down the boxes they were carrying before moving around in front of the earth pony. Pinkie Pie was standing still as a statue on her hind legs in a fake karate pose, eyes focused on a point on the far side of the room.

“Is... is she even breathing?” Dash asked, noticing how very still Pinkie Pie was standing.

“Oh no! She’s been Stared!” Fluttershy offered.

“Stared? What’s Stared?”

“You know, The Stare.”

“Ooooooh, yeah.” Rainbow Dash replied. “It’s when you stare an animal or pony down and it makes them do what you want them to.”

“Well, not *exactly*... but, yes. Well, sometimes, when I use The Stare and I don’t mean too... well, sometimes I can make the pony or animal I’m staring at just freeze up.”

“Wait, so you did this to Pinkie Pie?”

“Oh no, it wasn’t me.” Fluttershy quickly defended. “I haven’t done this to anypony in years. It was only when I first found out I had The Stare that I accidentally did this once in a while, but I’d never do it on purpose to another pony. No, some other pony did this.”

“Well, how do we fix it?”

“Well, um... I usually just throw a bit of water on them, but anything that gives the pony a little shock is enough to snap them out of it.”

“Oh, then I know just the thing.” Rainbow Dash said, hovering up near Pinkie Pie’s ear and beginning to whisper. “Hey Pinkie Pie! Twilight just got a letter from Princess Celestia. She wants *you* to plan the next Grand Galloping Gala so it’ll be, like, 200% more fun.”

Pinkie Pie’s eyes, which had been narrow and transfixed on a spot on the far side of the room, went wide, and in a flash, the pink pony was bouncing off the walls and ceiling, her giggles filling the air.

“Oh, that is so super duper *amazing*! I am going to make it the best party ever! I’ll make it the most amazing incredible tremendous wonderfully terrifically humongous fun party in all of Equestria! *Oh the Grand Galloping Gala will be the greatest party. Oh the Grand Galloping Gala will be the greatest party. Hip hip, Hooray, It will be the best, all thanks to me, to Pinkie!*”

“Yeah, Pinkie Pie... I was lying.”

The party pony froze up practically mid-jump, defying gravity for a moment before dropping down to the ground. Springing back to her hooves, Pinkie Pie trotted over to Dash with a cold glare in her eyes.

“That was *not* an okay prank, Dashie.”

“Sorry, but it wasn’t meant to be a prank. I needed to say something to snap you out of being Stared.”

“Stared... wait, I was Stared?”

“You actually know what that is?”

“Oh... um, yes. When... well, when I first met Pinkie Pie she kind of, well... scared me and, I didn’t mean to but... I used The Stare on her, and she got Stared.” Fluttershy admitted sheepishly.

“It was the last time she ever did it,” Pinkie Pie pointed out. “Unless you count today.”

“But Pinkie, I wasn’t the one who used The Stare on you.”

"You weren't? But then who..." Pinkie Pie began, only for her eyes to narrow as turned to look at the far end of the room, intending to glare at a pony that was no longer there. "It was HIM!"

"Him who, Pinkie?"

"The Spy!" The party pony seethed as she trotted across the room and pointed to a spot on the floor.

"I followed him in here, and he was standing right here, and I had him cornered, but then he opened his eyes, and they were turquoise instead of the color they were, and then the next thing I remember is you telling me Celestia wants me to plan the next Grand Galloping Gala, which, by the way, is *still* a very mean prank." The party loving pony forced out in a single long breath.

"Look, Pinkie, I said I was sorry!" Dash countered as she flew over by the earth pony. "But, I guess you weren't kidding about the spy. I mean, it's not like an imaginary pony could have Stared you."

"But why would anypony be spying on us?" Fluttershy asked as she made her way across the room, choosing to walk between the desks.

"I don't know, but I sure as sugar am going to find out... after all the fun afternoon games though. I would hate to miss the seven legged race, or watching the tug of war."

"Uh, Pinkie Pie, you *did* miss all that." Dash admitted.

"*WHAT!?*"

"Yea, you've been in here all afternoon. We're actually cleaning up right now."

"Oh... oh now I *am* going to find that spy! Not just because he was a Spy Spyerton McSpy. No, now it's *personal*. No pony makes Pinkie Pie miss Pin the Tail on the Pony!"



# Chapter 9

## Revealing Truths

Twilight walked back to the library with Nyx as the sun began to set near the western horizon while Rainbow Dash and a few others stayed to clean up the Learn and Play Day. It was a moment the unicorn was thankful she hadn't volunteered to help, since staying around the school at that point was the last thing she wanted to do.

Nyx was as happy as she could be, bouncing along with her first place ribbon from the tug-of-war competition, still wearing her Cutie Mark Crusader cape and a kazoo in her mouth, her chosen prize from the prize box. The little filly was content to play the kazoo in a triumphant fan fare that only she knew the notes to, a sight that made Twilight smile a little.

Twilight was happy that Nyx had a good day, and that it had ended well. The silence from the crowd after the last round of tug-of-war had been deafening. Had it not been broken by Nyx's friends, Twilight could only imagine how bad the filly would have felt, wondering if she had done something wrong. But thankfully Apple Bloom, Sweetie Belle, and Scootaloo had ran up to her and cheered her on, making the black filly very happy.

Yet, it was only a small drop of happiness in a sea of a very bad situation. While Nyx was unaware of what had happened, Twilight had been in the crowd watching when Nyx began to use her magic to try and win that last round of tug of war. She was using her magic, a lot of it... and that was when it began to happen.

Nyx's mane, at first, just seemed to start shimmering, something that may have just been contributed to a trick of the light. But as the little filly began to use more and more magic, her mane and tail began to change more, reflecting the arcane energy that the filly was using.

Her hair began to get lighter, and then actually began to float and wave in the air, as if Nyx was floating deep underwater instead of standing on solid

ground in a tug of war grudge match. The shimmering of the hair also began to get more noticeable, starting to focus into a few dots.

It was one of the worst things Twilight could imagine happening. Nyx's mane and tail had started to change into the night-blue mane and tail that Nightmare Moon was known for, infamous for... and the change had started to happen, right there, with everypony at the Learn and Play Day watching.

By some small miracle, Nyx's hair didn't change completely. It got close, but it didn't finish the transition. If anything, it more closely resembled Celestia's mane, which was still made of hair even though the follicles were in a rainbow of pastel colors and moved constantly. Nightmare Moon's mane and tail, in contrast, were clouds of magical energy, which was why she was able to use and manipulate them like they were extra appendages.

Everything that happened brought several unwanted thoughts back to the forefront of Twilight's mind. For the first time since that evening Nyx had called her mom, Twilight was starting to doubt herself. Could Nyx really be Nightmare Moon? The unicorn had always argued that Nyx just *looked* like the infamous Mare in the Moon, but... with those memories coming back, and Nyx's unbelievable level of magic... was it possible she really was Nightmare Moon?

Another part of Twilight's mind snapped at this, cracking a mental whip like some wild animal tamer trying to drive a beast back into its cage. No, Nyx was *not* Nightmare Moon! The filly was too sweet, too well behaved, too... too *sensitive* to ever be Nightmare Moon! She had friends and was happy. While Nightmare Moon laughed at times, it was because she believed she had won. A maddening laughter that was not born of true happiness.

But Twilight was starting to wonder if she'd have to deal with the fact that Nyx had the fallen princess' power. And... possibly even her immortality. That the filly she was taking care of, was raising... would possibly be alive for thousands of years after she had gone, with the power to do things like move the sun and moon. Was she really up to that kind of responsibility, to shape the life of a filly that could live for the rest of time?

"Twilight, are you okay?" Nyx asked, breaking the unicorn's train of thought. The little black filly had noticed how quiet Twilight had been, and ended her happy kazoo playing to look up at her unofficial mother.

“Yes, I’m fine.” Twilight lied, putting on a smile as she and Nyx neared the library. “Just tired, that’s all; we’ve had a busy day. Now, why don’t you run in and show Spike your ribbon? I’m just going to stay outside for a little while longer.”

Nyx nodded, replacing the kazoo in her mouth and blowing on it loudly as she ran inside, accidentally scaring one particular dragon quite well. Twilight smiled at this sight, a smile that faded quickly as the truth of the situation weighed down on her.

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“Dear, you really should drink your tea before it gets cold,” Rarity lectured, before taking a sip from her own cup. She looked across the table at her desk, though she might as well have been having a conversation with a statue. Twilight had hardly said a word since her arrival, choosing to instead just stare at her cup of tea like it held all the answers in the world.

“Twilight? Twilight!” Rarity snapped, bringing the purple unicorn out of her thoughts.

“What? Oh! Oh, sorry Rarity. I... I was just thinking about something.”

“That’s all you’ve been doing since you *got* here, Twilight. All you’ve said to me is that you wanted to talk, but you haven’t said a single word since then. What is wrong?”

Twilight sighed, lifting the cup of tea magically as she drank it all down in a single gulp, something that made Rarity squirm since it wasn’t at all the manners of a proper mare.

“I’m sorry Rarity, I’m just worried about Nyx.”

“What for, Dear? Don’t tell me she’s gone missing again.”

“No, she’s at school.”

“Then why are you worried?” Rarity asked as she refilled Twilight’s cup of tea, silently hoping the purple unicorn would drink it properly this time.

“Rarity, everypony in Ponyville has heard what happened at the Learn and Play Day! They all know Nyx turned Fluttershy into a tree and how she won the tug of war tournament by herself with her magic. They all saw when her mane and tail start to turn magical... start to resemble what Nightmare Moon’s mane and tail used to look like. I’m worried that I won’t be able to keep her safe for much longer. That everypony in town will realize how strongly she resembles Nightmare Moon, that Celestia will swoop down from the palace... that they’ll take her away from me.

“I... I’m wondering if I shouldn’t just lock Nyx up in the library and hide her away, at least until things calm down.”

“Twilight...” Rarity began, speaking softly. “Locking Nyx up is the *last* thing you should do. That would be no better than Celestia banishing her to the moon. She’d be separated from her friends, from doing the things she loves like going to school, and it would break her heart having you go from the pony she loves to the pony that’s keeping her unfairly imprisoned in the library.”

“But Rarity... I’m just so worried-”

“And that’s perfectly normal. Heavens knows I worry about Sweetie Belle every time she goes off with her friends to do her Crusading. Those three fillies have gotten into more danger than I ever did growing up... and I’m always afraid that somepony will come running into my shop telling me Sweetie Belle got hurt... or worse.

“But I can’t let my concerns keep Sweetie Belle from enjoying her childhood. She should be out there with her friends, having fun and even getting into trouble... not too much trouble mind you, but some.”

“Sweetie Belle is just a normal little unicorn, Rarity. Nyx is-”

“Nyx is just as normal.” Rarity retorted. “Yes, she is an alicorn, and, yes, she has magical power that you and I could only dream off. She is, however, still just a normal little filly. She goes to school, she has friends, she gets teased by bullies, and when she is scared or when she is in trouble, she has somepony that cares about her to come to her rescue... a certain purple unicorn who is quite the maven *herself* at magic.”

Twilight smiled a little.

"I... I guess you're right, Rarity."

"Trust me, Twilight, it's a *good* thing that you are worried about her; never think otherwise. But don't ever let your worry make you do things that wouldn't be in Nyx's best interest. Yes, there is a risk of the truth being discovered when she is out and about Ponyville... but that's only a risk. You try to hide her away in the library, and I guarantee the only thing you'll really accomplish is making Nyx hate you."

"How do you know all this, Rarity?"

"Learning from experience." Rarity offered softly, now staring into her own cup of tea. "After all, I've been taking care of Sweetie Belle all by myself for the past several years now. After... well... after what happened to our parents."

"You want to talk about it?"

"Maybe another time, Twilight." The white unicorn replied. "I tend to get misty eyed when I think about it too much, and I've got ponies coming into get fitted for some dresses in an hour. I need to look presentable. Still... I will definitely tell you about it sometime."

"Of course, Rarity," Twilight offered with a smile. "Whenever you are ready."

"Now, in light of all this, I *do* hope you're going to let Nyx go to the Cutie Mark Crusader sleep over Apple Bloom is having at Sweet Apple Acres. I can only imagine that Nyx is just as excited about it as Sweetie Belle is.

"Probably *more* excited considering it's her first sleep over. And... yes, I think I will let her go."

"That's good. Not only will it make Nyx happy, but, if ponies around town see her going out with her friends, it will help dispel any thoughts that what happened at the Learn and Play Day was out of the ordinary."

“Yeah, and, if our friends are any indication, they all just think Nyx is really good at magic, like me. So... for the moment I can just say that strong magic runs in our family, and most ponies seem to believe that. After all, I turned my parents into potted plants and made Spike grow to a full grown dragon when I was taking my entry exam for Celestia’s School for Gifted Unicorns, and I was still just a filly myself back then too.”

“You mean the day you got your Cutie Mark? Yes, I heard it was quite the impressive display, at least from what Sweetie Belle told of the story.”

“Yea, it was pretty crazy.”

“Mind sharing?”

Twilight shook her head, taking a sip of her tea before going into the story, though she’d try to keep herself from jumping around endlessly saying “Yes!” as she had done with the Crusaders.

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“Well, I don’t think our Cutie Marks have anything to do with bein’ rodeo ponies.” Apple Bloom said dejectedly, as she pushed open the door to her bedroom. Sweetie Belle, Scootaloo, and Nyx were all following close behind, their sleeping bags already rolled out on the floor in the yellow farm filly’s bedroom.

“Though, it was kind of fun seeing Big Macintosh tied up like that,” Scootaloo offered with a chuckle. “He didn’t even know what hit him.”

“Tell that to my sister,” Apple Bloom replied as she jumped onto her bed. “Because if she had found it funny, we wouldn’t have been sent to bed already.”

“Still, I’m pretty tired.” Sweetie Belle admitted, lying down on her sleeping bag.

“Aw, don’t tell me you want to go to sleep already?” Scootaloo whined. “Sure, we had to go to bed, but there is still a lot of fun things we could do.”

“Like what?”

"We could tell... ghost stories!" The orange pegasus replied, grabbing a flashlight and holding it under her face, using it to create a spooky face.

"No offense, Scootaloo, but your ghost stories aren't that scary." Apple Bloom commented. "Even Nyx isn't afraid of them."

"Hey!" the black filly whined, though from her tone of voice, she was more insulted than hurt.

"Okay, then what do you think we should do?" Scootaloo asked.

"We could play a board game." Sweetie Belle suggested, Nyx smiling at the idea.

"No, that's too boring." Scootaloo replied, making Nyx pout a little bit. *She* liked board games...

"Well shoot... what are we goin' to do then?"

"Um... well, Twilight did give me a book she said really helped with her first slumber party... which is kind of what this is," Nyx offered, horn glowing as she levitated a book from her saddle bags, which were stacked with the rest by the bedroom door.

"Are slumber parties the same as sleepovers?" Sweetie Belle asked, as Nyx cracked open the book.

"Well, you spend the night with friends, so I guess they're the same. Still, I don't want to do any sort of makeup stuff," Scootaloo said, scrunching up her nose at the thought.

"Me neither," Nyx agreed, just before she looked up from the book. "We... could have a pillow fight..."

"We only got four pillows, and my bedroom is too small," Apple Bloom countered.

"Oh thank goodness... We could make s-mores."

“We don’t have marshmallows... or chocolate... or gram-crackers... or even a fire to roast the marshmallows on,” Sweetie Belle pointed out.

“Well... Ghost Stories are in here too, but I think we’ve already decided not to do that...”

“Bet you’re glad about that, huh?” Scootaloo teased. Nyx glared at the orange pegasus for a bit, before turning back to the book.

“Here’s another game: Truth or Dare.”

“That could be fun,” Sweetie Belle offered with a smile. “Let’s give it a try.”

“How do you play?” Apple Bloom asked.

Nyx held a hoof on the page in the book, quickly reading it over before speaking.

“Okay, rules are simple. Somepony starts by asking if another pony wants to tell the truth or take a dare. If the pony chooses truth, they have to answer one question truthfully. If they take the dare, they have to do whatever dare the first pony gives them. Once the question is answered or the dare is complete, the next pony in the circle takes their turn. Play continues for as long as desired.”

“That sounds kind of boring, actually,” Scootaloo said bluntly. “I mean, the truth part sounds all right, but the dares? What could we dare each other to do?”

“Oh, I know!” Apple Bloom perked up. “Let’s make it Truth and Challenges. If ya don’t want to answer a question, then ya have to complete a challenge. If you can’t, then ya *have* to answer a question.”

“Oh, that sounds way better,” Sweetie Belle agreed. “Let’s do it.”

Nyx wasn’t sure about this idea, but...three of her friends wanted to, so maybe it wouldn’t be too bad. She used her magic to put the sleepover guide book back into her bags.

“So, who wants to go first?” Nyx asked.



“Oh, me! Me!” Scootaloo called out, putting a hoof in the air. She then turned her attention on Apple Bloom. “Truth or Challenge?”

“Um... I’ll go with the Challenge.”

“I challenge you to stand on your head for ten seconds.”

“Ha, is that all?” Apple Bloom replied confidently. Within moments, the yellow filly was balancing on her head, legs waving around as her friends counted down.

“10... 9... 8... 7... 6... 5... 4... 3... 2... 1... 0!”

Apple Bloom got back on her hooves, smiling but then wavering a little bit, having to shake her head.

“Whoa, that makes my head all swimmy.”

“Really, let me try?” Sweetie Belle chirped, the unicorn quickly flipping onto her head. Soon, all four Cutie Mark Crusaders were on their heads, laughing and giggling as the blood rushed from their legs into their skulls.

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“Okay, Nyx... Truth or Challenge?” Apple Bloom offered about an hour later. The game had turned into a perfect way to spend the last bit of the sleep over. The four friends had done a lot of strange and silly challenges, from seeing how long they could hold their breath to having hoof wrestling contests. Nothing that would be considered a proper dare, but plenty of very fun challenges.

The black filly bit her lower lip, turquoise eyes focusing on Apple Bloom as the black filly tried to decide which thing she would do.

“Truth.”

“Tell us something you’ve never told any other pony.”

“Like what?” Nyx asked, caught a little off guard by the very general nature of the question.

“Anything.”

“Yea, just make it something cool,” Scootaloo added.

“Well... I can’t really think of anything to tell you... but...” Nyx fell silent at this, glancing back at her vest. “There... there is something I can show you.”

“Really, what is it?” Sweetie Belle asked.

“I think it’s better if you just see it but... you got to promise not to tell any other pony. Twilight and Rarity know, but they told me I couldn’t show what I’m about to show you to anypony.”

“Oh boy, this has to be *good* if Twilight told you to keep it a secret,” Scootaloo grinned. “But yea, we promise not to tell nopony.”

Nyx turned to look at Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle, the two other fillies also offering their promise. Still, Nyx wasn’t done.

“And... and you have to promise me you won’t hate me and we’ll still be friends after I show you.”

“Well, that’s a silly thing to promise.”

“Yea, we’re the Cutie Mark Crusaders. We’re going to be best friends for life.”

“No matter what.”

Nyx nervously smiled, looking at her three friends. Decision made, the black filly got up from her sleeping bag, and walked across the room into Apple Bloom’s closet. The black filly shut the door, and for a moment there was only the sound of rustling from behind the door. Apple Bloom, Scootaloo, and Sweetie Belle all craned their necks, watching anxiously until the door opened.

Nyx nervously walked out, carrying her vest in her teeth. Once she was a few steps out of the closet, the black filly spread her wings out, stretching the feathered appendages for a few moments before letting them fold to her sides.

Sweetie Belle, Scootaloo, and Apple Bloom all stared with eyes wide and jaws hanging open. Nyx could only offer a weak smile, taking a moment to set down her vest. The silence in the room was a bit unnerving. Nyx wanted her friends to say something, anything. She started to frown and tear up just a tiny bit, fears flashing in the filly's mind.

Had she just made a *huge* mistake? Had she just lost the three best friends she had ever known? Had she...

Yet, the growing ball of fears was blown away before it could get too large. Nyx found herself surrounded by her three friends, who had zipped up to inspect her long hidden wings with admiration.

"Why didn't you tell us sooner you had wings?" Apple Bloom asked, a bit in awe.

"Well, Rarity told me that if ponies knew I had both a horn and wings, that they would get jealous of me. I... I didn't ask for them, I just have them..."

"Oh yeah; you could so make Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon jealous." Sweetie Belle admitted, offering the thought like it would be something amazingly fun to do.

"But aren't you jealous? Rarity said everypony would be... and I don't want to do that to anypony..."

"Naw, why would we be jealous?" Apple Bloom asked. "It's just part of who you are. It be as silly as me being jealous of how well Sweetie Belle sings."

"Or me being jealous of how well Scootaloo rides her scooter."

"Or me being jealous of how good Apple Bloom is at fixing up things like our clubhouse."

“Yea, it’s like my big sister Applejack says: ‘There ain’t no point in bein’ jealous, because it doesn’t change how things are’.”

“Still, why *do* you have wings and a horn? The only ponies I know that have both are Princess Celestia and Princess Luna,” Sweetie Belle pointed out.

“Well, isn’t it obvious?” Apple Bloom asked, looking at her friends who only answered her with silent, blank stares. “Well... okay, maybe not so obvious.”

“Just spit it out, Apple Bloom,” Scootaloo replied.

“I bet that one of Nyx’s parents is a unicorn and the other is a pegasus.”

“Is it really that simple?” Sweetie Belle asked. “I mean, isn’t there somepony in our class that has a mom that’s a unicorn and a dad that’s a pegasus?”

“Maybe it doesn’t happen all the time,” Scootaloo suggested. “I mean, isn’t there also a pony in our class who has a pair of unicorns as parents but doesn’t have a horn of her own?”

“Yeah, I think you’re right,” Apple Bloom agreed. “It must only happen some of the time. Still, it’s pretty cool.”

“Yea, it is,” Scootaloo cheered.

“So... why does Twilight make you wear a vest to hide your wings?” Sweetie Belle asked.

“Well... like I said, Twilight and Rarity told me that if I didn’t, I might make other ponies jealous... and I just really, really didn’t want to do that. I didn’t want to hurt anypony’s feelings. That, and Twilight is nice. I don’t think she’d make me do anything without a good reason.”

“Yea, Twilight is pretty cool.... a bit nerdy and not as cool as Rainbow Dash, but she’s all right,” Scootaloo stated.

“Hey, you know what this means?” Apple Bloom asked with a grin. “If Nyx is an alicorn... then that means the Cutie Mark Crusaders has one of every pony!”

“One of every pony?” Sweetie Belle asked.

“Yeah! I’m an earth pony, you’re a unicorn, Scootaloo is a pegasus, and Nyx is an alicorn!”

“Hey, yeah, that’s right!” Scootaloo agreed with a grin. “Anyways, it’s your turn Nyx.”

The black filly smiled as she laid down on her sleeping bag and enjoyed the feeling of not having to wear her vest, allowing her wings a few strong flaps before folding them against her side.

“Okay, Sweetie Belle, Truth or Challenge?”

“Truth!” The little white unicorn answered without a moments’ hesitation.

“What’s the funniest story you have of your big sister Rarity?”

Sweetie Belle snorted, and started giggling.

“Oh, you girls are going to like this.”

It didn't take long for Sweetie Belle to tell the story, and by the end all four fillies were giggling loudly, laughter that was only ended when a pounding came at the bedroom door.

“Apple Bloom, you and yer friends get to sleep right this minute, or I’m goin’ come in there and hogtie all of you in your sleepin’ bags!” Applejack threatened, having been kept up by the girls and their sleep over. “I got buckin’ to do in the mornin’, and I won’t have you four keepin’ me up all night.”

The four fillies chimed back an apology, and, with their game ended by Applejack, the Crusaders decided to call it a night. Nyx flipped the room’s light switch with her magic, and soon the four fillies were lying in the darkened room.

Still, before anypony could go to sleep, Nyx broke the silence.

“Um... thank you... thank you for still being my friend, even after I showed you my wings.”

“Aww, of course we would still be your friend!” Sweetie Belle replied from her own sleeping bag on the verge of going to sleep. “We’re the Cutie Mark Crusaders; that’s like being friends for life with a cool theme song.”

*We are the Cutie Mark Crusaders.  
On a quest to find out who we are.  
And we will never stop the journey  
Not until we have our cutie marks.*

While Sweetie Belle had been the one to start singing, the other three started singing as well. It wasn't the intense, and arguably painful, rock ballad that they had performed at the talent show. Instead, the three sang it softly, softly enough that even Scootaloo's voice was bearable.

To the sound of their own theme song the four drifted off to sleep, none resting as well as Nyx. She had been able to reveal a truth about herself to her friends, and they accepted her all the same.

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Nexus stared up at the moon through his study window, a glass of orange juice floating in his levitation magic nearby. He swirled the contents gently, a visual indication that his mind was chewing over new information. He had received the reports from the spy, and while some of the information was welcoming, other bits were troubling.

His plan had gone off without a hitch; a few fliers sent out in the mail inspired some local teacher in Ponyville to have a ‘Learn and Play Day’. It was the kind of public setting where Nyx wouldn’t be around Twilight Sparkle the whole time, and thus could be observed and even spoken to. The spy had done all that, until a pink earth pony started chasing him. He had watched, he had observed, and even gone up and spoken with Nyx at her booth.

He had also witnessed and reported the two feats of magic the little filly performed. Turning a pony into a tree... winning a tug of war game by herself against four much larger and stronger opponents. It was the kind of

magic that no filly, not even a prodigy like Twilight Sparkle, could possess at such a young age, let alone be able to control. It was the kind of magic held only by two others: the alicorns who sat upon the royal thrones.

But while the magical potential was there, the queen was not. The filly did not act like Nightmare Moon, did not speak condescendingly to the country bumpkins of Ponyville. The spy described her as nervous and timid, having a few friends. All things that Nexus wouldn't have believed would be attributed to Equestria's true queen, at least when dealing with the common pony.

But the potential was there, and that would be enough. Making a second attempt at the resurrection spell from scratch, without the lingering shreds, would be nigh impossible. But the filly was a seed, something that could be used to draw in the traces of Nightmare Moon's magic which had been dispersed by Celestia's interruption. That magic would bear with it the echos of Nightmare Moon. The memories, the emotions, the essence of great dark empress would fill the filly, and she would become the queen Equestria deserved.

But being able to complete the spell would be difficult. He would need time to prepare, resources, and, above all, the spell would need to be obscenely powerful. That was the only way to be sure the ritual would complete before Celestia could interfere a second time.

A powerful spell, however, could not be setup secretly. One precluded the other, and thus Spell Nexus found himself thinking in circles as he sipped at his orange juice. There was a need to act quickly, before something happened to the filly, but he could not act overtly. The spell had be powerful, but had to be done secretly. If he could not strike a perfect balance, he risked losing the filly or revealing his true intention to Celestia.

What he needed was-

"Sir?"

"Yes, Proper Etiquette?" Nexus asked, glancing over his shoulder at his butler, the pony standing in the study's doorway.

“Princess Celestia is at the front door and wishes to have a word with you, but she wants it to be known this is a request and not a demand. Shall I see her in?”

“Yes, please.” Nexus replied, closing his eyes. When he reopened them the turquoise color, a blessing given to those who were of the order, had disappeared and were replaced by Nexus’s original slate gray eyes. He then downed the rest of the orange juice in his glass, shivering a little from the resulting brain freeze. He then moved over to a chair and picked up a book, putting up the charade that he was enjoying a quiet evening reading in his study when the princess stepped in.

The timing was near perfect, Nexus just getting settled into one of his chairs with a book when the doors opened, Princess Celestia strolling in while her guards remained in the hallway.

“Thank you for allowing me into your lovely home at such a late hour, Nexus,” Celestia said as she strode across the room. “I do hope I wasn’t interrupting anything.”

“A good book and nothing more,” Nexus lied expertly with a reassuring smile as he set the book down on a nearby end table. “Still, I find it surprising you are out and about at such an hour. You are usually in bed by this time.”

“If I may be honest with you, Nexus... I have been having trouble sleeping,” Celestia admitted as she came to a stop beside the unicorn.

“Then please, make yourself comfortable,” Nexus replied, motioning to a large cushion that was kept in the study specifically in case the princess were to visit. “And tell me what troubles you.”

Celestia took Nexus’s offer, sitting down on the cushion as she began to speak. She told Nexus about the spell in the forest, about the research his co-worker Bastion was doing on the spell, and of many other things Celestia had learned about the Children of Nightmare. Information Nexus already knew, but the unicorn feigned interest. He listened, and offered appropriate levels of shock and disbelief.



“To think, ponies trying to resurrect Nightmare Moon. It is hard to believe some would be so foolish,” Nexus mused when Celestia finished speaking as he poured a fresh glass of orange juice for himself. He offered Celestia some, but she replied with a smile and a shake of her head, a very polite refusal.

“But you stopped them,” Nexus pointed out, lifting his glass in a very casual toast. “And Equestria continues to thrive in your protective embrace. So why have you not been sleeping well?”

“I’ve come to believe that the spell, while interrupted, may not have been completely unsuccessful.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Do you know my student, Twilight Sparkle?”

“The most magically gifted unicorn I’ve ever had the pleasure of getting to know? Of course I know your student! I would bet that everypony at your school knows of her, staff and students. Why do you ask?”

“At the Spring Festival in Ponyville, I discovered Twilight was taking care of a young black-coated filly by the name of Nyx, a filly she said was her half-cousin. A filly that, if my sources are to be believed, started living with her shortly after the cultists cast their spell in the forest. A filly who, in recent days, performed two very profound feats of magic at a school weekend event.”

“Well, I can only imagine magic runs in her family.” Nexus commented before taking a sip from his glass.

“Yes, I would believe that as well, if Nyx was related to Twilight, but I have checked the family’s records. There is no listing of Twilight having a half-cousin named Nyx. In fact, there is no listing of a Nyx being born in Equestria in the past several decades. It is as if this filly appeared out of thin air.”

Nexus, who had been taking another sip from his orange juice glass, froze up for a single moment. Not long enough for Celestia to notice, but a small

sign that the true Nexus, who was hiding behind sweet words and feigned interest, was a bit concerned.

“Appeared out of thin air?” Nexus echoed, “As if... produced by a spell?”

“The same conclusion I reached. Bastion Yorsets has been leading a team to discover the nature of the spell, which is how I’ve come to know for certain that it was a ritual designed to bring back Nightmare Moon from the lingering shreds left behind by the Elements of Harmony. Bastion, however, cannot even venture a guess as to what would happen if the spell was interrupted.”

“And so you believe this filly, Nyx, was produced by the spell... a spell meant to give new life to Nightmare Moon.” Nexus summarized. “I believe I now understand why you’ve been losing sleep.”

“No... Spell Nexus... you don’t.” Celestia countered as she stood up and moved across the room. “For it is not as simple as you make it sound.”

“What’s there to make it complex?”

“The fact that Nyx doesn’t act anything like the mare I once knew,” Celestia replied as she looked to the moon. “Nightmare Moon... the real Nightmare Moon... the mare my sister became... was a vindictive, deceptive, hateful pony. She desired to plunge Equestria into eternal night, not just so ponies would appreciate the beauty of the stars and moon, but so they would also be deprived of the sun they loved so dearly.

“She was threat to all Equestria, but that was not the worst part. The worst was that I had to watch as Luna, my dear sister, became that monstrous mare, bent on vengeance. It was my duty as a big sister to protect her... and I failed. I failed so horribly that I had to banish her to the moon, and wait a thousand years for my student and her friends to do what I could not.

“And now,” Celestia continued, lowering her head as her regal composure began to fail, a tired expression taking its place on her face. “The past few nights... my dreams have been haunted. I see the filly Nyx growing, becoming the monster I once knew. She laughs, and plunges Equestria into eternal night before taking away my sister again. I scream out in the dream... only to find myself sitting up in my own bed in an icy sweat.

"I fear this filly, Nexus... but at the same time I feel guilty for fearing her."

"Why would you feel guilty?" Nexus asked.

"Because Nyx has done nothing to warrant such fear," Celestia answered, not taking her eyes off the moon. "I have met Nyx personally, over a short dinner, and she acted nothing like the Nightmare Moon I knew. At first, the filly seemed honestly scared of me and my sister. She shied away, and only after some encouragement from Twilight was Nyx even able to say hello to us.

"It was Luna who was able to finally draw Nyx out of her shell, and, after that, the filly laughed and spoke excitedly on many topics. She spoke of friends, spoke of school... spoke of all the things a normal filly her age would want to talk about: all things Nightmare Moon would never care about.

"And thus I am torn. I fear Nyx when she has shown no signs of being a danger. I worry for what she might become, but at the same time I believe that she is not the same as Nightmare Moon. She is the product of that spell, and yet she acts like any normal filly as she lives, laughs, and has friends.

"And that, Nexus, is what is troubling me," Celestia concluded as she turned away from the window.

"It is something that would trouble anypony," Nexus comforted, faking his concern. "I am honored you would come to speak with me about this, but I must ask... what does Luna think of the filly? Certainly she, who was once Nightmare Moon, would be able to judge the filly's true nature."

"I... I must confess, I have been doing everything in my power to keep this a secret from Luna. It has not been easy; she was able to sense the same surge of magic I felt rise up from the Everfree Forest some time ago. But I've been able to convince her it was nothing to worry about, and have kept the rest of what I've told you hidden."

"I find it strange you would want to keep this a secret from Luna. Do you not trust her with this matter?"

“No, I do trust her, but... I choose to keep this a secret to protect her.” Celestia admitted. “Call me a foal if you wish, Nexus, but I’m Luna’s big sister. I lost her once to Nightmare Moon, and I don’t want her getting anywhere near this.

“So... I’ve come to you, Nexus,” Celestia continued as she moved away from the window, retaking her seat next to the unicorn. “Because, while I cannot turn to Luna in this, I need somepony to talk to. I need somepony to give me their *honest* opinion.

“Am I wrong to fear Nyx? Am I wrong to doubt in my student’s ability to judge character? I do not know if Twilight has noticed the similarity, or how much she remembers from the night she was ponynapped. Still, I want to believe that if Twilight believed Nyx was a danger, she would come to me.

“And even if Nyx grows to be the same in body and power, could she not be her own mare, devoid of the malice and hatred that made Nightmare Moon who she was? Or... is there truth in my dreams? Is the simple truth that, in time, Nyx will become the only mare in the world I truly fear?”

Silence fell upon the study at this, Nexus slowly taking his gaze off of Celestia. He closed his eyes and swirled the orange juice in his glass. To Celestia, it looked as if the unicorn was considering the question, but in truth he was considering the situation as a whole.

Celestia, with her weak, tender heart, saw there was a chance the filly was a threat to Equestria, but did not act because of her feelings. An alicorn of her power and stature, hesitating to remove a threat to her throne. He’d pity the princess if her weakness wasn’t so pathetic. And, above that, she obviously feared what Nightmare Moon’s return would mean. She feared having to face the alicorn again, Equestria’s true queen no longer held back by the sun princess’s sister, the feeble Luna.

Indecision, compassion, and fear... all weaknesses that only proved to Nexus further that Celestia wasn’t fit to rule Equestria, that only the cold wisdom of Nightmare Moon would ensure the kingdom’s future.

But these weaknesses were not without their purpose. Nexus took a sip from his glass of orange juice, a means of hiding the smile that was trying

to creep onto his lips before he regained his composure. Yes... these were weaknesses he could exploit.

“You are not wrong to fear Nyx,” Nexus began, picking his words carefully. “It is your job, as a ruler of this kingdom, to try and foresee anything that would arise to threaten Equestria. And right now, the filly is a credible threat. Nightmare Moon was the worst thing to happen to Equestria in recorded history, and, if there is even a small chance Nyx could become the Mare in the Moon, then it is a threat you should take seriously.”

“But I cannot condemn Nyx for what she might do.” Celestia argued. “Not only would that go against Equestrian law, Twilight would never forgive me.”

“Your concern for your student is heartwarming, Celestia, but I shouldn’t need to remind you that you have a whole kingdom to worry about. Is it not better to save everypony in Equestria from the danger that is Nightmare Moon, even if it means one particular unicorn doesn’t like you anymore?”

“It is better, Nexus... and perhaps if I was a stronger mare, I could do what is best for the kingdom without batting an eye. But... I will not act against Nyx unless I am certain she is a threat, even if it means I must endure several sleepless nights.”

“Then maybe I can offer that certainty,” Nexus replied, smiling gently.

“And how would you do that?”

“If I recall correctly, there is a magical ritual from the zebra homelands that may just be the answer to this predicament. It would take time to study it, even longer to prepare the spell, for, if I recall correctly, it is very complicated. But... if the spell works, you will be able to take a glimpse inside Nyx’s mind and even her soul. From that glimpse, you should be able to see whether or not the filly is something you need to fear.”

Celestia smiled, the weights of fear and doubt beginning to lift off the alicorn’s chest.

“Spell Nexus, do you honestly believe you can prepare this spell? Can you promise that this spell will do as you say?”

"I don't know if I can outright promise, but I am very certain," The unicorn replied with a confident grin.

"Then, please, coordinate your efforts on the spell with the palace. I will make arrangements so that anything and everything you will need to perform this spell is provided." Celestia said, as she stood up from her cushion. "Do whatever it takes to get this spell prepared as quickly as possible."

"It would be my pleasure to do so, Princess... but, I should warn you: if my memory about the spell is correct, then Nyx will need to be present. This isn't something that can be done unless she's at least in the same room. Nyx would need to be brought to the spell, taken from Twilight."

The smile that had only just made its way onto Celestia's face vanished, replaced by a frown. For a moment, the sun princess sat in silence, contemplating the one catch to her and Nexus' newly hatched plan.

"Nyx would need to be taken from Twilight Sparkle?" Celestia echoed, as if hoping she had misheard the blue unicorn.

"Yes." Nexus stated coldly. "I doubt it would be wise to have such a magically talented unicorn in the room should... well... should the spell reveal the worst."

"Then that shall be my part in this," Celestia said, her heart once again heavy in her chest. "Spell Nexus, I would ask you to simply focus on preparing the spell. I... I will handle the task of fetching Nyx personally."

"Are you sure?"

Celestia nodded.

"Twilight deserves as much."

"Very well. I will begin preparations in the morning. I will need time to study the spell, and then I will need time to gather the materials and prepare. Once the spell is ready, however, I will inform you so that you can fetch the

filly. After that, it will take but a few minutes to know whether or not Nyx is truly Nightmare Moon and whether or not she poses a threat to Equestria.”

“Thank you, Nexus.” Celestia said, managing a weak, half hearted smile. “You have been of greater service this evening than I could have hoped for.”

“Do give me some credit, Princess. My special talent is, after all, creating and understanding complex spells.”

“Oh, I haven’t forgotten. After all, it wasn’t so long ago that you were one of my faithful students,” Celestia teased, the weights of fear and doubt beginning to lift off the alicorn’s chest. “Now, I believe I’ve taken up enough of your evening. I shall return to the castle to get some rest, but please send word to me when you are ready to begin preparing the spell.”

“Of course, Princess.” Nexus replied as he got out of his chair and walked with Celestia to the door of his study. “And I hope you have a pleasant evening.”

“Good night to you too, Spell Nexus,” Celestia said as a final farewell. Nexus returned it with a wave of his hoof as the princess slipped out the study doors. Spell Nexus waited until the princess rounded a corner further down the hall before he pulled the doors shut and moved to the far side of his study. Looking out the window, a gentle, happy smile on his lips as he watched Celestia enter the courtyard below. Within a few moments, she had boarded her chariot and was being flown off back to the castle.

It was only when Celestia was out of sight that Nexus closed his eyes, opening them a moment later to reveal the slate gray orbs had returned to the turquoise color that marked him as a member of the Children of Nightmare. His gentle grin turned menacing, and the dark blue unicorn had to fight the urge to laugh out loud.

Horn glowing, Nexus began pulling books off his study shelves. Yes, he would need time to prepare, but now he had all the time he would need. He had no fear of Celestia acting, for the princess was waiting for him to help her act. A second opportunity, a second chance to complete the spell, had been laid in his hooves by none other than the sun tyrant herself. It was like

fate and destiny were on his side, that the world itself worked to help him bring back Equestria's true queen.

"Celestia, you have become a contributing architect in your own demise," Nexus whispered, the one bit of gloating he allowed himself before diving into the work that laid ahead of him.



# Chapter 10

## Treachery

The doors to the Ponyville School House erupted open with cheers and flying papers, all the little fillies and colts racing out with wide smiles. Among them were the Cutie Mark Crusaders, who were laughing and giggling right along with all the others. Cheerilee watched with a smile as the ponies raced off towards town, walking back into a school house with a bounce in her step that she only got once a year.

The cheer for both Cheerilee and the students all stemmed from the same source: school was out for the summer.

“No more school, no more school, no more school!” Apple Bloom cheered several times, bouncing around like Pinkie Pie as she and the other crusaders made their way into the center of Ponyville.

“Yea, a full summer vacation to find our Cutie Marks! This is going to be awesome!” Scootaloo offered. “So, what should we try first? Skateboarding? Paragliding? Wait, no... we should try to be Cutie Mark Crusader Bungee Jumpers!”

“That all sounds kind of dangerous, Scootaloo,” Sweetie Belle said anxiously.

“And...scary...” Nyx whimpered with a slight shake.

“Maybe we could start off with something easier.” Sweetie Belle suggested. “We... uh, we don’t want to go through all your awesome ideas straight away, do we?”

“No, I guess not,” Scootaloo thought out loud.

“How are we gonna keep track of all our ideas anyways?” Apple Bloom asked. “Didn’t we already try paragliding before?”

“Did we?” Scootaloo asked, while Sweetie Belle stuck out her tongue in concentration.

“Wait, why would a pegasus need to paraglide anyways?”

“Um...” Nyx began nervously. “I...think I might have an idea to keep track of everything.”

“What’s that?” Apple Bloom asked.

“Well, Twilight’s always making lists to keep herself organized, so... how about we all make a list of all the things we want to do to try and find our cutie marks, and then we’ll combine notes and make one big list together? That way, we’ll know what we have and haven’t done.”

“Hey, that’s a great idea!” Apple Bloom cheered.

“It is?”

“Uh-huh. If we do that, we’ll be sure to find our cutie marks in no time!”

“Yeah!” The other two cheered in agreement, making Nyx smile, glad she was able to do something to help out, since her skittish nature did made it hard for her to participate in the more active ideas, namely the ones she thought were scary.

After quickly hammering out the details of the plan, the four agreed to meet at Twilight’s library the next day after lunch with their lists. With a final “Cutie Mark Crusaders” chant, the group disbanded, each running home to try and think of as many things they could try during the summer in their search for their cutie marks.

Nyx practically galloped all the way back to the library, bursting through the door. Twilight and Spike had been working in the library’s ground floor. Spike was checking out a few books for an earth pony while Twilight was putting other books back on the shelf. The purple unicorn didn’t know what hit her as Nyx tackled her unofficial mother, giggling almost nonstop.

“I’m home!”

“So I see.” Twilight replied, sitting up from her new location on the floor while Nyx bounced excitedly around her. “And how was your last day of school?”

“Really fun! Cheerilee ordered some treats for us, and she handed out our final grades.”

“And how were your final grades?” Twilight asked. Nyx was more than eager to reply, magically opening her saddle bags as she pulled out her grade report and held it out. Twilight took the note in her own magic, holding it at an angle she could read. Her face then lit up in a smile, seeing the stellar grades Nyx had managed to achieve. They weren’t perfect, but still pretty darn good for a filly who started two thirds of the way through the school year.

“So... did I do good?” Nyx asked, a little nervously. “Cheerilee said I did good but... did I do good?”

“You did amazing.” Twilight replied, setting the grade report on the nearby table. “In fact, I think we need to celebrate. What do you think, Spike? Should we take the rest of the afternoon off and do something fun?”

“What about the library? You’re the one always saying we have to keep it open during the day so that ponies can check out books if they want.”

“Oh, come on Spike, it’s a special occasion. The end of school only comes once a year.”

“Hey, you don’t have to ask me twice,” The baby dragon said with a laugh, making a few final notes in the library’s ledger about the books that were just checked out before slapping it shut. “So, what are we going to do?”

“I think Nyx should decide.”

“Really? I get to pick?”

“Yep, whatever you want to do Nyx.”

“Can we get lunch at the Sugarcube Corner?”

“Yes.”

“And then can we go play at the park?”

“Yes.”

The little filly was practically on the verge of exploding in excitement, bouncing over towards the door like a certain pink earth pony. Twilight and Spike quickly followed, the trio locking up the library for the afternoon and heading off to celebrate.

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“That was the best afternoon ever!” Nyx cheered as she, Twilight, and Spike began making their way back to the library as the sun drew close to the far horizon. All three were smiling ear to ear, having spent the whole afternoon basically just playing in the park. Games of tag, hide and seek, and Twilight taking the part of a pretend monster that Nyx and Spike fought to defeat a number of times. The kind of random, unplanned day of fun that Twilight had often missed growing up, considering all the time she spent reading books.

“Can we do it again tomorrow?” Nyx asked.

“Maybe not tomorrow,” Twilight replied while smiling, though slightly worn out from all the playful running. “But maybe this weekend. After all, weren’t you going to do something with your friends tomorrow?”

“Yea; we’re each supposed to think up a bunch of things we could try out over the summer to try and find our Cutie Marks.” Nyx chirped in a reply, before her smile quickly turned into a panicked frown. “OH NO! ...I... I forgot to start my list...”

“Well, I wouldn’t worry too much. You have until noon tomorrow. I’m sure, if you start on the list tonight, you’ll have more than enough things to share with your friends tomorrow.”

“Yea, don’t worry about it Nyx.” Spike offered, “You got all night to... hey, Twilight?”

“Yes Spike?”

“Isn’t that Princess Celestia’s chariot outside the library?”

Twilight, who had been paying most of her attention to the baby dragon and filly riding on her back, looked forward. Spike’s observation had been accurate; the princesses’ royal chariot was parked just outside the library, a few pegasus guards hitched to the front and standing at attention.

Curious, Twilight walked up to the library door, opening it slowly as she peaked her head inside.

“Ah, Twilight, I was wondering where you were,” Celestia commented, the regal princess sitting on a cushion at the library’s reading table, which was more of a coffee table for the very tall princess. “I hope you don’t mind, but I decided to drop in for a visit.”

“Not at all,” Twilight replied as she walked across the room. “I just wished you had warned me you were coming; I would have cleaned up the library.”

“Yes, and you would have made the whole town put up decorations for my arrival,” The princess remarked knowingly. “And I was hoping for a more subtle visit. I hope you don’t mind.”

“I course I don’t mind, but shouldn’t you be in Canterlot for the sunset?”

“One of the benefits of having my sister back is that I can now afford to sneak away from my duties from time to time. Luna is going to handle the sunset this evening.”

“Well, make sure to thank Luna for me,” Twilight said with a smile, “Still, are you hungry? We were about to eat dinner.”

“No thank you, Twilight, but don’t let me stop you. It looks like you three have had a long day.”

“Yes, but it was a fun day too,” Twilight replied before turning to look at the dragon and filly riding on her back. “Spike, Nyx, would you two mind starting dinner? I know I said I’d cook tonight, but...”

Spike waved her off.

“Don’t worry about it Twilight, I know how long it’s been since you’ve had a chance to talk with Celestia. Come on, Nyx, let’s go rustle us up some grub.”

The baby dragon and filly jumped off of Twilight’s back, quickly making their way into the kitchen. At the same time, Twilight moved over to the reading table and sat down across from Celestia, offering a smile.

“So, what bring you to Ponyville? Is there another dragon taking nap in the mountains?” The unicorn joked.

“No, but there is something important I need to talk to you about,” Celestia replied, her usually cheerful, almost whimsical tone growing more serious as the alicorn’s horn glowed. There was a flash from behind Twilight, and when the unicorn turned, she saw a few lingering sparkles around the kitchen door.

Twilight recognized the spell immediately, having seen Celestia use it before. It was a spell that blocked sound, which meant that what Celestia wanted to talk about wasn’t meant to be heard by Spike or Nyx.

“Now, Twilight... I’m here because I need to talk to you about Nyx, who I know is *not* your cousin.”

Twilight felt her heart skip a beat as she turned her head back towards Celestia, her eyes meeting Celestia’s knowing gaze. The unicorn at first had the urge to continue her lie, but... something in the princess’s eyes told Twilight she couldn’t get away with that. It was just like the few times in the past she had been in trouble with Celestia for this or that.

There was no point in lying.

“How much do you know?”

“I have my suspicions, which is part of the reason why I’m here. Before I say another word, I need you to be completely honest with me about Nyx. Tell me *everything*.”

Twilight could feel her mouth going dry and a knot forming her throat, but she began to speak all the same. She told Celestia everything about where she had found Nyx. Every hard fact the unicorn could offer was presented, along with a few of her own theories. Above all, Twilight made it a point to say a number of times that she didn't believe Nyx was Nightmare Moon.

Twilight told Celestia everything, and the princess listened intently. Her face was kept in its normal regal composure, a well practiced mask that Celestia used when dealing with any serious situation. While Twilight often looked into Celestia's eyes, trying to read what the princess was thinking, the unicorn was unable to determine a thing. A thousand years of being a monarch of Equestria had given Celestia the best poker face in the entire kingdom.

It didn't take too long for Twilight to say everything she wanted to say, but the unicorn was still exhausted when she had finished. With every word she said, Twilight had felt anxiety growing and twisting in her belly, and she was beginning to feel just a little bit weak because of it.

"Thank you for your honesty, Twilight." The alicorn began, once Twilight was finished speaking, offering a truly warm smile with her words. "And I want to say how proud I am of you, even though I wished you had told me about all this sooner. Few mares would have done what you did. Not only did you help a filly lost in the forest, but you took her in. You obviously care for her a great deal."

"I... I do." Twilight replied, letting herself smile a little.

"M-might," Celestia began, coughing once to try and improve the strength in her voice. "Might I ask how much you care?"

"What do you mean, Princess?"

"What is Nyx to you? Are you simply a caregiver, or does Nyx perhaps look upon you as a friend?"

"Well... *ha ha*... actually, it's funny you should ask that. Nyx kind of thinks of me as..." Twilight grew very quiet at this point, rubbing the back of her neck and muttering out the final few words at a level that made them unintelligible to the princess.

“Could you please say that again, Twilight?”

“She... thinks of me as a mother.” The unicorn admitted, managing to say the words just loud enough for Celestia to clearly hear her. Twilight's words ushered in a dead silence on the library. Celestia just sat there, even her brain needing a moment to chew over what had just been said. The sun princess then began to frown, her regal composure failing as a mixed expression of exhaustion and guilt began to form on her face.

“Twilight... I wish you hadn't told me that.” Celestia admitted a few moments later. “I wish you had just let me believe you were a caregiver to Nyx, and nothing more... for you have only made what I have to do that much more difficult.”

“What do you have to do?”

“Twilight... your theories about the night you were ponynapped are correct. Bastion Yorsets lead a team of unicorns in studying the spell performed by the cult, and he confirmed that it was intended to resurrect Nightmare Moon.

“The cult even had the shreds.”

“The shreds?” Twilight echoed.

“You may not have notice them, but when you used the Elements of Harmony on my sister, a number of shreds were left behind. These shreds held lingering amounts of Luna's old power, echos of the mare she used to be. I had trusted Spell Nexus with destroying these shreds, but then they were stolen from his home late one night. The cult ponies were the ones that stole the shreds, and from what was gathered after the scene, it is apparent that they were used in the resurrection spell.”

Celestia took deep breath, shoring herself up to tell Twilight something the unicorn wouldn't want to hear. “Thus, Nyx did not simply come from the spell. She was made with the lingering pieces of Nightmare Moon. Because of this, Twilight, I must take Nyx back to Canterlot with me.”



A graveyard-like silence fell upon the room after Celestia's words, Twilight looking at her teacher with eyes that were slowly narrowing, her mind beginning to comprehend the true purpose behind Celestia's visit that evening. It was the visit she had been dreading.

"Please understand, Twilight, I take no joy in this," Celestia continued when Twilight offered no response. "But, while Nyx currently shows no signs of being Nightmare Moon, you cannot deny there is a chance she could be a threat to Equestria. For all we know, the filly you care for could be a ruse. Nightmare Moon could be disguising herself and her true intentions as she bides her time.

"Even if that is not the case, you just admitted that Nyx has some of Nightmare Moon's memories. Should more of her memories return, Nyx could also remember her hatred of me, her jealousy of the sun. She could become a threat to Equestria once again."

"But... but Nyx would never do that!" Twilight argued, strong conviction in her voice, "She isn't Nightmare Moon, and she *hates* those memories. She was crying when she remembered, because she remembered wanting to hurt me and she couldn't understand why."

"Twilight-"

"And I know what you're thinking. I thought about it too, at first. That maybe Nightmare Moon was just trying to trick me, pretending to be a filly, but I know that's not true. I can't tell you how or why... I have no evidence to prove it, but I *know* Nyx is a good pony. She isn't Nightmare Moon. She just isn't. And-"

Twilight found herself silenced, not by harsh words or anything so violent. No, in a span of a few moments, Celestia had circled the table and was now holding Twilight in an embrace, the white alicorn holding the small purple unicorn with her neck and one of her hooves.

"Please stop, Twilight," Celestia asked, her voice ringing with the echoes of desperation. "You are only making this more difficult for me."

"But... why do you have to take her?"

“Because I’m scared, Twilight.” Celestia admitted, words that rang in Twilight’s mind and shook the foundations of her conscience. “My dreams have been haunted with visions of Nyx growing into Nightmare Moon. I see her, threatening not just Equestria, but everypony I hold dear. I see her threatening you, my sister, everypony I care about. I see her stealing everything away from me, and... I’m powerless to stop her.”

Celestia began to hug Twilight more tightly, bitter memories surfacing in the alicorn’s mind.

“Powerless... just like I was unable to save Luna a thousand years ago. It is my duty to do what is necessary, Twilight. It was my duty a thousand years ago to defeat my sister, so the sun could rise over Equestria again. It was my duty... and I would do it again. My actions saved lives, brought joy back to the ponies of this kingdom... but I never forgave myself for that day.

“I... I have to do this, Twilight. I cannot wait until Nightmare Moon has risen again before acting. I cannot give her a chance to take my sister away again, to hurt anypony... especially those I care for so dearly. I... I cannot let her have that chance.”

“But she isn’t-” Twilight began to protest again, only to be cut off by Celestia.

“I know, Twilight, but take heart in the knowledge that I’m not taking Nyx away to punish her.”

“You’re... you’re not?”

Celestia shook her head.

“No, I am taking her to, hopefully, put my fears to rest. Spell Nexus has prepared an old, powerful spell that will allow me to take a glimpse at who Nyx really is. A spell to see not only Nyx’s mind, but her soul. In that glimpse, if I find nothing more than traces of what Nightmare Moon used to be, then I will return Nyx to you with the sunrise.”

“And what if you find more than a few traces?”

“As long as Nyx does not contain the malice, jealousy, and hatred Nightmare Moon once knew, then she will be returned to you. It was those feelings and emotions that drove my sister to become Nightmare Moon. If they do not exist in Nyx, then she cannot truly be the mare my sister once was. This is a spell that can also be repeated, so, as Nyx grows, we can continue to monitor the mare she is becoming.”

“But... what if you find that she does contain these feelings? What if you find-”

“Twilight, don’t make me tell you something you don’t want to hear.” Celestia almost begged, the alicorn holding her unicorn student more tightly. Twilight, however, fought against the princess’ embrace, pulling herself away as her tear-filled eyes furrowed into a glare.

“NO! I won’t let you take her! Nyx is my daughter, and I know she isn’t Nightmare Moon! That should be enough for you, or do you not trust me anymore?”

“I do trust you, but-”

“Then *listen* and believe me! Nyx. Is. Not. Nightmare Moon!”

Celestia approached Twilight again, and while the unicorn tried to shy away, the princess pulled her into a comforting embrace for a second time. Celestia even sat down, allowing her to not only put her hoof and neck around Twilight, but to also wrap her wings around her student. It was the most tender and comforting hug the princess could offer.

“Twilight...” The princess began, a single tear rolling down her cheek. “I’m so sorry, and I promise, I swear to you, that unless I am utterly convinced Nyx is a threat, I will return her to you in the morning. I will do what is necessary to protect Equestria... but I am not heartless. If Nyx has a hope of not being Nightmare Moon, of being a mare of her own, then I will allow her to have that chance.

“It is no less than what I did for my sister. Once the transformation had taken hold... once she had become Nightmare Moon, I begged and pleaded with Luna to lower the moon, to become my sister again. It was only when I saw there was no hope that I used the Elements of Harmony.

“So please... Twilight, I beg you... beg you not as a princess of Equestria, or as your teacher. I beg you as a pony who fears for those she cares about... who fears for her sister... let me take Nyx. Allow me to put these fears to rest... for you do not know how much they torture me.”

And that's when Twilight felt it, something that caused her mind to lock up and the air to catch in her lungs. A single small drop of water landed on the unicorn's body before sliding down to the floor. It was a tear... a single tear that had escaped from Celestia's eyes and dripped onto Twilight.

Twilight had never seen Celestia cry before, not since the day that Luna came back.

And, in that moment, the unicorn felt her defiance shutting down. Was Celestia honestly this scared? How monstrous was Nightmare Moon back when she first threatened Equestria? And... Twilight was beginning to wonder if Celestia had a real reason to be scared. She denied it... denied Nyx was Nightmare Moon... but evidence to the contrary existed.

The doubts began eating away at Twilight's conviction, the unicorn desperately trying to grasp onto some thought... some idea that would allow her to continue to believe Nyx wasn't Nightmare Moon... but there was none to be had.

“I've wondered, sometimes, who Nyx really is. I've seen what she can do... seen the power she holds. She... she could be Nightmare Moon. But, even if she is, that doesn't mean she's evil, does it? She can be Nightmare Moon and still be a good pony, can't she?” Twilight asked quietly, struggling with her words.

“Yes, Twilight, she can,” Celestia tried to comfort. “Still, it seems you have shared in my fears. So please, let me take her to Canterlot. Allow me this one test... and let us both put our doubts to rest.”

“So please... let me take her to Canterlot. Allow me this one test of Nyx's character... and let us both put our doubts to rest.”

Twilight's last defenses fell at that invitation, of the test not only ending Celestia's fears but killing off the doubts that had, at times, flitted into her

own mind. A chance to be sure, to know without a doubt, whether Nyx was or was not a threat Equestria. The unicorn's mind grasped onto the idea for dear life, using that one thought to quell the storm of doubts that had risen up.

For a time, Celestia continued to hold Twilight, even as she felt the unicorn submitting to her request. Still, after offering a final apology, the alicorn pulled herself away slowly before moving towards the kitchen. Her spell of silence on the door evaporated, the sounds of cooking starting to echo into the library's main room as Celestia pushed her head through the door.

"Oh, hey Celestia." Spike greeted when he saw the alicorn. "Change your mind about eating dinner with us?"

"No, I'm afraid not, and... I must ask that Nyx back to Canterlot with me."

"What for?" Spike asked, the baby dragon and filly pausing from their dinner preparations.

"Twilight has told me that Nyx is an alicorn, and I simply believe it is her best interests to have her examined, to ensure she's healthy."

"Can't you have a doctor come here or something?"

"While I could ask my doctor to come to Ponyville, he also serves as a doctor for many in the royal palace, and I cannot, in good conscience, ask him to drop everything else he has scheduled to make a trip here." Celestia lied, keeping up her regal composure in hopes that Spike would believe the story.

"I guess that makes sense," the baby dragon eventually replied, "but why right now? Isn't it kind of late?"

"My intention is to take Nyx back with me this evening and have her see the doctor as soon as we arrive. Then, since it will be even later by the time the doctor is finished, I thought Nyx might like to spend the night in the castle. I can even show her Twilight's old bedroom at my school for gifted unicorns."

Nyx lit up. The idea of not only getting to see the prestigious school but also getting to spend the night at the castle filled the filly with excitement.

On more than one occasion Twilight had told Nyx a bedtime story about the times she had spent with Celestia, learning magic and being the princess's private student.

"Well, I guess if Twilight is okay with it," Spike said, not entirely sure about all he was being told. Still, like Twilight, the baby dragon had never been given a reason to doubt Celestia, and he had no reason to start at the moment. Nyx, on the other hoof, was bouncing with excitement, willingly following Celestia as the filly alicorn trotted out of the kitchen.

Yet, as Celestia moved to the library's front door, Nyx glanced over to Twilight, who was sitting with her head turned down, eyes hidden by the bangs of her hair. Almost instantly the excitement that had been filling the filly died away. Before Celestia could stop her, Nyx was over by Twilight, looking at the unicorn anxiously.

"Twilight?" she asked gently. "What's wrong?"

Twilight didn't answer, didn't even turn to look at Nyx. She just kept looking down at the floor, body trembling a little as tears flowed from her eyes.

"Twilight?" Nyx ventured to ask again, only for Celestia to move over beside her.

"Twilight will be all right, Nyx." Celestia tried to reassure the filly, the white alicorn using a hoof to gently guide Nyx towards the door. "Now, come along. If we hurry, we might be able to get back to Canterlot in time to watch Luna raise the moon."

Nyx, however, squirmed away from Celestia, running back over to Twilight. "No, I don't want to go anymore. Twilight... Twilight, what's wrong? Why are you crying?"

"Nyx, please, we need to leave."

"NO! I don't want to go!" Nyx snapped at Celestia, getting right up beside Twilight and nuzzling one of the unicorn's leg. "I want to stay here with Twilight."

"I promise you'll be back in the morning, but I need you to come with me, Nyx."

"NO! I don't want to see the doctor! I want to stay here with Twilight!"

"I'm sorry, Nyx," Celestia said, the alicorn struggling to stay strong as her horn began to glow, "but you have to come with me."

Slowly, Celestia began to wrap her magic around Nyx, levitating the filly away from Twilight. Nyx began to toss and turn in the magic, trying to free herself even though she had no chance of escaping the levitation spell. All the while, she began to panic and scream.

"NO! Let me go! I don't wanna go! I want to stay here!"

"What's going on out here?" Spike asked, starting to open the kitchen door. Celestia, however, quickly diverted some of her magic, slamming the door shut and locking it. Spike began to pound and shout from the other side. Her conviction was already failing, crumbling like a sand castle being eaten away by constant ocean waves. She needed to leave with Nyx quickly, before Twilight changed her mind, before she lost the will to do what she needed to.

Celestia quickly slipped out the door, Nyx floating in the air behind her. The filly had now given up trying to free herself from the magic, and was now focusing on Twilight, failing and calling out to the unicorn in her panic.

"Twilight! TWILIGHT! Please, don't let her take me, Twilight! I don't want to go! Please, I want to stay here, Twilight! If... if I did something bad, I'm sorry! Please, I don't want to go! Twilight! TWILIGHT!"

The last of Nyx's cries were muffled as Celestia shut the door to the library, carrying the filly out to her waiting chariot. The whole time Twilight hadn't moved a muscle, her whole body tensed as the unicorn kept herself planted in the library. She kept thinking the same things to herself over and over. Celestia had to do this. They had to know for sure. It was for the best. Nyx would be back in the morning. All Celestia needed was a chance to prove to herself what Twilight already knew.

**"MOMMY!!!"**

Twilight's head snapped up, eyes narrowed into dots. From outside the library, Nyx's cry had pierced the night, ringing loudly in the library. The cry surged deep into Twilight's mind, blasting through all the doubts that had taken up residence in her thoughts. The shout blew through it all, released a thought in Twilight's mind that burst forth like a bolt of lightning unleashed from the sky.

### ***WHAT WAS SHE DOING!?!?!?!?***

It didn't matter if Nyx was Nightmare Moon or not. It didn't matter if someday Nyx would bring about the destruction of Equestria. Nyx... Nyx was her *daughter*. She understood why Celestia was scared, but... this wasn't right. Twilight treated the filly like her own flesh and blood child. Nyx was her daughter... and Twilight was her mother.

And no real mother lets her daughter get taken away without a fight.

Without a moment's hesitation, Twilight bolted for the door, horn already glowing. She didn't know what she was going to do. She couldn't really hope to face off against Celestia... but she couldn't just let her take Nyx away either. She'd do what she could, she'd fight with all the magic she had... even if it got her thrown in a dungeon or banished.

Nyx deserved that much.

But by the time Twilight got outside, it was too late. The chariot had taken off and was now flying away. Twilight tried to chase it, running with her eyes turned skyward. It was something doomed for disaster as Twilight didn't watch the path ahead. She tripped on a rock, trembling and crashing to the ground. hard on the ground. When she looked up again the chariot was even farther away, being whisked back to Canterlot by the strong wings of the royal guards who pulled it.

Twilight broke down into tears right there, not caring who saw her or where she was as she cried openly. She had just done the unforgivable. Even if Nyx was returned to her the next day, even if Nyx was officially decreed to not be Nightmare Moon... she would never be able to forgive herself for what she had done.



It all came rushing in too fast, the realizations and heartaches filling the unicorn to the brim. She couldn't cry hard enough and fast enough. The pain was just too severe. In the end, Twilight couldn't contain it all, and she screamed. She cried out to the night with the loudest, most pain-filled voice that had ever escaped her lips.

***“NYX!!!!”***

=====

Spell Nexus stood, slate gray eyes focused on the chariot that approached from the sky. He stood just outside a door, the entrance into the grand throne room of the palace. Inside, the Children of Nightmare worked to set up the spell, though they did not look the part of Nightmare Moon's followers. No, for the moment, the cult looked simply as ponies Nexus had brought to assist with the spell. The royal guards and Celestia were none the wiser.

The royal chariot came down from the sky, landing at the door. Celestia stepped down, looking as if she had been crying the whole way over. Behind her, a pair of guards moved to the chariot and brought the sleeping Nyx.

“Are you all right?” Nexus asked, faking concern.

“No... no, I'm not.” Celestia replied, trying keep her composure but struggling. “I just stole away a filly from her mother... if Nyx isn't Nightmare Moon... then what I've just done is inexcusable.”

“Such a task should not have fallen to one with a heart as tender as yours, Your Highness,” Nexus offered solemnly. “But, hopefully, you shall be able to return her to Twilight unharmed in the morning.”

“No...the harm has already been done, Nexus,” Celestia countered as she and the dark blue unicorn moved into the throne room.

Nexus offered no words in reply as he and the princess moved across the hall. Nyx's sleeping form was placed in the center of the complicated spell which had been setup in the royal throne room. Four columns stood in a perfect square about the center, torches burning at their tops. Unicorns that

Nexus had brought in to aid with the spell, secret members of the Children of Nightmare, fed their magic into the columns which glowed with ancient runes.

“How does this spell work, Nexus?” Celestia asked as she looked over the setup.

“The spell will handle all the work. All you need to do is stand in the center and feed your magic into the columns. When the spell has enough built up energy, it will automatically activate.”

The sun princess nodded, striding into the center of the ritual while all the unicorns, pegasi, and earth ponies that were working to set up the spell moved to the sides of the room. Nexus was the only one that stayed close, standing just on the edge of the spell as he watched the princess with slate gray eyes.

Celestia approached the center of the spell slowly, her towering shadow falling over the sleeping form of Nyx. The young filly had been placed exactly in middle of the arcane lines and standing columns, the focal point of the magic. Celestia looked down at the little filly, who still looked scared even though she was asleep. The sun princess watched disguised alicorn for a time, and then shut her eyes to offer a very quiet prayer.

“Please... my little pony... let Twilight be right about you.”

At that, Celestia took in a deep breath and spread her wings, horn glowing. Slowly, glowing trails of energy began to form between the princess and the four evenly spaced columns. Threads of magic which moved and danced, as if caressed by an intangible wind. Slowly, more and more of spider web-like threads of magic formed, connecting the tip of Celestia’s horn to the columns.

As the spell began to build in magic, Nexus slowly circled, staying just beyond the boarder of the ritual. He passed behind one of the columns, and, when he re-emerged the other side, his eyes had turned turquoise, glinting in the light given off by Celestia’s spell.

“How much magic does this require, Nexus?” Celestia called out.

“Just a little more, Your Highness. The columns just need a little more charge.”

The princess tossed her head, furrowing her eyebrows as she put more of her magic out into the spell. Celestia chanced a glance down at Nyx, the filly still sleeping as the lines on the floor began to glow around her. She would know whether or not to fear Nyx. She would know the truth... if only so she could know what would need to be done.

Celestia felt a twinge in her horn as the spell reached full power, and prepared herself for it to activate. She didn't know what to expect. Perhaps she would see visions or see Nyx transform into the mare she would become, but instead Celestia felt the nature of the magic in the spell change. The stone columns, which had been glowing pastel colors, shifted to a threatening red tone.

Celestia then felt something hit her in the chest, like she had been bucked hard. The force was enough that Celestia's hooves were lifted off the ground, the white alicorn careening across the room before crashing against the throne room doors. It was enough to knock the wind from Celestia's chest, but still the alicorn quickly clamored to her hooves, looking in the direction of the spell.

In the moment that Celestia had been thrown from the spell, all the ponies that had been around the room converged. They all moved inside the ring drawn on the floor, and standing in the very center of them all was Nexus. He looked across the room at Celestia, turquoise eyes dancing in joyous victory.

“For the night eternal, for Equestria's true queen!” Nexus called, grinning devilishly before his horn lit up. Energy began to crackle across the stone columns that Celestia had filled with magic, the harsh red color growing brighter and brighter as it enveloped Nexus and all the ponies. Then, with a final flash, it all disappeared.

It was all too late that Celestia realized the treachery that thrived in her royal court.

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*FLASH... KRAC-CROOO-OOOM!*

Nexus and the rest of the Children of Nightmare appeared in the center of Ponyville, their arrival announced with the a flash of light and a rumbling sound of thunder ten times louder than what any storm could produce. It was a thunder that woke every pony in the town from their sleep, many drawing outside to see where the noise had come from.

“Form a perimeter.” Nexus ordered to the ponies around him. “Let none draw near. The spell that will finish our queen’s resurrection has already begun, but it will take time for her to draw in the magic needed.”

The cult members nodded, quickly spreading out. The earth ponies and unicorns forming a tight ring around the still glowing red pillars while the pegasi took to the sky and circled, becoming a threatening air force. Other members of the cult, who had been told to wait in Ponyville, quickly began to rush from the nearby homes and shops. They brought with them saddle bags filled with cloaks, the members of the order donning their uniforms as their eyes changed to turquoise.

Among those who had been waiting in Ponyville were Night Wind, Gray Gale, and Stonewall... Nexus’s lieutenants. Joined by them was another in armor, a thin earth pony with a regal blue mane and a gently turned mustache. To the locals, he was known as [Horte Cuisine](#), a waiter at a local restaurant. To a certain pink pony, he had been a spy to be hunted.

To Nexus, Horte Cuisine was the informant that was his eyes and ears at the Learn and Play Day held by Ponyville Elementary. Somepony in the community, one who would not be suspected of being an agent. After all, who would think that a pony that brings food would be working for a cult bent on resurrecting a fallen princess?

“So, is it really her?” Gray Gale asked, looking at the black filly who was still sedated from Celestia’s spell.

“Yes; while Celestia would doubt this filly’s power, I can see the truth. Our queen lies before us.” Nexus offered, looking skyward. The red glowing columns were acting as magnets, drawing in the wild magical energy that lingered in the air. Among that magic were trails of indigo smoke, which began to circle and spin, spiraling down like water in a whirlpool before

feeding into the sleeping Nyx, who physically began to mature, quickly outgrowing her vest, glasses, and headband.

“Should we be worried about the villagers?” Stonewall asked, seeing the crowd of ponies growing very quickly, drawn in by the bright glowing red color of the columns, which was visible from everywhere in Ponyville.

“Our brothers and sisters will keep the crowd at bay, and Celestia will not be able to follow us quickly enough to interfere. Look, our queen is already at half the size she should be. We have nothing to fear... no pony can stop us.”

=====

Twilight galloped at a full sprint, Spike barely holding onto her back. She had seen the flash of light, heard the thunder, but more importantly, sensed the powerful surge of magic. She didn't know what was going on, but for that much magic to be used up at one moment, it had to be something very large.

The unicorn rounded a corner, and saw the huge crowd of ponies gathered around the glowing red stone columns in the center of the town. She also saw the ponies that were keeping the crowd away from said columns, recognizing the cloaks. It was the cult who had ponynapped her.

Twilight felt her blood turn to ice, the unicorn entering a panic as she tried to push her way through the crowd and get closer. She didn't know what the cult was doing in the center of the village, but Twilight knew it was going to be bad. Still, she would try to stop them, she couldn't just let them finish whatever spell they were casting. She just had to get through the crowd, she just had to...

A crack of thunder made Twilight stop in her tracks, eyes turning skyward. Above the town, trails of indigo smoke circled, conducting sparks of fierce blue energy. The crack came as a ring of energy spread out across in the air, spreading across the night sky like a ripple across a pond.

The ring of energy, however, then abruptly stopped and began flowing back, drawing into a single tight sphere in the air right about the center of town. The indigo smoke and other lingering magics in the air were drawn

into the growing sphere of energy, and then, with a single crack of thunder, all that energy flowed down to the center of the spell being cast.

=====

Nyx awoke just as the last of the magic fed into her, body crackling with the final traces of energy. She lifted herself off the ground, standing up tall, taller than she had ever stood before in her life.

No... that wasn't quite true. She... she was this tall before; it had been... a long time ago...

She looked down as the five ponies that had been standing around her quickly backed up and bowed.

And, as Nyx looked upon them, she began to smile... and then laugh. It wasn't the giggle of a filly, but more of a dry chuckle, one that grew in volume, becoming loud and haughty. The alicorn then raised her head, looking at the night sky as her laughter became crazed and maniacal, ringing loudly over the dead silence that had fallen in Ponyville.

It was the laughter of somepony who had just realized a cruel and terrible truth.

Nyx finally understood everything. She understood why she woke up in the Everfree Forest when she did. She understood why she had memories of fighting Twilight and wanting to harm her. She understood why she was able to say those lines in that school play so well. And she finally understood why she looked the way she did.

She remembered what she was. *Who* she was.

Nyx turned her gaze away from the night sky, looking at the huge crowd of ponies that filled the center of Ponyville. Ponies who had towered over her mere moments before, but were now dwarfed by her stature. She remembered another time when she stood over them, looking upon their sun-loving faces. How, on the day of the Summer Sun celebration, they looked on her with fear, even though they didn't know who she was.

Now they were looking over her with *greater* fear, for they now *knew* who she was. It should have made her happy to be able to inspire such fear in them.

Instead...it made her feel uneasy....but why?

Nyx gave a very slight shake of the head to banish the thought, putting on a wicked smile before beginning to speak, her voice managing to be regal, smooth, and threatening all at the same time.

“My friends, neighbors... *subjects*... why do you look at me with such fear? You of all ponies should feel honored! For you will be able to tell your children and your children’s children that it was *you* who witnessed the queen’s rebirth. That it was *you* who witness her moment of accession and enlightenment... and that it was *you* who showed her kindness when she was incomplete.”

Nyx took a step forward, moving past the cloaked ponies who bowed to her and moving into the crowd of scared Ponyville residents. Those she approached quickly moved out of the way, clearing a path, as they *should*.

“Yes, I was among you this entire time, though I was by no means trying to deceive you... though it is very easily within my power. No, I truly had no idea where I was, what was going on... who I was. And yet you graciously accepted me into your town. When I take what is rightfully mine, I’ll be sure to remember your kindness... as long as you obey and give me the respect I deserve.”

Nyx continued to walk through the crowd, none of them daring to move, speak, or take their eyes off her.

“There are, however, those who deserved to be mentioned. Ponies who deserve special thanks, for without them, I may not be standing here tonight with my mind clear and power returned. Among those are two *very* special fillies. Now, I wonder where they could be.

“Ah, there you are...Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon.”

An entire group of ponies suddenly back away, the two young fillies in question shaking in their hooves as Nyx now towered over them like a giant.

“Yes, everypony, take a good, long look at these two. When I was still but a meek, cowardly, and curious filly, it was *they* who set me up with a prank. It was *they* who sent me into the Everfree Forest, and it was there, amongst the trees, that I came across some of the lingering bits of my magic. It was because of *them* that I regained my most important memories... and regained enough of my power to attract the attention of those who would finish the spell to give me a life and body of my own, no longer bound to that foal Luna.

“Yes, you could say that *they* are *directly* and *fully* responsible for me being able to stand among you as I am, for without that fateful trip, I may have simply stayed a harmless, timid little filly.”

Nyx leaned her head down, staring at the two fillies who were now terrified beyond belief from the very same pony they had once bullied and teased. Nyx, however, gave them the most gentlest of smiles.

“Thank you, you two,” She offered in her sweetest voice, which felt like poison in the fillies’ ears. “From the bottom of my heart for helping me change from the biggest loser in Ponyville into the mare I was meant to be.”

At that, Nyx stood up, smirking maliciously as several ponies began to glare at the two fillies with the highest levels of anger and contempt. Oh yes... this was a revenge *much* sweeter than merely pulling them into a mud pit. Maybe her new subjects might do her a favor and take care of the two eyesores for her.

“N-Nyx? Is that you?... Why are you doing this? What’s wrong?”

Nyx froze at hearing the small voice, her body become rigid as her dragon-shaped iris pulsated feverishly with surprise. She let her eyes fall to the source of the voice, seeing a single young filly staring up at her. It was Scootaloo, the orange pegasus looking at Nyx, not with eyes filled with fear, but ones brimming with sadness and confusion. For a moment, Nyx remembered that Scootaloo lived near the center of town, which would explain why she was so close to the center of the crowd.



She, however, could not stand to meet Scootaloo's gaze or speak a direct reply to the orange pegasus' question. She could only close her eyes, making a violent turn as she moved through the crowd in the opposite direction.

She only stopped after taking several steps, casting her head back, but keeping her eyes closed: she couldn't bring herself to look at Scootaloo.

"No, I am not Nyx... or, more accurately, I am no longer her."

With those few words spoken, Nyx then turned her head forward again. She then caught sight of a familiar mulberry pony in the crowd, Cheerilee. Instantly, Nyx's mind latched onto verbally attacking the teacher, if only to forget that Scootaloo was watching her from a distance.

"Hello, Cheerilee, my teacher. Yes, I am no longer Nyx... but I am sure *you* could tell all these ponies who I really am. After all, *you* saw the resemblance just as everypony else did. And was it not *you* who called me 'wicked and dastardly'? Was that not why I was perfect for the part in your little spring play?"

Cheerilee shakily took a few steps back, cringing as Nyx's mystical indigo mane held and flicked at her chin. The fear was easy to see, Cheerilee watching the mane as if it would strike out like a snake at any moment. After a few tense seconds, Nyx stepped away, her eyes drawn to a pony that was forcing her way through the crowd.

Within moments the purple unicorn pushed herself through a final few ponies, coming to a stop directly in front of Nyx... her eyes streaming with tears, some fresh while others were long dry.

"Hello, Twilight, my savior, my best friend...and the only one I have ever called 'mother'." Nyx said coolly. "Are you here to *lie* to me again? Tell me that I'm not a 'bitter, vengeance driven mare'? Tell me that the most obvious answer is wrong even when the proof is right in front of your face?! *Try to comfort me with false words!?*

"Or are you here to apologize to me? To beg and grovel at my hooves? Admit that you were *wrong* to keep this information from me? Or were you

simply so desperate to care for a filly of your own that you didn't *want* to believe the truth?"

Twilight couldn't bring herself to say anything, which made Nyx furrowed her brows and grit her teeth.

"*Well?!? ANSWER ME!!!*" Nyx shouted, anger welling up inside her from the mere sight of Twilight. It was, however, not anger from Twilight's past actions, from the part she played in Nyx's defeat. It was not even anger spawned by the pain of having her very soul and mind torn apart by the Elements of Harmony, at least that wasn't the core of her current anger.

No, the core of the anger she felt came from a sense of betrayal. From her feeling that she had been lied to...had been abandoned. She could feel her eyes trying to water, but, by sheer will and anger, Nightmare Moon made them stop and dry.

"You have nothing to say... fine, because your actions have said enough already. You *conspired* with Celestia, you *let* her take me away. You abandoned the only pony you called a daughter. I guess I know now just how *little* I meant to you."

Nightmare Moon took a step forward, shutting her eyes to force back the tears that were trying to form as she offered a few final words to Twilight.

"I am *ashamed* that I had ever called you my mother."

The black alicorn moved back towards the center of the crowd, to the area that had been left clear by the ponies in cloaks. The five who had been standing around her when she first awakened galloped up, quickly bowing as the blue unicorn spoke.

"Nightmare Moon, our most powerful and majestic Queen." The unicorn of the group offered to Nyx who, despite her missing armor, eye shadow, and cutie mark, was truly the same mare they had long to see in her full glory.

"Celestia and Luna can be seen in the distance along with a large contingent of the royal guard. It would not be wise to linger here and face the Royal Sisters. You are reborn, but your power may not be complete.

Let us retreat so that you can gather your strength, so that, when you are ready, you can bring the princesses beneath your hoof.”

Nyx looked at the unicorn, smiling. Already there were those who were willing to accept her, to regard her with the same respect they had for the Royal Sisters.

“I assume you have someplace prepared.”

“Of course, my Queen.”

The black alicorn offered a smile, turning back to the crowd.

“Remember this night well,” She called out. “For it marks the beginning of the end of the old order of Equestria! Treasure the days that come, for they shall be your last! For soon, the night shall last forever and I, Nightmare Moon, shall be Equestria’s one true queen!”

With that Nightmare Moon broke into her maniacal laughter, her mystical mane swirling. The magical aura consumed all the cloaked cult ponies, drawing them up in the swirling magic before, in a single flash, they all disappeared into the night, leaving the shocked ponies of Ponyville to stand in utter silence.

The silence continued even when Celestia and Luna landed with the royal guards, arriving far too late. Nightmare Moon had returned.

# Chapter 11

## The Castle of Nightmare

They were too late. Even when they had her in their sights, they were too late. Celestia's worst fears came true. Nyx had become Nightmare Moon... and Celestia had been the one to deliver the filly to those who would complete her transformation.

Luna had lingered in Ponyville to find out more about what happened while Celestia had gone straight back to Canterlot. Upon arriving at the palace, the sun princess ordered for her generals to be summoned. She didn't care if they needed to be roused from their beds or pulled from their spouses. She needed to speak with them immediately, and was making rare use of her royal rank to ensure it happened.

That had been a few minutes prior, her most trusted guards off to fetch the generals. This left Celestia with a moment to herself, and as she waited for the generals to begin to arrive, the sun princess decided to sit in her throne. She needed a moment to rest, both physically and mentally.

That moment, however, would be very short as Celestia heard the doors to the throne room open. She didn't think her generals could have arrived so quickly, and in truth they hadn't. The pony that had entered the room was Luna, the moon princess striding across the room quickly. Celestia rose from the throne and walked to meet her sister.

"Luna, I'm surprised you were able to return so quickly. Have you already finished interviewing the residents of Ponyville?"

"I delegated the task to a number of guards, because there is only one pony I want to talk to at the moment, and that pony is you. What have you been hiding from me?"

Celestia winced a bit, realizing the conversation she and her sister were about to have wasn't going to be one of their better ones. Still, the sun princess maintained her composure, putting on a caring face.

“I don’t know what you mean, Sister.”

“Don’t ‘Sister’ me, Celestia,” Luna countered. “ You *know* something about that mare that was just seen in Ponyville. The one that looks just like I used to and is vowing to bring eternal night to Equestria. Now, what. Have. You. Been. Hiding from me?”

Celestia turned, facing away from her sister, unable to look Luna in the eye as she began to recount the truth.

“Just a little after the end of winter, a cult ponynapped my personal student, Twilight Sparkle, as part of an elaborate spell that would have done the unthinkable. I am happy to say that Twilight suffered nothing worse than a very small cut on the hoof and some rope burns. The spell in question, however, was designed to take the shreds left behind when you were saved by the Elements of Harmony.”

“And do what?”

“The spell would have taken those shreds, the lingering magic and echos of the mare you used to be... and used them to create a new Nightmare Moon.”

“A... new Nightmare Moon?” Luna echoed in disbelief. “I.. what... How is that possible?!? I was Nightmare Moon! I became that mare when I let my anger and jealousy get the best of me! I became that mare when I stole magic to make myself more powerful... but all those powers and emotions were destroyed by the Elements of Harmony.”

“They were not destroyed, Luna. The Elements of Harmony are not a force of destruction. They could only separate you from the power and jealousy that once possessed you. What was left was in those shreds.”

“But how could power and some lingering echos of my emotions be enough to make a full grown mare?”

“I do not claim to fully understand it... but you know how magic works just as well as I do, Sister. Truly pure magic is a rare thing; any magic from a unicorn can carry with it an echo of its owner. It is why some spells are

stronger when driven by emotions, like anger or happiness. It is why no two unicorns have the same magic. Magic and the soul are very closely tied.

“And, because of this, I can only assume that an echo of the mare you used to be, an echo of Nightmare Moon, lingered in the magic that the Elements of Harmony left behind. *That* was what the resurrection spell was meant to focus and strengthen, drawing in not only the magic in the shreds but any of your old power that remained in the Everfree Forest. Anything the spell couldn’t find, it would replace with naturally occurring magic.

“It would be from that concentration of magic and your lingering emotions and thoughts that the cult would have formed a new Nightmare Moon.”

“But... but even if the spell formed a body from that... for Nightmare Moon to even be alive, for her to be a completely separate mare from me...wouldn’t that mean she would now also have to have her own-”

“It doesn’t matter anymore.” Celestia interrupted, turning back to face Luna. “She is back, and we must stand against her.”

“Sister, I do not disagree with you on that fact, but... if all of this happened just after winter, then why am I only finding out now?”

“I didn’t want to have to burden you with this knowledge. It was something that I was supposed to deal with, so you wouldn’t have to.”

“Wouldn’t have to?!? Celestia, what is *wrong* with you?! I was Nightmare Moon once! Everything that mare did was my fault! If, somehow, somepony were to bring that...that....pony back as a complete and separate mare, then it’s my fault for being her in the first place!”

“Luna, stop it! You aren’t responsi-”

“Yes I am! It’s all my fault!” Luna argued, turning her back on Celestia, the moon princess unable to stomach even looking at Celestia for the moment. “If I didn’t let my jealousy and anger get the better of me, we wouldn’t even be having this conversation in the first place! There wouldn’t be a Nightmare Moon if it weren’t for my mistakes!”

“Luna, I just felt that-”

"When were you even going to tell me about this?"

"Sister, please-"

"Were you...were you ever going to tell me about this?" Luna asked, turning her head to cast an accusing glare at the sun princess. Celestia didn't say anything...she couldn't say anything... and Luna got her answer from that silence. A look of disbelief grew on the moon princess' face as she turned back to face Celestia.

"....you weren't ever going to tell me anything... ever. You were hoping to keep this whole thing a secret!"

" I was only trying to protect you, keep you from having to-"

"Keep me from what?! Keep me from taking responsibility for my past mistakes? Keep from doing what I can for the sake of our kingdom, for our ponies?! Nightmare Moon, either as what I was or...or what she is now, is still my responsibility! You should have told me about this from the very beginning!"

"If anything, Celestia, the fact that she and I were once one and the same makes *me* more qualified to deal with this situation than *you* ever would be. At the very least, if our roles were reversed, I would have told you the truth."

"I know... and perhaps you are a better mare than me in that regard... but you've had enough to deal with. You've only just started to settle back into castle life, have only just caught up with Equestria's history and laws. You've been working yourself to the bone to catch up so you can help me rule... and, I just didn't want to burden you further. I only did it as your sister."

Luna huffed, stomped a hoof... but after a few tense moments nodded her head.

"I understand Tia... I do. You've been protective of me since I came back, and I appreciate that. Yet, while you are my older sister, we are *both*

princesses of this kingdom. I hope in the future you'll trust me enough to tell me when things like this happen."

"I... I will try, Sister."

"I guess that will have to do for the moment." Luna grumbled, choosing to focus her frustration on more pressing matters. "Now, we should send word to your student and her friends. We will need the Elements of Harmony if we want to be sure we can defeat this new Nightmare Moon."

"We... may not be able to rely on the Elements of Harmony this time, Luna." Celestia admitted.

Luna tilted her head a little to the side. "Why not?"

"...do you remember Twilight's cousin, Nyx? The one who played Nightmare Moon during the children's play at the last Spring Festival?"

"Of course; I sat next to her at the dinner we shared after the performance. She kept asking me questions about the moon, stars, and everything else that popped into her head. Why do you ask?"

"That filly.... was never Twilight's cousin, nor is she even related to Twilight by any familial connection. She had never been seen before until her arrival in Ponyville a few days after Twilight was rescued."

Luna needed a moment to take in the information, her mind drawing the connections. When she realized why Celestia would be bringing up Nyx, the moon princess's jaw dropped in shock as her eyes narrowed in disbelief.

"No.....no, you can't be saying... You...you don't mean to tell me that-"

"The filly known as Nyx was the product of the original resurrection spell, an incomplete copy of Nightmare Moon. And... this evening the cult got their hooves on her and were able to finish the spell they started... returning to Nyx all the memories and powers she once possessed. Nyx... was always Nightmare Moon, at least in part."



“But... how did the cult get a hold of her? The few ponies I spoke with in Ponyville before departing said that the cult appeared, and that Nightmare Moon rose up from the center of the spell. They never saw anypony be taken into the ritual, and surely Twilight would have sent a letter to you if she feared Nyx was missing.”

“No... she wouldn’t have.”

“Why?”

“Because... I was the one that took Nyx... I was the one that delivered her into the hoofs of that cult.” Celestia seethed in anger, tossing her head at her own blindness.

“WHAT!? Celestia, how could... I mean not telling me is one thing but... did you *actually* take Nyx from Twilight? What could have possessed you to... do you realize that...”

“I AM FULLY AWARE OF WHAT I’VE DONE!” The sun princess snapped, cutting off Luna’s accusation.

“But... *why* would you take Nyx away from Twilight?” Luna asked, the tone of her voice demanding an answer.

“For sometime now, I have feared that Nyx was Nightmare Moon, or at least somehow tied to the spell cast just after winter. At a school function, she was able to turn another pony into a tree and displayed other magic well beyond any unicorn, even Twilight. My dreams became tormented with images of her growing into the mare you used to be and threatening everypony I care about.

“I... I had to be sure she wasn’t a threat. I had to know what I was dealing with, so I could act before she became a danger to Equestria... to Twilight.. to you. So... I spoke with Nexus, and he promised a spell that would allow me to glimpse Nyx’s soul. That way I could know for certain if she was a danger... and I took Nyx away from Twilight so that she could be tested.

“But, of *course*,” Celestia growled, frustration flaring, “It would seem the greatest threat came *not* from Nyx, but from Spell Nexus. He was attacked at the beginning of last fall, his home ransacked for the shreds of

Nightmare Moon. He was hospitalized for weeks... and he show no signs of treachery... and yet, he not only seems to be a member of that cult, but a high ranking one.

"He was once my student... why would be he betray me?"

"Why would you betray Twilight?" Luna asked, refocusing the conversation. "Don't you think she would have noticed if Nyx acted like the mare I used to be? Don't you think she would have sent you a letter if she feared something was wrong? You once told me you trusted Twilight completely... why would you doubt her on something so serious?"

"And why couldn't you just *wait*? If Nyx was going to become Nightmare Moon. there would have been warnings, signs... she wouldn't have just transformed overnight. Why did you have to act before there was an actual threat? You realize that it's your fault this happened, don't you? It's your fault Nightmare Moon-"

"I KNOW!!!" Celestia snapped, her composure breaking like a frail twig. The exhaustion and emotions that Celestia had been trying to control overwhelmed the princess. "Do you actually think for a moment that I *wanted* to do any of this?! To cause a dear student such pain? I do *not* need to be told the heinous nature of my actions! I went to Twilight's home to take the child, unaware of how much my student had grown to care for the filly. She had become like a mother, while I was only expecting a mere caregiver.

"But I could not wait for Nyx to become Nightmare Moon. I could not wait until that witch was standing on our doorstep with half of Equestria destroyed in her wake. I had to act preemptively. I had to be able to prepare, to get ready... so that if Nyx *did* change into Nightmare Moon, I would be ready to stop her before anypony got hurt."

"But why couldn't you wait, Celestia?" Luna asked as her disbelief-fueled rage turn into a steady simmer. "Why did you feel you had to act... why couldn't you wait?"

"Because the last time I waited, I lost you for a thousand years!" Celestia bellowed out, beginning to cry. "And... I... I-I don't want to lose you again....."

Luna's anger cooled as she watched Celestia, the sun princess panting as she was overcome by the guilt, the fear, and the pain in her heart, all things made worse by Celestia's near exhaustion from the stressful events of the day. The sun princess fought back her tears, but that did not stop a few from slipping down her cheeks.

"The last time I waited... the last time I decided to just wait and see if things would get better or worse... was when you were showing the first signs of your jealousy. I thought... I thought you would get through it. I thought that surely the ponies of Equestria would begin to appreciate your night as I did after every sunset and before every sunrise. I decided to wait... to let things work themselves out.

"And we both know what happened because of that.

"So condemn me for what I've done, Luna; it's no less than I deserve. I stole a daughter from a mother because I feared the monster she could become... and because of my actions, I made those fears a reality. But... I couldn't just sit by and wait. I couldn't give Nightmare Moon the chance to hurt the ponies I care about. I couldn't let her hurt Twilight... I couldn't let her hurt you... I just...

I couldn't stand by... and hope that things would work out... not again."

"Sister..." Luna began, her voice carrying the first comforting tones the moon princess had offered since the conversation had begun. Celestia, however, shied away from the comfort, turning and moving towards the throne.

"But I can't think about that now. I can't think of the what if's... what I should have done... what I could have done differently. I can only focus on what's ahead right now... which is the threat Nightmare Moon poses. I must be ready to stand against her."

"Not 'I', Sister... 'we'." Luna offered, moving up beside Celestia. "We are both princesses of this kingdom, and Nightmare Moon is a danger to ponies I care about too. Just as she threatens me, she threatens you... and I'm *not* going to let her hurt my big sister. We'll work together... we'll find

her... and if she won't listen to reason... we'll do what is necessary to protect Equestria."

Celestia smiled, nodding her head and leaning into Luna.

"Thank you, Luna... I... I don't think I could have faced this if you weren't beside me."

"That's what sisters are for, Tia."

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Nightmare Moon stood in an elegant hall carved out of fine marble. Regal columns flanked either side of the hall, rising to a high, arched ceiling which was dotted with diamonds to portray a copy of the nighttime sky, a particularly large diamond set to mimic the full moon. Rich purple curtains were draped everywhere, and torches glowed with magical white gems, making the room much like the elegant night.

"Does it please you, my Queen?" Spell Nexus asked, bowing respectfully.

"It does." Nightmare Moon replied, striding up to her new throne. Rich night-blue cushions set against rare, black oak from the dragon country. She sat down in the throne, wings fluttering as she settled into it. Nightmare Moon could only smile, looking across her room... her *throne* room.

"Though I am curious as to how you managed to construct such a grand room in secrecy."

"It is not just this room, my Queen, but a whole castle." Nexus replied, lifting his head. "We found unexpected allies in a clan of wild mutts known as the Diamond Dogs. They were a more than willing workforce once we promised to assist them in their search for the precious gemstones that fill this underground area.

"They dug out this entire cavern, and then assisted in the construction of the castle. Once you have defeated Celestia and Luna, there is but a few dozen feet of rock that separate this castle from the surface and, with your unmatched power, you could easily raise the castle to the surface... a proclamation of your new place as Equestria's ruler."

“And the Diamond Dogs were willing to put forth so effort for the gemstones? To what end?”

“We.... honestly do not know, Your Majesty. We never questioned why the Diamond Dogs wanted the gems... they just do. Perhaps they are like dragons, and eat them. Or perhaps they just like to roll around in piles of gemstones as hogs roll in mud. Still, whatever their purpose for wanting gems were, they were a strong, fast, and willing workforce.”

Nightmare Moon’s eye flashed, a spark of curiosity rising in her as she suddenly found herself wanting to know just what the Diamond Dogs did with the gems. What *did* they do with them? Did they really eat them? Roll around in them? But wouldn’t rolling around in them hurt? Or maybe they had really thick skin, just like how dragons had thick scales. Maybe they liked to make jewelry out of them, or used them on clothes!

Nightmare Moon couldn’t help but think of all kinds of questions. Where did they live? Did they live in the mines or did they have homes to go to? What did they eat? They obviously didn’t eat ponies if they were willing to work with Spell Nexus and the Children of Nightmare. Were they carnivores or omnivores?

Did they wear clothes, and if they did was was it all the time or only sometimes like ponies? How good were they at making clothes? Where did they get the cloth for their clothes? Did they use sheep or did they perhaps use the fur shaved from long-haired Diamond Dogs?

Did they have a form of government? Who was their leader? Did they recognize the Royal Pony Sisters or were their mines considered to be outside of Equestria? Nightmare Moon’s mind was boiling with questions, and she would have at least some of them answered.

“Spell Nexus, I want to see the leader of the Diamond Dogs. If their leader is unavailable or if they have no de facto leader, then I want to see at least three to five of them that are considered upstanding members of their community.”

Nexus looked up at Nightmare Moon with equal parts of curiosity, concern, and confusion.

“Forgive me, Your Highness, but... part of our agreement with the Diamond Dogs was that at the conclusion of the deal they would migrate much further into their tunnels. They haven’t been seen since.”

Nightmare Moon looked down at Nexus, her face utterly blank. She, subtly, sighed, closing her eyes.

“I see...how unfortunate. Still, if anypony happens to see a Diamond Dog, please pass on my message that I, Nightmare Moon, would like to keep communication open with them.”

“As you wish, Your Majesty.”

Nightmare Moon couldn’t help but frown a bit. She *hated* it when she couldn’t find the answer to a question. That was her vice, an insatiable curiosity that drove her to learn as much about a topic until she either knew everything about it or she couldn’t possibly think another question. It was why she loved to sit in Cheerilee’s classroom everyday when she was still in school. Oh, how she found such *joy* in learning new things from the mulberry pony who-

Nightmare Moon shut her eyes, forcing the thoughts that had started to run out of control in her mind back into line before she looked down upon Nexus. She could not think of those memories anymore; she was a queen. Cheerilee was no longer her teacher, just another subject that needed to be brought in line. That’s what they all were.

They were just subjects, nothing more.

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Nightmare Moon followed Nexus down one of the castle’s many halls, being given a grand tour of her new home. The castle really was beautiful, but... the alicorn wasn’t entirely sure about some of the decorations. Around almost every corner there was a mural, there was a statue, or there was something depicting her.

That alone would have been creepy, but it wasn’t just images of her standing or sitting regally. Each mural and statue depicted something. Her

standing over the beaten and defeated bodies of Celestia and Luna. Her casting a dark shadow over cowering ponies. They were all images of her triumph and the future Equestria could look forward to.

It was a dark future Nightmare Moon wasn't entirely sure she liked.

"And here is the royal library," Nexus offered, drawing the alicorn's attention away from the castle decorations as the pair entered the library. "Please forgive the lack of books on the shelves. We built it to be able to house the collection from the Canterlot palace, should you decide to keep this castle once you've overthrown the Royal Sisters."

Nightmare Moon looked upon the shelves which were mostly empty. It really was a beautiful room, towering bookshelves taking up the walls and a cool, dark color scheme. It would have been nice if Nightmare Moon didn't notice the painting above the library's fireplace showed her standing over charred, blackened ruins.

Looking away from the painting, Nightmare Moon took notice of the few pegasus ponies fluttering about, putting away some books that had been gathered for the collection.

"Why do all of you have eyes the same color as mine?" Nightmare Moon asked.

"It is your blessing, my Queen. As you may know, I was once the headmaster of Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns. Upon your initial defeat, she tasked me with disposing of your shredded remains. It was upon examining and interacting with those shreds that I became enlightened to your wisdom and power.

"It was on that same day my eyes turned into the turquoise color you see now, and it became a sign of the order. I bestow the gift of these eyes upon each pony who joins the Children of Nightmare, who pledges their service to you, the same blessing which grows and thrives within me."

Nightmare Moon found it a relatively interesting truth. Still, it was only a minor curiosity, and as Nexus guided her about the library, the alicorn let her dragon shaped eyes float across the shelves. One book caught her eye in particular.

Coming to a stop, Nightmare Moon used her magic to remove the book from the shelf, gently flipping it open to the title page. *Grand Tales of Equestria*.

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*"And with that final buck, the wolves were driven from the town," Twilight said as she glanced up from the book she was reading aloud. "And the ponies rejoiced as they were once again saved by the mare among them brave enough to stay out at night, the village's own black coated guardian: Nyx of the Night."*

*"And did you really name me after her!?" The filly alicorn asked in disbelief, Nyx snuggled into her bed as Twilight shut the book which had been the source of that evening's bedtime story.*

*"Yes... though I'll admit it was mostly because she's the only other pony I've heard of with a black coat." Twilight replied as she put the book down.*

*"Do... do you think I could be as brave as she was someday?"*

*"Of course. Being brave isn't like a special talent; you just have to be able to stand up against the things that scare you."*

*"Have you ever stand up to something really scary?"*

*"Well... this one time, my friends and I had to go face a dragon."*

*Nyx's eyes went wide. "Really!?"*

*"Oh yes. He was taking a nap in the nearby mountain, and his snoring was throwing all kinds of black smoke into the air. So, Celestia asked... hey, wait a minute! You just got a bedtime story, you don't need another."*

*"Awwwww..."*

*"I promise I'll tell you the story tomorrow night," Twilight assured, gently kissing Nyx on the forehead. "Now, go to sleep."*



*"Okay." Nyx replied with a yawn as she snuggled herself a little further under her covers.*

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"Your Majesty?"

Nightmare Moon shook her head, snapping the book shut and replacing it on the shelf.

"My apologies; I can get caught up in my reading."

"No apologies necessary, my Queen. This is, after all, your library. It is yours to enjoy whenever you see fit," Nexus replied. "Though there is still much of the castle to see."

"Then lead on. Let me see all that you have prepared for me, my faithful subject."

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"Here we have the guard barracks, where we train those new to the order to defend this castle. The good news is that word of your return is spreading, and those I have sent out to recruit new ponies to our cause are finding several eager to try and get on good terms with you. It would seem that not all of Equestria is foolish enough to stand against you."

Nightmare Moon didn't offer any words in reply as she saw soldiers in black armor attacking training dummies, each of which was dyed and designed to look like a familiar set of mares.

"Why do the training dummies look like Twilight Sparkle and the other ponies who bear the Elements of Harmony?"

"It is because they who are the greatest threat to you, my Queen. It was they who defeated you, and we shall not let them even draw close to this castle. Should they get it in their heads to attempt to bring their unified power against you again, they will be dealt with immediately."

This comment was punctuated as a guard attacked a training dummy that looked like Twilight Sparkle, and, with a single swift motion, beheaded it, the cotton stuffed head bouncing onto the ground.

“No.” Nightmare Moon stated firmly, her eyes fixed on the beheaded training dummy.

“My Queen?”

“Should the Bearers of the Elements of Harmony come to the castle, they are not to be harmed. Twilight Sparkle is to be brought directly to me and the rest of her friends locked in the dungeon until I have decided how I want to punish them for standing against me once before. The Elements of Harmony themselves are to be taken from them for safe keeping. They will all be dealt with by me when and how I see fit.”

“Of course.” Nexus replied, his smile positively devilish. “I can fully understand your desire to punish them with your own hooves.”

“Yes... and I want one of the training dummies brought to my bed chamber as well. One of the training dummies that looks like Twilight Sparkle... and it is to be intact.”

“It will be there before the end of the tour.”

=====

“The dining hall is, of course, spacious enough for any sort of event, should you ever be interested in holding a gala or other such frivolity.” Nexus explained as the pair walked alongside the long regal table. It was made of soft, brown oak, covered in a night-blue table cloth.

“You’ll also be happy to know we already have employed a royal chef who is eager to tickle your taste buds with some of his deserts.”

Without warning, Nightmare Moon found an eager unicorn standing beside her, levitating a filled-to-the-brim tray with expertly decorated cupcakes. The cupcakes had purple frosting above a black cake, with a single curl of white chocolate set delicately on top of the thick swirl of frosting.

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*“Seriously, who would have thought making cupcakes would be so hard?” Scootaloo grumbled, the four Cutie Mark Crusaders standing in the middle of an utterly messy and disorganized kitchen.*

*“I told you.” Apple Bloom said.*

*“So Girls, how are things going?” Pinkie Pie chirped, the earth pony sticking her head into the kitchen.*

*“Not so good,” Sweetie Belle admitted.*

*“Please don’t be mad about the mess!” Nyx begged.*

*“Oh Girls, I’m not mad! You should have seen the mess I made of the bakery when I first started working for the Cakes. After all, my special talent is throwing parties, not baking; it was something that took practice for me to get any good at.” Pinkie Pie reassured. “Now, why don’t we get this place cleaned up. Then I’ll show you how to make cupcakes one more time?”*

*The four fillies lit up, eagerly helping to clean up the mess and trying to make another batch of cupcakes. With Pinkie Pie offering close supervision and unending enthusiasm, each filly had a batch of cupcakes to take home that were, at the very least, passable, if not pretty darn good.*

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*“My Queen, do the cupcakes displease you?” Nexus asked, noticing Nightmare Moon had zoned out again.*

*“No.” She replied, using magic to gently nudge the tray away. “I am just not hungry at the moment. Have some delivered to my chamber. I will taste them later.”*

*The chef nodded, practically galloping off at that moment to place a select few of his desserts in the bedchamber while Nexus showed Nightmare Moon into the kitchen, to show her that it had all the modern conveniences and the capacity befitting a queen such as her.*

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“And we finally come to your private chambers, my Queen.” Nexus offered, his horn opening the large, elegant door. “You will find a pair of guards stationed outside at all hours, should you ever need any assistance. Only the finest furniture was selected and the decorations were picked out by myself. Does it please you?”

“Yes.” Nightmare Moon replied, barely even looking at the room as she stepped inside.

“I am honored to hear you say that, my Queen. Now, you are undoubtedly tired. I will leave you to rest, and when you are ready to begin the campaign to seize Equestria, simply have one of the guards come find me.”

“I will.” Nightmare Moon replied flatly, watching as Nexus offered a final bow before leaving. The great black alicorn glanced at the two guards set outside her room before she shut the door, locked it, and put up a magical barrier to block not only entry but sound as well. She then turned and truly took in the atmosphere and furnishings of the room.

Like the rest of the castle, it was decorated like the night sky, with dark blues and purples accented by moons and stars. A perfectly circular bed set in the dead center of the room, easily large enough to fit the princess-sized alicorn comfortably. It stood beneath an intricate fresco of the moon on the ceiling.

The walls were lined with the rest of the room’s furniture: a fireplace, a vanity mirror, a set of dressers, a few tables, a bookcase, a door to a small exterior balcony, and a writing desk. Everything somepony would need to enjoy a quiet night in their bedroom.

Nightmare Moon circled the room once, looking over all the new furniture before she turned her attention to the bed. Placed there were all the things she had requested during the day, carefully presented to her. The cupcakes from the chef and the training dummy of Twilight Sparkle.

She lifted the cupcakes first, gingerly taking a bite from one. They were good... so good that they reminded her of Pinkie Pie’s cupcakes. Hers were always so moist... so tasty... maybe the chef-

The cupcakes hit the door a moment later, thrown there by alicorn magic. They formed a sticky mess, slowly sliding down the wooden surface. Nightmare Moon glared at the cupcakes as if they were demons, and, as a final measure, she took the tray that had been holding the desserts and smashed it against the door as well, flattening the cupcakes. When she released her magical grip on the tray, the whole gooey mess slid down the door, leaving a streak of frosting and cupcake crumbs.

The next thing to fall under Nightmare Moon's hateful gaze was the training dummy of Twilight Sparkle. She lifted it up with her magical mane, holding the cotton stuffed doppelganger gingerly before her magic began to squeeze tightly around its neck.

Nightmare Moon stood there, strangling the lifeless doll for a few minutes before she threw it on the ground and proceeded to stomp on it. Time and again she brought her hooves down on the stuffed dummy and when it was leaking cotton from a number of holes, she lifted it up and threw it across the room, the mess flopping once before landing far beneath the alicorn's new writing desk.

Nightmare Moon let out a slow, heavy pant after the exertion of taking out her anger on the dummy of Twilight... and as the anger was burnt away, other emotions began to crawl to fill its place. Without even thinking about it, Nightmare Moon dropped down onto her bed, not even trying to find her pillow.

She lay there for a time, her eyes shut... but when she did open them, she saw herself staring back. A mirror placed along one part of the circular room's wall was what held the reflection. It was not a true vision of Nightmare Moon, not as many ponies knew her. She lacked her armor, she lacked her purple eye shadow... and oddly enough, she lacked her cutie mark. She was simply a very large, black alicorn, with a flowing mane of a star dotted nighttime sky... but that alone was enough.

She was Nightmare Moon, and soon everypony in Equestria would be her subject. She would rule with a iron hoof, and plunge the kingdom and Equestria into an eternal night.

After all, it was what she wanted... it was what was expected of her.

# Chapter 12

## Mother of a Nightmare

“Ah can’t believe Nyx turned out to be Nightmare Moon. It... it just makes about as much sense as a blue apple,” Applejack commented.

“I can’t believe you were in on it the whole time and didn’t tell us!” Dash snapped, glaring angrily at Rarity. The white unicorn in question immediately lifted up a hoof as she sat up defensively, batting her eyelashes several times.

“Twilight made me promise not to tell! And it’s not like she knew *either*,” Rarity argued, “or didn’t you notice that she was crying her eyes out after Nightmare Moon disappeared? I had to carry the poor thing all the way back to the library and tuck her into bed.”

“Do you think she will be all right?” Fluttershy asked.

“I... I don’t know, Dear.” Rarity admitted. “Twilight... Twilight is taking what happened very hard.”

“I’d be more surprised if she *didn’t*. She loved that little filly like she was her own,” Applejack pointed out.

“I’d try to cheer her up, but... the only way I know how to cheer up ponies is with parties... and Twilight doesn’t need a party right now...” Pinkie Pie said, her voice lacking much of its usual enthusiasm.

“No, she doesn’t. Right now, Twilight just need some time. But... I’m sure she’ll be back on her hooves soon.”

“She’d better! Nightmare Moon is alive. That means we need to stop her again, and we can’t use the Elements of Harmony without her.”

“Dash! Ssshh, Twilight will hear you!” Applejack scolded. Still, the five friends that currently talked in the main level of the library didn’t realize how well their voices carried in the old tree. Despite talking in quiet voices, their

words were able to bounce all the way up stairs and reach the bedroom, and Twilight's ears.

The unicorn laid in bed, eyes utterly red from crying as she stared out her window. She laid on the top of her bed, hugging a ripped purple vest, a bent headband, and a pair of cracked glasses to her chest, all that had been left in the center of Ponyville after Nyx became Nightmare Moon.

Twilight hugged these items to her chest as tightly as she could, but they offered her no comfort. They could not replace the little, black filly Twilight desperately desired to hug. The filly she wanted to be able to talk to, to beg forgiveness from. They couldn't replace Nyx.

She knew why she had done it... she knew why, and that simple fact was tearing up Twilight's insides like a Parasprite in a basket of apples. A pain that was only growing more numerous and ravenous with each passing second. Celestia... she was the princess and a mentor. Some would argue she was like a second mother to Twilight, considering how close the pair had gotten while the unicorn was at Celestia's school.

And when one of the ponies you trust in the world above all else, a pony who always seems to be right and knows just what to do, tells you... tells you that the filly you're caring for needs to be taken away, at least part of you wants to agree. She had fought, argued, but Celestia didn't waver, and, to Twilight, it became like she was trying to move the sun itself... an impossible task.

So part of her submitted, part of her agreed with what Celestia was saying and shut down. The logical part of her brain conceded, even though her heart and other parts of her were screaming for her to do something. She... she had just shut down... become shell-shocked. The thing she feared the most in the world happened right in front of her eyes, and she had been unable to stop it, unable to convince Celestia that Nyx wasn't a danger to anypony.

But then Nyx called out... called out to her mother, and Twilight realized what an idiot she was being... but it was too late. They were gone... and now all she had left of the filly she cared for like a daughter were her things.

But things couldn't replace Nyx... they would never be able to replace Nyx.

There was only one thing Twilight desired more than having the little filly back. She wanted to say she was sorry, to just say the words, whether or not she was forgiven. She honestly didn't deserve to be forgiven, but... she wanted somepony to know that she was sorry. That she'd take it all back if she could.

But there was only one pony those words would mean anything to, and Twilight had no clue where Nightmare Moon was. She had vanished, and despite the all-out search by the Equestrian army, there was still no sign of her. It was like she and the cult ponies just disappeared into thin air, which was actually an accurate description of the spell that was cast.

Twilight herself had tried a number of spells to locate the alicorn. Scrying Spells, locator spells... they all failed. Twilight could only guess that the cult were purposefully masking Nightmare Moon's location, to keep Celestia and Luna from finding out where they had hidden.

"Hey, did I tell you yet that I figured out who the spy was?" Pinkie Pie's voice echoed from the library's main floor, drawing Twilight's attention back to eavesdropping on her friends' conversation.

"Spy? What spy?" Applejack asked.

"There was a spy at the Learn and Play Day," Dash answered. "Pinkie Pie chased him around until he used The Stare to make her freeze up."

"Yea, and you know who it was? That waiter pony, [Horte Cuisine](#), from the cafe in town. I saw him standing with all those nasty cult ponies, and I recognized his mane and those creepy weepy turquoise eyes of his."

"Pinkie, they... um.... *a//* had turquoise eyes." Fluttershy pointed out.

"I know, but I could still tell it was him. When he saw me, my nose got scratchy and my ears got floppy. That means that somepony recognized me, and he was the only one looking at me."

"Well shoot, makes you wonder how many other ponies around town were working with those crazy ponies."



“Yes it does, Applejack, but I’m sure we’ll find out the extent of *that* particular poison in the morning, when we see which ponies are still around and which are missing.” Rarity offered.

Rainbow Dash said something after that, but Twilight didn’t hear it. The unicorn’s horn was glowing, stuffing her saddle bags with a number of different items. She then pushed open her bedroom window, jumping out onto the small balcony before using her magic to levitate herself down to the street below.

=====

Within minutes, Twilight had made her way to Horte Cuisine’s home, the waiter stallion and bachelor that lived a few blocks away from the restaurant where he worked. Twilight made no effort to be stealthy or discrete as she used her magic to force open the door. The home looked positively pleasant. Warm, welcoming, and very clean; not at all the kind of home Twilight would expect a cultist to live in.

Heading up stairs, Twilight found her way to the home’s one bedroom, again finding the furnishings warm and welcoming. She, however, wasn’t there to appreciate Horte’s taste in curtains. Moving over to the bed, Twilight magically opened her saddle bags, a number of items flying out. An enchanted map of Equestria, a few smooth stones to make the map lay flat, and then a book, *Skillful Seeking - Scrying and Searching Spells*.

Flipping open the book to a marked page, Twilight read the instructions and then quickly began to rummage through the room. She opened drawers, searched the closet, and utterly ransacked the room. She gathered bits of jewelry, pictures, anything and everything that was both small and something a pony might call personal.

With cloud of random items floating around her head, Twilight looked down at the book and read the instructions on the spell again. She had the magically prepared map and she had to have some item of Horte’s that was of great personal value. That would be enough to try and scry for the waiter’s location.

Because Twilight had a single hope: that, while Nightmare Moon was protected against scrying spells, some of the cultists were not.

Levitating each item she had collected above the map, Twilight cast the scrying spell, hoping it would lead her to Horte Cuisine, and, thus, to Nightmare Moon. For most of the items, the spell had little to no effect, and any item that failed to work was quickly tossed to the side.

The item that finally worked was an old pocket watch. When the scrying spell was cast upon it, a thin line of light formed between the watch to a place on the map. A smile crept onto the unicorn's face, seeing the scrying spell was pointing to an area near Ponyville.

Quickly dropping all the other items, Twilight set the watch onto the open spell book before turning her head. Horn shimmering, the unicorn drew out another map from her bag, setting it over top of the previous map. It took a moment for Twilight to enchant the second map so it would work with the scrying spell, but it was a task she accomplished all the same.

With the new map prepared, which was of Ponyville and the surrounding area, Twilight grabbed up the pocket watch again, focusing her magic as she called on the scrying spell again. The line of light formed, and Twilight took notice it was moving. The line was pointing to the edge of town, but was slowly moving away.

Twilight watch the spell anxiously for a time, watching as the place the line was pointing to moved farther away from Ponyville. Then, just as the line was starting to point to the area of the old gemstone quarries, the spell suddenly stopped working and the line disappeared. Twilight blinked a few times, looking up at the watch and wondering if she had done something wrong. The unicorn, however, couldn't find a flaw in her scrying spell... it was still working.

The spell, however, was being blocked.

Eyes flashing, Twilight used a quill to mark on the map where the scrying spell had last pointed before she quickly packed up all her things. She had a direction to go and a hunch, which was enough for her. Twilight made no effort to clean the mess she had left in the room upon her departure, finding it a very small way for her to get back at the earth pony who had been spying on her, her friends, and, undoubtedly, Nyx.

The sun was just starting to rise as Twilight set out from Horte Cuisine's home. While the unicorn had been up all night, she did not feel tired. She was a pony on a mission, with her eyes forward and her eyebrows tucked down in determination as she began walking in the direction of the distant gem quarries.

=====

"Twilight... Sugarcube... are you awake?" Applejack asked. The five friends of the purple unicorn had decided to spend the night at the library, just in case Twilight needed them or Nightmare Moon decided to attack. Each had slept through the night with their Element of Harmony necklace, and Spike had ensured Twilight's Tiara was safely tucked away in her bedside table. Not the best place to hide such an important artifact, but better than leaving it out in the open.

Applejack saw a mound beneath the covers of the bed, moving over close beside it.

"Sugarcube... I know your beatin' yerself up 'bout what happened, but... well, you can't just lie here mopin'. We got to go deal with Nightmare Moon before she can attack the princesses, and we can't do it without yer help."

Twilight didn't offer a reply, and, after a few anxious moments, Applejack reached out a hoof to poke the unicorn and make sure she was awake. When her hoof sunk deeper into the mound beneath the covers of the bed than it should have, the orange farm pony tore off the covers.

Where she thought Twilight had been lying was instead several strategically placed pillows, one with a note attached.

*By the time you read this, I will undoubtedly be long gone. There is something I have to do, and I won't let any of my friends or anypony else put themselves in danger trying to come with me. There are some things I have to say, to get off my chest... apologies that have to be voiced.*

*And there is only one pony I can say them to.*

*I do not know where I am going, and I doubt that I will return. I don't expect everypony to understand why I am doing this, but I have to see ~~Nightmare Moon~~ ~~Nyx~~*

*my daughter one more time. I have to tell her how sorry I am, even if she doesn't believe me.*

*Sincerely,  
Twilight Sparkle*

“Horse-feathers!” Applejack cursed. “Twilight, girl, what are you thinkin’?!”

=====

Twilight peaked around the corner, taking note of the two guards standing in the earthen tunnel. After reaching the empty rock quarries outside Ponyville, it hadn't taken long for the unicorn to figure out that she needed to head down into the elaborate tunnel network of the Diamond Dogs.

A few hours of navigating corridors and Twilight knew she was in the right place, having almost walked into a pair of patrolling guards. In a twisted mockery of Celestia's royal guard, the unicorns were wearing armor of a similar build but it was midnight blue, like the armor worn by Nightmare Moon. Also, like Celestia's soldiers, the armor was enchanted to change the coat color of the pony wearing it. The sturdy built unicorn stallions were a haunting, almost sickly gray tone beneath the armor.

She had managed to avoid most of the wandering patrols, but now Twilight faced a pair of guards that stood vigilantly at a single door in the tunnels. She had no clue what was behind the door. It could be where Nightmare Moon was or it could easily be a guard barracks filled with a whole platoon of armored soldiers.

Twilight slipped back behind the corner, having to swallow the nervous knot in her throat and shore up her courage. She then picked up a nearby loose gemstone with her magic, floating it in the air for a moment before chucking it a fair distance down the tunnel. The gemstone clattered against the stones, its tinkling noise echoing across the solid stone of the walls.

A few tense moments passed, but the guards did not move. When Twilight looked again, she saw the two unicorns hadn't moved an inch. They remained still as statues, minus their ears, which now stood in a little more

erect attention. The purple unicorn's attempt to draw the guards away from the door did nothing but make them more alert, a little fact that made Twilight grit her teeth in aggravation.

"Okay, time for another tactic." Twilight whispered, horn starting to glow. She'd have to do this quickly, but maybe it would work. Peeking out from behind the corner one more time, Twilight cast out her magic. The magic reached the door, and after taking a few moments to build strength, Twilight unleashed it.

The heavy wooden door swung open with a slam, crashing against the stone wall on the far side. Despite being trained, the two guards jumped a little when the door opened so suddenly. They quickly looked inside, trying to see who had thrown it open. Twilight, however, did the best she could to study and focus on the room beyond the door. She took in every detail she could, painting a picture in mind as long as she dared before hiding behind the corner again.

She then waited there until she heard the guards re-close the door, and then waited a little longer after that, to make sure they weren't going to come searching for her. When both of those conditions were satisfied, Twilight smiled and began picturing the far side of the door in her head, trying to recall every detail. When she held a solid image of the destination in mind, her horn glowed with magic and she disappeared in a flash.

Twilight didn't dare open her eyes for a moment, fearing she may have aimed incorrectly and appeared directly in front of the guards. Still, when nothing reached out to grab her the unicorn risked a look, and smiled when she saw she teleported to exactly where she wanted to be, on the far side of the door.

With guards bypassed and a new trick for getting by any future obstacles, Twilight continued down the tunnel. It went straight for a long time before ending in a right turn, and upon reaching the right turn, Twilight peaked around the corner and almost let out an audible gasp at what she saw.

A huge cavern had been carved out of the solid rock. It stretched on for what had to be twenty or thirty stories, and was easily several dozen city blocks wide across. Even more impressive what was built in the cavern. A castle, both elegant and terrifying, had been erected in the deep

underground cavern, its tallest tower just a few feet short of scrapping the ceiling.

It was undoubtedly the castle of Nightmare Moon, and Twilight was suddenly regretting not bringing her friends along. Still... she quickly shook this fear from her mind. If she had brought her friends along, it would be to face, and defeat, Nightmare Moon using the Elements of Harmony, and she... she couldn't be a part of that.

That wasn't why she had come searching for Nightmare Moon.

Twilight hung back in the small access tunnel for a time, watching the many patrols of guards that kept watch from the castle's high walls. As if being underground wasn't enough, the castle still had defensive walls, which only made Twilight's approach that more difficult.

Yet, remembering her trick for getting by the last pair of guards, Twilight began looking about the castle. She then saw an opening: a balcony on the tallest tower. Grinning to herself, Twilight focused her magic and teleported. With that single, simple spell the unicorn found herself standing on the balcony, having bypassed all of the castle's outer security.

She'd have to be sure to tell Princess Celestia about the trick. Her mentor would undoubtedly like to know how easy it was for the magically-inclined unicorn to sneak into such a heavily guarded castle by just popping around using her teleportation spell.

For the moment, however, Twilight shelved that thought and poked her head into the room the balcony was attached to. It seemed to be a room that existed only as a means of accessing the highest balcony of the castle, a room elegantly decorated with a night time sky on the ceiling and a map of Ponyville on the floor, but otherwise completely devoid of furniture. It seemed a shame to waste such a perfect room, but Twilight didn't think about it long as she moved towards the far stairwell and made her descent.

Twilight felt a lot less sure about what she was doing, having almost screamed when she came across a room filled with dismembered and broken training dummies. Training dummies that looked a great deal like her and her friends. After she saw a number of the dummies were missing their heads, Twilight couldn't help but lift a hoof to her neck and swallow

nervously. It was a good thing she had been able to avoid the castle guards so far.

After slipping back out of the storage closet she had hidden in, Twilight made sure the pair of patrolling guards were well past before she continued down the hallway. The castle was kept lit with a number of enchanted gemstones, the precious jewels a fairly easy to come by resource in the tunnel network of the Diamond Dogs. That, and with the castle so far underground there was no hope for natural lighting. It made sense that everything had to be lit with a non-burning light source.

These, however, were all side concerns. Twilight had been scouring the rooms for probably an hour with no sign of Nightmare Moon, but the castle was pretty large. There was also a chance Nightmare Moon was moving around. The alicorn could have moved to another part of the castle Twilight had already checked, for all the unicorn knew.

These worrisome thoughts were dispelled when Twilight heard another patrol of guards approaching, the unicorn quickly ducking into an open door. She didn't have time to shut the door without drawing suspicion, so Twilight hid in the dark room as she watched the guards pass by just outside.

The guards stepped into view, but with them was another pony... a pony Twilight recognized. Spell Nexus, the headmaster to Celestia's School of Gifted Unicorns. The purple unicorn could only panic and wonder why he was in the castle. Had he been ponynapped? Was he being held captive? Did Nightmare Moon want to torture him for information?

Despite the danger to herself, Twilight also saw an opportunity. If she set him free, he could go tell Celestia and Luna where Nightmare Moon was. That way, they could prepare and plan an attack against the castle. He was also a unicorn with a talent for magic, and that meant he might be able to wield the Element of Magic in her place. He could possibly complete the Elements of Harmony, since Twilight doubted she'd be leaving the castle once she presented herself to Nightmare Moon.

Before Twilight even really knew what she was doing, she jumped back into the corridor with her horn glowing. With a single resounding clang, she used her magic to smash the helmets of the two guards together, making

them slump over on the floor in a daze. Twilight then wrapped her magic around Spell Nexus and drug him away as she galloped down the halls, putting as much distance as possible between her and the guards she had just attacked.

For five minutes Twilight ran and, when she was finally satisfied that she wasn't being followed, she came to a stop and released Spell Nexus from her levitation magic, the blue unicorn looking at her in disbelief.

"Don't worry..." Twilight said between pants as she poked her head around a corner. "I don't know why Nightmare Moon ponynapped you, but you don't have to worry. I can get you out of here."

"But Miss Sparkle, what in the world are you doing down here? How did you even *find* this place?" Spell Nexus asked.

"My friend, Pinkie Pie, figured out that a pony in Ponyville named Horte Cuisine was part of this crazy cult. So I used a scrying spell on some of his things, and saw him moving towards the gemstone quarries before he suddenly disappeared. So, I guessed that there was really only one reason there would be protective spells over the quarries."

"But how did you get by the guards?"

"Oh, that was easy." Twilight replied, still looking around the corner to make sure no guards were coming. "I know a teleportation spell, so I just popped by the guards whenever I needed to. That's actually how I plan to get you out of here. Once I'm sure the coast is clear, I'll teleport us up to a balcony. There, I can teleport us down to a cavern entrance. You'll have to find your own back to the surface from there, but I'm sure you can manage. I've got something I have to do here."

"Oh, I can assure you, Miss Sparkle, that won't be necessary."

"Won't be- what do you mean-"

**THUNK**

Twilight felt something firm strike the back of her head, and the world fell away in an instant. Behind her, Spell Nexus frowned, lowering the hoof he



had just used to strike Twilight. Nexus then lifted his head, drawing in a deep breath.

“GUARDS!”

Nexus’ bellow brought three pairs of guards running, including the pair that had been attacked by Twilight. Nexus looked at each set of guards, and pointed to them in turn.

“You two, take her to the dungeons, and, if she resists, *don’t* be gentle. You two, go fetch the best unicorn sorcerers we have and tell them we need to expand the defensive spells. The anti-scrying spell needs to include Ponyville.”

“And you two,” Nexus said, pointing a hoof at the two guards who were supposed to be protecting him. “Be thankful I need you for something, otherwise you’d be in the dungeon for letting yourselves get defeated by single unicorn mare. Now, I want you to go and alert all the tunnel guards to be on the lookout for the Bearers of the Elements of Harmony. It sounds as if this one came here alone, but I do not want to be surprised if the others decide to show up.”

The three pairs of guards all snapped to attention and saluted, before quickly going about their tasks. Nexus followed the guards that carried the unconscious Twilight, smiling to himself gently.

“You shall be presented to the queen in time, Twilight. But first, I need to hear how you do that lovely little teleportation spell of yours. Can’t have other unicorns like you sneaking into the palace, now can we?”

=====

The pair of servants at the entrance of the throne room pushed the large doors open, quickly bowing as Nightmare Moon stepped through. The fallen princess had been returned to the frightful image so many ponies knew her by. She once again had on her purple eye shadow, something to accent her otherwise utterly black appearance, and she was once again clad in her regal armor. Elegant horse shoes, a chest plate with a crescent moon, her neck plate, and the sleek helmet which fit her head so perfectly.

All that was missing was her cutie mark, something that perturbed Nightmare Moon to no end. She was a full grown alicorn. a queen, and yet she was *still* a blank flank. Nexus had offered an explanation that her original cutie mark was actually Luna's cutie mark, that it had been the moon princess' special talent to move the moon across the sky. Now that she had her own body, and was her own mare, Nexus surmised that Nightmare Moon might have a different special talent.

He then, of course, quickly went about flattering Nightmare Moon endlessly, saying her Cutie Mark would undoubtedly be a crown or something else that would appear when she defeated Celestia and Luna and took her rightful place as the queen of Equestria. Nightmare Moon let her thoughts linger on her blank flank for just a few minutes, before she looked to the far end of the throne room.

Nexus was standing near the throne, smiling gently as he drank from a glass of orange juice, his favorite drink. Orange juice was good, but Nightmare Moon had tasted some of Applejack's famous Sweet Apple Acres apple juice. Now *that* was a good juice. She had first tasted it with Twilight, when she was being introduced to the unicorn's friends for the first time. Applejack seemed scary, the earth pony so strong that she could properly buck an apple tree with a single kick, but the moment she tried that apple juice, she had-

Nightmare Moon closed her eyes and cracked her thoughts back into line, forcing herself to end her recollection of the memory as she sat in her throne.

"My Queen, you are looking positively radiant in your new armor."

"Thank you, Spell Nexus. The blacksmith you recruited does fine work."

"The finest, my Queen. You deserve nothing less."

"Is there anything else you wish for me to attend to today?"

"There is but one matter; a bit of good news."

"News?"

“Bring her in.” Nexus called. At the beckoning of the unicorn, a set of doors to the side of the throne room opened and a pair of guards came trotting in. They dragged between them a partially limp body, which they then deposited on the floor just below Nightmare Moon’s throne.

“She was found sneaking around the castle corridors, and it appears that she came here alone. A rather stupid thing to do, considering she is supposed to be the smartest one of her rag tag group of friends.”

Nexus chuckled at his own insult but Nightmare Moon remained still as stone. The breath had got caught in her chest, and her eyes were fixed on the battered figure on the floor below her.

It was Twilight Sparkle, and the unicorn looked like she had been on the losing end of a brutal fight. Her mane and coat were a mess and she was covered in small nicks and scratches. The unicorn’s right eye was puffy and swollen, like she had been hit in the face.

“Stand before your queen!” Nexus barked, using a bit of magic to lift Twilight off the ground. The sudden movement seemed to snap the unicorn out of her stupor, her legs flailing around a moment until she realized she was being levitated. When Nexus was sure Twilight would be able to stand on her own hooves, he lowered her back to the ground. And Twilight did stand, though she lifted up her front right leg, as if it hurt to put weight down on it.

“So, how do you wish to have her dealt with, my Queen? I can only imagine some of the tortures you could inflict upon her... and then, after you’ve had your revenge, perhaps a beheading? Or maybe it would send a more powerful message to have her hanged?”

“Leave us.”

Nexus was a little caught off-guard.

“Pardon, my Queen?”

“*Leave. Us.*” Nightmare Moon seethed, her dragon eyes focusing on Nexus in a firm, angered gaze. “No other pony is to be in this room *except* me and Twilight, and no pony is to enter until I call for you.”

“Of... of course.” Nexus partially stammered, quickly galloping around the hall. He did not have to echo Nightmare Moon’s orders to any of the ponies who had been in the room, all of them quickly fleeing and locking the doors in. Nexus was the last to leave, slipping out the front entrance. Nightmare Moon waited until she heard a click of the door’s great locks before she turned her gaze back to Twilight.

The alicorn rose from her throne, wings spreading wide as she cast her shadow across Twilight, the unicorn taking an anxious step back in fear, the terror glinting in Twilight’s one unharmed eye.

“What are *you* doing here?” Nightmare Moon asked, her voice dripping with hatred and paranoia. “Have you come to try and purify me as you did before? Come to use the Elements of Harmony to save Equestria? Have you come to destroy what you helped protect? To fix the mistake you made believing I was not Nightmare Moon!?”

“I... I... I...”

The black alicorn slammed a hoof.

“WHY ARE YOU HERE?!?”

“I came to say I’m sorry.”

Twilight’s words echoed hauntingly across the hall, the unicorn’s voice lingering in the air. Nightmare Moon remained still as stone for a time, but then she stepped back. The alicorn folded her wings and sat back down in her throne.

“It is too late for apologies. I have learned just how much....or rather, how *little* I meant to you when you let Celestia take me away.”

“But-”

“Don’t try to lie to me. I see through your charade. Celestia came to visit, you two *talked* in private... and then she came into the library kitchen, saying she wants to let me have a ride in her chariot. Of course, I was naive enough to believe her... but you knew what was going on. You knew,

and that's why couldn't even *look* at me when she was taking me out the door. You *conspired* with her *against* me... you knew what she was going to do, and you. Did. *Nothing* to stop her."

"Please, Nyx... I'm so sorry." Twilight said, looking up at Nightmare Moon through her one good eye, the other still completely swollen shut.

"My name is not Nyx. It is Nightmare Moon."

"You can call yourself what you want: Nightmare Moon, Queen Moon, the Empress of Equestria. You'll always be Nyx to me."

Nightmare Moon's gaze hardened.

"Oh, how so *very* sentimental of you, Twilight Sparkle. Pity that sentiment wasn't there when Celestia was taking me away. Though, now that I think about it, you probably *wanted* her to take me away."

"No... no Nyx I didn't-

"Yes you did! You saw who I was, you saw the truth, and, no matter how much you denied it, you were *scared* of what I would become. So you let Celestia take me away... just take me away, so you could forget about me and go back to your happy *little* life. Go back... and pretend... pretend like I was never even there..."

"I... I was scared. I'll admit it," Twilight said, trying to defend herself, taking a single anxious step closer to the alicorn. "Celestia was scared too... and... and she convinced me that... I had to let her take you... so that you could be tested. So she could be sure whether or not you were Nightmare Moon. And, if you weren't, she was going to bring you back... Celestia never meant to take you away forever."

"Sweet lies and nothing more."

"No, Nyx, it's the truth. I heard you call out to me... and not as Twilight. You called out to me as your mother... and I realized what I was doing, and I tried to stop Celestia... I raced out and I was ready to fight Celestia for you... but you two were already gone. I wanted to stop it Nyx... I did."

“A touching story... but that’s *all* it is.” Nightmare Moon snipped, “No matter what your intentions were, it was your *actions* that set all this in motion. It is through your actions that you have done ill against me, and for which you shall receive no forgiveness.

“And do not think I have forgotten the stream of *lies* you have filled my head with. You said I was not Nightmare Moon, that I could never *be* her. Well, if that was true, we wouldn’t be sitting here would we? I have to wonder if the lie was more for your own sake than my own... if you weren’t trying to deny the truth that stared you in the face.”

“It wasn’t a lie, Nyx... and it still isn’t a lie... or at least, it doesn’t have to be.”

“You are *truly* in denial when you can look upon me as I am and *not* see me as Nightmare Moon.”

“Nyx, ponies choose who they want to be. We all have that choice, and so do you. You are only Nightmare Moon if you want to be... and the Nyx I know wouldn’t want to be doing all this. She wouldn’t want to take over Equestria, or make her friends worry.”

“*Worry?! HA!* Who is foalish enough to worry about *me?!?*”

“I can think of three... three Crusaders who were your closest friends.”

A memory flashed in Nightmare Moon’s mind, of Scootaloo staring up at her. The one pony in the crowd, besides Twilight, who hadn’t looked at her in fear. Whose eyes had been filled with concern and sadness.

“They will need to learn that their friend is never coming back,” Nightmare Moon offered coldly, taking her gaze off of Twilight. “That she’s gone forever.”

“She doesn’t have to be, Nyx, you don’t have to be-”

“ENOUGH!!” Nightmare Moon bellowed, the command punctuated by the alicorn’s wings unfurling. Still, Nyx held back her anger for the moment and folded her wings again, tucking them against her side.

“Nexus! Guards! Come in here at once!”

The blue unicorn and two guards slipped into the room within seconds, the three galloping up and bowing to their queen.

“You called, Your Highness?”

“With Twilight Sparkle in our custody, there is no threat posed by the Elements of Harmony. Celestia and Luna are defenseless. We must simply wait for the prime opportunity to strike against the Royal Sisters. Soon, I will fly for Canterlot to take the kingdom, but for this day, I wish to retire to my chambers and rest.”

“Of course, Your Excellence. And what would you have me do with Twilight Sparkle?”

“You have done *quite* enough already, Spell Nexus,” Nightmare Moon seethed, her words dripping with her disappointment.

“Y-your Majesty?”

Nightmare Moon once again stood up and unfolded her wings, only this time she was walking towards Spell Nexus, forcing the dark blue unicorn to back up into a wall as the alicorn kept getting closer and closer, towering over him.

“Do you... at all... recall my direct orders, Nexus?”

“Your majesty, I-”

“I told you... that if *any* of the Bearers of the Elements of Harmony were found, they were to be captured *unharm*ed, and Twilight Sparkle directly brought to me *immediately*.”

“Y-your Highness, you must understand-”

“**SILENCE FOAL!!!**” Nightmare Moon snapped, “I gave you *one* simple order, and you failed to follow in spirit or letter! Give me one *single* reason why I shouldn’t have your head for this insubordination!”

“My...m-my queen, I... I-I...” Spell Nexus stuttered, trying to find words to defend his actions. When he was unable to do that, the unicorn dropped to the floor, bowing as low as he could. “Forgive me, Your Highness... I acted only in your best interest. I beg you, have mercy.”

Nightmare Moon remained silent for a time, glaring daggers at Nexus, but she then huffed and turned, walking back to her throne.

“I will forgive this *grave* sin you have committed against me and show you the mercy you don’t deserve, *if* you can follow my next order to the letter and without fail.”

“Anything, Your Highness.”

Nightmare Moon turned and sat in her throne, tucking her wings away carefully.

“Twilight Sparkle is to be taken to the dungeon and be given a cell of her own. Her injuries are to be tended by the finest doctors we have available, given the same treatment you would to any of our own ponies. Ensure that she has a proper blanket and pillow. She is also to be fed properly while she is in our custody, and not just bread and water. She is to be given *real* food, food you *yourself* would be willing to eat, Nexus.”

“But... but Your Highness. She-”

**“DO YOU QUESTION MY WILL, NEXUS!?!”** Nightmare Moon snapped, wings unfurling again out of instinct. “I will deal with Twilight Sparkle in *my* own way at a time of *my* choosing. Until then, you shall follow my orders and treat her as I have directed!

“And... if I discover that she has been harmed in *any* way, by you *or* the guards again, it will not be *her* hanging from the gallows! *Do I make myself clear?!?”*

“O... of, of course Your Majesty. I will see to it personally.” Nexus replied, quickly scampering up to the throne and offering another bow.

“Good. And to ensure that you obey, here is a small taste of my wrath as punishment, to remind you of the price of disobedience.”



With that, a small bolt of lightning crackled from Nightmare Moon's mane, striking Nexus on his flank. The unicorn would have probably yelped in pain, but instead bit back the cry as he continued to bow. The bolt left a small mark of singed hair and it had done no real damage, but it was quite painful and the spot would be tender for days to come.

Once the worst of the pain had subsided, Nexus stood and rushed off, intending to relay the black alicorn's orders lest he further experienced his master's wrath. Nightmare Moon watched Nexus leave, and only once Nexus was out of the room did she allow herself a few breaths to calm down. She then glanced over those ponies who were still in the room, a few guards and Twilight. Most were looking at her in fear, some of the guards visibly shaking from the display of anger and power.

"I am now retiring for the day," Nightmare Moon announced as she stood from her throne, forcing herself to look straight as she walked past Twilight and towards the throne room doors. She then glanced at two guards, who quickly snapped to attention under gaze.

"I expect you to escort Twilight Sparkle to her cell and ensure that everything I told Spell Nexus to do is done. Report to me directly if anypony has failed to obey my orders."

"Yes, my Queen," the two guards replied in unison before moving over to Twilight. Where the unicorn had been tossed roughly into the room, the guards now handled her as if she was the most fragile thing in the world. They escorted the unicorn from the room, even helping Twilight keep the weight off of her one hurt hoof.

Doing everything they could to keep Nightmare Moon from redirecting her anger to them.

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Nightmare Moon moved into her bedroom and slammed the door behind herself, throwing up her magical sound proofing as she began to stomp around the room. She was tempted to topple furniture, to cause destruction for the sake of it. She was just so angry...

But the source of the anger was making Nightmare Moon's mind spin. She was not angry at Twilight, even after all the unicorn had done wrong. No, her anger stemmed from a far different source. She was enraged at Nexus and her guards for what they did to Twilight: for bring the unicorn to her, her hooves beaten and with a black eye.

The worst part was that Nightmare Moon didn't understand *why* she was angry. What did *she* care? Twilight had given her up, abandoned her... had lied to her constantly about the fact she wasn't Nightmare Moon. She should have been happy to see the unicorn get a small fraction of the punishment she deserved. Nexus was right; Twilight deserved be tortured before finally being hung from the gallows... but then, why was she still so angry that the unicorn had been hurt?

Nightmare Moon stomped around her room for half an hour, her mind going in circles as she tried to figure out why she had been so angry, why she was *still* so angry. She even tried throwing a few books across the room, doing anything to try and relieve her rage, but it still remained.

The alicorn's horn began to glow, armor floating off and landing in a pile at the door. She needed to think, and the armor was starting to become too much of a distraction. It fit her well, but armor was always in some way uncomfortable.

Armor removed, Nightmare Moon flopped down onto her bed, not even bothering to clean off her eye shadow as she tossed and turned violently, trying to expend the frustration that just continued to boil inside her.

Who was she angry at? Was it Twilight? Was it Nexus? Was it the guards? Who was it?

The alicorn finally stopped tossing, flopping to one side as her eyes gazed off into the distance. Once again, the alicorn found herself staring at the mirror on one side of her room... and for the first time in the half hour of rage and confusion, Nightmare Moon asked herself a single, silent question.

Was she angry with herself?

It was a thought that took root like a seed and began to grow into other thoughts. The first of those thoughts was it didn't make any sense. What reason did *she* have to be angry with herself? She was a queen, with loyal servants and soon a kingdom of her own. If anything, she should be happy of how successful she was going to be.

But it was success that became tainted with the thought of Twilight in the dungeons below. Did she really want to succeed when it meant Twilight had to get hurt? Not just physically either. Nightmare Moon was about to attack Celestia, the pony that was a teacher and mentor to Twilight, a pony the unicorn cared about deeply. How much would it hurt Twilight when she heard the news that Celestia had been defeated.

And why did she even care?

Nightmare Moon's rage returned, but only for a few moments before she just gave up. The alicorn was mentally exhausted, and she decided to try and disregard her thoughts as she turned over on the bed, putting her back to the mirror.

Her gaze now was focused on her writing desk, and soon drifted to the item that had been thrown beneath it the previous evening: the mostly destroyed training dummy of Twilight Sparkle. Without even really thinking about it, Nightmare Moon lifted her head, horn glowing as she drew out the tattered and ripped dummy. Her magic flowed into it, the ripped threads repairing themselves, as the puffs of cotton were drawn back inside. Within moments, the training dummy was once again in pristine condition.

After looking at the dummy for a time, Nightmare Moon floated it into bed beside her, hooking her legs around it. The material was rough, but, with a bit more magic, Nightmare Moon turned the sturdy, unforgiving potato bag fabric into something softer, a substance that felt almost like a real pony coat. In her legs, the training dummy became much more a doll.

Her grip on the life sized doll tightened as Nightmare Moon thought of Twilight, alone, in the dungeons, in pain from her injuries... in greater pain because of what the alicorn had said and done. Nightmare Moon had seen it when the unicorn was in the throne room. There was true remorse in her eyes. Twilight meant every word she said, every apology she offered.

But Twilight was wrong about one thing. She was Nightmare Moon. She was the Mare in the Moon. There was no escaping the truth, and, thus, there was no escaping being Nightmare Moon.

She was Nightmare Moon... and she could never be Nyx again.

# Chapter 13

## All Hail The Queen

CLANG... CLANG      CLANG... CLANG      CLANG... CLANG

“Move move MOVE! I want this changing of the guard done NOW!” One of the guard captains bellowed, stomping along the battlements of the royal palace, his rough, dry voice echoing off the stone castle like thunder. Armored soldiers were running quickly in every direction, their armor glinting in the last traces of the setting sun.

In the few, short minutes, several dozen soldiers had run off the battlements, only to be replaced by an equal number of new guards. The new guards stood in a line, standing in stiff attention as the guard captain walked down the line. White pegasi, dark gray unicorns, and iron gray earth ponies, the armor of the castle enchanted so that no matter what pony put on the metal, they looked the same from the outside. Some of the soldiers were even female, but the magic hid them all the same.

“All right, I want you ponies to listen and listen GOOD!” The captain snapped as he spun and began walking back down the line. “I’m NOT going to sugar coat it: Equestria. Is. In. Crisis! We’ve been on high alert since Nightmare Moon’s return seven days ago, and though the royal guard is known for its diligence and endurance, even they need to rest.

“So that’s where *you* newbies from the training camp come in. You will EACH be paired off with a seasoned army pony, and you WILL patrol this castle and I EXPECT you give it your all. Luna is currently leading the armies in the search for Nightmare Moon while Celestia rests, and we’re going to make this the BEST night of sleep she’s ever had, AREN’T WE?!”

“Sir, yes Sir!” The line of newly recruited soldiers retorted.

“So you keep your EYES on the skies and horizon. NO PONY gets close to the castle, NO PONY disturbs Celestia, and, if you see Nightmare Moon, I expect you to do. Your. Duty. DO YOU UNDERSTAND!?”

“Sir, yes Sir!”

“GOOD! Now report to your posts,” The guard captain finished, the line of soldiers quickly dispersing. The several dozen new recruits each quickly met up with one of the seasoned veterans that were still on duty, forming teams of two as they began to patrol the castle.

The night wore on slowly as the moon rose up into the heavens. The night was still, quiet, and, for many of the seasoned soldiers, it all felt too quiet. The new recruits also began to act a little jittery, but most kept their mouths shut and just patrolled. One, however, chose to break the silence.

“So... uh... what have you heard about Nightmare Moon?” The young unicorn asked as she and the senior guard she had been paired with rounded a corner in the castle’s many hallways.

“Nothing good.”

“I... I heard from another guard that Nightmare Moon is actually more powerful than Celestia. That she can shape shift, and turn into a cloud. That she can-”

“Kid, take a breath and stop thinking about it,” The veteran guard lectured, keeping his tone flat and professional. “ You’ll never make it through the shift if you psych yourself out.”

“Sorry, sorry... I-I just, I’m worried.”

“Well, you’d be a foal not to be, but you can’t let that get to ya. Just try and think about something else.”

“Oh... okay... uh... s-so, where is... um... where is Luna and the rest of the regular army?”

“In the Manehatten area, doing aerial and magical sweeps for anything out of the ordinary.”

“Manehatten... that’s a few hours away flying, isn’t it?

“A few hours for a normal pegasus, maybe an hour for Luna.”

“But... what if Nightmare Moon attacks the castle?” The younger guard asked nervously, glancing around at the shadows of the hallway. “W-won’t it take too long for Luna to get back?”

“The second anypony sees a sign of Nightmare Moon, we’ve got some of the best and brightest unicorns ready to cast some protective hocus pocus. We’ll hold our ground... and by the time Nightmare Moon gets through us, Luna will be back.

“Nightmare Moon may be strong, but she can’t take on both princesses at the same time.” The veteran guard assured, letting his voice become a little kinder.

“So... uh, where are the protective spells?”

“Library; where else would egg-heads set up something like that?”

“And where is Celestia?”

“She should be in her bed chamber resting, though I’ve heard from some servants she’s been pacing the halls the past few nights. Can’t really blame her. I’d be anxious too if I knew Nightmare Moon was out to get me.”

“Wonderful... that’s... that’s good to know.” The younger guard said, her voice shifting a little in tone. It was enough of a change that the veteran guard turned, wanting to ask the recruit what was wrong. The words, however, never left his mouth as the unicorn found himself in a indigo cloud. His shouts of panic muffled, and in time the guard fell silent.

When the cloud pulled away, he slumped over onto the floor, lost in a deep sleep.

All around the castle, the new recruits were doing the same thing, each attacking the veteran guards they had been paired with. Some of the recruits then made their way to the library, slipping in and putting the unicorns that would have cast the protective wards to sleep. In a few, short minutes, every defender in the castle had been dealt with.

And with the castle guard defeated, the traitorous new recruits began to break into clouds of smoke, these clouds zipping and whipping through the halls of the castle before forming into a single mass just outside Celestia's bed chamber.

When all the clouds had gathered, the indigo mist swirled and, from it, Nightmare Moon materialized. The alicorn smiled, looking down at one of the guards she had just put to sleep and giving his helmet a gentle tap.

"Nexus was right; this really was too easy," Nightmare Moon mused, letting her voice return to its normal tone. "So eager were the guards to fill their ranks with fresh minds and eyes that, when a whole group of ponies arrived at the training grounds, they were more than willing to put me... all of me, to work."

The alicorn had used the same trick she had used on Rainbow Dash. Nightmare Moon divided herself into multiple clones that then took on the shape of other ponies. For the cyan pegasus, she had become a trio of aerial aces, the Shadowbolts. In a much grander example of her shape shifting power, she had taken the place of several dozen guards in training, who had been kept from reaching their duties by Nexus and the Children of Nightmare.

It had been interesting being an army of ponies. Nightmare Moon had never before divide herself up into so many copies, but it had served its purpose. The castle was undefended, no word of alarm had been sent to Luna... and Nightmare Moon had Celestia all to herself. It was a grand gambit of a plan, one Nexus hadn't entirely approved of, since it meant sparing the castle guard.

Still, Nightmare Moon found herself... uneasy about dealing with the guards in a more permanent manner. That was, however, a minor concern at the moment. The alicorn instead focused on the reason why she was in the castle. Glancing about for a moment, Nightmare Moon got her bearings, and started to walk down one of the castle halls, beginning her search for Celestia.

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The first room Nightmare Moon had checked was Celestia's bed chambers, where the alicorn should have been resting. But, she was not there, and so Nightmare Moon was forced to begin searching the rest of the castle. She worked her way down from one of the towers, checking every room for Celestia. It was a search she had time for; Luna would not return to the castle before dawn, but Nightmare Moon was beginning to fear Celestia may have sensed something was wrong and fled.

Nearing the ground floor of the castle, Nightmare Moon was about to round a corner in the hallway, when a noise began to reach her ears: hoofsteps. Almost instantly, the alicorn had turned into a cloud of smoke, disguising herself once again as a rookie pegasus guard. She then waited a few moments for the hoofsteps to get closer before she rounded the corner quickly, jumping out to confront the unknown pony.

"HALT! Who goes there?"

The pony in question jumped, fumbling with his unicorn magic as he tried to keep the covered tray he was carrying from hitting the floor. It was a frantic few seconds of juggling, but eventually the unicorn got a hold of the tray and breathed a sigh of relief before looking up at the disguised Nightmare Moon.

"My-my apologies, I am Silver Platter; I work in the royal kitchens." The unicorn stallion offered hurriedly, thankful that it was only a guard that had startled him.

"Only guards are supposed to be out at this hour." Nightmare Moon snipped, disguising her voice so she sounded like one of the young recruits. "What are you doing?"

"Delivering a meal to Celestia."

Nightmare Moon let her fake anger cool, relaxing her body as she folded her wings.

"Isn't it rather late for Celestia to be eating?"

"Yes, but her pet phoenix delivered the order to the kitchen, and I'm not *exactly* in a place to question the princess' eating habits."

"I suppose not." Nightmare Moon offered with a chuckle as an idea formed in her head, "But I cannot allow anypony to wander the halls. I will escort you to the princess... though... I do not know where she is."

"Oh, Celestia has requested the meal be brought to the throne room." Silver Platter replied as he walked up beside the guard.

"Then I will allow you to set the pace." Nightmare Moon replied, shifting as she and the unicorn began to walk down the castle halls.

"I'm honestly surprised I didn't run into a guard sooner," Silver Platter admitted, the stallion trying to make some small talk. "And don't you ponies usually walk around in pairs?"

"I'm just a reserve brought in so that the normal royal guard can rest, and there aren't enough of us to keep paired patrols."

"I guess that makes sense. The royal guard has probably been getting less sleep than Celestia and Luna, pulling double and triple shifts if what I've heard is true. From what I heard, Celestia tried to tell them all this wasn't necessary, that she and Luna could take care of Nightmare Moon together, but the generals wouldn't hear of it."

"So all the guards and precautions are being done against Celestia's wishes?"

Silver Platter nodded.

"Yes ma'am, but what else are we supposed to do? The princesses are in danger, and if we don't try and protect them, no pony will."

"So you would face Nightmare Moon, despite being horribly out matched, just to protect Celestia?"

"Me? Oh heavens no!" Silver Platter replied, laughing nervously. "I'm just a unicorn that's loves bringing good food to good ponies. But that's what you and the other guards are doing, and I can respect that."

"T-thank you..." Nightmare Moon choked out, the words tasting rotten in her mouth. She shouldn't have been accepting thanks when *she* was the one that the guards and princesses feared. Still, Nightmare Moon kept her composure. She kept quiet for a time, letting the last conversation subject die in the silence before bringing up another, since the servant pony seemed a bit nervous.

"What are you bringing the princess?"

"Nothing much... a lot of comfort food actually, though I can certainly understand why she wants it. Stressful times, after all." Silver Platter began as he levitated the plate he was carrying lower and lifted up the lid. "We've got a bowl of Maroon Carrot Soup, a few freshly picked apples from the princess' golden apple tree, and a very large slice of cloud cake with a frosting flower."

"But that soup is purple."

"But of course! Maroon carrots are purple, so it would make sense that soup made from them would be purple. That, and they are sweeter in flavor than most common carrots."

"I prefer celery soup myself," Nightmare Moon offered as Silver Platter put the lid back on the serving tray, and levitated both high above his head. The pair rounded a corner and a set of very large doors came into view.

"And I'm a fan of tomato soup." The unicorn waiter smiled. "But, it looks like we're here. If you wouldn't mind, could you wait out here for a moment? It will just take me a couple minutes to give Celestia her meal and then you can escort me back to the kitchen."

"I don't believe that will be necessary."

"Why's that?"

"Because you'll be asleep." Nightmare Moon explained, and before Silver Platter could turn around the alicorn had enveloped him in the indigo cloud that was her body. It was but a few moments before the waiter lay fast asleep on the floor, Nightmare Moon reforming herself into the waiter's exact copy as she held the covered serving tray aloft in her magic.

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Celestia sat back in her throne, staring mindlessly at the ceiling. She was tired, and would have rather been asleep, but... sleep was not coming easily to the princess. Too much weighed on her mind. Anxiety of wondering when Nightmare Moon would attack, concern for Luna, and fear for what had happened to Twilight Sparkle, since no pony had seen or heard from her student in days.

*KNOCK... KNOCK...*

Celestia perked her ears up, moving her gaze from the ceiling to the throne room doors as a figure poked his head inside.

"My apologies if I disturbed you, Your Highness, but I have the meal you requested."

"Thank you, Silver Platter." Celestia greeted; she had made it a point to know the name of everypony that worked at the castle. "And I do apologize for making a request like this so late in the evening."

"No apologies necessary, Your Highness," Silver Platter replied as he crossed the room and presented the serving tray for the princess. "Though I hope you do not mind if I linger. That way I can take the dishes back to the kitchen once you've finished."

"I do not mind in the slightest." Celestia said with a smile as she used her own magic to remove the lid from the serving tray. She sniffed the warm soup, the aroma's offering some comfort for the princess. While few knew about it, and even fewer would admit it, Celestia had a tendency to eat when she was anxious, to seek comfort in sweet and savory foods.

A habit that, thankfully, didn't cause Celestia too much trouble since she was rarely truly nervous, but after Nightmare Moon was dealt with, she would need to put herself on a diet to get her eating habits back in order. She had indulged in cloud cake a few too many times over the past week. The pegasus-made dessert was her great weakness, at least when it came to food.

The soup danced across the princess's tongue and warmed her insides, while the apples from her golden apple tree offered a crisp freshness unmatched by any other fruit in the kingdom. And, finally, each bite of the cloud cake melted in the princess's mouth, coating her tongue in its light, rich flavor.

The last thing to meet Celestia's tongue was the large frosting flower that had been on top of the slice of cloud cake, the sun princess saving the thick, sugary decoration for last. A smile slipped onto the alicorn's face as she leaned back in her throne and enjoyed the lingering flavors in her mouth.

"I trust the meal was to your liking?" Silver Platter asked as he took the empty tray in his magic, setting it off to one side before starting to walk around the back of the throne.

"It was delicious; be sure to extend my thanks to the kitchen staff. I may just be able to get to sleep tonight thanks to that meal."

"Good... everypony deserves a good *last* meal."

Celestia snapped her head to the side, watching as a figure stepped out from behind her throne. Where Silver Platter had been the pony to move behind the regal seat, the pony that stepped into Celestia's vision was decidedly *not* the unicorn waiter.

Nightmare Moon smiled slyly as she positioned herself directly in front of Celestia's throne, having returned to her normal form.

"How... how did you get in here?"

"You should be more careful when bringing in new recruits, Celestia; they aren't always as loyal as your normal guards."

"So, what happened? Did some of your cultists infiltrate the castle?"

"Like I needed them to do this." Nightmare Moon mused, breaking into a cloud. The cloud divided itself into multiple pieces, those pieces floating down to the floor just below the throne before they manifested themselves

into several dozen of Celestia's guards, though they all looked up at the princesses with the black alicorn's turquoise eyes.

"It would seem you are just as powerful as you were a thousand years ago, even though you lack the power Luna currently possess."

"You can thank Spell Nexus for that. Whatever power Luna retained was replaced by power drawn from the Everfree Forest," Nightmare Moon explained as she reformed herself.

"And what of my guards and servants? I can only imagine you went through them to get to me."

"Don't worry your pretty little head, Celestia; I have no quarrel with them. I merely put your guards asleep, and now they are catching up on the rest they deprived themselves of by protecting you. As to your servants, they are unaware of what occurs, except for Silver Platter. He sleeps in the hallway just outside this room."

"You... didn't hurt anypony?"

"I had no need to."

"You had no need to bring lightning down on the ponies at the Summer Sun Celebration, and yet you had no qualms doing so then," Celestia attested as she rose from her throne, starting to walk down towards Nightmare Moon. "Now you are showing mercy and restraint. Perhaps, despite your appearance, you are not the same mare I once knew."

"HA! You're just as delusional as Twilight Sparkle."

"Twilight... so I take it you know where my student is."

"She's in my dungeon." Nightmare Moon answered, moving away as Celestia reached the bottom of her very large and extravagant throne. The pair of alicorns then began to circle each other in the center of the throne room, Celestia bristling at the mention of her student, while Nightmare Moon wore a smug smile, just to spite the sun princess.

"And how did she end up there?"

“She came to me, if you would believe it. I would have thought you’d taught her better than to go running to the very ponies that would want to capture her, but that’s what she did. She wanted to sell me some sob story about how sorry she was for what happened. It was *truly* pathetic.”

“Yet you let her live, even though, as long as she is alive, the Elements of Harmony are a threat to you.”

“I will tell you what I told Spell Nexus. I will deal with Twilight Sparkle in my own way and in my own time, ” Nightmare Moon snipped, horn beginning to glow. “Besides, you have more important things to be worried about, Celestia.”

Nightmare Moon’s magic surged, and in the air beside the alicorn a magical blade took shape. It was forged of what looked like black metal that shined and flashed like calm water beneath the night sky. While alicorns were very powerful, they were not truly immortal. Their strength came from the amount of magic they held, and the best tool to counter that magic was a weapon of pure arcane energy, much like the sword Nightmare Moon now wielded.

“But why would you give Twilight’s friends a chance to rescue her? Why would you risk them reuniting and using of the Elements of Harmony?” Celestia asked as she formed her own magical sword, holding it in a defensive position as she and Nightmare Moon continued to circle one another.

“They pose no danger while I have Twilight, and they have no hope of rescuing her. Should they try, my guards would capture them. They would be brought before me, unharmed, so that I would be able to decide their fate.”

“Unharmed?” Celestia echoed, cocking an eyebrow. “You ordered your forces to have them brought to you unharmed?”

“I will *not* let Spell Nexus, or any pony, take the vengeance I *deserve* for what those ponies did to me at the last Summer Sun Celebration.”

“Then what do you intend to do with them?”

"Whatever / see fit. Their fate is in my hooves, and nopony, neither you nor Nexus, has any right to question my decisions. I am *above* reproach."

"You speak as if you and Nexus are not seeing eye to eye."

Nightmare Moon laughed, though she made it a point to keep her sword raised.

"He is a foal who believes he knows my every desire, but I am not so easily understood by such common ponies. He knows of my desire to seize Equestria, and he acts to support that, as he should. It was, however, his hooves that hurt Twilight, and it was his belief that I would have her hanged or beheaded, that such a thing was my desire."

"And isn't it? Would it not be simpler for you to let him do as he wishes with Twilight?"

"Nopony hurts Twilight except ME!"

Nightmare Moon struck out, launching herself at Celestia as she swung her sword in a wide arch. The sun princess blocked the blow, the clang of metal striking metal echoing across the throne room walls. Nightmare Moon then attempted a thrust, but Celestia spread her wings. With a single powerful flap, she threw herself back, dodging the blade and putting more distance between herself and Nightmare Moon.

"I do not wish to fight you," Celestia said, raising her blade as she blocked a downward swing from Nightmare Moon, the two magical swords clashing with a resounding clang.

"Then surrender yourself!" The black alicorn snapped, pressing her blade against Celestia's, trying to break the princess's defense by sheer force. Celestia, however, would not be so easily defeated, as a careful turn of her blade sent Nightmare Moon's sword off to the side. Celestia then proceeded to bring up the butt of her sword, the blade connecting with Nightmare Moon's throat.

The sudden thrust of the sword's blunt hilt into her neck caused Nightmare Moon to stumble back, coughing and wheezing from the blow. Celestia,



however, did not press her attack, and instead stayed on the far side of the throne room as she lowered her sword.

“Answer me this: have you hurt Twilight Sparkle?”

“N-no,” Nightmare Moon choked out. “She... she has been recovering from the injuries given to her by Nexus, under the care of my castle’s doctor.”

“You are caring for her?”

“I am having her injuries treated simply so that she can properly appreciate the pain I will induce when I take my due justice for what she’s done!”

“And what has she done, Nightmare Moon?”

“Don’t speak as if you don’t know!” Nightmare Moon yelled, her words dripping with loathing as she recovered from Celestia’s blow. “She betrayed, lied to, and, above all, abandoned me!”

“Listen to me, Nightmare.... no. Listen to me, Nyx. I’m sorry; I did not want to take you away from Twilight forcibly, and I had every intention of returning you to her the next morning.”

Nightmare Moon was unable to stop the tears welding up in her eyes as she thought back to that fateful day. “Lies... nothing but lies to distract me. You and Twilight conspired against me that night. Twilight knew what you were going to do, and she did nothing to stop it. She *wanted* you to take me away. She... didn’t want me anymore.”

“Nyx, that is *not* true. Twilight tried to convince me you weren’t a danger, that I didn’t have to take you away from her. She didn’t want to let you go. ”

“But she did... and she did *nothing* while you took me away, and I will *never* forgive her for it.”

“But-”

“Don’t think I’ll ever forgive you either! It’s your fault! Everything is *your* fault! *You* allowed the ponies of the past to ignore the night sky, turning Luna into me! *You* sent your student to Ponyville where she and her friends

murdered me with the Elements of Harmony! *You* took me away from Ponyville, from my simple, ignorant life!

“Everything is your fault, and now it’s time for you to pay for *your* sins!”

Nightmare Moon, having regained her strength, lashed out, springing into the air as she soared across the room while yelling in a furious rage. She brought her sword beneath her, the alicorn swiping at Celestia as she flew by. Celestia dodged to the left, spinning herself around as the black alicorn landed and resumed her ground attack, sparks soaring into the air as their blades clashed again and again.

Once Celestia saw an opening she acted, but not to strike down Nightmare Moon. When the black alicorn overextended one of her attacks, Celestia was able to spin around and buck, her hooves hitting Nightmare Moon's side and sending the black alicorn flying across the room. She would have likely crashed into a wall, but with a flutter of her wings Nightmare Moon was able to right herself and land, skidding across the floor.

“Nyx, please, I implore you, end this senseless fight. I promise-”

Nightmare Moon ignored Celestia and instead swung her sword, her and the sun princess's blades clashing as the black alicorn put all her strength behind her sword. It was enough to force Celestia’s blade out of the way. Before the sun princess could dodge, the tip of Nightmare Moon’s sword nicked the Celestia’s cheek, leaving a very small cut that began to weep blood.

“Stop calling me Nyx! I am not Nyx! I can *never* be Nyx because of you! Because of you, I am and will forever be Nightmare Moon! Now silence your tongue and quit holding back!” Nightmare Moon snapped, pointing her sword at Celestia. “Fight me, Coward!”

“I am *not* a coward,” Celestia retorted firmly as she wiped the blood away with her front, right hoof, “and I am not the only one holding back. You strike only to injure me, Nyx, and that is not the only time you have shown mercy. You put my guards to sleep, where in the past you wouldn't have batted an eye at seeing them injured or even dead. You speak of Twilight's betrayal, and yet you have not taken your vengeance against her. If you are truly Nightmare Moon, then why do you show mercy?”

“I... I...”

Nightmare Moon struggled with her words, her mind locking up as she was faced with Celestia’s questions. Why was she holding back? Why wasn’t she giving it her all? She had practiced with a sword as the guards in training, she knew how to fight, so why wasn’t going for the killing blows?

“Nyx...” Celestia began, lowering her sword as the fight slipped into a lull. “I know you’ve been hurt, I know you have a right to be angry at me, and I do not deserve forgiveness for the part I played in turning you into this. Yet, I also know this is not what you truly want. That last blow could have ended this fight but you held back. Please, end this farce and let us put our swords away. It is not too late.”

“Too late?” Nightmare Moon echoed, a inferno of rage building behind her eyes. “Too late?!?”

“It *was* **ALWAYS TOO LATE FOR ME!!!**” Nightmare Moon yelled, her voice growing until she was shouting at the top of her lungs. At the same time her mane started to surge and swirl, reflecting the storm of anger within the alicorn.

“You speak as if I had a chance, but you could *never* ignore what I’ve done in the past! That is why you feared me, why you took me away from Twilight! You offered me no chance to atone for my past, and thus I will not offer *you* any mercy! I. Hold. Back. No longer!”

Nightmare Moon launched herself Celestia, this time accompanying her charge with a volley of lightning bolts. Celestia managed to block a few of the arcane bolts with her sword, but she was struck by others. The bolts, however, did little more than cause the alicorn to wince, distracting her, but not keeping her from blocking Nightmare Moon’s sword strike.

But the rage and magic behind Nightmare Moon’s blade would prove too much. Before Celestia could retreat, her own sword began to crack and fracture before bursting apart beneath Nightmare Moon’s attack.

The breaking of the sword threw the sun princess into the air, the magic kicking back on her. She rolled and bounced across the throne room floor,

eventually coming to a stop at the base of her own throne. Shards of the shattered blade had speckled Celestia with small cuts, and her breathing was labored as the pain of the magical kickback pulsed in her body.

When Celestia was finally able to recover, it was too late. Nightmare Moon stood over her, the black magical blade she wielded placed against Celestia's neck. For a moment the pair just stared at each other.

But Celestia did not close her eyes, did not wait for the bitter end. Instead she looked directly into Nightmare Moon's gaze, and kept her vision locked with that of the other alicorn's. The moments turned into seconds, time slowly slipping by. Nightmare Moon remained still as stone, not removing her blade from Celestia's neck and yet, at the same time, not finishing the fight.

"You're still holding back."

"SHUT UP!!!" Nightmare Moon screamed, pressing the sword a little more firmly into Celestia's neck. "I could end this right now. I could kill you, get my revenge for everything you've done against me and truly have Equestria for my own. It would take but the slightest twitch, and your life would be forfeit."

"I implore you to stop, Nyx."

"Why? Why should I stop now? Give me one good reason why I shouldn't slash your throat!"

"Because, though you deny it, your actions and words still tell me that you care about Twilight," Celestia calmly explained. "So I ask you to stop, Nyx, before you do something you regret. This is your point of no return. If you finish me here, you will secure Equestria for your own, but across Equestria, even in Twilight's eyes, you shall be nothing but a monster."

Nightmare Moon's eyes pulsed wildly at the mention of Twilight. She thought of the unicorn, and could picture how distraught the unicorn would be after she learned of her mentor's death.

Nightmare Moon let her sword lower a few inches, but then shook her head firmly. She banished the thought from her mind and brought her sword

back against Celestia's neck. She gritted her teeth, tensed her muscles, and prepared her magic. She was going to do it, but she could not bring herself to look away from Celestia's eyes.

Yet, the damage had already been done. Her resolve was wavering, and after several moments the alicorn sighed. She lifted her blade from Celestia's neck, leaving the sword close to the alicorn's throat but no longer keeping the mystical weapon pressed against her opponent's white coat.

"Your time will come, but before then you will know the pain I've suffered," Nightmare Moon muttered, her voice lacking its usual forcefulness and instead sounding broken and hollow. "For a thousand years you shall be banished to the sun, held amongst its magic, just as I was held by the moon. And once you've known my suffering, only then shall I take my final revenge."

Nightmare Moon's magical mane began to wrap itself around Celestia, the fallen princess drawing on her magic as she prepared. When the magic had built up and Celestia was completely encased in the star field of a mane, Nightmare Moon began to form the banishment spell.

There was a flash of light, and, when Nightmare Moon removed her mane, the sun princess was gone. With the alicorn sent to her imprisonment, Nightmare Moon lifted her eyes. She stared at the now empty royal throne, and, after a few moments, she lifted her sword and thrust it forward, crying out in rage as she sunk the sword deep into the chair's back.

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Luna banked to one side, looking over Canterlot. It was nearly dawn, and she was returning to the castle so that Celestia could fly out and meet the army and continue the search for Nightmare Moon. Yet, as Luna drew close to the castle, she began to take notice how still... how quiet the castle was. She saw no guards moving along the battlements, saw no pony at all. Some servants should have at least been out tending to the early morning chores, but there was no pony to be seen.

The moon princess felt the air catch in her chest, and, with a few furious flaps of her wings, Luna surged forward towards the castle, diving down into the courtyard. She did not land nor slow down, instead throwing open

the castle doors with her magic as she soared through the castle halls. It was something Celestia was unable to do because of her size, but Luna was still small enough that her wingspan fit inside the corridors.

The corridors were deserted, utterly empty, and it did nothing to improve Luna's nerves. She flew with even greater speed, fearing the worst as she raced amongst the halls. Luna first went to Celestia's bedroom, but when the alicorn wasn't there Luna went to the next likely place: the throne room. When she couldn't sleep, Celestia always liked to go sit in the throne room.

"Sister? Sister, are you in here?" Luna called, landing in the throne room doorway. She looked first to the throne, desperately hoping to see Celestia there. But the throne was empty, with a large hole in the backing, and standing just in front of the throne was an all black alicorn, with a swirling magical mane and tail.

Luna felt herself tense when she saw Nightmare Moon, a figure she had only ever before seen reflected back in a mirror. Was this really what she used to look like? She could now see why so many ponies told scary stories about her. An all black mare, with a magical mane and tail of the night and piercing dragon eyes... it was the kind of things nightmares were made off.

But the small glimpse Luna could get of Nightmare Moon's eyes was not what she would have expected. The alicorn was not glaring at Celestia's throne nor was her expression happy. It was a look of confusion, the look that belonged to a mare that was having trouble understanding what she was doing.

It was a look Luna had seen looking back at her from a mirror when those eyes were her own.

Swallowing nervously, Luna drew up her courage and began to walk across the room. Though there was a regal red rug that ran from the door to Celestia's throne, the moon princess' hoof steps were still audible. Nightmare Moon's ears first swiveled to pick up on the sound, and when Luna was halfway across the room the black coated alicorn turned her head.

"You're back earlier than I expected... or perhaps it is later in the morning than I realize," Nightmare Moon remarked quietly, turning to face Luna.

"Where is Celestia?"

"Your precious sister is getting a taste of her own medicine. She has been banished to the sun."

"Only banished? We feared-"

"Do not take this as a sign of mercy. I merely wished for Celestia to know the torture of imprisonment that I endured for a thousand years. Once she has known that, then her life is forfeit."

"Imprisonment 'we' endured," Luna corrected as she took a careful step closer. "Or do you forget where you came from?"

"I have not forgotten... all the memories I have are either my own or the memories from when you were the one called Nightmare Moon. It is from those memories that I know my desires and destiny... a destiny you were too weak to seize for your own. A destiny that will be mine."

"But is it a destiny you want?"

"It is all I know and all that is expected of me. I cannot recall any time when I did not want this, the eternal night and the defeat of Equestria's royalty... which includes you." Nightmare Moon answered, manifesting her magical sword as she began to walk towards Luna. "Now defend yourself."

"Is that truly all you can remember?" Luna countered as her own magic flared, the moon princess forming two smaller, shorter blades which floated on either side of her. "Do you not recall the time you spent with Twilight, Nyx?"

"Do *not* call me that. I am Nightmare Moon."

"But do you remember the time you spent with Twilight?"

"Of course I do; I would not forget something so recent so easily."

“Then you have memories beyond being Nightmare Moon, beyond the memories you had to inherit from me.”

“What is your point? So I have my own memories; they are a few short months compared to the hundreds of years of memories I have from the time when we were one and the same.”

“But I *know* those memories are a thousand times happier than the memories we share. I came to know you briefly, Nyx, at the dinner after the Spring Festival play. You talked of friends, of school, of Twilight... you were happy. Why are you throwing that away to pursue old desires that were never yours?”

“They *are* my desires. I want vengeance, I want Equestria... I want ponies to look upon the beauty of my night.”

“But it *isn't* your night. It's *mine*.” Luna stressed, “It was *my* jealousy of Celestia that turned me into you, *my* loathing of the ponies who slept through my night... but that's because I was the one that made it. I was the one being ignored, not you. It isn't your night the ponies ignored, so why do you feel you need to do this?”

“Well, it will soon *be* my night. With you gone, I shall inherit not only your memories but your status as ruler of the nighttime sky. I will make it more beautiful than you ever could. And ponies will look upon it, and be in such awe that they will love the night, and forget all about the sun.”

“Nyx, you don't have to be what I was. You can escape it, or do you forget that I was able to change what I was? I'm not Nightmare Moon anymore, which means you don't have to be either.”

Nightmare Moon hung her head, letting her sword lower.

“No... you are wrong... for it is not just your memories I inherited. The loathing, the fear, and the hatred Equestria had for you became mine. You were left to live a happy life again thanks to the Elements of Harmony while I... I... I became your scapegoat, the monster in the dark that you were saved from.”



“Nyx... I am so sorry, Nyx. Because of me, you had to be born of darkness. You had to be born alone in the worst place imaginable... and you had to be born with my past. I never asked nor wanted you to take responsibility for what I did. I should be the one to bear those burdens, not you... but... if you don't stop this, you'll have your own sins. It won't be my past that haunts you, but your own.

“Nyx, just think for a second and-”

“I told you not to call me that! I. Am. Nightmare Moon!” The black alicorn seethed. “It is what I am, it is the *only* thing I can be. It is the only thing Equestria will ever see; no matter what you say, they will only ever see Nightmare Moon.

“I am Nyx no longer.” The black alicorn proclaimed as she lifted her head, eyes flashing with determination as she raised her sword again. “Now defend yourself. If I have to be Nightmare Moon, than I shall also be Equestria's Queen. I will seize the destiny you were too weak to grasp, and, in time, the ponies shall forget about you, forget about Celestia, forget about the sun, and they shall love the night.”

“I... I'm sorry Nyx, b-but I can't just let you do this.” Luna stated shakily, trying to keep a firm stance though she fully realized how outmatched she was. The moon princess lifted her twin blades, taking up a defensive position. “I-I will fight to protect Equestria.”

“You will fight... you will fall... and then you'll share Celestia's fate.” Nightmare Moon seethed as she lifted her sword, “Because this is *my* kingdom now.”

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Whispers and hushed voices filled the Ponyville square, every pony in town gathering just outside the town hall. The sun was supposed to have risen several hours ago, but, instead, the moon still lingered in the center of the sky, looking down upon the world with its pale glow. What was worse now was that the Mare in the Moon had returned. The dark pattern of craters across the moon's surface which took the shape of a unicorn head once again looked down on the kingdom of ponies.

On the steps of the town hall, the Mayor of Ponyville, Ivory Scroll, moved up to the podium. It looked like she had been crying, but the mayor wiped her eyes and cleared her throat, forcing herself to be strong.

“Fillies and Gentlecolts, as mayor of Ponyville it... it is my duty... my *solemn* duty... to announce that Princess Luna and Princess Celestia have... have been defeated...”

A hushed gasp cascaded through the crowd, ponies looking at each other with disbelief, but none daring to speak as they hung on every word that left Ivory’s mouth.

“I received word from just after sun... when the sunrise was due to occur. During the night, Nightmare Moon took Canterlot castle without raising an alarm. She defeated Celestia, and then laid in wait until Luna returned to the castle a few hours ago. Both princesses have... are now imprisoned in the sun and the moon respectively, banished to the celestial bodies they once guided across the sky.

“Nightmare Moon has hereby decreed herself Queen of Equestria, and the Children of Nightmare... the ponies responsible for her return... are already taking control of the government. I have been told that... that any open rebellion against the new crown will be met harshly and... and that...”

Ivory had to lick her lips, her voice trembling as she forced out the final words.

“A-and that we have seen the last of the sun. That this night... will last... f-f-for... forever.”

Another gasp cut through the crowd, a few ponies even fainting.

“Oh Miss Mayor, you speak as if this is some great tragedy.”

Every head in the crowd spun around, looking back to see Nightmare Moon striding towards the crowd. She was flanked on either side by two of her own royal guard, clad in armor that matched hers in color and eyes with brilliant turquoise.

The crowd quickly parted and made a path, much like they did the day Nightmare Moon first returned. Some even bowed as she passed, a sight that made Nightmare Moon smile a bit. It was a start; she couldn't expect them *all* to be so eager to bow right away. It would take time, but now... now she had all the time in the world.

Nightmare Moon's horn glowed as she moved the podium off the town hall stage, Ivory quickly retreating back as the black alicorn climbed up onto the city hall's veranda. She passed a glance at the mayor. She was shaking like a leaf, but the mare still managed to bow. Satisfied with the level of respect, Nightmare Moon then turned to face the crowd, her voice ringing out through the night.

"Citizens of Ponyville, it is hard to believe that merely a week ago I stood amongst you, freshly reborn, and now I am already your queen. One must truly wonder how sturdy your monarchy was, considering how easily it was toppled.

"But toppled it I have, and I now stand as your one true queen. Under me, Equestria shall flourish under the eternal night. You need not fear for your crops or your homes, for while the night can be cold, those most loyal to me have already begun the act of making this kingdom a place that can thrive beneath the moonlight. They have been long prepared for the night eternal.

"And there is further reason to rejoice. For, as I promised on the day of my return, I have *not* forgotten the kindness you all offered me when I was but a scared little filly. For this, I have decided to give Ponyville a great honor, bestow upon it a gift no other town or city in Equestria will share."

The ground shook, a distant rumbling reaching the ear of everypony as Nightmare Moon's eyes glowed. All eyes turned to the distant rock quarries, in the hills just beyond Ponyville. For a moment there was nothing, but, as the rumbling continued, a single pointed spire began to rise up. That first spire was joined by others, and soon a whole castle had risen up like a mountain from the quarries, looking down upon Ponyville like a giant ready to strike.

"For the time being, Canterlot shall remain the administrative capitol of Equestria. The bureaucrats and politicians shall continue their labors

amongst the white stone streets of the mountain-built city. But Ponyville shall be the *true* heart of this kingdom, for it is here I make my castle and my home.

“So rejoice, residents of Ponyville, for this town shall soon see prosperity unmatched as it slowly becomes the beating heart of Equestria.”

“You... y-you,” Ivory Scroll tried to utter out, her voice shaking as she forced out the words. “You... *honor* us, Your Highness. We... w-we will gladly serve as your home.”

Nightmare Moon smiled. “Well chosen words, Mayor. I will let you keep your position.”

“Well, some of us ain’t goin’ down without a fight!”

The black alicorn flicked her gaze up as every pony in the crowd turned their head. Standing beyond the crowd were six ponies. Five of them she recognized. Applejack, Rarity, Pinkie Pie, Rainbow Dash, and Fluttershy all standing, wearing their Elements of Harmony necklaces. Some stood firmly, while Fluttershy was hiding behind Rarity. Still, all five of them were there.

The sixth pony, however, was one Nightmare Moon did not recognize. She appeared to be a simple earth pony with a blue coat with white and silver hair. She was, for some reason, wearing a light purple, pointed hat and cape. Both articles of clothing were decorated with silver and gold colored stars. The pony stood with her head held aloft, her posture reminding the alicorn of Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon.

Nightmare Moon hated her already.

“Well well well, I was wondering when you five would show up. Who’s the new mare?”

“Her name is-” Applejack began, only for the blue pony to interrupt her.

“I believe that / can speak for myself, thank you *very* much.” the new pony snipped. She turned and gave Nightmare Moon a confident grin and glare,

as if she was looking down at some pony far beneath her. It was an expression that only inspired confusion in Nightmare Moon.

Who would be so foolish as to *not* fear her?

“Remember this face well, Nightmare Moon, for it will be the face of your *doom!*” The blue pony exclaimed as she pointed a hoof at the newly self-appointed queen. “For on this day, it will be I, the Great and Powerful Trixie, who will single-hoofedly vanquish you and bring peace and order back to Equestria!”

An eruption of magical fireworks and firecrackers erupted from behind the blue pony, as if in some fanfare for the words.

“You're kidding. You're kidding, right?”

“I assure you, Nightmare Moon, this is no jest.” The pony offered. A light purple glow encased the mare’s hat, causing it to rise up and shift back on the pony’s head. The adjustment revealed that the blue pony was, in fact, a unicorn. “I, the Great and Powerful Trixie, shall defeat you.”

“Okay, this *has* to be a joke.” Nightmare Moon scoffed. “Do you have *any* idea who I am? Do you even have a *clue* to the power that courses through every fiber of my being?”

The unicorn seemed to shake just a tiny bit at Nightmare Moon’s statement but quickly gave a subtle shake of the head and regained her confident glaze.

“I am fully aware of *your* power, but I wield a far greater one, and with it I shall send you back to the dark pit you crawled out from. For you see, I am not merely a unicorn but I am *the* most magical unicorn that has ever existed!”

Nightmare Moon couldn’t help but gape. This... this foal... she was either completely clueless or had death wish. Who was crazy enough to be so boastful? The only time Nightmare Moon had ever heard of a pony with such an ego was when-

Nightmare Moon's eyes pulsed, a realization striking her. She... she knew this mare. Not personally, but she had heard of her. Twilight had told her a story once about a blue unicorn that had come into town, boasting she had defeated a Ursa Major. But when an Ursa *Minor* came into town, the unicorn was unable to do anything, leaving Twilight to save the day.

It was one of her favorite bedtime stories.

The black alicorn smirked, speaking with a deceptively gentle tone. "Oh... oh yes, of course. I've heard of you before, *Great and Powerful Trixie*."

"Y-you... you have? I mean, of *course* you have! Far and wide has been spread the tales of the miraculous feats of the Great and Powerful Trixie!" The unicorn exclaimed as she released more firework magic in the air.

"Yes, I know who you are. You are the egomaniac with a tacky hat that almost destroyed Ponyville with your boasting."

That sucked the air right out of Trixie's lungs, the unicorn's eyes tiny as dots.

"At least..." Nightmare Moon continued, smiling devilishly. "That's how Rarity put it. When Twilight told me about the last time you were here, she was more... polite, though she basically said the same thing."

"Wait, you *know* her?! And you told her *that?!?*" Trixie hissed as she glared daggers at Rarity.

"Hey, don't you get mad at her! *She's* not the one boasting that she's going to 'save the day' all by herself!" Rainbow Dash retorted in Rarity's defense.

"And I shouldn't need to remind you that your Element of Magic isn't worth a rotten apple without the rest of us." Applejack added, pointing an accusing hoof at Trixie.

"Hey, *you're* the ones who convinced me that not only I could be the new Bearer of the Element of Magic, but that defeating Nightmare Moon would salvage my career! I wouldn't even *be* here if it weren't for you, so you better not ruin my big chance!"

“As amusing as it is to meet the overconfident show pony from one of the stories Twilight told me,” Nightmare Moon interrupted, keeping the six ponies from squabbling amongst themselves further, “I am curious as to what makes you think you actually stand a chance against me. Just how do you plan to defeat me, immortal alicorn, when you are nothing more than a mere unicorn?”

“I, the Great and Powerful Trixie, intend to use the most powerful magic known to pony kind, for I am the new Bearer of the Element of Magic!” Trixie exclaimed, lifting her hat again and revealing a familiar tiara. The unicorn quickly adjusted her hat, replacing it on her head and putting the tiara on top of it, allowing the mare to proudly wear both at the same time.

For the first time since her transformation, Nightmare Moon felt real fear.

Even if she was annoyingly boastful, Trixie was still a unicorn whose special talent was magic itself... and that might be enough to complete the Elements of Harmony. It was a fear of Nightmare Moon’s that became validated as the blue unicorn began to focus her magic, the Elements of Harmony beginning to react. It was the first sign that the six ponies were actually going to pose a threat, the jeweled necklaces and tiara coming to life as they lifted the ponies off the ground.

Nightmare Moon instinctively worked herself down into a defensive position, ready to leap clear of the attack from the Elements of Harmony. She had been torn apart by the magical rainbow once; she wouldn’t let it happen again. She’d jump out of the way, try to escape, but she would not go down a second time so easily.

The six ponies were enveloped in light, and after a few tense moments the rainbow appeared... but instead of being afraid for her life, Nightmare Moon was struck with the overpowering desire to laugh.

The rainbow spat out by the Elements of Harmony was the size of a small candy bar, and floating through the air lazily with mismatched and sickly colors. It drifted on the wind like a leaf, and when it finally did reach Nightmare Moon and struck her, the rainbow did not burn or hurt. Its only effect was that it made that one small patch of her body feel slightly warmer, a rather pleasant sensation, actually.

Yet, as Nightmare Moon tried to contain her laughter from the pitiful display by the Elements of Harmony, she was struck by a curious desire to teach the show pony a lesson and have a little fun at the same time. Taking in a deep breath, Nightmare Moon groaned loudly, as if in anguish, and then let her body burst into indigo smoke which seemed to disappear into thin air.

To all ponies watching, it appeared she had been defeated.

It was a sight that left the crowd utterly stunned, turning back to look as the six ponies that had used the Elements of Harmony were lowered back to the ground. They landed gently, collapsing on the street and lying motionless for a time.

Unlike the time with Twilight Sparkle, in which the six had never felt better, they were now covered with scuffs and scratches. It was like the ancient magic had worked *against* them, not with them. Trixie herself hastily shoved the tiara off her head, throwing the valuable artifact into the dirt as she rubbed the sides of her skull. Her head was pounding with the worst headache she had ever felt in her life.

"Is... is it over?" Rarity asked, forcing herself to her hooves as she looked around and saw no sign of Nightmare Moon.

"I... I reckon it is. I didn't think it'll be that easy a second time, or that Trixie would actually be able to sub in for Twilight."

"You doubted that I could be the new Bearer of the Element of Magic?" the blue unicorn asked, despite her splitting head. "Don't you know, you can *always* bet on the Great and Powerful Trixie!"

At that the town that had gathered, staring to celebrate and cheer Nightmare Moon's defeat. Soon Celestia and Luna would grace the town with their presence. The moon would be lowered and the sun would rise and everything would be normal. And, as sure as the sun would rise, Trixie stood up and began to bask in the adulation, soaking it all in.

"Yes! Yes, *celebrate* ponies of Ponyville! For I, The Great and Powerful Trixie, have saved Equestria all by herself! I truly am the greatest equine who has ever lived!"



Very quickly the cheers from the crowd began to die, the Ponyville residents beginning to remember why they didn't particularly *like* the "Great and Powerful" Trixie. Still, they wouldn't let Trixie's gloating ruin their happiness. Nightmare Moon had been defeated, it was a day to celebrate.

Still, amongst the growing celebration, there was one pony who was crying.

"Fluttershy, Dear, what's wrong?" Rarity asked, the four friends gathering around the pegasus while Trixie continued to soak in the cheers from the crowd.

"Yeah, Sugarcube, no need for ya to be crying. Everythin's going back to normal again."

"N-no it isn't!" Fluttershy whimpered through tears. "Nyx... Nyx is gone now... and Twilight will be so... so..."

Before anypony could offer the yellow pegasus a word of comfort, the Bearers of the Elements of Harmony suddenly found themselves being levitated into the air. An indigo tornado surrounded them, swirling and spinning the six ponies as the tornado carried the six to the center of the crowd, depositing the mares in a pile right on the front steps of the town hall.

It took a moment for the six mares to recover from being spun around. Pinkie Pie was the first to sit up, her eyes spinning.

"Did...did anypony get the license plate number of the chariot that hit us?"

The pink earth pony's question drew out a haughty laugh, the swirling tornado of indigo moved away from the ponies and materializing into Nightmare Moon. The alicorn glared down at the mares for a moment, her eyes still glowing as all six of the Elements of Harmony floated gently inside her mane. Yet, as her eyes returned to normal Nightmare Moon smiled.

For a moment Nightmare Moon considered enacting her revenge on the mares who had just attacked her; that was what Nexus would have her do. Still, she was feeling merciful, if only because the Elements of Harmony did nothing to her. Maybe it was because they used the wrong mare or...

perhaps it was because of some other reason. At the moment, Nightmare Moon didn't really care why the Elements of Harmony hadn't worked.

Instead, she focused her attention to the blue unicorn that actually believed herself to be a match for Equestria's new queen. It really was laughable; Trixie wasn't even in the same league as Twilight Sparkle, let alone an alicorn like Nightmare Moon.

Trixie was still out of it, but was beginning to recover from being spun in a tornado. She sat up and rubbed her head as Nightmare Moon loomed over her. When unicorn finally opened her eyes, Trixie was staring straight into the face of Nightmare Moon, who was grinning rather mischievously.

"Gotcha." she whispered, making Trixie yelp. The unicorn tried to bolt, tried to run away, but Nightmare Moon quickly whipped out a bit of her own magic and caught one of Trixie's legs. The show pony stumbled, tripped, and crashed to the ground, sliding a little before coming to a stop. Trixie did not try to escape again, trembling in fear as Nightmare Moon towered over her.

"To celebrate your rather disappointing rebellion, I believe I will be taking a trophy to remember this day."

At that Nightmare Moon let her mane violently strike out at Trixie, making her flinch as the tendrils of the black alicorn's mane drew close. But Nightmare Moon didn't touch a hair on Trixie's head, instead using her magical mane to remove the show pony's hat and cape.

"What? Afraid that I would take your pretty little head?" Nightmare Moon sardonically asked. "Don't worry, if I want that I'll come back for it. Now, if I remember Twilight's story correctly, this is the part where you realize what a foal you've made of yourself and you run away."

"M-Mark my words, you haven't seen the last of me!" Trixie vowed weakly, trying to save face even though she knew Nightmare Moon was letting her go. "For while you may have won the battle, the war is far over! The Great and Powerful Trixie never runs away... she only makes tactical retreats!"

At that, Trixie used her magic to summon a smoke screen, one that quickly vanished as the show pony fled Ponyville in very much the same way she

had during the Ursa Minor incident. It left much of Ponyville's crowd groaning and smacking their faces with their hooves, most wondering why they had actually believed Trixie was able to defeat an alicorn.

While the crowd was disappointed, Nightmare Moon was positively giddy, reveling in her most recent success. The one thing left that could possibly defeat her, the Elements of Harmony, were now in her possession. She could now make sure they were never used again. The alicorn was so thrilled, she couldn't keep herself from having a little more fun.

Looking over the crowd of ponies that hung on her every word out of fear, Nightmare Moon once again turned into an indigo cloud, swirling and condensing before she re-materialized. Still, instead of a regal alicorn, Nightmare Moon now had the exact appearance of Trixie herself, wearing the very cape and hat she plucked from the mare but a few moments ago.

"Behold, Ponyville!" the shape shifted alicorn shouted out in Trixie's own voice. "I am the Weak and Cowardly Trixie! Thrill as I attempt to pretend that sparklers and flashes of light are worthy of admiration! Be dazzled as I bored you with speeches about my own unfounded belief in my own abilities! Gasp as I turn tail and run at the first sign of danger!"

The Not-Trixie began to laugh haughtily, finding amusement at her own joke. Still, the performance was met with utter silence, nopony in the crowd offering as much as a chortle or giggle. The Not-Trixie looked out at the frightened audience, first with a look of being hurt before her expression contorted into one of annoyance.

"Hmph. Plebeians. You would think they would appreciate a mare that can shape-shift at will." Nightmare Moon grumbled as she changed back into her normal appearance, the Elements of Harmony still in her mane while Trixie's hat and cape found a temporary home in her tail.

Still, with her impromptu attempt at celebrity roasting failing to earn even a giggle, Nightmare Moon redirected her focus on the five remaining mares that dared to opposed her. She expected them to be shocked, filled with fear, to be trembling in her shadow... but they were, in fact, arguing amongst themselves.

"I *told* you we shouldn't have used her." Rainbow Dash grumbled, glaring at Applejack.

"Oh hush up you; she was the only unicorn we could find who had a special talent for magic, and even that was a long shot."

"So, my little ponies," Nightmare Moon began, ending the disagreement and forcing the five mares to take notice of her, "What am I going to do with you?"

"Do whatever you want, you can't make us talk!" Dash shouted defiantly.

"Yea!" Pinkie Pie agreed, only to look quizzically at Rainbow Dash a moment later. "Wait, what *would* we talk to her about?"

"Pinkie Pie, Shhhh..."

Nightmare Moon chuckled.

"Your bickering *alone* is very amusing to me. How would you five like to be my personal court jesters? I'll even let you have visitation rights with Twilight Sparkle."

"Your Majesty, the law dictates that there is only one punishment for those who dare to attack you," One of her guards quickly offered with a respectful bow. Nightmare Moon glared into empty space and sighed heavily, as if somepony was interrupting her fun.

"Let me guess... this is one of Nexus' laws."

"Yes, Your Highness."

"And what does this law say?"

"That any pony that attacks your royal grace is to meet the gallows."

"Did... did he just say... gallows?" Rarity offered in a hushed, disbelieving whisper.

"He... he did Sugarcube."

"But... but what about the animals at my cottage? There are some that need their medicine. I have to go take care of them." Fluttershy worried, starting to tear up in a panic. "There is a little ferret that needs his bandages changed and... and there are song birds that are just about ready to take their first flight. What will happen if I'm not there to catch them if they fall?"

"You be strong, Sugarcube. I promise all those little animals will get along just fine," Applejack tried to reassure. "Just... just like how Big Mac and Apple Bloom and Granny Smith will get along. It will be hard, specially when the next Apple Bucking season comes. Don't think Big Macintosh will be able to handle all them trees himself... but Apple Bloom's gettin' big. She'll be buckin' apples any year now... she'll be able to help."

"But... but I can't go to the gallows! I just can't! Who will...who will look after Sweetie Belle? I'm...I'm the only family she has left..."

"And... and who will throw the parties when I'm gone?" Pinkie Pie asked. "Who's going to make the cake when I'm gone? The Cakes will have their anniversary party soon, and there is a wedding party that we have to cater, and then there is a birthday party for Lyra, and..."

"This isn't fair..." Dash complained, trying hard not to sob or cry, even though the tears were starting to form. "I was going to go to the Wonderbolt tryouts this summer... I was going to be a Wonderbolt. And I promised Scootaloo that I would teach her how to fly next year when her wings were stronger...I *promised* her that I would...who's going to teach her now? And...and who's going to clear the weather in Ponyville if I'm not around?"

Nightmare Moon watched as all five ponies began to break down, many beginning to cry as they realized the cost their attempted rebellion would bring. As she watched them, she felt a tightness forming in her chest as she focused in on what each was saying, of all the lives that would be affected if the five were forced to face the gallows.

Nightmare Moon couldn't help it. For some reason, some reason she couldn't explain, she... she hated the thought of sending those five to the gallows. She... didn't want to see that happen to them. Just the thought of it

was making her lip quiver and her eyes start to tear up, especially when she thought about how Twilight would react if she heard the news.

Nightmare Moon quickly used her mane to subtly dry her tears, reforming her steely composure. She had decided what to do with the five who dared to opposed her.

“Shall we take them into custody, Your Majesty?” The guards asked, moving a few steps towards the five mares, only to suddenly be stopped by Nightmare Moon’s wings.

“No, you are to let them go.”

“WHAT!?”

The question had come from not just the guards, but the five mares as well... who stared up at Nightmare Moon in disbelief.

“I *said* that you are to let them go! I am officially pardoning them as my first act as Queen of Equestria.”

“But, my Queen, the law says-”

“AM I, OR AM I NOT, YOUR QUEEN?!” Nightmare Moon snapped. “Now, return to the castle and inform Nexus I want him to take me through *all* the new laws he’s enacted. Every single one of them! And let him know that if he *dares* enact any more laws without my permission or consent, that I will consider it an act of treason!”

“But my Queen, we aren’t supposed to leave your side for any-”

“**NOW!!!!**” Nightmare Moon bellowed, her angry shout punctuated by a lightning bolt directed at the hooves of the guards, making them jump into the air and take off, soaring as fast as their wings could take them to the now-above ground castle. Nightmare Moon kept her eyes on the guards for a few more moments before turning her gaze down on the five mares.

“You’re... you’re letting us go... just like that?” Rarity asked in disbelief.

“It is a repayment of kindness, and nothing more,” Nightmare Moon answered coldly as she spread her wings. “For the kindness you showed me when I was but a cowardly filly, I am now sparing your lives.

“Do not expect the same mercy should you try and rise up against me again.”

With those final words, the black alicorn took flight. She circled once over Ponyville, looking down at the crowd and seeing their fear filled eyes. She then turned in the direction of her freshly-risen castle, the Elements of Harmony, along with Trixie’s hat and cape, floating in her magical mane and tail as the alicorn flew away.

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With a flutter of wings, Nightmare Moon landed on her bedroom balcony, stepping inside. She floated the Elements of Harmony to a nearby dresser, tucking them away along with the pieces of her armor, removing her helmet last and hanging it off a stud in the wall. The cape and hat of Trixie she simply tossed onto a table, the alicorn intending to deal with them later.

Using a wet cloth from her vanity, she cleaned away her eye shadow. The now simply-black Nightmare Moon gently laid down on her bed, breathing out slowly. The past few hours had been physically, mentally, and emotionally exhausting... but yet, as the alicorn tried to rest, she found sleep would not come easily.

Her mind began to turn, go over the alicorn’s actions of the past few hours... Nightmare Moon struggling to understand her recent choices.

First, she didn’t attack the guards. They could have easily sent the entire Children of Nightmare at the castle and seized it by force. In fact, that was what the royal guard expected her to do, to be a direct threat to them.

But.... she hated that plan. She knew that somepony on both sides would have gotten hurt... so she instead used her magic to become a few dozen ponies, ordinary ponies, and spent time as recruits. She trained, got a taste of what it was like to be a defender of Equestria... and even got to know some senior guards, even if just a little bit. Got to hear about their wives and husbands, their fathers and mothers, their sons and daughters... and

once she heard that, the only way she could attack was by the least painful non-lethal weapon she had, an ability to put other ponies to sleep.

Second, she didn't kill Celestia or Luna. In her anger, she almost got close to snuffing out Celestia but... she had a sinking feeling that even if the white alicorn hadn't mentioned Twilight, she still probably wouldn't have killed the sun princess.

Why did she spare them? They were still a threat to her; they would *always* be a threat to her. Even if they were locked away in the sun and moon, they *would* find a way to get out. It would have been smarter to just kill them, but... no, she hadn't done it. She *couldn't* do it. Even though it would have made her rule truly eternal, she chose not to kill them, even when they had expected her to.

She didn't even attack head on. She held back on Celestia until she said something to make Nightmare Moon angry, and she even went easy on Luna, only attacking until the moon princess' swords backfired like Celestia's. It was a moderately painful defeat, but far less than if Luna had actually been struck by Nightmare Moon's sword.

She went easy on them... and, after that, she let Twilight's friends go completely unpunished. Those six together were the greatest threat to her rule. It would have made more sense to take them out... permanently.

But she hadn't. When they started to worry about not being there for their family and friends, Nightmare Moon felt an emotion she didn't remember feeling when she first faced them, when their paths had crossed in the Ancient Castle of the Royal Pony Sisters... back when she was still just a shade of Luna.

Compassion.

She honestly, truly, did not want to kill them, not only because they had friends and families that would have been devastated, not only because it would have broke Twilight's heart, but...she truly did not want to see anypony face the gallows.

She didn't want to kill... she had no desire to kill. Even if somepony attacked her, even if somepony hated her, she... didn't want to kill. She



didn't want to see anypony die at her hooves if she could help it. She was... was... was afraid to see anypony die.

Nightmare Moon violently shook her head, standing up tall, regal and proud. Afraid? What did *she* had to be afraid of? She was no longer that scared, crybaby Nyx. She was Nightmare Moon: Eternal Queen of Equestria, the Bringer of the Night Eternal! She was the sole alicorn left in the world, the most powerful pony that ever lived and *would* ever live! She had nothing to be afraid of; NOTHING!

She had won, in all aspects her victory was absolute. She had everything she had ever wanted. Celestia and Luna were banished to the sun and moon respectively. She now held the Elements of Harmony, the one force that could defeat her. She was now the one true Queen of Equestria, and she would reign for millennia to come. And there was no other alicorn or unicorn powerful enough to challenge her magic, magic that was practically, as far as the average pony was concerned, all-powerful.

It was her victory... so then why did it feel so hollow?

# Chapter 14

## Once a Crusader

*KNOCK... KNOCK... KNOCK...*

Cheerilee looked up from her book, not expecting any company. The teacher was curled up with a blanket in her home, a fire roaring in the fireplace. Nightmare Moon had taken over Equestria one week ago, and, without the sun's warmth, the kingdom had been slowly getting colder and colder. At the moment, the air outside was still mildly bearable. Cheerilee, however, doubted that would last for much longer.

*KNOCK... KNOCK... KNOCK...*

The second set of knocks drew Cheerilee out of the warm sport she had made for herself on the couch. She moved to the door, checking through the peep hole first. She never used to worry about which ponies were on her doorstep, but ever since Nightmare Moon took power... well, she didn't feel as safe as she used to.

However, the ponies on her doorstep were not royal guards, Nightmare Moon, or anypony that looked dangerous. It was instead three familiar fillies, who Cheerilee quickly opened the door for.

"Girls, what are you doing out here in the dark?" The mulberry pony asked with a smile.

"It's always dark now." Scootaloo replied, standing beside Sweetie Belle and Apple Bloom on Cheerilee's front step.

"Oh... I guess that's true. Still, what can I do for you three?"

"Cheerilee, can we ask you some questions?" Sweetie Belle asked. "I've been trying to get Rarity to tell me what's going on, but she won't say anything."

"The same with Applejack and Big Macintosh."

“And my parents too,” Scootaloo finished.

Cheerilee smile weakened.

“Girls... I really don’t think its my place, especially if your families don’t-”

“Please, Cheerilee!” The three Crusaders begged in unison.

“Oh... okay. Still, why don’t you come inside?” Cheerilee suggested, stepping back to let the fillies in. “Can’t have you three standing outside in the cold.”

Once the Crusaders were inside, Cheerilee pulled her door shut and rubbed one of her legs to drive away the chill. She guided the fillies to her living room, letting them jump up onto her couch while she leapt up onto a smaller chair, grabbing up a free blanket and wrapping herself in it.

“So Girls, what questions did you want to ask me?”

“We wanted to know what happened to Nyx,” Apple Bloom explained.

“Yeah, how did she get so big? Why does she look like, and call herself, Nightmare Moon?” Scootaloo asked.

“And why is she making it dark all the time?” Sweetie Belle added.

“Girls... I really don’t think I-” Cheerilee began, but her final protest died in her mouth as she saw the concern in the eyes of the three fillies she had brought into her home.

She didn’t want to do this. She would have much rather lied and said that Nyx was just confused...and...if she could be hopeful for a moment, maybe that was the case. Maybe Nyx was still alive in the monster that took over Equestria. It was hard to imagine a filly as sweet, innocent, and timid as her becoming...

Cheerilee sighed. She didn’t want to do it, but they needed to know the truth, even if their family didn’t think they were ready to hear it. But at the very least, she could try not to make them panic too much by

overemphasizing what was going on... maybe give them a little bit of hope... because it was a hope that Cheerilee was holding onto herself.

“Girls, I’m only telling you this because you’re really concerned about your friend...but you have to promise me that you won’t tell your families what I will tell you. Can you do that for me?”

The three fillies nodded their heads, eager to learn anything they could about why their friend was looking and acting the way she was.

“Now, I don’t claim to understand it all myself, but...it seems that the reason Nyx looks and acts like Nightmare Moon is because...she was Nightmare Moon all along.”

“This whole time?”

“No way; Nyx isn’t like that at all, is she?”

“Again, I’m not sure exactly what happened... but, from what I’ve heard, Nightmare Moon became a filly, and that filly was Nyx, your friend. Twilight told me she was her cousin, but...I’m suspecting that was just what Twilight said to cover up the truth.”

“But....even if Nyx is Nightmare Moon, why would she make it dark all the time? She always liked it when the sun was out.”

Cheerilee sighed, once again trying to think very carefully on how to phrase her words. She wanted to tell them the truth as she understood it, that when Nyx became Nightmare Moon, she remembered all her old desires and wishes... but that seemed too harsh of a truth for the fillies.

Cheerilee decided she could sugar coat the truth a little for them.

“I think Nyx is just confused, Dears. Wouldn’t you be confused if you suddenly found yourself all grown up, with a lot of strange memories, magical powers, and a bunch of ponies calling you Queen?” Cheerilee offered, hoping the three fillies would accept her explanation.

“I... guess that makes sense,” Sweetie Belle said.

“You see, Girls, when Nyx grew up, she remembered who she used to be, which was a very different pony than the one we got to know. Now, she’s just confused about who she is, and she just doesn’t really know which pony she is supposed to be. So... she’s being the pony she used to be... has memories of being. Its also, unfortunately, the mare everypony expects her to be... which is Nightmare Moon.”

“But...if she’s just confused...that means she could be Nyx again, right? Maybe she doesn’t *like* being Nightmare Moon.”

“Y-yeah! I mean, if she was *really* Nightmare Moon, she wouldn’t have let my Big Sis and her friends go. That *proves* she is still Nyx!”

Cheerilee tried to give a hopeful smile, even though it was hard to smile these days.

“I hope so, Girls. I hope that Nyx will remember not who she used to be as Nightmare Moon, but who she used to be when she was your friend. Maybe...maybe she just needs some time to think about things. I bet, as soon as she’s figured a few things out, she’ll eventually put things back to the way they were.

“Now, do you have any other questions?”

“No, Cheerilee.” The three chimed, almost like they were back in class.

“Okay; Now, why don’t you run along and go play? Oh, and please make sure to shut the door when you leave.”

The three fillies nodded, jumping down from Cheerilee’s couch and offering some quick “Thank You’s”, before leaving their teacher’s home. Lining up side to side, the three fillies walked down the street together.

“I feel bad for Nyx,” Scootaloo said, glancing at her two friends. “I can’t imagine what it would be like to be confused about who you are.”

“Yea, it’s like having a different cutie mark on each of your flanks. You wouldn’t know if your special talent was supposed to be one or the other.” Sweetie Belle agreed.

“Too bad we can’t do anything to help her.”

“Yea, too bad.”

The unicorn and pegasus filly continued to walk, not noticing that their third friend had stopped dead in her tracks. When they did take notice, they looked back to see Apple Bloom staring at the ground, like she was thinking about something.

“Hey, Apple Bloom... you okay?”

The farm filly was quiet for a few moments more before snapping her head up.

“Crusaders, we have a friend who doesn’t know who she is.” Apple Bloom stated, speaking like a general to her troops. “A fellow Crusader in that big nasty castle that is confused, and you know what she needs?”

“Um... no.” Sweetie Belle replied, not understanding why Apple Bloom was acting or speaking the way she was.

“Well, I do. She needs somepony to remind her who she is. To remind her that she has friends, friends that want to be able to play with her in the sunshine again. And Crusaders, we’re just the ponies to do it.”

Scotaloo smiled, getting into the attitude.

“Yea, let’s go show Nyx that Cutie Mark Crusaders stick together no matter what!”

“Guys, you do realize Nyx is in that *big* scary castle, and that the castle guarded by all those *big* scary ponies in armor, *right?*” Sweetie Belle pointed out.

“So? We’ll just sneak past the guards.”

“Yea... we could be Cutie Mark Crusader,” Scotaloo began, only to fall silent and look over at her friends. “Uh, what’s a pony called when they sneak into places like a castle?”

“Boogie Mare?”

“No.”

“Infiltrator?”

“Close, but no...”

“Spy?”

“That’s it!” Scootaloo said with a bounce. “We’ll be Cutie Mark Crusader Spies!”

Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle smiled at this, the three ponies high-hoofing before quickly running.

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Nightmare Moon descended a spiraling stone staircase of her castle, thankful that she was not constantly flanked by guards when she was in her own home. The past week had all been about transferring the power over Equestria from the Royal Pony Sisters to her. Members of the Children of Nightmare were put into important positions of power, if they weren’t already in such positions, and the government, while shaky, was once again turning.

Nexus dealt with most of the politics, something Nightmare Moon was thankful for... though she still kept a careful eye on what he was doing. After discovering that he had levied a number of new laws, each of which were punishable with death, Nightmare Moon had the laws re-written on the spot, despite Nexus’s protests.

Yes, she would need to keep a closer eye on what he was doing.

At the moment, however, court was over. It was past 6:00 pm, and the castle was ending business for the day. Nightmare Moon would be expected in the dinning hall soon for dinner, to speak with lords and ladies who had sided with her new regime... all of which had her turquoise eyes. A sign that Nexus was spreading what he called her “blessing” around quite freely.

Nightmare Moon was starting to get a little sick of seeing everypony around her with the same colored eyes. She decided that as soon as she was done here, she was going to tell Spell Nexus that she wasn't going to attend dinner, that she just wasn't in the mood. She was Equestria's queen, what was *he* going to do?

Reaching the bottom of the staircase, Nightmare Moon pushed the thoughts from her mind and strode down the dimly lit hallway. She was down in her castle dungeons, passing by the many empty cells until she reached the one at the very end... the only occupied cell.

Twilight Sparkle sat up from her cot, having wrapped herself tightly in the blanket. Twilight was unharmed, but still bore one sign of her imprisonment. A metal collar was secured to the unicorn's neck, something that blocked her magic. It ensured the unicorn could not escape through her teleportation spell or even by levitating a key.

"I trust the guards have been treating you as I ordered."

"They bring me my meals and nothing else," Twilight replied softly.

"Good. That's... good." Nightmare Moon said as she looked away, not able to bring herself to look at Twilight... not when she was like this. "And are your injuries healed?"

"My ankle is still a little tender, but I'm fine..... How are you doing?"

"I am perfectly fine. I am the Queen of Equestria. Everypony is enjoying the beauty of an eternal night, the Children of Nightmare are settling into control of the government, and Equestria is mine to rule. I couldn't be happier."

"You don't sound happy."

"What would *you* know about how I sound when I'm happy?"

"Because I've *seen* you happy, Nyx. I've heard you laugh, seen you smile. You may say you're happy, but I can tell you're not."



"You don't know what you're talking about," Nightmare Moon snipped, "I told you, I'm happy. I have achieved my goals, and I am now the Queen of Equestria. I have made the night last forever... and that makes me happy."

"Nyx, please... if you don't like what you're doing, then stop. You don't have to be Nightmare Moon. You don't have to do *any* of this."

"And what would you have me do, Twilight? Give up the crown? Release Celestia and Luna?"

"Yes." Twilight answered, pulling herself out from underneath her blanket and moving to the cell door, getting as close as she could to Nightmare Moon.

"Then you would have me sign away my own freedom. The moment Celestia and Luna are free, they will work together to make sure that I take their place... and I will *not* spend another thousand years banished to the moon. It is too late to go back now, Twilight, even if I wanted to."

"But... do you want to?"

"No... because I know there *is* no going back. There is no forgiveness. That's what you and Celestia have taught me, your final lesson as the mare I once called mother. No matter how well I behaved, no matter how good of pony I was... I was marked by the mare I used to be. I am Nightmare Moon, because that is the only thing I can ever be... because that's the only thing anypony can ever see."

Nightmare Moon had enough, turning and striding down the hall towards the staircase. Twilight watched the alicorn for as long as she could, pressing her face up against the bars. The unicorn listened until she couldn't hear hoofsteps anymore before she finally moved away from the cell door, climbing back into her cot and wrapping herself in her blanket.

And like the few other times Nightmare Moon had come to visit, Twilight found herself crying without even realizing it. The unicorn wiped the tears from her face, lying down on her side as she rested her head on her pillow, letting the tears form a damp spot in the fabric.

She didn't see Nightmare Moon... she saw her daughter, confused and lost... and Twilight cried. She cried because she didn't know what she could say or do to help Nyx find herself.

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"Halt, who goes there?" A guard snapped from the top of the castle gatehouse.

"Apple delivery," Big Macintosh called up to the guards, the great red stallion hooked to a wagon filled with apples. "Y'all ordered them yesterday."

The guards on the top of the gatehouse flipped through some paperwork, but then poked their heads over the edge again. "Proceed. Unload the wagon just inside the gate and then leave. You got that?"

"Eeyup." was all Big Macintosh offered in reply, watching as the castle gates opened before pulling his cart inside. As the farm pony was instructed, he unloaded the baskets of apples and then left, the gate sliding shut behind him. Once the cart was gone, servants from the castle's kitchen came out to fetch the baskets of apples, carry them inside, and place them in the pantry for storage.

Once all the apples were moved, The last of the kitchen servants shut the light off in the pantry as he left, pulling the door shut with a click. For a time, the inside of the pantry was pitch black and utterly quiet... but after a single minute of that silence, a rustling sound began to filter through the air. A sound punctuated with the sound of apples hitting the floor.

"Coast is clear."

After some straining and grunting, a light flared to life in the room. The light sat at the very tip of a little white unicorn horn, the horn attached to the head of Sweetie Belle. The little white filly was poking her head out from a basket of apples, looking around the room. Apple Bloom was already out of her own basket of apples, the yellow filly pulling out her Cutie Mark Crusader cape, while, from a third basket, Scootaloo popped into view.

"This was an awesome plan, Apple Bloom!"

"Thanks," The farm filly replied. "It's a good thing I overheard Applejack and Big Macintosh talkin' about the delivery to the castle. I don't know how we would have gotten in otherwise."

"But now what do we do, now that we're here?" Sweetie Belle asked.

"Simple. If Nyx is in the castle, she has to eat sometime, right? Well, that's the best part about us bein' in the kitchen and it bein' so close to dinner time. We'll just wait until somepony makes her dinner-"

"Then we'll use our super spy skills to follow that pony, and she will lead us right to Nyx!" Scootaloo offered before striking a dramatic, kung-fu pose.

"But... we aren't even in the kitchen. We're in a pantry, and we don't have super spy skills," Sweetie Belle pointed out.

"Well... it's still a solid plan."

"Hey, get some of those apples," a fourth voice spoke from outside the door.

The three fillies jumped, ducking into a corner of the pantry and hiding behind some bags of potatoes as the door opened. One of the kitchen workers stepped inside, lingering for only a moment as he grabbed one of the baskets of apples. He then turned to leave, letting the door swing shut under its own weight.

The door was about to snap shut again when Scootaloo bolted out of the hiding place got her hoof in the way. She winced a little as the heavy door hit her hoof, but the orange pegasus had succeeded in keeping the door cracked open. The other two fillies quickly moved over beside Scootaloo, the three peaking out the crack in the door.

There seemed to be two sides to the kitchen. On one side, a team of chef ponies were making a bunch of very plain looking meals, food being mass produced in large quantities. On the other side of the kitchen, however, one chef worked diligently on a few smaller plates, stacking them with much more delicious looking food.

“I bet that’s Nyx’s dinner.” Scootaloo whispered, pointing at the chef working away from all the others.

“What makes you think that?”

“Well, she’s supposed to be queen or something like that, and I never seen food like that. So, it must be something really fancy, and queens eat fancy food.”

“Makes sense to me,” Sweetie Belle remarked.

“But how are we gonna follow him to where Nyx is?”

“Look, he’s putting some of the plates onto that cart. We’ll just take one of those big silver things he’s using to cover the plates with and hide on the bottom of the cart.”

“But how are we going to get that lid?” Apple Bloom asked. The answer, this time, came from Sweetie Belle. The little unicorn grunted and shut her eyes tight as her horn began to glow. Shakily, one of the largest silver plate covers began to float up into the air, moving lazily along the ceiling towards where the crusaders were hiding. It dipped and bobbed a number of times as Sweetie Belle struggled to keep the item lifted, but it remained aloft.

“That’s it, just a little closer.”

“I... I can’t... do it.”

“Come on Sweetie Belle, just a little farther.”

“I... I just... can’t.” Sweetie Belle answered, her magical grasp on the silver lid breaking. The lid dropped like a rock, landing on the floor with a clatter. The abrupt noise caused many of the cooks in the kitchen to jump, and soon all eyes were on the silver cover.

The nearest cook, the one who had been preparing the fancy food, trotted over to the silver plate cover. He picked up the lid magically, looking beneath it and expecting to find some ruined food. Still, there was nothing there... but as the cook lifted his eyes, he noticed the pantry door was open.

Curiosity getting the best of him, the chef used his magic to open the pantry door while he kept the serving dish lid in the air beside him. He looked all around the pantry, but when he saw nothing he looked back at the other chefs and shrugged. With no apparent explanation for where the lid had come from, the chefs in the kitchen went back to their tasks, writing off the event as a mystery.

The chef that currently held the mysterious plate cover went back to work as well, picking up a particularly large plate, laid out elegantly with a number of sugary desserts, with his magic. He took the lid, and, after using a wash cloth to clean the bottom rim, he placed it on the plate of desserts. He then gently set both the plate and lid down on the bottom of the serving cart before getting back to his cooking.

“Whew... nice move, Scootaloo.” Apple Bloom whispered, she and the other fillies beneath the lid now set atop the dessert plate.

In the last possible moment, the orange pegasus had grabbed her two friends and dove out of the pantry. The serving lid had come down right on top of the trio, and, by pressing their legs against interior sides, the trio managed to keep themselves inside the silver lid, even as it was lifted off the ground.

Still, now that they were on their way to Nyx, the trio let themselves get down from the inside of the lid, carefully stepping around the desserts on the plate the lid was now covering.

“Man, these sure do look good.” Scootaloo offered, once Sweetie Belle had made her horn light up, letting the fillies see the sweets they were standing amongst. “You... you think Nyx would mind if we had some?”

“She always liked to share the treats she brought to school with us,” Apple Bloom offered.

“Yeah, and now she has a whole kitchen of ponies to make her all the sweets she wants.”

The three fillies smiled at each other for a few more moments before turning their attention down to the pastries beneath them, licking their lips.

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“Your dinner, Your Majesty,” The waiter pony Horte Cuisine offered, pushing the dinner cart into Nightmare Moon’s bedroom. “The royal chef also prepared a selection of desserts for you. They are on the plate on the bottom of the cart.”

“Thank you, you can just leave it there,” The black alicorn replied, having only just arrived back in her room herself, caught in the process of removing her shoes. Horte Cuisine just offered a nod in reply, backing out of the room with a bow before pulling the door shut. Nightmare Moon only sighed at the sight, having already grown tired with the constant pomp and circumstance the castle staff went through.

Having cleaned off her eye shadow, the now all-natural Nightmare Moon moved over to the food cart, horn glowing as she lifted a lid off her dinner proper. The royal chef had, of course, taken her very simple request and turned it into some artful bit of overly fancy food. The sandwich was cut into weird angles and stacked like some fancy piece of art. Her side salad had also suffered, the green leaves garnished with strange looking flowers.

The only thing that looked simple was the soup; then again, it’s hard to mess up soup.

Leaving the sandwich and salad, Nightmare Moon took up the soup in her magic, levitating it over to the bed with her as she went to resume her reading. The one benefit she had come to enjoy as Equestria’s new queen was access to the royal library. Some of the books she had been able to read were amazing... one of the few things that brought her comfort... despite the few times the books inspired [lingering memories of the Ponyville library, Spike, and Twilight.](#)

Holding the soup with her magic, Nightmare Moon drew out a spoonful and drank it gently, Rarity's lessons in etiquette lingering with the alicorn, despite everything that had happened. She did not slurp and did not spill: she ate the soup like a proper mare.

*AAAchoo!*

Caught off guard, Nightmare Moon almost dropped the whole bowl of soup. By a small stroke of luck she managed to save it, but not before spilling a few drops of soup on her bedspread. The alicorn furrowed her eyebrows at the mess. With a bit of magic she drew up the soup from the fabric, levitating it over to the garbage. Nightmare Moon then set the bowl down on a nearby table, turning her eyes to the source of the sneeze she had heard.

It was the dinner cart, specifically the dessert tray on the bottom. Climbing out of bed, Nightmare Moon strode over to the cart and lowered her head down, bringing her ear close to the silver lid that covered what was supposedly a plate of desserts. She listened for a moment, and was able to discern tiny voices whispering beneath the lid.

Eyebrows furrowing further, Nightmare Moon grabbed up the tray with her magic and carried it to the bed. She placed it directly in the center before spreading her wings, the alicorn preparing to face whatever was under the lid.

She lifted the lid off in a single, abrupt motion, revealing three tiny figures. Three fillies, covered in crumbs from long eaten desserts and looking up at her, startled by how abruptly their hiding place had been uncovered.

The fear in the filly's eyes, however, was replaced with happiness as the three red cape-wearing crusaders smiled and jumped up, moving to the edge of the bed, completely un-intimidated by Nightmare Moon's staunch stance, and wide spread wings.

"See? I told you we'd find her," Scootaloo said. "My plan was just that awesome."

"It was sure was!" Apple Bloom cheered. "And boy Nyx, you sure got big! You're as tall as Princess Celestia!"

"Um... we're sorry if we ate your food. We... kind of missed dinner," Sweetie Belle apologized, the little white unicorn gently tapping her hooves together.

"Yea, sorry about that." Scootaloo added, rubbing the back of her neck. "You aren't too mad, are you?"

Mad? Nightmare Moon was honestly unable to process anything at the moment. She was still as a statue, mind and body locked up like a machine with a wrench thrown into its gears. Her jaw hung open, and her turquoise, dragon like eyes had narrowed as she stared down at the three little fillies that had managed to find their way to her bedroom without being detected by the guards.

"Whoa... Nyx, is this your room?" Apple Bloom asked, the filly looking around the space in awe. "It's so... big."

"And beautiful."

"Well, Nyx isn't exactly as small as us anymore," Scootaloo pointed out. "Hey, Sweetie Belle, look over there. She has a vanity mirror like your sister."

"It's called a *vanity* mirror." The little unicorn corrected, the three fillies jumping down from the bed and scampering over to the mirror, jumping up onto the surface and looking at their reflections.

"Oh, I got crumbs in my mane and my tail," Sweetie Belle whined, using a bit of her magic to try and clear the crumbs away.

"Well, that's what you get for sittin' in one of the desserts," Apple Bloom said flatly.

"It wasn't my fault! The cart shook. At least I didn't eat it, like Scootaloo did."

"What? It was still good... just a little smushed," The orange pegasus defended as she opened a small makeup box that was on the top of the vanity, taking notice of the large amount of purple eyeshadow inside.

"Wow, that's a lot of makeup. Didn't know you were into-"

Scootaloo did not get to finish her sentence as the makeup box was snapped shut by Nightmare Moon's mane. The black alicorn rushed over to where the three little filly's were, looking down at them with panicked eyes.



"I-I'm not! It's just that everypony here keeps expecting me to-"

Nightmare Moon caught herself, giving her head a firm shake. No...no, she couldn't talk like that anymore. Even if they were her friends... were once her friends... that wasn't who she was anymore.

"What are you three *doing* here?" she asked, voice firm, but not harsh.

"We wanted to help you so you weren't so confused," Apple Bloom said as she and the other crusaders turned away from the mirror and looked at Nightmare Moon. The alicorn still had a significant height advantage, even though the fillies were standing on top of her vanity table, but the fillies either didn't care or didn't notice.

"Confused?"

"Yea," Sweetie Belle answered. "Cheerilee said that you were confused about who you were, and so you were trying to be the pony other ponies expected you to be."

"And that's why you made it so that the sun doesn't come up. Because you're confused," Apple Bloom added.

"So we decided to come help you remember who you are, so you're not confused anymore. After all, Cutie Mark Crusaders stick together."

"We even brought you a cape!" Sweetie Belle chirped, the little unicorn sticking her head beneath her own cape before bringing out a fourth small little red cape, with the blue Cutie Mark Crusader emblem and the interior made with golden fabric.

"We tried to bring your old one, but we couldn't find it at the library. So, I decided to make you a new one... though, now that I think about it... I probably should have made it bigger," Sweetie Belle admitted, holding up the tiny cape to the princess-sized Nightmare Moon.

"Oh yea... a whole lot bigger," Scootaloo said with a nod.

Nightmare Moon was again struck speechless, her eyes focused on the little red cape. She gingerly lifted a hoof to it, Sweetie Belle letting the black

alicorn take it. Nightmare Moon held it up to her eyes, focusing on the haphazardly sown blue emblem with a rearing, smiling, cap wearing yellow filly on it.

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*"Why are we going to the club house again? I thought we were going to go and try to be Cutie Mark Crusader Couch Salesponies with Mr. Davenport," Nyx asked as she followed Apple Bloom to Sweet Apple Acres where, in a more secluded, private part of the farm, was a simple club house. A hoof-me-down from Applejack and current headquarters of the Cutie Mark Crusaders.*

*"We are, but we need to go pick up something first," The farm filly replied before nosing open the door to the shop. She then stepped back, letting Nyx walk in first. The little black filly didn't think much of it until she suddenly found Scootaloo and Sweetie Belle standing in front of her, big smiles on their faces.*

*"Oh... hi everypony; I... I thought you were going to meet us at Sofa's and Quills."*

*"We were, but first we got a surprise for you," Scootaloo said, grinning ear to ear.*

*"A surprise... oh, um, really? What is it?"*

*"First you gotta close your eyes, and keep them closed."*

*Nyx closed her eyes as fast as she could, keeping them sealed tight even as she felt something made of fabric fall on her back. She stood there, biting her lower lip in anticipation, but she wouldn't let herself peek.*

*"May I look yet?"*

*"Yes!" Sweetie Belle chirped, and Nyx opened her eyes and looked back. There, on her back, on top of her usual vest, was the signature red cape of the Cutie Mark Crusaders.*

*“Consider yourself an official Cutie Mark Crusader,” Apple Bloom announced happily. Nyx looked over at the cape, a smile spreading onto her face. That smile was soon joined by tears, Nyx's eyes gently leaking.*

*“Th-thank you....thank y-you so much...” She sputtered out, having to close her eyes and wipe away some tears.*

*“Told ya she would cry.” Scootaloo teased with a grin on her face.*

*“Scootaloo! That’s mean!” Sweetie Belle chided, though she was surprised to hear Nyx giggling a bit.*

*“It’s okay, I’m just... so happy to have three great friends like you.”*

*“And we’re glad to have you as our friend too.” Apple Bloom said with a smile, a smile that all four fillies shared together as both friends and Cutie Mark Crusaders.*

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Nightmare Moon shook her head, reclaiming her thoughts from the memory that had forced itself to the front of her mind. The three small crusaders were still looking up her, smiling as they waited for the black alicorn’s response. For a moment longer, Nightmare Moon looked at the little cape, and then gently set it down on the side of the vanity.

“Girls... we need to talk.” Nightmare Moon spoke, neither as a friend nor as a queen, but as an adult speaking seriously to children. She stepped away from the vanity, motioning with a hoof for the fillies to follow her. Apple Bloom, Sweetie Belle, and Scootaloo did just that, being lead across the room to Nightmare Moon's bed. The three fillies jumped up first, sitting down on the edge as Nightmare Moon climbed up and laid down on her stomach, which brought her head at least somewhat closer to the heads of the fillies she once called her friends.

“First of all, you shouldn’t have come here. You put yourself in a lot of danger sneaking into the palace. If one of my guards had found you, it would have been very bad... and I can’t imagine how worried everypony is, since I *know* you didn't tell anypony where you were going.”

“Well, if we had, they would have stopped us.” Apple Bloom offered.

"For good reason." Nightmare Moon scolded, causing the three fillies to flatten their ears.

"W-we just... just wanted to help. We were worried about you."

"I... I know Sweetie Belle... and I appreciate your concern. But I don't need help. I'm the Queen of Equestria now."

"What about Celestia and Luna? What happened to them?"

"Hasn't anypony told you?"

The three fillies hesitated, but eventually nodded their heads.

"No pony has told us directly, but...sometimes we hear them whisperin'," Apple Bloom admitted. "They said you locked the princesses up in the sun and moon, and you were the one makin' it dark all the time. That isn't true, is it?"

"It....it is...I won't lie to you, you...should know the truth." Nightmare Moon said with a sigh, afraid of how her former friends would act.

"But...why would you do that?"

"It's... it's complicated, Scootaloo," Nightmare Moon replied, trying to defend herself against the fillies. "I... I-I have a lot of expectations that I have to live up to."

"That's what Cheerilee said too."

"She did?"

Apple Bloom nodded. "Yea, she said that, since you don't really know the pony you're supposed to be, you're being the pony others expect you to be."

"But that's why were here," Scootaloo added. "To remind you who you *really* are."

“And... and... who am I to you three, now that I’m like this?” Nightmare Moon asked, partially fearing the answer.

“Well...you *did* look scary the other night...” Scootaloo said, making Nightmare Moon close her eyes and lower her head in shame.

“But now that we’re all here...you don’t seem that scary at all.”

Nightmare Moon quickly lifted her head back up, unable to believe what she was hearing.

“I... I don’t?”

“Nope! I think you’re just confused, and if that’s true, then you’re still our friend, Nyx. A pony that is really awesome at magic.”

“And a pony that’s also really good at school and is always ready to answer Cheerilee’s questions.”

“And who is always really nice and fun to play with.”

The black alicorn was finding it difficult to breathe, a tightness in her chest forming that she couldn’t shake away, no matter how hard she tried to banish it with her thoughts.

“But... you do know who I am, right? You know why everypony calls me... why I call myself Nightmare Moon.”

“Cheerilee said that you were always Nightmare Moon, but... we’ve never really met Nightmare Moon. We’ve only ever known you, Nyx,” Apple Bloom explained. “And I think you just need somepony to tell you that you don’t have to be the bad pony everypony else expects you to be. You can just be yourself, even if you do look like Nightmare Moon.”

“Yea, it doesn’t matter what a pony looks like on the outside. It’s who that pony is on the inside that counts.”

“That, and getting a cutie mark,” Scootaloo added. “Hey! I bet you’ve got your cutie mark! Oh, what is it? What is it!”

"I... don't have a cutie mark yet." Nightmare Moon replied, looking back at her utterly blank flank.

"Well, don't worry about it, Nyx. Everypony finds their special talent sooner or later. You'll just have to keep crusading with us until you find it. After all, that's what the Cutie Mark Crusaders are all about," Apple Bloom reassured.

"I... I think... I think I would like that." Nightmare Moon replied... letting herself smile even the slightest bit... a smile that was wiped away when the door to her bed chambers opened.

"I do apologize for this, my Queen, but there is something that you should be aware of. There are reports that the monsters in the Everfree Forest have started to get restless. It may be in our best interests to-" Nexus began, only for the unicorn to freeze up as he looked at the three small fillies that were sitting on Nightmare Moon's bed.

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"They need to be made an example of," Nexus grumbled, pacing around anxiously. Before Nightmare Moon could stop him, the unicorn had called for the guards. Apple Bloom, Scootaloo, and Sweetie Belle were now held out in the hallway, being held by her soldiers.

"They are fillies, Nexus, ones who were my friends when I was, myself, just a cowardly filly. They meant no harm."

"It is not the *intent* that matters, but the action taken. They snuck into your castle, and were able to reach your bed chambers without detection. That kind of trespassing cannot be allowed, or how long will it be before assassins begin roaming these very halls? NO! They need to be made an example of!"

"So what would you have me do? Let them hang from the gallows?"

"If that's what it takes to ensure your rule as Queen is unquestioned, then yes." Nexus replied sternly. "I respect your wishes, my Queen, but, if I may speak frankly, you have already shown far too much mercy. You've allowed the mares who bore the Elements of Harmony to go free, when they should

be rotting in the dungeon with Twilight Sparkle at the very least. Now, because of that, these three fillies believed they could just waltz up to you like you are any regular pony... and such disrespect cannot be condoned.

“To put it simply, my Queen, we cannot just allow them to go unpunished.”

Nightmare Moon’s gaze turned into a glare as she fixed her dragon orbs on Nexus. Her advisor was proving less loyal than she would have thought possible, or perchance she was the one not meeting up to his expectations. Still, there was no mistaking the intent in his eyes. If she ordered that the fillies be set free... Nightmare Moon had little doubt that Nexus would make an example of them all the same.

If she did not levy the punishment herself, then she would have no say in what the punishment was. Still, she would have to place her words carefully... or risk Nexus still taking things into his own hooves.

“Very well; they are to be imprisoned in the dungeon. Place them in the same cell with Twilight Sparkle. Those three are small, and there is no sense for us wasting cell space giving each their own. Offer them an additional blanket and pillow; that is all they should need. They are not to be touched or harmed... and hopefully, after a few weeks or months in the dungeon, they will know proper respect for their queen.”

This answer seemed to please Spell Nexus, the unicorn offering a smile. “Very good, Your Highness. I will have the guards escort them there straight away.”

With that the royal advisor turned, and stepped out of the room. Nightmare Moon shut and locked her bedroom door once Nexus left, and quickly moved over to her writing desk. Drawing out a scroll, feather pen, and ink bottle, the black alicorn began to write.

*Twilight Sparkle,*

*On this evening, Apple Bloom, Scootaloo, and Sweetie Belle snuck into the castle and managed to make it to my royal chambers. I would have sent them home if Nexus had not discovered them. They are currently being taken down to the dungeon, to be placed in your cell.*

*Please believe me when I say this: I would have set them free, but I fear what actions Nexus would take if I had. He saw their act of coming to see me as a sign of disrespect, one he demanded be punished. If I didn't punish them myself, I truly fear he would have taken matters into his own hooves.*

*So I have ordered them to be imprisoned, so that they will not come to harm from Nexus. They will be placed in your cell, where I trust you will do what you can to ensure they are safe until such time that I can release them.*

*I know I have no right to ask favors of you at this point, but please protect them. If you will not do this for me, then please do it for them.*

### *Nightmare Moon*

Nightmare Moon rolled the letter before taking hold of it with her mane. She then let her whole body turned in into the inky, indigo cloud. She surged out the window, zipping around the palace as she raced to beat Nexus and the guards to the dungeon. It was, thankfully, an easy feat, the black alicorn able to arrive well before her advisor.

Releasing the scroll from her magic, Nightmare Moon dropped her letter right in front of Twilight Sparkle. The piece of parchments sudden appearance startled Twilight, but her eyes quickly turned upward. Nightmare Moon let the unicorn catch a glimpse of her smoky body before slipping away, something that would hopefully inspire Twilight to read the letter immediately.

Nightmare Moon then left, returning to her bedroom just in case Nexus decided to return. Thankfully, the blue unicorn never came back, and, after a time, the alicorn turned into smoke a second time and snuck back down to the dungeon.

They were scared and confused, but her friends were okay. Twilight was doing her best to comfort them and they seemed unharmed. It was a sight that brought a wave of relief to Nightmare Moon, something that clung to her mind as she returned to her bedroom and laid down to rest. Her friends might hate her for locking them up, but it was more important to keep them safe.



Returning to her room, Nightmare Moon laid down on her bed and let her mind drift. For a time she pondered just how her friends had managed to get into the castle, but that curiosity was being slowly pushed away by more painful thoughts. Thoughts dredged up by the unexpected visit from the crusaders. The most painful of those thoughts was a simple, single truth that stung like a hateful bee in the alicorn's brain.

She still didn't have her cutie mark.

A cutie mark is supposed to appear when a pony finds that one thing that makes them special, their special talent. Nexus had assured that after she defeated the princesses, and took over Equestria, that her cutie mark would appear. He promised that her special talent and destiny was to be the Queen of Equestria... but if that was the truth, then why was she still a blank flank?

What did it mean? Did it mean that everything she had done, everything she accomplished... did it mean all that was for nothing? What was her special talent supposed to be? Nexus said it was her destiny, and it was the only thing she could remember wanting from her old memories. She wanted Equestria, she wanted the eternal night... this was what she wanted.

Yet... even that wasn't true. Luna's words echoed in the alicorn's mind from when the two had fought. Those were Luna's thoughts and Luna's desires. It was her jealous rage that had once been the sole defining feature of Nightmare Moon. They were her driving motivation when she was but a shade or mental infection of the moon princess... but she wasn't just a shade anymore. She was a pony of her own, given life, breath, and blood of her own.

And in that simple reality, where she was a mare of her own, Nightmare Moon began to wonder what she was actually doing. Was she truly meant to be the Queen of Equestria? Was she supposed to live up to the twisted shadow that her past created?

For, if that was true, then why hadn't her cutie mark appeared?

# Chapter 15

## Missing Joy

"I am a full grown mare, Nexus, explain; how it is even possible?" Nightmare Moon grumbled out, feeling exhausted after yelling for what was probably a half hour.

The dark blue unicorn took an anxious step back, having been on the receiving end of Nightmare Moon's first royal rant. The three intruding fillies had been placed in the dungeon the day before, and as soon as the castle opened for business the next morning, Nightmare Moon went on a verbal rampage. She stormed into the throne room, shouted for everypony else to leave, and proceeded to chew out Nexus about one thing.

The thing that had nipped at her mind all night, haunted her dreams, and hurt like an old wound that had been ripped open by the visit from the Cutie Mark Crusaders.

Her utter lack of a cutie mark.

"Your... Your Highness, I'm certain there is an explanation," Nexus replied, doing his best to try and calm Nightmare Moon without inviting her wrath at the same time. "After all, while you have obtained the title of queen, you have left much of the monotony of the job to me, a task I am glad to take. Still, perhaps your flank remains as it is simply because you have not taken a more active role in ruling."

"And what is a queen supposed to do when she rules?"

"If... if I may be so bold as to speak about your predecessor, Princess Celestia would fairly regularly hold court in her castle. Ponies would come to make requests of the throne, and she would decided whether their request was worthy of not only her attention, but the attention of the kingdom as a whole."

"And if my special talent is to be queen, this will make my mark appear?"

“Most certainly, Your Highness.”

“Then announce that I shall be holding court every day, from when the castle opens in the morning to when it closes at night. Let it be known that it will *be* this way until I deem otherwise or until my cutie mark appears.”

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The proclamation was made within the hour, messenger pegasi flying out to every corner of Equestria with news that the land's new queen was opening her court to the public. And come the ponies did, some traveling from the farthest reaches of the kingdom. When Nightmare opened her castle for the first day of her court, she was surprised to see the line stretched all the way to Ponyville, where many of the more distant travelers had made their temporary lodging.

They stood outside, forming a line long before the castle opened, despite the continuing, growing chill of the night eternal. They had bundled up in winter saddles, boots and scarves, despite the fact the calendar said it was supposed to be midsummer. They had all come to see her... and for a moment, Nightmare Moon dared to believe that maybe she was destined to be queen.

The black alicorn nestled herself into throne the last minute before her court was to begin. The ponies from outside had already been let onto the castle ground, the line moving forward so its front now sat just beyond the throne room doors. Nightmare Moon adjusted her armor and even took a moment to preen an out of place feather on her wings, wanting to greet the first pony who came through the door in all her regal beauty.

The clock clicked to the next minute, a few of the grander clocks in the castle chiming out the hour. With the last chime, the doors to the throne room opened, servants guiding the line of ponies through. They came to a stop half way across the throne room, the many ponies who had come looking upon their queen with wide eyes, all of which Nightmare Moon could see danced with fear.

The first in the line stepped forward, a pony farmer that Nightmare Moon found vaguely familiar. His cutie mark was of several carrots lying on their

side, and, while he wore a large brimmed hat, he quickly removed it once he reached the foot of her throne.

“It is an honor to be in your presence, Your Majesty. I am Danver, and my family runs a carrot farm just outside of Ponyville.”

“You are the neighbors to the Apple family, correct?”

“Yes, your... uh... glorious Majesty.” Danver replied, needing a moment to find an appropriate compliment.

“And what request do you bring to this court?”

“I... I... I...”

“Speak, Danver Carrot.”

“I... I would request that you would raise the sun, Your Highness.”

Nightmare Moon’s eye brows furrowed, her words dripping with resentment as if it was poison.

“*The sun?*”

The carrot farmer Danver winced, taking a step back.

“My... my crops are wilting, Your Highness. Your unicorns have come to help me replant but... but we cannot just replant this late into summer. The carrots won’t be ripe in time for the harvest and... and I can only imagine how much colder it will get when winter sets in. All... all I request is that... that for a few more months you allow the sun to shine. To give us ponies a chance to grow and harvest our crops for winter.”

“Like my rule over this kingdom, the night shall be *eternal*. Your request is denied!”

Danver did not argue or protest, instead turning tail and sprinting out of the throne room at a full gallop. His quick departure made many of the ponies in the line shift uneasily, but they all stayed, though many looked much more fearful than they had been moments before.

Nightmare Moon took a moment to compose herself before calling for the next pony. How *dare* he ask to see the sun? If there was one thing that she was known for, it was that she would make the night last forever. It was part of who she was, part of the pony the Children of Nightmare and all of Equestria expected her to be.

Still, with a few moments, her temper cooled, and Nightmare Moon motioned for the next pony in line to come forward. He appeared to be a business mare, dressed with a tie, collar, and cuffs. He bowed, and introduce himself in almost the exact same way the carrot farmer had. Nightmare Moon could only guess her servants were instructing the petitioners on how to speak to her.

And just as his introduction was similar, so was his request. He asked for the sun to be raised. His reasons were far different than the farmer, and Nightmare Moon didn't even really listen to them as she found herself gritting her teeth. She denied the business pony's request, and quickly called for the next.

Pony after pony came to her, and time after time Nightmare Moon heard the same request. They wanted the sun; they wanted their day. And while none dared speak it, she could tell that they wanted more than just their sun. They wanted the Royal Sisters back. They wanted Equestria to go back to the way it was. But it was too late for that. She was queen now, and they would have to deal with it.

After spending hours listening to ponies request the sun, Nightmare Moon had enough. She stood up from her throne, spreading out her wings in a display of her aggravation.

"Let it be known that the next petitioner who asks for the sun to be raised will locked in the dungeon. I will *never*. Raise. The. Sun. I am queen now, and as queen, I have decreed that Equestria shall live in a night eternal. Now, all those who have a request for the sun to be raised, or for Celestia and Luna to be freed, should *leave*... Now!"

Every pony in line turned and bolted, many screaming in panic as they ran from the throne room. This just seemed to fuel the anger burning in Nightmare Moon's chest, but she did not pursue the petitioners. She was

glad they were gone, glad to be rid of their sun-loving faces. How *dare* they ask her to raise the sun, when it was her desire to see the night eternal.

Though... it *would* be nice to see the sun again... for just a few minutes.

Nightmare Moon cursed as her own mind betrayed her, the great black alicorn sitting in her throne and glaring at the floor tiles, trying to decide which one she would smash to try and release her pent-up frustration. On top of it all, she could tell that her special talent was not in being queen... or at the very least, it wasn't in holding court. No cutie mark would come of this, and that was the entire reason she had agreed to hold court in the first place.

Just as Nightmare Moon had picked out the part of the floor that was going to be the unfortunate victim of her aggravation, she heard somepony approaching. Two sets of hooves walking down the hall towards her throne room. Were there still petitioners... still ponies who had a request *not* related to the sun... or were there ponies just too stupid to take a hint?

The black alicorn sat up in her throne as she watched the doors, eventually seeing two ponies come into view: a pair of pegasi, a mare and a stallion. The stallion was fairly large, with a very short-cut blond mane and brown coat. A heavy set pony, who looked to be fairly middle aged and had a rough shadow across his face from not shaving, a rare example of a pony that could grow a beard.

The mare was average sized, with a lavender coat and a mane that was a mixture of different tones of yellow. She was a surprisingly splash of color compared to the stallion, and yet the pair walked up together and approached the throne together, bowing down respectfully. They were ponies she recognized... ponies she had met once or twice before, but Nightmare Moon failed to remember their names and how she knew them.

"It is an honor to be in your presence, your Majesty." The stallion began, "I am [Boxxy Brown](#), and this is my wife [Cloud Kicker](#)."

"And what do you want?"

"We'd... " Boxxy Brown began, choking a little on his words but forcing them out all the same. "We'd like to know if our daughter can come home."

“And who is your daughter?”

“Scootaloo, Your Highness.”

Nightmare Moon felt her heart seize up in her chest. She now realized why the pair were familiar; they were Scootaloo’s parents. She had seen them only in passing, when she and the other Crusaders went by Scootaloo’s house to pick up the orange pegasi. It was strange to think such a brightly colored and spirited filly came from these two, but then again, little ponies didn’t always look and act like their parents.

“I... I am afraid she cannot.”

“Why?... please, Your Highness, whatever Scootaloo has done wrong, can’t you show her mercy?” Cloud Kicker asked, her voice trembling. She was on the verge of breaking down, but she was holding herself together... if only barely.

“I cannot.”

And that was enough to break what little control Cloud Kicker had over herself, the mother wailing as she dropped to her knees.

“Please, she needs to be at home, not locked in a dungeon! I promise, whatever she did wrong, we’ll make sure she never does it again! We’ll even move out of Equestria, we’ll do whatever you want! Just let us have our little filly back!”

“Cloud Kicker...” Boxy Brown said, trying to offer his wife some comfort as she began to cry on his shoulder.

Nightmare Moon kept her gaze on the pair for a time longer before looking up. Without a word, she motioned for the servants to leave, her guards as well. The throne room was once again sealed up: sealed like it had been the day Twilight Sparkle was brought before her, with no prying eyes to see what she was about to do.

The black alicorn stood from her throne and closed the distance between her and Scootaloo’s parents. Boxy Brown looked up at the alicorn in fear

while Cloud Kicker only continued to cry, the mother too worried about her daughter to even notice what was going on. Yet, to Boxy's surprise, Nightmare Moon lowered her head down, putting herself at the same eye level as the parents.

"I do not wish to cause you two, or Scootaloo, pain... and I realize you miss her. I would have set her free, but my advisor demanded that she be punished for trespassing in the castle. I feared that if I did not take action myself, he would take action for me... action far more severe than I would have liked.

"So I cannot release Scootaloo yet, but she is safe, I assure you. While she is in the dungeon, she is not locked up alone. She shares a cell with Sweetie Belle and Apple Bloom, and is being watched over by Twilight Sparkle. The four of them are keeping each other strong, and they are being well cared for. You will find Scootaloo no worse for wear when she is returned to you, and she *will* be set free in time.

"I... I just can't do it right now." Nightmare Moon said softly, almost apologetically.

"But when? When can she come home?" Cloud Kicker asked.

"Request an audience with me again in a few weeks. My advisor should be satisfied with the punishment by that time, and I will be able to release not only Scootaloo, but Sweetie Belle and Apple Bloom as well. And, if you would do me a favor, share this information with Rarity and Applejack... they are undoubtedly just as worried about their family."

Boxy Brown nodded his head. "We will do that."

"Good," Nightmare Moon offered in reply, turning her back on the parents. "Despite what you may think of me, what I've done is in their best interest. I have come to realize my advisor is... far less forgiving than I am. If he had been allowed to pick the punishment of the fillies... it would have been far worse than a few weeks spent in the dungeon."

Boxy Brown and Cloud Kicker nodded. And, unlike all the petitioners before them, the pair bowed a second time. "Thank you, Your Highness."



"I also ask you do not speak of our agreement. I would not have word of this reach Spell Nexus."

"We'll only tell Rarity and Applejack, so that they will know that Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle are safe," Boxy Brown assured. "Come on, Cloud Kicker."

The mare nodded, tears still streaming down her face, but Cloud Kicker was at least partially comforted by the notion that her daughter would be returned soon. When the pair left the throne room, the servants moved back in as Nightmare Moon just sat back down in her throne.

"Are there any other petitioners?"

"No," One of the servants replied.

Nightmare Moon offered a weak nod.

"Then I am ending court today. Have the gate guards notified and let the ponies of Equestria know that they must come asking for an audience, that I shall no longer be holding open court."

"Understood, Your Majesty."

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Despite the failure of holding court, Nexus continue to offer possible things for Nightmare Moon to do that he believed would expose her cutie mark. Every aspect of ruling the kingdom, from making speeches, to helping form laws... Nightmare Moon even sat through what was an utterly boring tax meeting, but her flank remained utterly blank.

When a week of trying different royal duties failed, Nexus began suggesting other talents related to the night-time sky. He suggested Nightmare Moon try changing the appearance of the stars, turn the night into her tapestry and fill it with such beauty that all of Equestria would forget about her sun. To make them *want* the eternal night just as much as she did, so they would never want to be parted with the beauty of her sky bound art.

Yet, when Nightmare Moon did try her hoof at changing the stars in the night time sky... she quickly regretted it. Memories flashed of art projects in Cheerilee's class, where some of the students were able to produce fairly well done pictures. Hers, however, always turned out foalish. The only way she knew how to draw a pony was with a stick figure. About the only pony less skilled with art in the class was Sweetie Belle, and that's just because she kept forgetting to wash out her brush between colors when they were painting.

Any change Nightmare Moon made to the night sky was no improvement. She tried to make constellations, but there was a subtlety to Luna's artwork. The constellations had vague resemblances to the creatures they were supposed to be, but were also up for interpretation. All the while, the true constellations remained images hidden within the grander picture of the sky, coming to the surface only when one's eyes searched for them.

This was a stark contrast to anything Nightmare Moon attempted. The constellations she made stood out like graffiti on the tapestry of the night, the rough and haphazard brushstrokes of a painter that might as well have been purposefully trying to desecrate another artist's work. For an entire night Nightmare Moon attempted to make the sky her own, but every change she began was removed in disgust a few minutes later.

And the only thing that Nightmare Moon succeeded in doing over the course of the night was building up her frustration. Her cutie mark had once been a moon; she was supposed to have a special talent for this, for tending the night sky... but if anything, her actions were equivalent to a foal who had found hoof paints.

As a nearby clock chimed the morning hour, Nightmare Moon finally had enough. With a stomp of her hoof, she used her magic to wipe away her latest failure before she let her whole body turn to smoke. She zipped through the air like an angry snake, returning to the balcony of her bedroom and stomping inside.

She moved straight to her mirror, turning sideways so she could stare at her still very blank flank. She glared at that patch of her coat, as if trying to force her cutie mark to appear through sheer will alone. When that didn't work, the black alicorn shut her eyes tight and fought the urge to smash her bedroom mirror for daring to show her embarrassing blankness.

What made her special? Was there *anything* that made Nightmare Moon special, beyond being a pony that every other pony feared and despised?

Opening her eyes again, she let her angry glare turn from her blank flank to her armor. At the moment, it was just as much as a mockery as her absent cutie mark... she was no war pony, no terror who would strike down those who stood in her way. If she was, then she would not have spared Twilight or any of the Elements of Harmony. Armor was something worn by a killer or a soldier, and she was neither. Without even a thought, Nightmare Moon magically removed her armor, tossing it all into a corner with a loud clatter.

Her eye shadow was next to go, another thing that Nightmare Moon had grown tired of applying. Yet she applied it anyway to meet the expectations of Nexus and the Children of Nightmare. A wet cloth removed every trace of the makeup, and once again Nightmare Moon looked upon herself as simply a black mare.

And how befitting was her black coat. She was nothing but a shade... a shadow... a poison... an infection of thought and magic that had taken captive of the true guardian of the nighttime sky. Even the cutie mark she once possessed was just a twisted shadow of Luna's. It had been *Luna's* talent for the sky, *Luna's* jealousy and emotion, *Luna's* desire that had formed and given purpose to Nightmare Moon.

But now that she was separated from Luna, made a mare of her own... what did that leave? The desires that Nightmare Moon remembered, that once burned within her like a fire, had gone ice cold, lingering only in her memories. She had no desires of her own, no wishes of her own... could it be possible she didn't even *have* a special talent of her own? That she had no cutie mark because she would never have one?

Unable to stand her reflection in the mirror anymore, Nightmare Moon moved to her bedroom balcony, choosing to look out across Equestria. Two weeks the single night had lasted, and the effects were visible. Plants were wilting all across the kingdom, even the staunch and sturdy Everfree forest was looking sickly. The few ponies out so early in the day were bundled up against the strong, nipping cold. Bundled up like it was the dead of winter, when it was in fact supposed to be summer.

Nightmare Moon's mind wandered as did her eyes as she looked upon Ponyville. She saw Sweet Apple Acres, and thought of Applejack. The orchards were looking weak; how much longer would the trees be able to survive?

Nexus had seen fit to put the replacement of the trees in Sweet Apple Acres at the very bottom of the replanting list. While some orchards across the Equestria had already been replaced with apple trees that could grow under the moonlight and in the cold of night, Applejack's family would not be replanted until practically the end of fall... and by then they would have no food of their own. Ponyville itself would also suffer, since the Apple family provided a great deal of the winter stores.

Nightmare Moon violently shook her head. Why did she care about this? The Nightmare Moon she used to have been would have just laughed at the hardship, revealed in the suffering, but such sights no longer inspired joy in the alicorn's chest... instead spawning only guilt.

When she was but a twisted reflection of Luna, Nightmare Moon had been filled with nothing but vengeance, anger, and jealousy... but now that she was her own mare, there was something else there. She did not know where it came from, whether it was already there when she awoke in the Everfree forest, if it was implanted in her during the time she was Nyx... but Nightmare Moon could feel a part of herself that hadn't been there before she became Nyx.

...and it was a part that *did* care about the suffering of others, the part that made sure Twilight and the Cutie Mark Crusaders were safe, unharmed, and taken care of in her dungeon. It was a part that feared what any more eternal night would do to Equestria.

Nightmare Moon glanced upward at the sky, her chest filling with a mixture of emotions. She was disgusted with the moon and stars, tired of seeing the night sky, thirsting to feel the sun on her coat, and wishing to end the suffering she had imposed on Equestria. This all accumulated into one thought, which lead to one desire, which lead to a single decision.

With her mane swirling gently and her eyes glowing white, Nightmare Moon stretched her magic to the heavens. Without a warning to anypony watching below, the moon began to move across the sky, racing across the

inky blackness. Within five minutes it had reached the west and began to set beyond the distant horizon, but Nightmare Moon did not look to her sinking moon.

Instead, her gaze focused eastward.

A bit of red started sneaking into, and mixing with, the dark blue and black of the night. It was just barely a shimmer at first, but it began to grow slowly. The red fringes were soon pushed farther into the sky by an orange core, and the orange pushed higher as a bright warm yellow sphere began to peak over the horizon.

This was against everything she was supposed to stand for, everything she was supposed to want. Yet, Nightmare Moon couldn't help but smile. She could already feel a few of the sun's golden rays striking her coat and filling her with warmth. Her eyes moved to the sky which began to shift from inky blackness to a bright, cheerful blue. The stars slowly faded, their light masked by the brilliance of the sun.

It was daytime in Equestria.

Leaving her armor behind, the queen made her way to the royal throne room.... slightly curious as to just how long it would take before somepony came running in, looking for her in a panic.

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"My Queen, I have dire news!" Nexus yelled as he burst into her throne room, a number of soldiers following in his wake. Still, the unicorn's panic was met only by a cool pair of eyes and a small smirk from Nightmare Moon.

"Ten minutes? I was sure it would have taken you longer than that," Nightmare Moon mused.

"My Queen?" Nexus asked, he and the soldiers coming to a stop at the foot of the throne, confusion painted across their faces.

"It is nothing. Now, what pressing business do you have that makes you feel you can burst into my throne room and make such a spectacle of yourself?"

"Your Majesty, the moon has set and the sun is beginning to rise. In mere minutes it will clear the eastern horizon. Celestia has obviously escaped her imprisonment, and it is only a matter of time before she comes to strike you down. I have already alerted the guard, and the castle is preparing to defend. We will do all we can to assist you in the upcoming battle, and-"

"That will not be necessary. You can tell the guards there is nothing to fear."

"Your confidence is refreshing, my Queen, but now Celestia has the advantage of surprise. We do not know when or how she will attack. She could be plotting an attack even as we speak."

"That would be true *if* Celestia had escaped the sun, but I assure you she is still in there."

"But... but then why...why is the sun rising? Surely it is not you-"

"Yes Nexus, *I* am the one that lowered the moon, and it is by *my* will and power the sun climbs into the sky."

Nexus could only look at Nightmare Moon in shock, mouth agape.

"B-b-but... but Your Highness, *why* would you end your own night? Is it not your deepest desire to have Equestria forever bathed in the glory of the moon and the stars, so no pony can ignore the beauty of the night?"

"Don't be foalish!" Nightmare Moon barked. "Have you even *felt* how cold it is outside the castle? Have you even *seen* the plants beginning to wilt? It is a miracle Equestria has survived two weeks of constant night, but to expect this kingdom to survive an eternity is ludicrous!"

"My Queen, if this is about the progress of turning Equestria into a paradise that can survive the eternal night, then I assure you-"

“That your renovations would come too late. Half of Equestria would have starved and the rest would have frozen to death. Not only were your progress in replanting pitiful at best, but the warding spells that *you* promised me would keep the roads and populated parts of Equestria as warm as any normal day still aren’t completed. How many times did you promised me that you were almost done and yet the night kept getting colder and colder?”

“And speaking of the night, there is no longer any reason to make it last forever anymore. Things are *not* as they were a thousand years ago, Nexus. There are now ponies who live, work... spend their entire lives sleeping through the day and being awake at night. There are ponies who appreciate the beauty of the night, but there is beauty to be found in the day and sunlight as well.

“Beauty that I have decided to rule over. I have decided that as long as I am the supreme ruler of Equestria, I will raise and lower the sun and moon myself. I will do just as Celestia did for a thousand years, and I shall be her *better*. I shall hold dominion over both heavenly orbs, and be the purveyor of their beauty not for merely a thousand years, but for all eternity. I shall be the eternal mistress of both day *and* night.”

Nexus obviously wanted to argue more, wanted to try and convince his queen that bringing back the day was not a good idea, but Nightmare Moon kept him silent with a single hard glare. Eventually, the dark blue unicorn bowed, as did the rest of the soldiers.

“...as you wish, my Queen. Is there anything else you would like me to know?”

“Yes; I will be taking leave of the castle today.”

“Of course, Your Majesty. I shall have somepony fetch your armor and-”

“No, I shall be going out just as I am.”

“But your Highness, I really think-”

“I’LL DECIDE WHAT I WILL AND WILL NOT WEAR!!! NOW AWAY WITH YOU!!!”

Nexus bolted, the guards following behind him. Nightmare Moon let an irritated sigh escape from her nostrils as she moved towards the throne room doors. Within minutes, the black alicorn had reached one of the castle's many balconies and she looked upon the sun and rich blue sky with a smile... like she was greeting a friend she had long missed. The warm rays fell on her black coat and filled her with warmth.

A gust of wind carried with it the sounds of cheers and what Nightmare Moon believed was music. Turning her eyes towards the source, she looked down into Ponyville. Ponies all about the town were rushing out into the streets, many gathering in the town square.

Her subjects... her "unblessed" subjects... they were as happy to see the sun as she was. They were rejoicing in its light and warmth, and it was a thought that actually made Nightmare Moon happy. A rare emotion she had not truly felt since she had taken over Equestria... and for once, she did not try to explain or wonder why she felt the way she did. She just let it soak in like the rays of the sun... and just let it lift up her long weighed down soul.

And, like misery, happiness at times loves company. Before she even really thought it through, Nightmare Moon had taken flight, letting her black wings carry her down to Ponyville and the impromptu celebration.

=====

Never had Ponyville been overtaken by a party so quickly. Pinkie Pie was working with several pegasi, including the lightning quick Rainbow Dash, to hurriedly put up decorations for a party that had arguably already started. A local DJ pony, who had been employed for such events as Rarity's fashion show for Hoity Toity, was already spinning disks and filling the air with music.

The whole town had been enveloped in the block party, ponies shouting their joy to the heavens. Warmth was already filling the air, driving away the long lingering chill of the extended night. Ponies who had bundled up were now tossing off boots, winter saddles, and scarves to bask in the sunshine. Every cloud was cleared away by a certain cyan colored pegasus, the sky completely unmarred.



So enthralled were the ponies with the celebration, they didn't take notice of the indigo cloud lingering in the shadows of the nearby trees. Nightmare Moon watched them, and would have been grinning ear to ear if she wasn't a floating mass of magical energy.

Now *this* felt good... *this* felt right. Seeing ponies laughing and playing in the sun, overflowing with happiness and joy without a care in the world. This was what Equestria was meant to be like. This was the Equestria she had seen through innocent eyes, and it was *not* an Equestria locked in an eternal night.

Nexus could go eat moldy hay for all Nightmare Moon cared. This was how she was going to rule. She would move the sun and moon just like Celestia did. It didn't matter what she used to want, what the Children of Nightmare thought she would want. She was the Queen of Equestria, she could want and do whatever she pleased and she didn't want to make the ponies suffer under eternal night. She wanted to see both the sun *and* the moon as much as they did.

The black alicorn's mind began to get away from her, imagination rolling. They were so happy, so overjoyed to see their sun... maybe now they would not look on her in fear. Maybe they would even thank her for bringing back the sun. Yes, she'd appear before them, and, instead of cowering in fear, they would finally see that she wasn't a monster. That she could be as just, regal, and caring as Celestia.

Yes, she would appear before them, smile down at them. She would do as Celestia did and affectionately call them "my little ponies", and speak in the sweetest, softest voice she could manage. She'd show them, the Children of Nightmare, and Nexus that she was her *own* mare, that there was *more* to her than the vengeance, rage, and anger.

She'd show them they would never have to fear another eternal night.

A few mares and stallions nearby began to cheer, lifting glasses of quickly prepared purple punch, and Nightmare Moon felt her mental smile widening as she listened to each cheer.

"Hooray for the sun!" One offered.

“Hooray for the day!”

“I say we raise a glass, toast Equestria’s true Royalty.”

The others nodded lifting their glasses. “To Celestia and Luna!”

...

Nightmare Moon’s heart dropped in her chest.

They... they weren’t just celebrating because the sun was out. No... they were celebrating her defeat. They thought the sunrise mean Celestia had come back, that Equestria was once again ruled by the Royal Pony Sisters. That she had been defeated.

In an instant, Nightmare Moon felt the urge to bring back the night, to take back the day she had given them until they could appreciate it, could appreciate her. She began reaching her magic to the sky, about to steal away the sun... but then her will and determination faltered.

It... it had been two long weeks of night... and these ponies would be heartbroken enough when they learned that she was the one that brought the sun back.

The cloud that was Nightmare Moon slunk off, sneaking between the hooves of the dancing ponies as she retreated from the party, the happiness, and the joy. She would let them have their day, let them have their celebration... but she could not bring herself to stay there. The joy, the laughter, the dancing, the music... each was like a dagger being twisted in her heart.

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On the far outskirts of Ponyville, where the party and its music were nothing more than haunting tones on the wind, Nightmare Moon laid down on the grass. In one of the town’s many exterior parks, she hid in the shade of a weeping willow, the long hanging branches hiding her from any ponies that might walk past on the path.

She was alone for the moment, which was just what the queen wanted.

Her heart ached, the pain flowing from the deep-cutting words of the ponies who celebrated in the center of Ponyville. The happiness that had flickered inside the black alicorn had been slain in cold blood the moment she heard that the ponies were celebrating her assumed defeat, leaving Nightmare Moon to once again wallow in... whatever ponies were supposed to wallow in.

The worst part was that she had tasted happiness again, the true happiness she once knew so well. It was like giving a single swallow of water to a pony lost in a desert. A moment of refreshment that was, in truth, only a taunt... a single moment of relief that only left the soul craving for more.

Why wasn't she happy? Nightmare Moon had everything she could hope for, cutie mark or not. She had ultimate power, magic unstoppable, an entire kingdom was in her hooves to do as she saw fit. She was the one true Queen of Equestria.

So why was she utterly miserable? Wasn't there anything that could make her happy? What had made her happy in the past?

The last question stirred Nightmare Moon's mind, answers bubbling to the surface. Memories that, in truth, Nightmare Moon didn't want to endure. She knew what had made her happy in the past, and it was *not* power or a crown. It was not a thing or a trinket... it was the ponies.

It was ponies like Twilight Sparkle, who had taken a lost, scared little filly into her home and treated her like a daughter. Ponies like Cheerilee, who were eager to teach. Ponies like Twist, who Nightmare Moon could do school work with. Ponies like the Cutie Mark Crusaders, who searched to find the one thing that made each of them special.

It was all the ponies of Ponyville, who had once looked upon her with smiles and happy faces, as just another pony in their humble little town.

Nightmare Moon groaned as she laid her head on the ground and covered her head with her hooves, her mystical mane wavering through. Why did this keep happening? Why did it seem that almost every little thing or every quiet moment caused her to think back to when she was still Nyx? Was that

really the only time she was ever truly happy in life? What was it that made those short months more important than the hundreds of years she spent as Nightmare Moon?

Why did the ponies she used to have in her life make her happy? Why did nothing she wanted bring her joy? Having eternal night didn't make her happy. Being a queen didn't make her happy. Even with a whole country at her mercy, she wasn't happy. What did she want? Why did she even want to rule in the first place?

Before she could stop herself, Nightmare Moon remembered exactly why she desired all of this, thinking back to when she wasn't yet her own pony, but merely a shade of Luna.

Luna was jealous and envious of Celestia, feeling that she was unappreciated. All she wanted was for ponies to love her night the same way they loved Celestia's day. That complex thought became distilled, refined, and became the central fuel for all the hatred and vengeance that had used to fill the black alicorn.

She just wanted to be... to be...

Loved.

Love? Was that it? Was that all she really wanted? Nightmare Moon began to think back, slipping through her memories. All her plans focused back on that single thought. Luna wanted ponies to love her night, and so did she once. Luna wanted to be the sole ruler of Equestria so she would be as loved as her sister, and Nightmare Moon had shared that desire.

Even after she had been stripped away from Luna by the Elements of Harmony, that one core truth had lingered, a simple thought so ingrained in who she used to be, that not even the Elements of Harmony could wash it away.

She just wanted to be loved?

And she *had* been loved... she had been loved as Nyx. Twilight had loved her, she had friends... and she was happy... and she had ruined it all. She might have been queen, but nopony loved her or would ever truly love her.

She was a monster, a tyrant, and even if she ruled the kingdom with the same kindness and caring once showed to it by the Royal Sisters, it wouldn't matter. Those who meant the most to her would be long dead by the time she was accepted by everypony else... if ever.

It was enough to make Nightmare Moon, the former Mare in the Moon, the eternal Queen of Equestria, the only remaining alicorn in Equestria... it was enough to make the most powerful pony in the entire world.... cry. She didn't wail, didn't bawl... but cry she did. In the protective shade of the tree, she wept in silence, not trying to hide the tears coming from her eyes.

And for the longest time, that was all Nightmare Moon did. She just let herself cry, ignoring all the world around her. The black alicorn didn't know or care how long she cried to herself beneath the shade of the tree, but her crying was abruptly stopped by a tiny voice.

"Are you okay?"

Nightmare Moon snapped her head up in shock. Who would even *dare* approach the queen when she was obviously in a bad mood?

Who would even.... care?

It took Nightmare Moon a moment to locate the source of the voice, its owner having retreated outside the sagging branches of the weeping willow, which hung practically to the ground. Still, after a few moments, the pony dared to push her head through the hanging branches of the willow. A filly, roughly the same age as the Cutie Mark Crusaders... one who Nightmare Moon recognized instantly.

Cream-white coat, curly red hair, admittedly dorky purple glasses, and a cutie mark of two crossed candy canes in the shape of a heart. There... there was no mistaking the pony Nightmare Moon had spent hours with at school, one she played with almost every recess.

A little filly named Twist.

"I... I'm sorry, Your Highness." Twist offered in her nasally tone. "I... I just heard somepony crying while I was going back to my house to get some of the peppermint sticks I made. I'll... I'll leave you alone if you want..."

"No." Nightmare Moon said before she could even really think what she was doing. "Please... it's been a long time, Twist. You don't have to go if you don't want."

"You sure?"

"Yes... and you don't have to call me Your Highness. I'd... I'd like it if you could just call me Nyx."

The little filly smiled a little at this, moving beneath the canopy of the weeping willow.

"My mom said you had gone bad and mean, and that you were the one that made it dark all the time... but I told her that wasn't true, that the Nyx I knew wouldn't be so mean. Though... you sure did get big."

Nightmare Moon felt the filly's words dig into her heart, the truth hurting. She had been a monster and a tyrant, and nopony was ever going to forget the two weeks she made them suffer without seeing the sun. Still, she did not snap at Twist, didn't try to defend herself. She would not risk scaring away one of the few ponies that dared approach her.

"I was... confused for a while, Twist. I did make it dark all the time, but... I'm sorry about what I did. I... I realize now how much I was hurting everypony... and I promise, I won't ever do it again," Nightmare Moon replied, trying to pick her words... keep them simple and sincere... just like how she used to talk.

"It's okay, Nyx. It was actually kind of fun at first. I've never been able to play outside after dark before. I had some really fun games of hide and seek with some friends from school, though I bet you would have been able to really hide well in the dark... well, maybe if you weren't so big.

"Hey, you should come to the party in town! It's super fun. Everypony is outside, dancing and playing."

"I would like to Twist, but... I don't think I can. I'm very busy," Nightmare Moon lied.

Twist sighed a little. "That's what Apple Bloom always says too, at least before she went to visit her family over a week ago."

Visit her family; a white lie offered by either Applejack or Twist's parents so the little filly didn't know that Apple Bloom and the other crusaders were locked away in the castle dungeon.

"Why does Apple Bloom always say that?" Nightmare Moon asked.

"Because she's always doing things with Scootaloo and Sweetie Belle, being a Cutie Mark Crusader." Twist replied, kicking at the dirt a little. "I'm happy I got my cutie mark, but, ever since I did, Apple Bloom has only ever wanted to play with me during recess... and now that school's over, I doubt she'll want to play with me at all... all because I can't be a Cutie Mark Crusader."

"Almost wish my cutie mark hadn't appeared..."

"Twist... I want you to wait here just for a moment." Nightmare Moon said, the alicorn getting to her hooves. "I have to run and get something, but I promise I'll be right back."

"Sure, just don't take too long. I want to go to the party."

Nightmare Moon nodded, and in a swirl of indigo cloud she disappeared. Twist hardly had to wait a full minute before the alicorn had returned, appearing from a swirling vortex of her smoky mane. She then laid back down on the grass by Twist, smiling gently.

"Okay, I want to close your eyes. I've got a surprise for you."

"Really?!" Twist said, bouncing on her hooves.

"Yes, but you have to close your eyes... and no peeking."

The candy cane colored filly shut her eyes tight, squeezing the eyelids shut to the point that she was contorting her face into a silly expression. Nightmare Moon had to stifle a small laugh at the sight, but continued about her work as she took something she had carried back from the castle in her mane, and carefully draped it over Twist's back.

“Okay, you can look now.”

Twist snapped her eyes open, and then looked to the thing Nightmare Moon had tied onto her. A smile practically exploded onto Twist’s face when she saw the red cape with a familiar blue and yellow emblem.

“As an official member of the Cutie Mark Crusaders and the Queen of Equestria, I hereby declare you an honorary Cutie Mark Crusader. Now you can play with Apple Bloom, Scootaloo, and Sweetie Belle all you want.”

“Really... even though I already have my Cutie Mark?”

“Being a Crusader isn’t just about finding your own cutie mark, but also helping a friend find their special talent. And who better to help a friend get their cutie mark than a pony who already has hers?”

Twist bounced. “Oh, I can’t wait until Apple Bloom comes back from visiting her family! I bet I could show her and her other friends how I make candy, and then maybe they could have a cutie mark like mine.”

“I’m sure Apple Bloom will be back sooner than you think,” Nightmare Moon offered, still unable to admit that she knew where Apple Bloom really was.

“Thanks Nyx; this is so sweet. I can’t wait to show everypony.” Twist offered, looking back at her cape before looking forward again, a bit of a realization on her face. “Oh, I forgot; I was bringing back some of my peppermint sticks to the party.”

“Well, you’d better run along then.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to come to the party?”

“I’m sorry Twist but... I really don’t think I should go.”

“Okay.” The creme colored filly replied, but not before reaching into her saddle bags and drawing out one of the peppermint sticks. It was wrapped in colorful tissue paper and had a big red bow on it.

“Here, you should at least have one.”



“Oh...oh Twist, no, I couldn't...”

“They'll make you smile.” The filly assured, after setting the peppermint stick down on the ground. It was too much for Nightmare Moon to bear, the black alicorn gingerly taking up the peppermint stick in her magic.

“Thank you Twist.”

“Okay, I'd better get going... but, Nyx?”

“Yes?”

“Is the sun going to rise tomorrow? Or is going to be dark for a long time again?”

“I'll make you a deal, Twist. If you promise not to tell anypony that you saw me, or that I was the one that raised the sun today, I'll make the sun rise again every day.”

“Does it have to be a Pinkie Pie Promise?” The filly asked, still having an uneasy memory of the pink earth pony shouting “forever” at them back during the school year.

“No, it doesn't.”

“Okay, I promise Nyx,” The filly replied with a smile, “but I hope you change your mind and come to the party. It's going to be a lot of fun. Still, if you don't, I'll see you later, okay?”

Nightmare Moon nodded, and watched as Twist slipped out from underneath the canopy of the weeping willow. With just a touch of magic, the black alicorn pushed back some of the hanging branches, watching as Twist bounced towards town, singing the Cutie Mark Crusader theme song as she went.

It was a moment of happiness... a single true moment of happiness that Nightmare Moon had missed so dearly since being fully resurrected... but as the moment ended and the warmth faded, the cold wind of reality cut the alicorn even deeper.

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Nightmare Moon remained where she was until towards the end of the day, when the celebrations had died down and the sun was nearing the far horizon. The alicorn made the sun set and the moon rise from hiding place beneath the tree, and lingered there a bit longer before she dared leave.

She moved through Ponyville as a mystical shadow, making her way slowly to her destination: the Ponyville Library. While Nightmare Moon was happy to give Twist the new Crusader cape that Sweetie Belle had made... the alicorn found her insides turning at the thought of no longer having the little bit of red fabric, with gold fabric lining and the little, haphazardly made blue emblem. She was happy to give her cape to Twist, but the alicorn still wanted a cape of her own.

But the cape she had given away was a new cape. The one Sweetie Belle had brought her when she, Apple Bloom, and Scootaloo snuck into the castle. Her cape... her first cape, it was still safe. It was tucked away inside a hiding spot she had found in the library.

A pony had returned a library book damaged, and Twilight was forced to throw it away. A number of pages had been torn out and damaged, but, around the same time, Twilight had been reading a story to Nightmare Moon where the main character hid things inside a hollowed out book.

Thus, the damaged book had become the best hiding spot. Not even Twilight knew about it. Nightmare Moon kept the book with a small collection of other books under her bed. All of them were just storybooks, her favorite stories. Twilight had ordered the filly her own copies, so she could read them whenever she wanted and never have to worry about the books being checked out.

Among the story books was a blue tome, an old collection of fairy tales, where the title of the book had been worn off with time and age. Only a few letters could still be made out, and Twilight was planning to have the book rebound if it hadn't come back to the library damaged.

But inside that book Nightmare Moon had cut away the pages, having to sneak a pair of scissors. She had cut away the interior, and created an

empty space where a few things could be kept. Inside that book were her treasures, amongst them her original Cutie Mark Crusader cape.

And in thinking about the cape and its hiding place, Nightmare Moon began to think of the other treasures she had hidden away in the same place. She wanted them back. Maybe even *needed* to have them. She was grasping at the happiness she once knew, trying to collect and hold every fond memory she had. She didn't want to forget, didn't want to just ignore what had happened, and having those few treasures would help her hold fast to memories that would slowly fade away otherwise.

The cloud that was Nightmare Moon drew close to the library at this point, and the alicorn was struck with a bit of déjà vu as she approached one of the windows. She had been in that place, done the same thing before. She had crept up to the library as a cloud and peeked in the window, back when she was spying on Twilight Sparkle and the other five ponies that would wield the Elements of Harmony.

And Nightmare Moon couldn't stop herself as she peaked in the same window, only to find a very different scene.

"Are you sure you'll be okay here by yourself, Spike? You are *more* than welcome to keep staying with me and Sweetie Belle." Rarity offered, the white unicorn standing in the center of the room.

"No, I need to be here and make sure the library is in tip-top shape for when Twilight comes back. I mean, the sun came up, which means Celestia has to be back. And if Celestia is back, it won't be long before she's freed Twilight, and I don't want Twilight to come back to a dirty library."

"You really are her number one assistant, aren't you?" Rarity praised with a smile.

"You bet I am." Spike stated proudly.

"Well then, I won't keep you from your cleaning... but, if you get hungry, I want you to come over to the boutique. While I can't promise you jewels, you are always more than welcome to spend dinner with me.

“And don’t stay up too late,” Rarity finished as she turned to leave. Nightmare Moon quickly shrunk back, hiding her cloud-like body to make sure she wasn’t seen by Rarity. Once the white unicorn was far enough away, the alicorn risked peeking in the window again, watching as Spike walked over to Twilight’s writing desk. He began to clean, but soon paused to pick up a nearby picture frame.

It was a picture of him and Twilight. The two were posing for the picture, undoubtedly a shot for a school yearbook or something back when Twilight was attending Celestia’s School for Gifted Unicorns. Both she and Spike looked younger in the image, at a time when the baby dragon was just starting to act more like Twilight’s assistant.

The baby dragon smiled at the picture before hugging it to his chest.

“I’ve missed you, Twilight; it will be nice having you back.” The dragon said, intending for only himself to hear the words.

But there was another who heard the words... and Nightmare Moon slunk away from the window, beginning to make her way back to the palace.

She didn’t have the heart to take away the hope that was filling Spike’s chest. The baby dragon would find out soon enough that it was Nightmare Moon, not Celestia, that raised the sun... and that Twilight Sparkle would have to remain in the castle dungeon.

He had the hope of a happy reunion with Twilight... and Nightmare Moon saw no point in taking that hope away so quickly. She would have her guards fetch the treasure book, have them wait until Spike left the library, so that none would know what was taken.

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The waiting was excruciating, Nightmare Moon sitting in her throne room and not wanting to move an inch, just in case the guards would arrive with her treasure book.

She had made the book sound like something far worse than it was, as if the tome contained her grand plans for Equestria or a dark magic spell she had researched. Nexus was more than eager to hear about such a book,

and even volunteered to go take the book from the library with his own hooves, to ensure its contents was never opened.

It was an offer Nightmare Moon didn't refuse, though she insisted that Spike had to be out of the library. When Nexus asked why, she gave him the simple logic that no pony or dragon in Ponyville was to know that the book even existed, and that seemed to thrill Nexus to the point that he would have probably waited years for Spike to leave the library before securing the book.

Thankfully, it had only taken hours. A short time after the sunrise, Nightmare Moon heard the doors to her throne room open, Nexus poking his head in.

"Were you successful?" Nightmare Moon asked, getting up from her throne and walking across the room to meet Nexus half-way. The loyal blue unicorn just smiled as he levitated the book beside him, offering a bow as he and the alicorn met in the middle of the room.

"Of course, my Queen. The book was in Twilight's Library, just where you said, and the baby dragon was out fetching breakfast for himself at the time. No pony saw us enter or exit.

"I have also ensured that no pony has even cracked the cover. The book has remained tightly closed since it was removed from its hiding spot, as per your request."

"Excellent." Nightmare Moon offered, taking the book in her own magic. "You have done well, Nexus."

"You honor me, Your Highness. Though... if I may be so bold... what exactly does this book contain? You have spoken of it as if it holds something of unfathomable importance, but I find myself wondering how such a simple-looking book could contain something so-"

"Do you *question* my word, Nexus?!" Nightmare Moon hissed out, leaning in close and glaring coldly at the unicorn. The unicorn had to swallow nervously, trying to force down the knot that had formed in his throat.

"No... Never my Queen! Perish the thought!"

“Good... Now I request privacy. It is of the utmost importance I am not disturbed. I want the throne room sealed, and you are to assist the guards in keeping watch until such time I say otherwise.”

“Yes, my Queen,” Nexus offered with a bow before quickly jogging off, shouting at the guards. Within moments, the throne room was sealed, as it had been sealed twice before.

But now, the alicorn was truly alone in the room... just as she wanted. Holding the book in her magic, Nightmare Moon let a hoof gently brush across the cover, the alicorn licking her lips a moment before cracking open the cover. . There, amongst the hollowed out pages, were her treasures... and Nightmare Moon felt the air catch in her lungs.

Lying right on top, and taking up the largest part of the book’s interior, was her original Cutie Mark Crusader cape. It was frayed on a few edges and had a stain on one corner, all things that had happened as she had worn the cape on her adventures with Scootaloo, Sweetie Belle, and Apple Bloom.

Removing the cape, Nightmare Moon gently draped it across the cover of the book as she looked at the other items inside. Her blue ribbon from the Learn and Play Day, little trinkets that she had gathered from her many attempts to find her cutie mark. Marbles, old coins... things that had no significant monetary value. Things no other pony would consider treasures.

But, to her, they were utterly priceless.

Before she could even stop herself, the alicorn found her magic reaching out to one of the trinkets... her kazoo. The cheap, little thing she had won along with the blue ribbon from the Learn and Play Day’s tug of war match. She drew the kazoo out with her magic, and soon found the toy against her lips.

It felt so much smaller now, as if she could break it just by holding it her mouth. Still, Nightmare Moon held the kazoo with the most delicate care, and she breathed out. The little kazoo gave up its note, which sounded against the halls of the throne room with a haunting tone. A tone that dredged up memories that Nightmare Moon couldn’t ignore.

She had regained her treasures, and the fond memories that were tied to them... but that was all they were: memories. Just memories. But that wasn't enough to soothe Nightmare Moon.

Right now, Spike was happier than the alicorn. Why? Because he had hope. He had hope and belief that Twilight would return, and that brought him greater joy than just the memories he had of the unicorn.

But Nightmare Moon... she had no hope. She had felt a flutter of happiness in her chest after talking with Twist the previous morning... but how long would it be before Twist was turned against her? How long before the filly learned the truth and, like all the others, expected her to be a monster?

And how long would it be before she would be able to feel the flutter of happiness again? Feel the warmth it brought? It had been weeks since she was resurrected; what if the next fleeting moment of happiness she could grasp onto didn't come for weeks, or months... or years... or decades?

Was there even a hope of her ever being truly happy again?

# Chapter 16

## To Harden a Soft Heart

For a full week, Nightmare Moon dutifully raised and lowered the sun, making the days pass as they did before her rule. She did that and little else, choosing to sequester herself in her chambers otherwise. She kept tabs on how the kingdom was being ruled, made sure Spell Nexus didn't overstep certain boundaries. Yet, beyond that, Nightmare Moon could hardly bring herself to rise from her bed, her heart weighing too heavily in her chest.

News had been spread that it was she who raised the sun, that it was by her choice that the eternal night ended. It had been some of the most startling news to ever hit Equestria, falling just short of the alicorn's very quick rise to power.

The reactions to the news were mixed.

The Children of Nightmare sulked, Nexus in particular, seeing her decision as a sign of weakness that needed to end. Still, they would dare not say such a thing to their Queen's face, but even she could hear whispers just as well as any regular pony.

The general populace at large seemed uneasy, as if Nightmare Moon was only teasing them with a few sunny days. That she would suddenly bring back the eternal night without warning. That she was only playing some sick game, or that she had something far worse planned for Equestria.

And if there were those who truly appreciated her returning the sun to the sky each day... Nightmare Moon didn't hear about them. Their voices were quiet whispers, lost in a sea of shouts from the rest of Equestria. Lost in the chorus of voices from those who either feared she would return the night eternal or demanded that she did.

It was a surrounding storm, which only aggravated the storm that billowed in Nightmare Moon's mind. She kept trying to understand why she felt the way she did. Kept asking the same questions over and over again. Why



was she only happy when she was with Twist and the Cutie Mark Crusaders, or thinking of her time as Nyx? Why did she not have the same driving desires she once had? Why was she showing so much mercy, when the old Nightmare Moon was merciless?

This endless merry-go-round of thoughts drove Nightmare Moon into her depression, making her hide in her bed chamber and lock away the world; pretend it didn't exist. Sequestering herself in the silence as she tried to understand what was wrong with her.

But at times, the world will not be ignored.

*STOO-ONGK!!!*

"Hey, I said you can't enter!"

"Grab her!"

*TRISH! CLANG!! CLONK!!!*

"Halt... I said HALT!"

"Watch it, she's making a run at the door!"

"Somepony get some pegasi here to help us catch her!"

"Watch out!"

*TRISH!! THRONG!! STREECHK!!!! TISH!!!*

"That... that's it! We got her! We've got her surrounded."

"No pony makes a foal out of us! You are under arrest for trespassing on castle grounds! Everypony, rush her on three... two... one..."

"RRRAAAAA!"

*KKKRRRAASSH-TRISSH. Clang clang....*

Nightmare Moon bolted up from her bed, eyes narrowed into points of anger as she moved to her balcony. She burst outside, wings unfurling as she turned her gaze down on the castle courtyard below. It was early morning, the alicorn having just raised the sun a few hours before.

Despite the early hour, Nightmare Moon took in the deepest breath she could manage before bellowing at the top of her lungs. The sheer volume of her voice undoubtedly scared some ponies in Ponyville awake.

***“WHAT IS GOING ON OUT HERE!?”***

All that answered was moaning and groaning, a large portion of the castle guard piled on top of each other in the center of the main courtyard. The cause of the commotion was just near the defeated guards. Giggling and bouncing around them playfully, as if it was all a game, was Pinkie Pie.

“You ponies are silly! That isn't how you play tag.”

Nightmare Moon didn't know whether to be shocked at what she was seeing, to be enraged her guards had been so easily defeated, or to drop on the floor and laugh her head off. A single hyper pink pony had just bested her guards without meaning to. The world could probably be on the verge of ending, and Pinkie Pie would still be Pinkie Pie.

“HALT!” Several fresh guards shouted, the unicorn soldiers having been drawn by the commotion. Their horns were already glowing, undoubtedly ready to either grab Pinkie Pie with levitation magic or use far more dangerous spells to stop the bouncing intruder.

“Oh, do you guys want to play tag too? Okay, but remember that I'm ‘It’, and you have to run away from me. These ponies just didn't get it; they kept running *towards* me.”

“This is no game; you are trespassing in the royal castle of Queen Nightmare Moon. Surrender now and you will not be harmed... much.”

“Guards, at ease.”

The unicorns, who had been on the verge of using magic to tie down and grab the pink earth pony, quickly snapped to attention as Nightmare Moon glided down from her bedroom balcony, landing near the commotion.

“Your Highness, this pony has trespassed in your royal castle!”

“Yes, I CAN see that,” Nightmare Moon replied, looking down at Pinkie Pie. “What are you doing here?”

“Well, I came here to come see you, but when I asked the guards, they told me ‘No, any petitioners that want an audience with the glorious Nightmare Moon must make an appointment, and be approved by Spell Nexus’.” Pinkie began, speaking the last sentence in a gruff voice, mimicking or mocking the guards.

“But then I told them that I wasn't a medical practitioner and that if I wanted to be part of an audience, I'd go watch a fun play, or maybe listen to a pony band. All I wanted was to talk to you, but they told me to go away.

“But I *really* need to talk to you, so I didn't leave. Then they opened the gates to make me leave, and I decided that if they were silly enough to leave the castle gates open, then they probably didn't mind if I came inside. And then all these silly guards started chasing me, and before I knew it, we were having a super fun game of tag.”

Nightmare Moon lifted a hoof to her mouth, trying her very best not to laugh in front of her guards. She didn't know what it was that she found so funny. It could have been Pinkie Pie being Pinkie Pie, how her guards had been made to look like foals, or maybe she just that desperate for a laugh.

In any case, Nightmare Moon truly struggled to keep herself from laughing, a smile slipping onto her lips. Still, with a forced cough the alicorn was able to regain her serious expression as she looked down at Pinkie Pie.

“And why did you want to see me?”

“To give you this.” Pinkie Pie replied, the pony reaching back into her curly tail and pulling out an envelope. She held it gingerly in her teeth until Nightmare took the envelope with her magic, opening it right there and removing its contents.

It was... it was an invitation... to a party... to Twist's birthday party.

In a flash, the mild humor Nightmare Moon found in the situation was replaced with a seething anger as she threw the invitation onto the ground and stomped on it with a hoof.

“What cruel joke are you playing?!?”

“Joke? What joke? Did somepony tell a joke? Oooooooo, was it a knock knock joke? I love knock knock jokes! My absolute favorite goes like this. The first pony says 'knock knock', and the other pony says 'who's there', and then the first pony says-”

“PINKIE PIE!” Nightmare Moon snapped loudly, causing most of her guards, as well as the pink earth pony, to jump. “I’m *talking* about the *invitation*.”

“Oh... *giggle*, that's not a joke, you silly filly.”

“Do you think I am so foalish?!? *Why* would I want to attend some little filly's birthday party? *Why* would she even *want* me there? *What* makes you think I'd believe her parents would even *allow* her to send an invitation to me, even if Twist *did* want to invite me? I should lock you in the dungeon for this cruel prank!”

“But... this *isn't* a prank.”

“Then answer the questions I just asked you.”

“Oh... okay. Let me see... uh... you asked a lot of questions.” Pinkie Pie began, looking skyward as if she was going to pluck the answer from the clouds.

“Um... okay. No, I don't think you're foalish. You're too big to be a filly, let alone a foal. Why would you want to attend a party? Well it's a party, and everypony likes parties. Second, why did Twist want to invite you? She said it's because she never saw you at the super fun block party we had when the sun came up again.

"As for Twist's parents, they *kind* of don't know she sent you an invitation. The party's going to be at Sugarcube Corner, so I was handing out all the invitations, and Twist asked that, if I had an extra one, that I would bring it to you.

"And, honestly, I wasn't sure at first. I mean, parties are always more fun when there are more ponies, but even / didn't think it was a good idea to invite you. But then Twist told me that you weren't really as mean as everypony thinks you are, and that she still wanted you at her party. So I smiled, and I told her, 'Silly Filly, I always have ten extra invitations just in case'. So after delivering all the other invitations, I bounced right over here to bring you yours!

"So, are you going to come? It's today, and it's going to be super fun."

Nightmare Moon let her gaze shift down to the smashed invitation, the alicorn carefully lifting it up and using her magic to straighten it. She then folded the invitation, and held it back out to Pinkie Pie.

"No, I am not coming."

"Aw, why not? Twist was really hoping you would come. She promised to make lots of peppermint sticks. She said you liked them."

"Tell Twist thank you for the invitation, but... I cannot attend."

"Well... okay." Pinkie Pie replied, taking the invitation and slipping it back into the curly hair of her tail. "It's still a party even if all the guests cannot come. Still, there's always room for more ponies at a party. So, if you want to come, the party's going to be today at noon. Just feel free to drop by if you want. I know Twist will be super happy if she thinks you're not coming, and then you *do* come. It will be like a surprise!

"Well, I got to get back to Sugarcube Corner." The earth pony offered, spinning on her hooves. "See you later, Queen Nyxie."

And, with that, Pinkie Pie started bouncing away, heading out the castle front gates and down the road to Ponyville.

“Your Majesty, would you like us to pursue and arrest her?” One of the unicorn guards asked.

“That depends. Do you think you can actually *catch* her?” Nightmare Moon asked, looking to the pile of guards that were just starting to get back on their hooves. “And do you want to risk making foals of yourselves if you can't?”

The guards glanced at each other, and then decided quietly to go back to their normal patrols. Nightmare Moon watch the humorous scene slowly disappear, the normal staunchness of the castle returning... and for a moment, the black alicorn wished that Pinkie Pie had hung around for just a little longer.

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The queen returned to her bed chamber, intending to resume the depressed wallowing she had been interrupted from. She laid down on her bed, shutting her eyes as she relinquished herself to her thoughts. Thoughts that, before Pinkie Pie's interruption, had been an endless questions to which the Nightmare Moon had no answers. Concerns over how all of Equestria was expecting her to be a tyrant and monster... and why she was finding it so difficult to live up to that expectation.

But those thoughts, those tortuous thoughts, were now being pushed back. Like a brave hero facing a pack of wolves, a single thought was fighting against the dark, clinging emotions that had weighed down the black alicorn.

Twist *wanted* her to come to her birthday party. She had never been to a birthday party before, and Nightmare Moon couldn't deny that some part of her was finding the invitation strangely tempting. For a moment, the full grown alicorn was a filly again, letting herself fantasize about what the party would be like. What kind of cake would it be? Would there be games?

Of *course* there would be games! If Pinkie Pie was involved then there would, at the very *least*, be Pin the Tail on the Pony. Maybe even a pinata!

Still, the fantasies of the party slowly died as Nightmare Moon looked at herself in her bedroom mirror, and was forced to remember she wasn't Nyx

anymore. She wasn't a filly anymore, she was an adult and the Queen of Equestria. She was Nightmare Moon, the bringer of the eternal night, and the monster who banished Celestia and Luna to the sun and moon. According to what Nexus, the Children of Nightmare, and most of Equestria expected, she was supposed to be an evil tyrant. Heartless, cold, and-

Nightmare Moon looked away from the mirror in aggravation. She... she was tired of this. Tired of being pulled in two so very different directions. She was supposed to be Nightmare Moon, and she was trying to be the terror and tyrant they expected. A mare to be feared. That was who the Children of Nightmare expected her to be, that was what all of Equestria expected her to be... that was who she used to be.

But... she just wasn't the same. Nightmare Moon had been denying it, trying to find her purpose in who she used to be, to be the mare she used to be... but the bitter truth was she wasn't the same. She wasn't Nightmare Moon... but she wasn't Nyx either. No, she could never be just simple, innocent Nyx again. She had done too much, hurt too many... the sins that stained her soul were as black as her coat, and could never be washed away.

She could not be Nyx... and so she could only be Nightmare Moon. That was the only pony she could be. She would not go to Twist's party; she could pretend she was never invited. That's what the old Nightmare Moon would have done. Still... alicorn couldn't bring herself to absolutely ignore Twist's special day.

She had to do something for the filly... something extra special.

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*KNOCK... KNOCK..*

Pinkie Pie bounced over to the front door of Sugarcube Corner, opening it with a bright smile. Twist's birthday party was in full swing, the only unaccounted-for guest being Nightmare Moon. The party, however, was still turning out fun, the music and happiness of the party flowing out into the street as Pinkie Pie held the door open.

"Hi, what can I do for you stallions?"

The pair of Nightmare Moon's royal guards remained stone faced, stepping to the side to reveal a large birthday present, wrapped in purple wrapping paper and blue ribbons, with a few holes in the top.

"We were ordered to deliver this present to a filly named Twist, and to see to it that she opened it immediately."

"A surprise present! OH, that's so fun! Just a second." Pinkie Pie replied, galloping back into the party. In moments the earth pony had found the guest of honor, whisking Twist away from the conversation she was having with a few other party guests, and bringing her to the large present sitting on the front step.

"Whoa, is that for me?" Twist asked when she saw the present, which was larger than she was.

"That's what they said," Pinkie Pie replied, motioning towards the guards, "and, they also said you had to open it right away. Sooooo...open it, open it!"

The filly nodded, just as eager as Pinkie Pie to see what was inside. She took hold of one of the loose bits of the ribbon with her teeth, Twist pulling back as the ribbon on top became untied. Without warning, the top of the box exploded open, shooting confetti everywhere as three figures popped up, smiling ear to ear.

"Happy Birthday!" Apple Bloom, Sweetie Belle, and Scootaloo all cheered, leaping out of the box with their front legs held over their head in the excited fanfare.

"OH MY GOSH!" Twist shouted, practically leaping at the three fillies. "I thought you girls were all out of town!"

"Well, we were, but... let's just say Nyx helped us get back home early," Apple Bloom partially lied.

"This is so awesome! The only way it could be better was if Nyx was able to come."



“Sorry Twist, but she can't.” Sweetie Belle said as she and the other Crusaders got out of the larger present. “But, Nyx wanted us to tell you she really wanted to come.”

“Yea, and she also sent you a present... well, a present besides us. It's in the bottom of the box.”

“Oh, I'll get it.” Pinkie Pie chirped, the earth pony bounding into the air before diving into the larger box. A moment later she resurfaced, holding a much more reasonably sized present in her teeth which she set down in front of Twist. Again, the little cream colored filly couldn't be stopped as she opened the box.

“What is it? What is it?” Apple Bloom asked.

Twist brought her head back out of the box, licking some chocolate off her lips. “It's fudge, and it's really good.”

“Oh, can I have some?” Scootaloo asked, quickly zipping over to the side of the present.

“Sure.” Twist replied, letting each of the crusaders and Pinkie Pie dig into the present, and take one of the careful cut squares of fudge. Soon, all their eyes were lighting up, having never tasted such amazing fudge before.

=====

A strong frown hung on Nexus's face as he descended into the castle dungeons. The unicorn had just been interrupted from his late lunch by a piece of very disturbing news. News that Nexus wished to act on immediately.

He was unaccompanied by guards, and, in fact, had secretly reworked the guard patrols so that he wouldn't have to worry about anypony interrupting him. Reaching the bottom of the stairs, Nexus strode along the empty cells of the castle dungeon until he reached the one at the very end, the only one that was occupied.

Twilight Sparkle was sitting up in her cot by the time Nexus came into view, the blue unicorn turning to face the mare as they glared at each other through the bars.

“You... this is all *your* fault.”

“Well *that's* wonderfully specific.” Twilight mocked, showing she had no love for the unicorn who had turned her little Nyx into a full-grown Nightmare Moon. “And just what is 'all my fault'?”

“Do you *realize* what Nightmare Moon did today?”

“No. All I know is that she came to take Apple Bloom, Sweetie Belle, and Scootaloo away. She didn't tell me what she was going to do with them.”

“Well, I'll tell you what she did. She let. Them. Go.”

A smile blossomed onto Twilight's face as she stood from her cot. “She did?”

“Yes... but it wasn't just that. No... she wrapped those fillies up in a present... and then wasted the royal guards' time by having two of her soldiers deliver the present to a birthday party. She also sent another gift... fudge made by the royal chef.”

The smile on Twilight's face turned to a triumphant grin. “That's my girl.”

“**NO!**” Nexus snapped, his voice filling the dungeon and echoing with his rage. “The queen is in no way your daughter, no matter what *lies* you filled her head with. If anything, you have *ruined* her.”

“Ruined her?”

“It is *you* who softened her heart, filled her mind with notions of compassion and laughter. It is *you* who taught her to love the sun, who allowed her to have friends. Friends only bring *weakness*. A true queen must think only of the kingdom and her own wishes, but now, Nightmare Moon is so soft-hearted she is sending birthday presents to a little filly!”

“You may call that ruining her, Spell Nexus, but personally, I'm *proud* of Nyx. She-”

“SHE IS NOT NYX! She is Nightmare Moon! She is meant to bring the eternal night to Equestria, to make the ponies of this kingdom suffer for how they scorned her in the past! To make you and your friends pay for defeating her with the Elements of Harmony. *That* is what Nightmare Moon should be doing.”

“That is what the *true* Nightmare Moon would do, but the pony you call Queen is not her. She is her own mare, and can choose for herself who she wants to be. And, just so you know, I'm *proud* to hear that my Nyx is choosing to be the pony *she* wants to be, not the monster *you* want her to be.”

Nexus shut his eyes and gritted his teeth, biting back a scream of rage. He stamped his hooves, tossed his head, doing his very best to keep himself from strangling Twilight Sparkle through the bars of her cell.

Still, after a few tense moments, the unicorn seemed to calm down. He was still plenty angry, but now the anger was back under control, allowing him to refocus his glare upon the unicorn on the other side of the bars.

“I do not know why I am so surprised. You were a student of Celestia, the bleeding heart who used to sit upon Equestria's throne. The one who sought peace above all else, who did not see that, under proper leadership, Equestria could rise to control so much more, to *be* so much more.

“And as the teacher passed the lessons onto the student, so did the student pass on the poisoned knowledge of kindness to the filly in her care. And even after my queen was reborn, even when Nightmare Moon returned as the mare she was meant to be, you *did not stop*. You came to the castle, speaking apologies and sweet words. It was *you* who refreshed the poison of kindness in Nightmare Moon's veins.

“But there is still hope...” Nexus said, horn glowing as he clicked open the lock on the cell. Twilight quickly retreated, pressing herself against the back wall of the cell as Nexus moved slowly towards her, his dark shadow falling upon the unicorn as his turquoise eyes flashing menacingly.

"If... if you hurt me, Nyx will-"

"Oh, you misunderstand, Twilight Sparkle. I have no intention of hurting you. In fact, quite the opposite. After all, there is no better cure for a soft heart than to be betrayed by one you hold dear."

=====

"And she wouldn't say why she wanted to see me?"

"No." Nexus replied as he walked alongside Nightmare Moon, heading into the dungeon. "The guards only reported that she started screaming, *demanding* to see you. I would not have brought it to your attention, but she has refused to eat her lunch."

"I thank you for bringing this to my attention, Nexus," Nightmare Moon replied. "But I would have you wait at the bottom of the stairwell. I will speak with Twilight Sparkle alone."

"Of course, your Majesty," Nexus agreed, the pair reaching the dungeon. As he was asked, Nexus remained at the base of the steps while Nightmare Moon walked to the far end of the hall, turning to look in on the cell that contained Twilight. The unicorn was lying on her cot, body almost completely covered with a blanket as she laid on her side, facing the wall.

"You wanted to see me?" Nightmare Moon spoke softly, wishing to keep Nexus from overhearing the conversation.

"Yes... please, the... the guards... they..."

Nightmare Moon felt her heart skip a beat, her magic opening the door to the cell as she rushed in.

"Did they hurt you?"

Twilight mumbled something, but Nightmare Moon didn't hear. The alicorn quickly bent close, bringing her head next to Twilight's.

"Did the guards do something to you?"

"I'm sorry... I'm sorry..."

"Twilight, no, whatever they did to you, it wasn't your fault." Nightmare Moon reassured, bending in close as she tried to nuzzle the unicorn's neck.

"I'm sorry... I'm sorry... I'm sorry... *that I ever found you in the forest.*"

In but a single breath, Nightmare Moon felt the atmosphere in the cell change. The panic and fear she felt for Twilight was replaced with dread. And within moments of that last, whispered word escaping Twilight's lips, the alicorn felt a searing pain in her right shoulder.

The alicorn jumped back, stumbling and falling onto the floor of the cell. She looked back at her shoulder, a large gash now visible. It was painful... the first physical pain Nightmare Moon had felt since she had been tangled in that thorn bush. And this pain... this pain was caused by Twilight.

Looking back at the unicorn, Nightmare Moon saw Twilight getting up from her cot slowly. The anti-magic ring that was supposed to be around Twilight's neck was gone, the brace lying on the pillow of the unicorn's bed. In the air beside Twilight floated a magical weapon, a thin but sharp dagger. Not as dangerous as a sword, but still something that could be lethal.

"Twilight... what are you doing?" Nightmare Moon asked, scrambling to try and get to her hooves, but the small space of the cell was making it difficult for the alicorn to find room to maneuver.

"Fixing my mistake."

"M-m-mistake?"

"Yes," The unicorn replied as she began to move towards Nightmare Moon, the magical dagger floating threateningly beside her. "You're a monster... you're a tyrant... I should have never saved you from the forest."

"Twilight... Twilight, what's wrong? Why- why are you..." Nightmare Moon stuttered out, her voice growing weak as she began to hyperventilate.

"It's... i-it's me... it's Nyx... d-don't you remember-"

"I remember perfectly what you've done. You took over Equestria, you banished my teacher to the sun, and you brought eternal night to Equestria. You locked up three innocent fillies, and made me promise them everything would be all right before you took them away."

"I took them away to let them go. *I let them go*, Twilight. You have to believe me. You... y-you always believed me."

The unicorn stood over Nightmare Moon, the alicorn still too panicked to coordinate herself enough to get back to her hooves. Now, the alicorn could only stare, her eyes meeting the murderous intent that currently lived in Twilight's gaze.

"You are a monster... and I should never have saved you. That's what being in this dungeon has helped me realize. That you were, you are... and you will always be a monster... and I'm ashamed I ever called you my daughter."

"N-n-n-no... n-n-n-no..." Nightmare Moon began to weep. "Twilight... Twilight don't say that. Please... please don't say that! I... I-I'm sorry did all this! Just... please... don't say that. I'm sorry."

"There is no forgiveness," Twilight said coldly as she began to raise the dagger. "I can never forgive myself for believing you were anything but a monster... and now, I'm going to fix my mistake. I'm going to fix. It. All."

"NOOOO!!!" Nightmare Moon cried out, the alicorn truly scared for her life. In a flash, Spell Nexus was at the cell door, his magic wrapping around Twilight. The unicorn was pushed up against the wall, Nexus holding her in place.

"GUARDS! The Queen is injured!" Nexus shouted out. Within moments, a patrol of soldiers arrived, the guards taking Nightmare Moon from the cell while Nexus used his magic to re-secure the anti-magic brace to Twilight's neck. Then, when the queen was out of her cell, Nexus slammed the door shut, and then turned to follow behind the royal guards as they carried Nightmare Moon away.

Nexus, however, didn't follow too closely. After all, he didn't want the guards, or his queen, noticing the grin on his face.

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Nightmare Moon laid on her bed, head resting on her tear-soaked pillow as she hugged her Twilight Sparkle doll to her chest. The alicorn had not moved from that spot for hours, having locked herself in her room and hidden away from the world. She didn't care what Spell Nexus or any of the Children of Nightmare thought. She wanted to cry... after what happened, she deserved that much.

Her world... in a single brief moment, her world had been shattered. The one solid, constant foundation she had been able to rely on through the chaos of becoming queen had just crumbled.

Twilight had attacked her... Twilight had called her a monster. Twilight... was ashamed of her.

Those thoughts hurt more than the wound in Nightmare Moon's shoulder, which had been bandaged and cared for. It was a pain in her chest, like someone had stabbed her with a dagger, and was now twisting it. Twilight, the one who always believed she was still Nyx... the one who raised her as Nyx... had turned her back on the alicorn.

She really was a monster... who was she kidding? She was Nightmare Moon, the Queen of Equestria, *the* most monstrous monster that Equestria had ever known. Any hopes and desires to the contrary were nothing but lies and falsehoods the alicorn was creating for herself. If Twilight... if even Twilight was unable to see her as anything but a monster... then she had no hope.

She was Nightmare Moon... and there was no escaping it.

The alicorn's thoughts turned as she hugged the Twilight Sparkle doll she had made from one of the training dummies. She wanted to say she was sorry, sorry for everything she had done. She'd take it all back if it would make Twilight love her again... but... what was the point? The unicorn herself said there was no forgiveness.

There would never be forgiveness... she was Nightmare Moon... and Nightmare Moon could never be forgiven.

Shuddering as a fresh wave of tears fell from her eyes, Nightmare Moon turned over on her bed, trying to find a dry path on her pillow to rest her head on. Her eyes flicked to the clock, allowing Nightmare Moon to see she had spent the whole afternoon just lying there... it honestly felt longer than that.

Still, the clock showed it was almost time for her to make the sun set. She was tempted to just blow it off, to leave the world in the amber glow of dusk... but, at the same time... she had a responsibility to Equestria. Even if Twilight hated her... even if every pony thought she was a monster... she wouldn't let them down. She'd make the sun and moon go through their cycle, rise and set.

It was the one thing she seemed to be able to do that didn't make somepony hate her even more.

Taking in a deep breath, Nightmare Moon had to draw up on every ounce of energy of she had left to haul herself up from the bed and walk slowly to her balcony. She hadn't done anything but lay there all afternoon, but she was still exhausted. Mentally and emotionally exhausted... and as soon as she was on her hooves, she wanted to lay back down.

Yet, the alicorn found the strength to reach her bedroom's balcony, stepping into the cool evening air. She turned her gaze to the west, where the sun was waiting to be tucked below the horizon, the sky already starting to glow with the warm, golden colors of the sunset.

Nightmare Moon reached out her magic, and did what was needed to nudge the sun. Thankfully, the golden orb seemed all but willing to sink below the horizon, starting to set. Nightmare Moon then turned her magic eastward, waking the moon from its slumber and calling it up into the sky.

The two celestial orbs were beginning their dance, exchanging control of the sky as the west was set ablaze with color by the sunset and the east began to bask in the cool light of the moon. It was a beautiful sight, one Nightmare Moon lingered to enjoy for a few minutes before turning, intending to retreat back to her bed.



Yet, just as Nightmare Moon turned, she took notice of something out of the ordinary. There was a huge crowd of ponies outside the castle gates, and on top of the gatehouse, Nexus was standing with a large contingent of soldiers. The gatehouse itself had also been modified. Jutting out from the top of the battlements was a platform, a simple structure of wood timbers, and a rope.

It was a set of gallows... and some pony was standing on the edge of the platform, a noose around her neck... and the mare in question was staring up at Nightmare Moon.

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Spell Nexus made every attempt to remain stoic and serious, to be professional, but he could not contain his giddiness. This was it, this was what he needed and hoped for. It had all worked beautifully, and now he was finally going to be able to get rid of Twilight Sparkle. Get rid of the mare that was injecting the poison of kindness into his Queen, making her weak.

The unicorn moved to the edge of the castle's gatehouse, looking over the beautiful set of gallows that had been constructed over the course of the afternoon. A single long, thin wooden platform extended from the top of the gatehouse out, over the waiting crowd of ponies below. Above that platform were a number of thick timbers, constructed and laid out to support a single, hanging rope.

The rope itself was long, one end tied into a hangman's noose. He had measured the rope himself. Once a pony was pushed off the platform, they would fall almost all the way to the ground below, a dreadful long fall that everypony below would watch. Then, just before their hooves would reach the ground below the gatehouse, the rope would snap taut. The victim would be dead almost instantly, but, more importantly, they would hang in clear view of the ponies below.

It was a thing of beauty to Nexus.

The sound of marching hooves drew Nexus' attention away from the gallows, and to a quartet of guards. The guards were just reaching the top

of the stairs that connected the castle battlement's to the courtyard below, and standing between the guard was a particular purple unicorn.

Spell Nexus smiled as he looked over Twilight Sparkle. Her ankles were shackled in heavy irons, and she had an anti-magic collar around her neck. Yet, he knew she wouldn't resist. She wouldn't try to escape or flee, but it sent a message. It sent a message that would reverberate across Equestria.

The ponies: they would look upon his queen and the Children of Nightmare with the fear and respect they deserved. They would inspire fear and loyalty, even if her highness continued to raise the sun. That small act of kindness could possibly turn into a very convincing bit of leverage. After all, the threat of an eternal night still lingered. Should the ponies try to stand up or revolt, Nightmare Moon would be able to bring back the eternal night until their spirits and wills were broken.

Yet all that was just frosting on the cake, side benefits from the unicorn achieving his true goal. Nightmare Moon would once again act like the queen she was meant to be. Right after her resurrection, the alicorn had been the queen he expected, the queen Equestria deserved... but then Twilight came to the castle, speaking her sweet words and apologies... and things had only gone downhill from there.

But now... now the queen thought that Twilight hated her, that even Twilight was now calling her Nightmare Moon. It was the deep cut that would make Nightmare Moon the mare she used to be, a cut that would end the streak of kindness the alicorn had been exhibiting. He had done it for the queen's own good, and he did not wish to hurt her majesty.

Still, it was something that had to be done.

While Nexus had been contemplating all this, the guards guided Twilight to the gallows, the unicorn walking out onto the platform. She stood there, eyes shut as she faced the crowd, who looked on in disbelief and worry. Some even began to call out in protest, but a few, quick passes by the castle's pegasus guards silenced those that would speak out against the execution.

Then, the moment came, the sun halfway set. Twilight was going to fall with the last traces of the sun... and so it was time for Nexus to begin his speech. Moving to the edge of the castle battlements, Nexus used a spell to magically increase the volume his voice, his words flowing out across the crowd and echoing off the castle's stone walls.

"Twilight Sparkle," Nexus began, his voice serious, though a smile still lingered on his lips, "You are accused of attempting to assassinate her royal majesty, the regent of the sun and moon, our beloved Nightmare Moon. The attack in question occurred earlier today, after you lured our queen into your dungeon cell. After drawing our queen close, you proceeded to attack her with a magically manifested dagger. Do you deny these charges as I have read them?"

"No," Twilight answered, her voice hollow and flat.

"Then, for your crimes against this crown and kingdom, you are hereby sentenced to execution by hanging, a sentence that is to be handed down immediately. " Nexus continued, his horn glowing as he secured the noose around Twilight's neck.

"Do you have any final words?"

For the first time since she had been guided to the gallows, Twilight turned, and looked back at Nexus. She looked at him through her turquoise eyes, shaking her head once. Nexus returned this with a smile, his horn already starting to glow as he prepared to push Twilight from the edge of the platform... to finally finish off the unicorn.

Yet, as Twilight turned to look forward again, her eyes drifted up and she caught sight of a black alicorn watching from a distant castle balcony. Their eyes locked, and remained that way for several moments. Nightmare Moon visibly bristled, her wings already spreading while Twilight just continued to look in her direction.

The brief moment of eye contact between two was then broken by Nexus. Letting his smile crack into a maniacal grin, the unicorn used his magic to shove Twilight off the platform, her purple body growing limp as she soared out into the open air.

Everypony below gasped as Twilight began to fall. The rope on the noose was long, and the unicorn would only reach its end just before she was about to hit the ground. A long, few seconds of falling before the final snap. Some ponies hid their eyes, unable to watch what was about to occur.

Others were unable to look away, no matter how they tried.

Further and further Twilight fell, the rope eating up its slack. Nexus had moved to the edge of the gatehouse, watching as the moment of his triumph drew closer. His eager eyes betrayed the fact he was enjoying the execution, that he was drinking in every moment. The grin on his face was one of victory, as if he had won some great battle.

The rope was about to snap taught, the air was about to be filled with a sickening crack. Nexus held his breath, bit his lip. The guards, the ponies below... no one dared blink.

And then...it didn't happen.

For a moment, the crowd, guards, and Nexus had to stare at the rope when what they expected to happen didn't occur. There was no snap of the rope or crack of a neck. The rope just swung lazily back and forth. The unicorn and noose that had once been at end of the rope had vanished, gone so fast that no pony had been able to see what had happened.

Nexus was the first to speak, his angry bellow echoing across the castle walls.

**“WHERE DID SHE GO!?!?!”**

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Nightmare Moon had never moved so fast, had never put so magic into becoming a cloud of energy. She had never managed to create a doppelganger so quickly, a fake Nightmare Moon she left in her bedroom, in case Nexus came looking for her. The alicorn had never done so much so quickly at the same time, and it had been a strain on her magic.

But... but she had done it. She had saved Twilight.

She was currently carrying Twilight away from Ponyville, the indigo cloud that was Nightmare Moon flying off into the Everfree Forest. Almost instinctual, Nightmare Moon found her way to the Ancient Castle of the Royal Pony Sisters. It was someplace forgotten; there would be no ponies around, and it was someplace Nexus would never think to look. The blue unicorn had undoubtedly started sending out troops to find the pony that was supposed to be hanging from the other end of his rope.

Moving to the safest part of the castle, the alicorn entered the old throne room. It had been the place of her greatest defeat, but, at the moment, Nightmare Moon didn't care. She very carefully deposited Twilight on the floor, before letting her body re-solidify.

Once her hooves were on solid ground again, Nightmare Moon rushed over to Twilight, lowering her head as her horn glowed. She removed the shackles and anti-magic brace, tossing the hunks of metal away. The next thing was the noose, Nightmare Moon gingerly lifting it off of the unicorn's neck before tossing it away, not wanting to look at the horrible piece of rope for a moment longer than she needed to.

And with that, Twilight was free and Nightmare Moon held her breath. What would the mare do... would she try to attack again? The alicorn wasn't sure she could bare being attacked by Twilight a second time, verbally or physically. Still, she had to be sure Twilight was safe. She just had to be sure.

And, after a few moments, Twilight began to recover from being whisked away so abruptly from her own execution. It was a sign of life Nightmare Moon was thankful of, but her heart still seized up in her chest when Twilight opened her eyes, revealing a pair of turquoise colored orbs.

Turquoise eyes... Twilight had turquoise eyes... which meant that Nexus had blessed her.

Was... was that why Twilight had attacked... was Nexus behind it? Nightmare Moon had always wondered what being blessed did, since Spell Nexus always said it opened a pony's mind to the wisdom of her rule. She had wondered, in the back of her mind, if the blessing didn't do more than that. If the blessing, in fact, twisted a pony's vision so they saw the truth

Nexus *wanted* them to see. Yet, whenever she asked about it, Nexus always assured her otherwise.

But... a flutter of hope came to life in Nightmare Moon's chest. If Twilight was blessed, there was a chance that the unicorn really didn't mean what she had said. Maybe... maybe she could fix this... maybe she could undo what Nexus had done.

Twilight was still bowing respectfully, and, after taking a moment to steady herself, Nightmare Moon sat down in front of the unicorn and cleared her throat.

"Please... rise." Nightmare Moon said, and that was what Twilight did. The unicorn stood up, her turquoise eyes once again locking with the alicorns.

"Why did you attack me earlier?"

"Spell Nexus instructed me to attack you, so that you would remember the mare you are meant to be, so that I could no longer poison you with kindness. He told me what to say, and I said it so that you would be able to become the queen you were meant to be."

"And... did Nexus do something to you before that?"

"He came to my cell in the dungeon," Twilight answered flatly, "And offered me the blessing of your magic. I then saw that you truly are meant to be Equestria's one and only queen. That is your destiny, and I had no right keeping you from it."

"No... no, you had every right to try and keep me from becoming a monster," Nightmare Moon whispered, the alicorn wanting to cry but forcing herself to stay strong. She couldn't be weak, not now... Twilight needed her.

"How does a blessing work? Nexus has never let me see the blessing ritual, so tell me how it is done?"

"Nexus opened his mouth, and a bit of black cloud slipped out. He then bit down, cutting off a piece of that cloud. That cloud then went down my mouth, and after a few moments, I saw the truth."

“Down your mouth...” Nightmare Moon echoed, licking her lips as she shifted anxiously. “Twilight... I’m going to try something... and if it works, you should be your old self again... but... it may not work. Do you trust me?”

“Of course, my Queen,” Twilight answered, though Nightmare Moon could tell it was more the blessing speaking than it was the real Twilight. Still, the alicorn took a deep breath and composed herself, calling on her magic.

She had to at least try.

Slowly, the alicorn reached out and surrounded Twilight with her magical, indigo mane. The floating cloud of encircled the unicorn, holding onto her gently. Nightmare Moon then gently opened Twilight’s mouth, and very slowly, she began to feed a bit of her magical mane down inside.

She kept her mane small and thin, so that the mass of magic wouldn’t keep Twilight from breathing. Still, Nightmare Moon gently fed more and more of her magic down inside of Twilight, exploring the open space of the unicorn’s lungs.

Nightmare Moon hoped to find something, anything that might have been the manifestation of the blessing Nexus had put on the unicorn. She, however, was unable to sense any foreign magic. It disheartened the alicorn, Nightmare Moon beginning to fear that being blessed was a permanent thing... that she had lost her real mother forever.

Yet, where Nyx would have broken down at such thoughts, Nightmare Moon shook her head and shoved the thoughts away. No, Twilight wasn’t beyond rescue. She could bring the real Twilight Sparkle back. Magic like this had to have a manifestation, it had to be hiding someplace.

She just had to find it.

Thus the search began, Nightmare Moon’s mane very gently seeping through the walls of Twilight’s lungs and beginning to pass through the rest of the unicorn’s body. Muscles, nerves, bones, organs... Nightmare Moon swept each with her magic, searching for Nexus’ “blessing”.

Fetlocks, haunches, ankles, back legs, thighs, hooves, chest, torso, forelegs, elbows; Nightmare Moon let her magic stretch into every fiber of Twilight's body and still she was unable to find the foreign magic. Running out of places to look, Nightmare Moon swept her magic up towards Twilight's head.

And that's when she felt it. Clinging to back of Twilight's skull, like a parasite or tumor, was mass of magic. It lingered and mixed with the muscles and bones that were already inhabiting the physical space. It was magic, but more importantly, it was foreign, not at all like the magic that naturally occurred in and filled the unicorn's body.

Nightmare Moon reached out to grasp the magical mass with her mane, slowly feeling out the extent of its presence. While there was a center core to the mass, there were also long tendrils, like roots, spread all across Twilight's skull. Some of the roots even reached out to the unicorn's eyes, undoubtedly why they changed color.

There was no doubt in Nightmare Moon's mind. The thing she had just found was the blessing, and without a moment's hesitation, she began to attack the mass with her own magic.

The tumor of magic fought back; it tried to repel the alicorn's attack, but it was no match. Nightmare Moon began to burn it away slowly, being extra careful to not hurt Twilight in the process. She cleared away the center part of the mass and every root, checking three times to make sure the mass was gone before removing her mane.

Then... Nightmare Moon waited, holding her breath. Twilight had zoned out during the procedure, and for a time, the alicorn feared she had done some harm to the unicorn. Yet, after a few tense minutes, Twilight began to groan, eyes furrowing as she lifted a hoof to her head. She shut her eyes, and kept them shut for a time as she rubbed her forehead, the unicorn suffering from a very nasty headache.

But then Twilight opened her eyes, and Nightmare Moon felt a wave of relief wash over her and a smile blossom onto her face. The eyes were once again purple... the blessing had been removed.

She had done it.



“*Urgh*, My head is *killing* me,” Twilight moaned as she lowered a hoof and began to look around. “What happened? Where am-”

Twilight didn’t get to finish her last question as she suddenly felt herself get taken up in an embrace, her face buried into black fur. Without a word, Nightmare Moon had moved closer to Twilight, drawing in and hugging the unicorn tightly to her chest as her great black wings encircled the unicorn, joining in the embrace.

“Oh... oh thank you. Thank you for being okay,” Nightmare Moon whispered, bending down and nuzzling at Twilight’s neck.

“Nyx... what... what’s going on?” Twilight said, managing to pull her head out from the alicorn’s chest so she could look in the direction of her head.

“Don’t worry, you’re someplace safe. You’re safe... and I won’t let Nexus ever hurt you again.”

“Nexus... wait... did he do something?”

“Don’t you remember?”

“I... I think... maybe,” Twilight admitted, the unicorn’s head still throbbing, though she found some comfort in Nightmare Moon’s embrace.

“It’s a bit hazy... but... it’s getting clearer. Nexus came to my cell, he was blaming me for how you’ve been acting. Then... then he came... *into* the cell. I tried to escape... tried run out and find the guards, but he pinned me and then... something black came out of his mouth and... *urgh*, my head.”

“It’s okay, you don’t have to try to remember everything right now,” Nightmare Moon reassured. “Just take your time.”

Twilight nodded, smiling a little as she let herself settle into Nightmare Moon’s embrace.

“The next thing I remember after that is hearing your voice. I... I was lying on my cot... I... I said something, and then you came into my cell. And then...”

Twilight audibly gasped, pulling herself away from Nightmare Moon as her eyes narrowed. The unicorn quickly shoved the alicorn's wing out of the way, looking at the bandages across Nightmare Moon's shoulder.

"It's not your fault, Twilight," Nightmare Moon quickly reassured.

"But... but I stabbed you! *W-why* w-would I stab you? *H-how* did I stab you? I... I don't even know how I cast that spell!" Twilight began to panic, breathing becoming rushed. Nightmare Moon, however, drew Twilight back into the embrace of her wings, hugging the unicorn as tightly as possible, as if fearing she would be ripped away at any moment.

"Twilight... you... were being controlled," Nightmare Moon admitted, once the unicorn had calmed down a little.

"Controlled? How?"

"Anypony that joins the Children of Nightmare receives a blessing from Nexus. It's supposed to be a blessing of my magic, something Nexus received when he first dealt with the shreds that were left after you and your friends defeated me with the Elements of Harmony.

"It's the reason why all the Children of Nightmare have turquoise eyes. Nexus said that the blessing of magic *opened* ponies' eyes to what good I could bring as Queen of Equestria. That it was the blessing that opened his eyes, inspiring him to form the Children of Nightmare and try to resurrect me.

"And... I think that's what he did. He used the blessing to make you attack me, so that he could use you against me. Use you to make me into the queen he thinks I should be."

"I'm so sorry, Nyx. I... I would never... never in a million years want to hurt you."

Nightmare Moon nodded, a few tears escaping her eyes and running down her cheek.

"I know... I know, Twilight... and I'm sorry... I'm so sorry."

“For what?”

“I... I believed it... I believed you hated me... and because of that... they almost... they were almost able to...”

“To what?”

Nightmare Moon just shook her head.

“I... I didn’t know they were going to do it. You have to believe I didn’t know... I would have never let them, you have believe that. I... I wouldn’t want to lose you like that.”

“Nyx, what are you talking about?”

“I... I almost wasn’t able to save you. If I hadn’t gone out onto the balcony then... if I hadn’t turned to look... then... then you could have... could have...”

“Could have what?” Twilight asked fearfully, her memories still not completely returned. “W-what almost happened?”

Nightmare Moon couldn’t bring herself to say it, so instead she pulled her head away from Twilight’s and folded her wings. The alicorn then used a hoof to motion in a particular direction.

The unicorn's eyes moved to look where Nightmare Moon was pointing, and there, lying on the ruined castle floor, was the noose that had, moments before, been around Twilight’s neck.

Twilight lifted a hoof to her neck, her breathing once again starting to become panicked, as she came to terms with the fact that she had almost been hanged. Yet, instead of trying to embrace and comfort the unicorn, Nightmare Moon instead got to her hooves.

She took a few steps, looking across the old throne room as a few memories flitted in her head. Memories of her first defeat in the castle by Twilight and her friends with the Elements of Harmony. Her coming to the castle as Nyx, and regaining the first of her lost memories and powers.

Memories that were being drowned out as Nightmare Moon thought of Nexus, and what the blue unicorn had almost done.

"Twilight... I want you to go to Zecora's hut." Nightmare Moon instructed, keeping her back turned to the unicorn. "I want you to go there and hide. You can't let the royal guard find you. They have undoubtedly been given orders to kill you on sight... and I need to know you're someplace safe."

"What... why? Nyx, what are you going to do?" Twilight asked, not liking the very serious tone of the alicorn's voice.

"I would have words with Spell Nexus," Nightmare Moon replied, spreading her wings. "And Twilight... stop calling me Nyx."

"But-"

"Nyx would have never let Nexus get so close to taking you away. Nyx... would have known something was wrong when you started shouting like that. I'm... I'm not your daughter anymore Twilight... I don't deserve to be called Nyx anymore... I don't deserve a mother as wonderful as you. I've... I've done too much wrong... there is no forgiveness for me. There is no forgiveness for Nightmare Moon.

"But, while there is no redemption for me... for what Nexus has done, there *will* be *retribution*."

With that, Nightmare Moon spread her wings, and before Twilight could offer a word in protest, the alicorn had taken flight, circling once, before flying off towards her castle.

# Chapter 17

## Tainted Blessing

“SHE DID NOT JUST VANISH INTO THIN AIR!” Nexus snapped, slamming a hoof down. The blue unicorn was in his office, the room he had claimed in the castle for his own personal work space. Since Twilight had disappeared from the end of the hangmare’s noose, Nexus had been orchestrating an all-out search for the unicorn, sending ponies out into the night.

“We’re sorry, Sir, but we can’t find any trace of the prisoner,” reported one of the two guards in front of Nexus.

The blue unicorn grunted in frustration.

“Did you search the town?”

“Yes Sir, just as you asked.”

“WELL SEARCH AGAIN! SHE DID NOT JUST VANISH!”

The two guards saluted, quickly vacating the room as Nexus plopped down behind his desk, the unicorn rubbing his eyes. Still, before Nexus could even gather himself, another guard came into the room.

“What do you want?” Nexus asked, not even looking at the guard.

“Queen Nightmare Moon wishes to speak with you, Nexus. She’s waiting in the throne room.”

Nexus’s aggravation cooled to a simmer, and the blue unicorn eyed the guard. “Did she say why?”

“She wanted to speak with you about Twilight Sparkle’s escape.”

Instead of being worried, Nexus felt himself smiling a little. The queen was worried that Twilight had escaped, which meant that even though the

unicorn hadn't died, his efforts had born fruit. This was the Equestrian queen he had been expecting. She would undoubtedly be furious about Twilight's escape, and demand she be captured. He was going to get chewed out, but it was a scolding the unicorn was actually looking forward to.

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It didn't take long for Nexus to reach the throne room, finding the main entrance shut. He lifted a hoof and knocked gently, the chamber beyond echoing with the sound. It sent a cold chill down his spine how silent the room was... and after shivering a moment, Nexus found himself smiling. Entering the throne room of the queen was inspiring fear... exactly what Nexus wanted everypony to feel who dared to enter the presence of Equestria's true queen.

"Come in, Nexus; I've been expecting you."

Nexus did not know where Nightmare Moon's voice had come from, but the doors to the throne room swung open of their own accord. Again, a shiver ran down Nexus's spine, but this time he wasn't able to enjoy it. Now he was starting to worry just what fate awaited him.

Still, the blue unicorn entered the throne room, quickly crossing the hall. Nightmare Moon was sitting in her throne, the royal seat turned to face the towering stained glass windows. The windows depicted Nightmare Moon flying through the sky, basking in the light of a full moon while ponies below cowered and fled in fear.

They were windows Nexus thought were the perfect decoration for the queen's throne room. Once he was fairly close, the unicorn respectfully bowed.

"You summoned me, Your Highness?"

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It had taken every ounce of will power, but Nightmare Moon kept herself from attacking Spell Nexus outright. On the flight back from the ruined castle, her anger had reached a boil. She was ready to do her worst to the

unicorn, punish him for what almost happened to Twilight. She'd make him pay... but as the alicorn imagined and planned what she would do to Nexus, other nagging thoughts began to enter her mind.

The first thought was what Twilight would think. Nexus deserved to be punished severely... maybe even made to face his *own* hangmare's noose, but... what would Twilight think if she did that to Nexus? How disappointed would she be that the alicorn had let herself get so out of control?

And from those thoughts of mercy another thought sprang to life and began to choke Nightmare Moon's anger like a weed. A single thought about Nexus's motives. A single realization... which made the alicorn decide she needed to wait and think out her actions. Most importantly, she had to let her anger cool, at least to a simmer. She could not risk striking out at Nexus in anger until she was sure of his guilt.

So, while she had let her anger cool, Nightmare Moon had sat in her throne, turning the chair away from the door so she could stare at the stained glass windows. The image they depicted, of her soaring over Equestria and inspiring fear, was exactly how most ponies thought of her.

It was an image Nightmare Moon had grown to despise. She hated those windows and murals, hated all of the constant reminders of what she was supposed to be.

Still, Nightmare Moon kept her anger under control, and, when she felt she had a firm enough grip on herself, she summoned Nexus. She then waited in the silence and listened to the knock on the throne room doors. She called for the pony to come in, listened as he approached, and then waited for the pony to introduce himself.

"You summoned me, Your Highness?" Nexus asked with a bow.

"Yes, Spell Nexus, I did," Nightmare Moon said coldly, still struggling to keep herself from attacking the unicorn outright. "I... wanted to ask you a few questions."

"Of course, Your Majesty, anything you want to know I will gladly answer for you."

“Have you found Twilight Sparkle?”

“No, she’s eluded our search for the time being, but she will be found.”

“And you ordered her execution because she attacked me?”

“Yes, Your Highness; something like that can’t go unpunished.”

Nightmare Moon slowly stood from her throne, stepping around the regal seat as she looked down at Nexus.

“One final question: you mentioned once before that Celestia asked you to handle the shreds of my body... and it was while interacting with those shreds that your eyes were opened to the truth, to the good I could do for Equestria.”

“Yes, My Liege; it was the greatest day of my life.”

“Would you have, before that day, ever considered going against Celestia?”

“I don’t see how that matters. I-”

“*Answer the question, Nexus.*” Nightmare Moon hissed, her words dripping with her resentment.

“I... I suppose I wouldn’t have,” Nexus admitted. “But that’s why I am so blessed! Your magic opened my eyes to the truth.”

“Or blinded you,” Nightmare Moon whispered, her voice so quiet that Nexus didn’t properly hear what she said. Still, before the unicorn could ask what she had muttered, Nightmare Moon approached him, towering over the unicorn with wings spread.

“Spell Nexus, would you like to receive a greater blessing from me?”

“A... a greater blessing?”

“A gift more precious than any you received from the shreds left behind by the Elements of Harmony.”



“O-of course, my Queen,” The blue unicorn answered, looking as if he was on the verge of tears. “It... it would be my eternal honor to receive any gift from you, no matter how small.”

“Then prepare yourself, Nexus... for I shall now grant you a gift... or rather return a gift to you. I shall return to you... your freedom.”

With those whispered words, Nightmare Moon brought her mane around slowly, letting it swirl and circle Nexus twice before she gently opened his mouth and nose. The unicorn did not fight back, closing his eyes and fully trusting in the alicorn.

As before, Nightmare Moon guided her mane slowly and in thin tendrils, the same thing she had done for Twilight a few hours before. The alicorn first explored Nexus’s lungs before extending her search, letting her magic seep into flesh and bone.

Yet, where Twilight’s blessing had only occurred in her head, Nexus’s blessing was far more advanced. Within moments of moving her magic beyond the unicorn's lungs, Nightmare Moon began to discover foreign magic. The unicorn's entire body was choked with the so-called blessing. The foreign magic was everywhere, like a thick network of roots that were pulsing in a steady, reliable rhythm... almost like a heartbeat.

Nightmare Moon felt her way along the infection until she reached the core. Unlike Twilight, the core of Nexus’s blessing wasn’t on the back of the unicorn’s skull. It was, instead, interwoven with Nexus' brain like a choking vine. The alicorn wasn't sure she could remove such an advanced infection, but she would try all the same.

Yet, as she began, the blessing shifted beneath her magic. It turned, and actually began to connect with the alicorn’s magic. Nightmare Moon was barely able to process what was going on before feeling a zap, her mind just as quickly filling with a array of strange thoughts. The suddenness of the attack made Nightmare Moon pull her mane out of Nexus, quickly distancing herself from the unicorn.

For a moment, she believed Nexus had been the one to attack her, but he act as if in a trance. He was staring at the ceiling, eyes rolled back in his head and mouth agape. For a moment it looked as if he wasn’t breathing,

but when he began to breath again something began to seep out of the unicorn's mouth: A ghastly black smoke, looking sickly and poisonous. With each breath, a plume of the dark smoke escaped Nexus, the vapors starting to circle and wrap around him while a black cloud formed above his head.

The cloud continued to grow, and even began to drift towards Nightmare Moon. It was a slow drift, and given a few seconds the cloud would have likely reached the alicorn. Yet, before it could draw too close, Nexus choked, as if something had suddenly grabbed a hold of his neck. At the same time, the spirals in Nexus's horn began to glow with a weak but steady white light. That light spread from the unicorn's horn to the rest of his body, covering almost every inch of his coat. When it was done, it looked like Nexus's body had been painted with eldritch lines.

From those glowing white lines, which seemed to focus around Nexus's cutie mark, chains of magic began to appear. The chains lunged out, somehow grabbing hold of the black cloud. They wrapped around and dug in, binding the smoke before the chains went taut and pulled the cloud back into the air above Nexus's head.

It was a display that left Nightmare Moon feeling tense, the alicorn anxiously fluttering her wings. Something about the cloud left her feeling uneasy, and not just because of how it had appeared. There was just something about it that put the hairs on the back of her neck on edge, yet at the same time she felt drawn to the cloud.

Taking an anxious step, Nightmare Moon walked around Nexus, keeping her distance until she stood just to the unicorn's left side. There, she focused on the white, eldritch lines that had appeared across his body. It was a spell of some sort, there was no doubting that, but it was not a spell she had seen before. The lines even seemed to merge with Nexus's spell-circle cutie mark.

Nightmare Moon began tracing the arcane lines with her eyes, trying to see if there was any rhyme or reason to the way they were laid out. She had come across a few books in the library about arcane lines, ones she had searched out when she had heard her resurrection spell had relied heavily on that ancient form of magic.

Yet focusing solely on the white lines would prove to be a mistake. As the alicorn tried to find meaning in the spell that had appeared across the blue unicorn's coat, the cloud was inching its way closer to Nightmare Moon. It came at her from the side, keeping the arcane chains that held it pulled taut.

When Nightmare Moon finally noticed how close the cloud had come, it was already too late. Striking with the speed of a snake, the cloud lashed out, surging through a hole in the chains that bound it. Nightmare Moon wasn't able to jump away fast enough, the cloud coming in contact with the side of her body.

From that one moment of contact Nightmare Moon felt something, as if a sea of emotions was pouring into her. Hatred, loathing, a thirst for revenge and power; these and many other emotions began to fill the black alicorn's chest. It felt like she was almost drowning, that she was being overwhelmed and washed away by the emotions.

In that moment, however, the white lines on Nexus's coat pulsed, the chains that were wrapped around the cloud snapping taut. The spell holding the cloud began to pull, and slowly but surely it drug the vaporous mass away from Nightmare Moon, eventually, pulling the two far enough away that the smoke was forced to break its connection, drawing itself back together into a single, billowing cloud.

The instant the connection was broken, Nightmare Moon found she was able to move and breathe again, and within moments her mind was in a panic. She stumbled back, eyes narrowing as she put greater distance between herself and the black cloud. The overwhelming emotions were already dying away in her chest, but Nightmare Moon still had lingering memories of what she had been feeling.

It was as she feared. Rifling through her memories, Nightmare Moon thought back to conversations she had shared with Spell Nexus, remembering details he had offered. He had been chosen by Celestia to dispose of the shreds that were left behind when she, or rather she and Luna, were defeated by the Elements of Harmony.

He had said it was while he was working with those shards that he received the very first blessing, that his eyes were opened to her wisdom and glory.

But, if anything, his eyes had been blinded. He had been twisted and turned into a tool by a will that wasn't his own, much like Nexus had used the poisonous magic to turn Twilight against the alicorn.

Yes... Spell Nexus was *not* the perpetrator.

He was just another victim... the *first* victim, and the *true* evil behind the Children of Nightmare, behind all that had happened in Equestria...

...was none other than Nightmare Moon herself.

The black cloud... Nightmare Moon could only guess that it was a part of her magic that had once been contained in a shred left behind by the Elements of Harmony. It was part of her... arguably the *worst* part. Her unmatched loathing of the Royal Sisters, her arrogant sense of superiority, her thirst for vengeance. The echoes of the most powerful emotions, the emotions that had made the original Nightmare Moon who she was, had attacked, entered, and corrupted Spell Nexus.

It was those emotions that drove Nexus to turn against Celestia, to form the Children of Nightmare, and to attempt the resurrection spell. Yet, if that was the case, why hadn't that poisoned magic tried to rejoin with the rest of the shreds when the spell was being cast? Why hadn't it left Nexus and joined with her?

That was when Nightmare Moon realized the purpose of the white lines that crisscrossed Nexus's body. It was a binding spell, meant to hold a majority of the poisonous magic.

Nexus was the headmaster of Celestia's school and a previous student of the princess. He wasn't an idiot, and he must have known that dealing with the shreds would be dangerous. Nightmare Moon could only guess that he prepared a binding spell either before he began working with the shreds or after he realized he had been attacked.

Nexus, the real Spell Nexus, had turned his body into a living prison, even if it meant that the corrupting magic was free to twist the unicorn's mind. Yet the binding spell was not perfect. Nexus was able to spread his so called "blessing", breaking off small pieces of the corruption inside him. Still, the binding spell was serving its purpose. It kept a majority of the

infection held within the unicorn, sparing Equestria but dooming Spell Nexus himself.

It was a bitter truth, Nightmare Moon still wishing to punish the pony who had threatened Twilight. She, however, could not deny his innocence. Spell Nexus was just another victim. He was just another pony she had hurt.

And she had to try and set things right.

Lightning began to crackle around Nightmare Moon's horn, the energy spreading to the alicorn's mane. She would attack this poisonous magic outright, and destroy it. She would rid the world of it. She would destroy the thing that had dared to threaten the ponies she cared for.

She would destroy the worst part of herself.

That thought... that one thought echoed in Nightmare Moon's mind like a haunting call, stirring something deep inside. She hesitated, just stood there while the black cloud continued to reach out to her, trying to touch her, even as the binding spell on Nexus's body kept pulling it back.

It was a part of her, the *worst* part, but... it was still a part of her.

Without even thinking, Nightmare Moon took an anxious step forward, now understanding why she was drawn to the cloud. It was her vengeance, pride, loathing. It was the thing that would let her become the merciless ruler that everypony expected, let her become a whole mare again. It was the part of her that would actually enjoy being seen as a monster, being feared.

The cloud was just inches away now, Nightmare Moon coming to a stop as she watched it reach out for her, trying to close the minuscule distance that kept the two separated. Nightmare Moon shut her eyes, the temptation building in her mind. If she joined with this, she would truly be Nightmare Moon. She would be able to forget about it all. Forget about her friends, about Twilight. She could simply forget about the time she had spent as a filly.

Nightmare Moon opened her eyes, the orbs glinting as a smile starting to form on her lips.

No, she wouldn't forget. She would take her revenge. She would make the Elements of Harmony pay for what they had done. She would smash the ancient power as she had before, and lead those who had wielded it against her to their just reward: a tight-fitting rope and a long fall from the gallows. Yes... she would watch them fall, watch them plummet until the noose tightened about their thin little necks, and their spines. She would watch them all fall, watch Twilight fall. She would watch the unicorn twist in the wind, a just reward for abandoning Equestria's true queen.

Fresh glowing chains lashed out from Nexus's body, the binding spell struggling to pull back the portion of the dark cloud that had managed to touch Nightmare Moon while she stood lost in thought. It was starting to spread across her, but one of the mystical chains had brushed against the alicorn, the magic burning like a hot stove.

The pain was enough to snap Nightmare Moon back into reality, the alicorn realizing what she was thinking. She jumped back, separating herself from the black cloud. Nightmare Moon panted, fighting the urge to vomit as she began to comprehend the vicious thoughts that had been filling her mind.

She had just wanted to hurt the ponies of Equestria, wanted to hurt Twilight. She had wanted to see Twilight hung at the gallows. She had wanted to bring back the eternal night, to deprive the ponies of their sun. She... she wanted to be the monster everypony thought she was.

Nightmare Moon took notice of movement out of the corner of her eye, seeing the cloud inching towards her again. She quickly took a step back, shying away at first before her eyes flared to life with the loathing in her chest.

"NO!" Nightmare Moon snapped, "I don't want you! You're what makes everypony hate me. You're what would make me into Nightmare Moon, the real Nightmare Moon. You're the part I've been missing and I don't-"

Nightmare Moon's words died on her mouth as she was hit with a cold realization, like somepony had thrown a brick in her face. Her breathing became slowed, tears building in the alicorns eyes. She began to laugh and cry at the same time. Laughing at how stupid she had been, and crying because of what she had lost.

“The part I’ve been missing...” The alicorn echoed through, half-heartily stomping the ground, venting frustration from her own idiocy. “Without you, I’m not the real Nightmare Moon. Without you, I could have gone on being ignorant, continued being a silly, scared filly. I could have just stayed Nyx.”

That thought sparked to life inside Nightmare Moon, like a match being tossed into a barrel of oil. It ignited a rage, a rage like none she had ever felt before. Nightmare Moon’s gaze quickly hardened, focusing on the black cloud with an unmatched hatred.

“And you... ***YOU TOOK THAT AWAY FROM ME!!!***” The alicorn bellowed. “You couldn’t be satisfied... couldn’t take defeat... you *had* to finish the resurrection spell... make me remember *everything* I’ve done... convince me to do things I can *never* be forgiven of! And, because of that, now.... ***THEY ALL HATE ME!!! I CAN NEVER BE HAPPY AGAIN BECAUSE OF YOU!!!***”

The surge of anger in Nightmare Moon’s voice seemed to give strength to the cloud, the dark magic swirling into a frenzy as it strained against the chains that bound it to Nexus. Still, as Nightmare Moon calmed herself from the outburst, so did the cloud also calm down, though it still continued to reach out to the black alicorn.

“*But no more,*” Nightmare Moon seethed as she lowered her head, eyes brimming with tears but, at the same time, burning with determination. It was in that moment the cloud of smoke changed its intent, no longer trying to reach Nightmare Moon. It, instead, was trying to move away from her, trying to distance itself from the alicorn. It was trying to flee, despite the fact that it was still being contained by the binding spell.

Nightmare Moon spread her stance, eyes beginning to glow white with her magical power. At the same time, the gentle waving of her mane grew more violent, the magical field of stars starting to rise upward and swim like a fire. Her mane stretched out and began to pool against the ceiling of the throne room. It was just like the night when she first came back to Equestria, when her mane filled the air inside the Ponyville town hall.

“I *won’t* be the mare you want me to be.” The alicorn spoke, punctuating her sentence with a crack of lightning from her mane. It arched down and

struck the black cloud, causing part of it to vaporize and burn away. The cloud surged and swirled in panic, struggling with greater force against the binding spell, like a caged animal in a panic.

"I *won't* let you hurt the ponies I care about any more! I *won't* let you hurt Rarity! ...or Rainbow Dash! ...or Applejack! ...or Fluttershy! ...or Pinkie Pie! ...or Cheerilee!"

With each name, Nightmare Moon brought down a crack of arcane lightning from the dreadful storm her mane had formed in the air of the throne room. With each strike, part of the black cloud was vaporized. The dark vapor scrambled and swirled, as if wincing, like it could feel the pain of being struck by the focused magical energy.

"I *won't* let you hurt Apple Bloom... Scootaloo... Sweetie Belle... or Twist! I *won't* let you hurt my friends *ever AGAIN!*"

The next bolt Nightmare Moon called down was stronger than the ones before, the alicorn's rage giving strength to her spell. It blew a significantly larger hole in the cloud, but unlike the bolts before Nightmare Moon also felt the lightning bolt striking her as well. It was like she had been stabbed in the chest with a dagger, the searing pain that made the alicorn grit her teeth.

Despite the fact that it was trapped inside Spell Nexus, Nightmare Moon still shared a link to the cloud. It was part of her, and her base instincts of self-preservation were screaming for her to stop. A fresh wave of nausea passed through the alicorn and her body felt like it was on the verge of giving out.

Her own body was rebelling, trying to keep her from further destroying the cloud, Nightmare Moon would not stop. Keeping herself on her hooves through sheer willpower, the alicorn continued.

"I *won't* let you hurt anypony ever again!"

This time, when Nightmare Moon shocked the cloud, it audibly hissed in pain, its form writhing in the air like a bag of wounded snakes. It was hurting, but it was pain Nightmare Moon did not hear or see, but arguably



felt herself. The alicorn's eyes were shut tight and her ears rang with the sound of her own screaming.

It hurt a lot worse now, Nightmare Moon feeling as if she had just hit her own chest with the lightning bolt. A burning, searing, stabbing sensation shot deep into the alicorn's body. It forced the alicorn to drop to one knee, just to keep herself from falling over completely. She panted, the glow in her eyes fading as she tried to recover.

It was a moment the cloud, which was half as large as it had been, tried to seize. It squirmed and strained against the chains of the binding spell, trying to fly towards the distant door in a desperate attempt to escape. It was beginning to succeed; the lines on Nexus's body were beginning to fade, the binding spell losing power. Soon the black cloud would be able to escape.

But freedom would come too late. Rising back off her front knee, Nightmare Moon steadied herself as she glared at the cloud down one final time as the glow in her eyes returned brighter than ever.

The thunderous storm formed by the alicorn's mane began to crackle with energy, saturated to the point where it couldn't hold an ounce more magic even if it tried. That energy began to focus, and with a single, final stomp, Nightmare Moon screamed her final words to the poisonous magic.

**"I WON'T LET YOU HURT TWILIGHT... *EVER...* AGAIN!!!"**

The surge of arcane lightning that was released at that moment was like none ever seen in Equestria. The thunder blew out the throne room's stained glass windows and cascaded across the land. A sound that felt like an earthquake in Ponyville and was clearly audible even in the distant Appleloosa.

The bolt of arcane energy itself was as thick as a tree trunk and shone like a miniature sun. The throne room was completely bathed in light, and anypony who happened to be looking at the throne room's windows was forced to shield their eyes from the bright glare.

The thunderous sound of the spell drowned out Nightmare Moon's screams. Even though she couldn't hear herself, the alicorn knew that the

scream coming out of her mouth was blood curdling. The pain... it was like nothing she had ever experienced before. It was worse than when she had been attacked by the Elements of Harmony, because now it felt like she was being burned and stabbed to death from the inside out.

To Nightmare Moon, it felt like the pain and the spell went on for an eternity. It was, however, only a few seconds before the spell was spent. The arcane lighting slimmed and faded before completely disappearing, a few lingering arcs of energy cascading across the room as Nightmare Moon collapsed where she was.

She trembled and panted, her body trying to recover as Nightmare Moon's vision swam. She didn't know how long she laid there, but as soon as she had the strength Nightmare Moon raised herself up off the floor, looking across the throne room.

Spell Nexus had been blown clear of the attack, the thunderous explosion knocking the unicorn into a far wall where he lay unconscious. The glowing white lines on his body looked broken and jagged, and were now starting to fade away; the binding spell had been broken, but it had served its purpose.

The dark cloud was gone, but still something remained of the poisonous magic. A pathetic little blob of black gunk, barely able to ooze and gurgle across the floor. It was no larger than a field mouse, and it rolled like a sickly, sticky little ball of tar on a very slight downward slope.

The gunk was inching its way to the throne room door, still trying to flee.

Sneering and grunting, Nightmare forced herself back up onto her hooves. Her legs were shaking, but the alicorn kept her balance enough to begin walking forward. It took only a few steps to catch up with the little ball of black ooze, the alicorn towering over the measly blob.

"If being happy again would cause me to hurt everypony I care about, everypony in Equestria, then... then I'd rather be miserable for all eternity."

With that, Nightmare Moon stamped the ground with her hoof as her eyes flashed white once more, causing a few final bits of arcane energy to surge across her hoof. The gunk burned and hissed under her hoof, and

Nightmare Moon winced at the slight pain in her chest. She, however, did not relent until the ooze was nothing but an ashy smudge on the floor.

And with that, Nightmare Moon took in a single deep breath, held it... and then let it slip out slowly. She stood there for several long moments, taking in everything she had just done... and she was happy. Equestria, her friends, Twilight.... they were all safe. She had destroyed the thing that had tried to hurt those she cared about.

But... what else had she just done?

That... that was a piece of her. It was the part of her that would have made everything she had done, everything she had accomplished, have meaning and purpose. Now... all the evil she had done had only made Equestria see her as a monster... which was arguably what she was.

She had just destroyed the only thing that would have let her truly be happy. She could not escape being Nightmare Moon... Equestria would always see her as the monstrous Mare in the Moon... but... even if they hated her, at the very least, she had done something right.

And it wasn't going to be the last thing she did right either.

=====

*CREEEEEEAAAAAAK... CREAK... CREEEEEEAAAAAAK... CREAK*

On a larger home on the outskirts of Ponyville, a single filly sat on a swing in the front yard. The hinges of the swing set creaked and squeaked as the filly just barely swung at all, moving just a few inches back and forth as she sat on the swing on all fours, her eyes on the ground.

Her dad always used to push her on the swing. He got busy sometimes, had to stay late at his jewelry store, but he *always* made time to push her on the swing. The swing had been her favorite birthday present, even more than her favorite tiara. It was the only thing her dad was always willing to do with her. He was always willing to give her a short push, even if he was heading out to work or going someplace.

But that was before Nightmare Moon came back.

The past few weeks had been the worst of the filly's life. Almost every pony in town was mad at her. Some were subtle about it while others were more forward, openly shouting at her for what she and her friend had done. She was being picked on and she hated it, but the worst part was what had happened with her father.

When Nightmare Moon came back, her father left home to go work and live in the castle. Her mother had said he was working for the Queen; that they should be happy, because her father was now a powerful stallion in the government. But she wasn't happy at all.

It was because of Nightmare Moon everypony in town was mad at her. Nightmare Moon had stolen her daddy, and she wanted him back.

Diamond Tiara continued to stare at the ground, not even caring that her trademark tiara had fallen off and was now sitting in the dirt underneath her swing. She didn't care about that stupid thing, she just wanted her daddy back.

Why did Nightmare Moon need him anyway? She had so many other ponies working for her; why did she need to take her daddy?

Diamond Tiara sniffled, using a front leg to wipe her nose as she continued to just stare downward. She didn't cry; she wasn't sad... she was angry. She wanted her daddy back, wanted to make Nightmare Moon give him back... but... but she was scared of the mare. It was stupid to think she was scared of Nyx... but... but Nightmare Moon was scary.

Diamond Tiara grumbled, pouted, and did her best to keep herself from crying. Those same thoughts had been circling in the filly's head for the hour she had been sitting on the swing. She had been sent outside to try and play by her worried mother, but all she had done was sit there.

But that's all she wanted to do. She wanted to be pushed on the swing by her daddy, and, if he wasn't there, she just wanted to sit. She'd just sit there until she was called for dinner, and even then she might not have gotten up. She... she wanted to sit there until her daddy came home and gave her a push.

Yet, amidst the creaking and whining of the swing's hinges, Diamond Tiara heard another creak. The house was surrounded by a fence, and the new sound she heard was the creaking of the front gate's hinges as it was opened. Diamond Tiara first thought it was Silver Spoon, and she lifted her head to tell her friend she wasn't in the mood to play or do anything. Yet, when the filly looked up, her gaze met with a pair of azure eyes.

She stared at those eyes for a long time, and those eyes stared back. The pony who owned those eyes took a tentative step forward, and then broke into a gallop. Diamond Tiara just as quickly jumped off the swing and ran to meet the other pony, leaping into his embrace. She hugged the stallion tightly around the neck, and he held her in his front hooves just as tightly.

"Diamond Tiara, Sweetie, it's time for dinn-" The filly's mother began, poking her head out the front door, only to stop mid-sentence. She looked at the stallion her daughter was hugging, and felt her own eyes tearing up.

"Regal... Regal Cut, is that you?"

The stallion looked up, smiling through the tears streaming down his face. In an instant, Diamond Tiara's mother was outside, joining the warm embrace the family was sharing.

"Daddy, does this mean you're not working for the queen anymore?" Diamond Tiara asked.

"Yes... yes it does. She released me."

"Released? But Honey, I thought-"

"Not now, Dear," Regal Cut said, quickly sneaking a kiss from his wife. "I... I promise I'll explain later. So... I heard dinner is ready?"

"Yes... yes it is."

"Good. Diamond Tiara and I will be right in, but first... I want to push my daughter on the swing."

The mare nodded, and Diamond Tiara laughed as she quickly galloped over to the swing, Regal Cut following behind her. Soon, Diamond Tiara

was giggling and laughing, calling out to be pushed higher while her father smiled, tears of joy running down his eyes.

All across Equestria, similar homecomings occurred. Stallions and mares who had once served Nightmare Moon returning to the families and friends they had all but abandoned to serve the black alicorn. Each speaking of how they had not been fired from their job, but released... given back the freedom they never knew they had lost.

=====

Zecora nosed open the door to her hut, returning from her trip into the Everfree Forest to gather the herbs and roots she would need for her latest brew. The zebra smiled as she moved into the house, the aroma in the air exactly what it needed to be. She turned her vision to her bubbling cauldron, where Twilight Sparkle was using her magic to carefully stir the contents.

"In herbalism, Twilight, you shown great potential. In just a few days, your growth has been exponential."

The unicorn smiled. "Thanks Zecora, but I'm just a quick study. That, and you have some really amazing books on herbs and their properties."

"In stewing herbs and roots zebras are unmatched, and to our books the same compliment can be attached. Still, I offer thanks for your aid with my work. You could have easily just hung around my home, like a lazy jerk."

"Well... even if I wanted to, I've never been that good at just sitting around, especially when I've got a lot on my mind. It helps if I can find something to distract myself with."

"Heavy thoughts rest upon your soul, undoubtedly about an alicorn queen who was once a foal."

"Filly." Twilight corrected. "But... yes, I am thinking about Nyx. How can I not? The last time I saw her, she was going to go confront Nexus about what he did to me. I know she's an alicorn... but it's been three days. What if something happened?"

“To your concern I can relate, you worry about Nightmare Moon and her fate. But you must understand you are a wanted mare, and-”

*KNOCK... KNOCK...*

“And Twilight, you must hide yourself with care,” Zecora finished, quickly changing her sentence while still managing to pull off a rhyme. Twilight nodded, slipping back into Zecora’s bedroom while the zebra moved to the front door. After giving Twilight a few more moments to hide and hearing the pony on the far side knock once more, Zecora cracked open the door and looked to see who was outside.

“Hey there, Zecora.”

A relieved smile formed on the zebra's lips. She opened the door as a particular orange farm pony walked inside, a baby dragon riding on her back.

“Applejack and Spike, it is good to see you. I hope you have not come seeking one of my healing brews.”

“Naw, we ain’t here for anything like that. Though, I gotta say, the critters here in the Everfree Forest sure seem more riled up than usual. I swear I saw something that looked like a wolf on my way here.”

“A Lupus Minor is what you saw, I have no doubt. I too have noticed them lingering about. For several days now the forest has not been at ease, far too many monsters linger amongst these trees.”

“If there are so many monsters, maybe you should come stay in Ponyville for a spell, just to be safe.”

“Your concern is touching, but you need not worry; if it becomes too much, I will leave this place in a hurry. Still, if I may ask, what brings you here, out into Everfree’s wild frontier?”

“Don’t bother barking up that tree, Zecora,” Spike said as he jumped of Applejack back. “I’ve been trying to get her to tell me the whole way here.”

“Well, I told ya it was a surprise, and now that we’re actually here, I’ll tell ya. We’re here to see Twilight.”

Spike’s eyes widened, the baby dragon quickly looking around. The unicorn in question, having heard her name, stepped out from her hiding place in Zecora’s bedroom. The second Spike saw Twilight, the baby dragon practically tackled her. He hugged her neck, laughing and crying.

“Twilight! Oh Twilight, I’ve missed you so much, and when I heard you were going to be executed I... I...”

“I’ve missed you too, Spike,” Twilight said, lifting a hoof and returning the dragon’s hug. “And I’m sorry I couldn’t tell you I was okay, but I couldn’t risk the royal guards finding me.”

“Well, Sugarcube, I reckon you don’t have to worry about that anymore,” Applejack responded, “and, by the way, it’s good to see you’re okay.”

“Thanks, Applejack, it’s good to see you too,” Twilight replied, “but why don’t I have to worry anymore? How did you two even find me, and what’s going on in Ponyville?”

“A whole lot a crazy,” Applejack answered. “A few days ago, Nightmare Moon called all the ponies she had workin’ for her to the castle. Every single one, and she kept them all locked up at the castle until sometime this mornin’. Then, the castle gates opened, and all them ponies started comin’ out.

“But here’s the strange thing: all the ponies that went in had turquoise eyes, but when I saw them comin’ out, not *one* of them had that eye color anymore.

“And that ain’t the end of it,” Applejack continued. “After all them ponies left the castle, the mayor then came out. She rounded up all the ponies in Ponyville, and read us a message from Nightmare Moon. It was all about how her crazy cult was disbanded, and how she was sendin’ all the ponies who worked for her back to their families.”

“She... she sent them ALL home?” Twilight asked in disbelief.



“Yeah, it was so crazy,” Spike said as he finished hugging Twilight. “I think I even saw Spell Nexus walking by the library, along with some other ponies from Celestia’s School for Gifted Unicorns. I would have never thought he had anything to do with this.”

“Oh, trust me, he had *something* to do with it alright...” Twilight grumbled, her memory of being attacked by the blue unicorn causing a small twinge of pain in her neck.

“Well, maybe not, Sugarcube. From the way it sounded, none of them ponies workin’ for Nightmare Moon were doin’ it on purpose... they were brainwashed. But she freed all them ponies, and then let them choose whether or not they wanted to stay and work for her or go home. And, from what I hear, they all chose to leave.”

“This is very peculiar and strange; what has caused Nightmare Moon to change?” Zecora asked.

“Don’t rightly know, Sugarcube. But that *still* ain’t the strangest part.”

“What could be stranger than what has been said? Has Nightmare Moon grown a second head?”

“No, I reckon even *that* wouldn’t be as strange as what she has done. Nightmare Moon went and stepped down as the Queen of Equestria.”

“She... she stepped down?” Twilight whispered in disbelief.

“No, I find this all too much to swallow. I believe your words, Applejack, are quite hollow.”

It took a moment for the farm pony to parse what Zecora had said before she furrowed her eyebrows.

“You callin’ me a liar?”

“Nightmare Moon relinquishing her crown and control, it goes against all her plans and her greatest goal.”

“Well, if you don’t believe me, then why don’t you take a gander at this?” Applejack replied, reaching back into her saddle bags. After a moment, the farm pony pulled out a scroll. Twilight took the scroll in her magic, unrolling it to see it was something of a royal proclamation, though it was written more like a letter. It did, however, have a royal seal.

Zecora leaned in behind Twilight’s head, the zebra reading the message alongside the unicorn.

*To the citizens of Equestria,*

*Today I, Nightmare Moon, have disbanded the Children of Nightmare, the cult of ponies who were responsible for my resurrection. They, along with any other ponies that joined the castle staff in the past few weeks, have been released from their service and are allowed to return to their homes, families, friends, and lives.*

*Please hold no ill will against these ponies; their actions were not their own. All that they did was done under the influence of my magic. My magic tainted and corrupted these ponies. They, like all of Equestria, were victims and nothing more.*

*If you must blame anypony, blame only me. It is my magic that twisted their minds.*

*Finally, I, Nightmare Moon, hereby step down as Queen of Equestria. All power and control of the government is hereby returned to the regents and officials appointed by Celestia and Luna, those who are entrusted to rule in the absence of the Royal Sisters.*

*Should anypony need to speak with me, they can find me in my castle. Otherwise, I would ask that you all simply pretend that I don’t even exist.*

*Nightmare Moon*

“I guess what you say is true; forgive me for ever doubting you.”

“Aw, don’t you worry about it, Zecora. I probably wouldn’t believe it myself if I hadn’t seen all them ponies leavin’ the castle un-brainwashed.”

“It kind of makes sense, actually,” Spike remarked. “Can you think of *anypony* you know that would have worked for Nightmare Moon willingly? I mean, back me up on this Twi... Twilight, are you crying?”

Twilight looked up from the message, quickly using a front hoof to rub away the tears that were starting to slide down her cheeks.

“Sorry... I’m just...so happy.”

“I’ll admit, Sugarcube, this here is some good news, but not exactly *that* good.”

“But don’t you see what this means?” Twilight asked, the grin on her face wide.

“I reckon I don’t. What *does* it mean?”

“She’s not trying to be Nightmare Moon anymore,” Twilight said, rubbing her eyes again to try and keep back the tears. “I think... I think my Nyx... is coming back.”

# Chapter 18

## A Mare Against Monsters

The castle, which once bustled with ponies going about their work, now stood silently in the gem quarries outside of Ponyville. Wind whistled through the empty halls, flitted through the windows, and, at times, made it sound like the old castle was singing some sad, lonesome, wordless chorus... as if trying to draw back the ponies who had once given it purpose.

Only one soul remained amongst the stone walls, a single resident that continued to haunt the halls like a restless spirit. At the moment, Nightmare Moon sat still in her throne like a statue, looking out across her empty throne room.

One week of utter silence and solitude. One week since Nightmare Moon had freed the Children of Nightmare, and removed the cursed blessing that Nexus had infected them with. A week where the alicorn had barely tended to her own needs. She had eaten and slept, but little else. Her coat needed washing, and her armor had grown dull without its usual polish. The eye shadow on her face was faded, neither being washed away nor reapplied.

A chiming clock in a distant hall alerted Nightmare Moon to the hour, and without moving a hoof or feather, she called on her magic. Her horn glowed, and the sun and moon exchanged places in the sky, the moon setting as the sun began its flight into the heavens.

The sun's light began to filter through the broken windows, its warmth starting to fill the throne room and its light falling on Nightmare Moon's coat. It was a warmth that offered a small bit of relief to the turmoil raging within the alicorn, a chaos perpetuated as Nightmare Moon's mind cycled endlessly on the same torturous thoughts.

Shutting her eyes, Nightmare Moon thought back to that moment the deed had been done. She had gathered all the Children of Nightmare in her castle courtyard, even Spell Nexus. While the worst of the dark blue unicorn's infection had been destroyed, enough still lingered to make him

like any other cultist, blindly obedient and loving. Still, his continued loyalty served a purpose. She had him gather all the others, and when she was sure every cultist was accounted for, she acted to remove the blessing.

They had fought and struggled, but the blessing had been removed. She had freed them all, killed every last trace of the poisonous magic Nexus had slipped to them. Some infections were worse than others, some infections fought back, but they all met the same destruction in one fell swoop.

And afterwards, all the ponies had lain on the ground, as if dead.

But then some began to rise, to open their eyes and look around. Nightmare Moon had smiled at the first moment. The ocean of turquoise eyes that had looked at her mere minute before was now a rainbow of colors. Browns, yellows, pinks, blues, greens, grays, ambers, magentas... but no other eyes matched hers. She alone had the turquoise irises.

For a time, the Children of Nightmare were bewildered. Some didn't know where they were or how they had gotten there, but their memories began to flow back, and, soon, they were all staring at her, fear and resentment dancing in their eyes.

Nightmare Moon met those gazes for a time, but then turned her back on the crowd and offered a few words, her voice strong but not threatening.

"I have returned to you ponies your freedom. Those who wish to stay may stay, and those who wish to leave may leave. I will hold no ill will to those who want to go back to their friends and family."

And, with that, the alicorn had used her magic to open the castle gates. She then just sat there and listened. She listened as she began to hear hooves moving against the ground and wings flapping in the air. The sounds of ponies leaving, not just a few at a time but in droves. She sat and listened until all was silent again, and only then did Nightmare Moon dare look to see who had remained.

And as she expected, there was no pony left. Not a soul had remained... but what sensible pony would want to stay to serve a tyrant and a monster?

It all ended with Nightmare Moon turning to the one pony who had remained, the one pony she had called to be a witness to what she had done. She had summoned the Mayor of Ponyville to the castle, and, now that she had freed the Children of Nightmare, she gave the mayor a written message and instructions on what was to be done with it. After that, Nightmare Moon slipped into her now empty castle and shut the doors behind her.

It was just another painful memory to join the alicorn's growing collection. Nightmare Moon felt a single tear stream down her cheek as she cracked open her eyes, looking across the room with her half open gaze.

She had been such a foal.

She had everything back when she was a filly, everything that mattered anyway. She had it all, and she threw it away. She let herself become a true Nightmare Moon, let herself hurt not only the ponies she cared about, but all of Equestria. She had gone along with it all, playing the part she believed she had no hope of escaping.

Yet she had every chance to escape, every chance to realize she needed to stop; she just refused to see it. She let her rage and pain blind her to the truth, that she didn't want any of it. She didn't want the eternal night or to be queen; she wasn't that monster.

Still, even if she wasn't the monster they believed her to be, too much had been done. Now she bore not just misdeeds done when she was but Luna's jealousy ponified, but a mountain of her own. She had done so many horrible things, from stealing Equestria's throne to putting her own mother in danger.

Nightmare Moon would do no more wrong. She would not hurt another pony, but how could anypony forgive her after everything she did? It would be better if she just released the Royal Sisters, and resigned herself to their judgment. Equestria would be happiest with its Royal Sisters back. It would be better off with her gone.

For all she had done... Nightmare Moon deserved to be punished. She deserved to be banished or locked in a prison... but since she could easily defy those orders with her power alone, the only punishment truly fitting of

her crimes and able to satisfy those who feared her was to be sent and imprisoned in the moon, to become the Mare in the Moon again.

More than once she had begun to undo the spells that held Celestia and Luna captive, to make up for her final mistake, but every time she was unable to bring herself to finish.

She wanted to do what was best for Equestria, but she just couldn't bring herself to do it. The Royal Sisters, they would show no mercy. Celestia and Luna were not the type to kill, but banishment to the moon was a strong possibility, and she did not want to go back to the moon.

She had been there for a thousand years, trapped in the cold loneliness, but this time it would be so much worse. She would not have her hatred to distract her, and chill of the solitude would sting far worse. Her happy memories, that carried with them warmth and laughter, would burn like salt in an open wound. They would become memories that would haunt her, taunt her with the life she had so foolishly thrown away.

Yet the worst part was that was that, if she was ever able to return from the moon, she would return to a world where she knew nopony except the Royal Sisters. She would never be able to see her friends again, never again be able to embrace Twilight. She would be alone, and she would still be hated.

And maybe... that was what she deserved. She was no longer the monster, but that did not redeem her of what she had done. It would be better to just release the sisters and be done with it... but she just couldn't bring herself to do it.

She didn't want to go back to the moon.

Nightmare Moon's mind lingered on her own weakness, only to be drawn out of the vicious cycle of emotions and thoughts. Her keen hearing picked up on distant hoof steps. A single echoing sound amid the castle's painful silence. They were drawing closer, and it sounded like the pony the hooves belonged to was running.

She, however, did not linger to meet the pony. Instead, the alicorn became a cloud and drifted up to the throne room ceiling, hiding amongst the glinting gems that elegantly depicted the nighttime sky.

Every morning since the Children of Nightmare had been freed, Twilight Sparkle had come to the castle. She would call out for Nyx, wander the halls for hours. She would only give up in the early afternoon, when her empty stomach forced Twilight to retreat back to Ponyville. Twilight's arrival seemed earlier than usual, but Nightmare Moon hid all the same.

She yearned to answer Twilight's calls... but she just felt too guilty. She could not face Twilight, not when it was her magic keeping Celestia and Luna trapped in the sun and moon. She could not face Twilight considering all she had done. She cared about Twilight, and was happy the unicorn was alive and safe... but she did not deserve to have such a wonderful pony in her life.

Twilight's love was wasted on a monster like her, so Nightmare Moon hid, shut her eyes, and lingered in the shadows whenever the unicorn came around. It would be better if Twilight just forgot that Nyx ever existed... because she could never be Nyx again.

She heard the creaking hinges of the throne room doors as they were opened, the sound of hoofsteps starting to echo across the interior of the throne room. It was like any morning: Twilight would arrive, and then start calling out to her. She would ask Nightmare Moon to come out and just talk to her... but the alicorn wouldn't let herself. No matter how much she wanted to, it was better if Twilight just forgot she ever existed.

Yet, when the pony the hooves belonged to called out, it wasn't Twilight's voice she heard. It was a far different voice, a smoother voice that spoke in rhyme. When Nightmare Moon dared to look, she saw it was no pony who had come looking for her.

It was, instead, a zebra.

"Where are you, Nightmare Moon?" Zecora called, looking about the throne room. "I must speak to you about Ponyville's impending doom."



Nightmare Moon debated answering Zecora's call for a moment, thinking that perhaps Twilight had gotten sneakier, and was sending another pony looking for her. Yet, the zebra seemed honestly worried. So she called on her magic, a little spell that would make it seem her voice was coming from everywhere in the room at the same time. That way, Zecora would not know where she was hiding.

"What is it?"

"Restlessness grows in the forest Everfree, the monsters are moving amongst its trees. Their hungry bellies groan and grumble. They march this way, making the ground rumble. I was forced to flee to escape their advance, but I fear Ponyville has no chance."

"The monsters are leaving Everfree?" Nightmare Moon echoed, making sure she had understood the zebra's rhymes.

"That is what I said, it is the utter truth; the monsters come to satisfy their pony sweet tooth."

Realizing that the zebra was dead serious about the threat, Nightmare Moon rematerialized her normal body right where she was in the air. She dropped down, landing with a thud in front of Zecora. The zebra noticeably jumped, but recovered quickly from the alicorn's sudden appearance.

"Why would they leave the Everfree Forest now?"

"The monsters remained amongst the trees in fear, cowering away from the princess who guided the sun, the celestial sphere. But now Celestia has been gone too long, the lingering scent of her magic is no longer strong. The monsters see their chance, they have realized she is gone. They now seek to rampage, with their hunger and brawn."

Nightmare Moon lowered her gaze, cursing to herself quietly. Just another thing she had done to cause pain to the ponies of Equestria. Just another evil she could be blamed for. Equestria really would have been better off if she had never been resurrected. It would be safe, and she wouldn't have to deal with the painful guilt that twisted in her chest.

"I'm sorry, this is my fault. I am to blame for it all."

“I did not come here to belittle you, Nightmare Moon, to use my words like salt in a wound. I came here to ask for your aid, hoping you would begin a mighty crusade. Repel the monsters that threaten the village, before they have a chance to pillage.”

“What do you expect me to do? I am Nightmare Moon, my only talent is in hurting the ponies I care about.”

“No, such self-pity I cannot condone, not when monsters threaten our home. Your guilt is justified, your actions were not right. To Equestria you were, for a time, a terrible blight. But now I ask you to answer this question, can you truly ignore the monsters’ aggression? Will you not stand against those who wish to take what you hold dear, show the creatures that you are an alicorn that they should all fear? Can you truly ignore Ponyville in its hour of need? Would you truly allow us to be nothing more than monster feed?

“It is not you who should hide in this castle, empty and dark, while monsters roam free in Ponyville’s parks. You are an alicorn, a pony of unmatched power. In your presence it should be the beasts who flee and cower. Such trespass should be met with your full fury, and if you are to do something, then you must hurry.

“For if you do nothing, then Ponyville will have a grim fate. Even Twilight will be nothing more than food upon an earthen plate.”

Zecora’s words struck a resonance inside the alicorn’s brain. The thought of Twilight being threatened sparked and ignited two fires inside the alicorn’s chest. A brew of emotions that began to swirl and gain in strength. Part of her felt insulted. These monsters thought that, just because Celestia was gone, they could turn Equestria into a buffet? Was *she* not also something to be equally as feared, if not *more* so? Had *she* not been the one to defeat Celestia?

At the same time, Nightmare Moon began to worry about all the ponies in Ponyville. Ponies she knew, ponies she cared for... her friends... Twilight. They were, at this moment, in danger. The monsters sought to eat them, to take away the ponies she cared about.

She wouldn't let anything, be it a monster or pony, hurt those she cared about... not again.

"How close are they?" Nightmare Moon asked, beginning to stride towards the throne room door, Zecora having to gallop to keep up.

"Do not doubt that they draw near. We may already be too late, I fear."

=====

GRRRAAAAAAAWWRRRRRRR!!!!  
GRRRRRRRAAAAAWWRRRR!!!!  
GRAAAAAAAWWWWRRRR!!!!  
GGGRRRAAAAAWWRRRRRRR!!!!

"It's a hydra!!!"

"Everypony run for your lives!"

"My daughter! Where's my daughter?!?"

"It's a hydra! We're doomed!!!"

"The horror!!! THE HORROR!!!"

*TTTHHHOOO MMM-CCCCRRRACCK-SCCCRRAACCKKK-  
TTTRRRACCK!!!*

Nightmare Moon took flight from the castle, Zecora holding tight to the alicorn's back as she soared skyward. From her high vantage point, the alicorn was able to take an assessment of the situation. A hydra had reached the edge of town, and was starting to rampage, snapping at the ponies who were currently panicking in the streets as it crushed anything that stood in its path.

No other beasts from Everfree had reached the town yet, but Nightmare Moon could see at least two more hydras moving through the trees towards town, the multi-headed monstrosities infamous for enjoying the taste of ponies.

Seeing all she needed to see, Nightmare Moon wasted no time as she practically dropped out of the sky. With her wings tucked, she dove to the center of Ponyville. She waited until the last moment to let her wings

spread again, slowing herself enough that her landing was firm, but not painful.

“Get as many ponies as you can to the castle. It’s the safest place right now,” Nightmare Moon said to her zebra passenger, as she kept her eyes focused on the hydra in the distance.

“I will direct all I can and ask them to pass the word, to the castle all of Ponyville will be spurred,” Zecora replied, jumping down from the alicorn’s back before starting to shout at any pony that would listen. In but a few moments, the flow of the panicked crowd was redirected, the populace of the town racing to the protective embrace of Nightmare Moon’s castle.

As Zecora began the rough evacuation, Nightmare Moon took flight again, surging forward towards the hydra. Three of the monstrosity’s four heads were snapping at ponies running through the streets.

One head, however, had some ponies cornered in an alley way: a gray pegasus and a purplish filly unicorn, both with straw blond manes. The monster had them pinned in a dead-end ally. Ditzzy Doo was doing her best to shield her daughter, Dinky, from the huge hydra head that was licking its lips mere feet in front of them.

The pegasus would have normally flown away, carried her daughter to safety, but one of her wings was ruffled, a sign she had injured it. The injury was not bad enough she couldn’t fly, but flying quickly was out of the question. She wouldn’t be able to pick up Dinky and get away before the monster snapped its jaws down on them.

The hydra head moved in a little closer, grinning at its first pony meal of the day. Ditzzy Doo took an anxious step back, but otherwise held her ground. She had her wings spread and body lowered, the pegasus trying to look as strong as possible, a natural defensive instinct even though she had no chance of scaring the monster away.

Licking its lips one final time, the hydra decided it had waited long enough. It brought its head back, the muscles in its neck coiling and tensing as it opened its jaw wide. It was mere moments from striking out, from enjoying the taste of a pony for the first time ever. Yet, before it could attack,

something dropped down on the Hydra's head, smashing its jaw against the ground.

The thing that had landed on top of the Hydra was Nightmare Moon, the alicorn dropping out of the sky like an anvil, using her own weight and momentum to smash the hydra head's jaw against the ground. It was at best a small diversion, but that's all she needed.

With a single fluid motion, the black alicorn took flight again as her mane stretched out, picking up Ditzzy and Dinky. With the mare and filly safely in the embrace of her magic, Nightmare Moon soared skyward and, when at a relatively safe distance, set the two down on her back.

"Are you two okay?" The alicorn asked, glancing over her shoulder as she leveled off.

"Yes... yes, we're fine," Ditzzy replied, crying through her misaligned eyes as she smiled and hugged Dinky tightly.

"Can you fly and carry her?"

"Yes."

"Then go with everypony else and fly to the castle. It's the safest place right now."

The gray mailmare nodded, quickly picking Dinky Doo up in her legs and taking off from Nightmare Moon's back. The pair flew a bit before Ditzzy turned to look back, wanting to offer a thank you to the alicorn. She, however, looked back just in time to see the hydra below stretching out one of its heads.

In a single, swift motion, it snapped its jaw down around Nightmare Moon, swallowing her whole.

Ditzzy froze in midair, not wanting to believe what she had just seen. The hydra head that had eaten the alicorn was smiling stupidly, licking and smacking its lips as it enjoying the lingering taste of the alicorn's magic. The other heads glared at the first with jealousy, obviously wishing they had gotten to enjoy the rare delicacy.

Yet after a few moments, all four heads of the hydra stood up straight, each getting a nauseated look on its face before each head let out a short burp. With each burp, a cloud of indigo, star-speckled smoke appeared in the air, quickly flying away from the hydra. The four clouds swirled together, Nightmare Moon materializing in the air with a cold, merciless glare in her eyes.

“Did you... just try ... to *eat me?*!” She bellowed, her voice seething with anger. The hydra backed up anxiously, the four heads looking at each other as they all began to realize they had just done something very stupid.

Nightmare Moon’s eyes flashed to life, and from her mane small bolts of arcane lighting surged out in rapid succession. They struck the ground around the hydra’s feet, the monster quickly jumping around in panic to try and keep its toes from being struck. This lasted for a few seconds before the hydra turned to flee, running back towards the Everfree Forest. Still, Nightmare Moon was not satisfied until she sent one final bolt of lightning shooting through the air, striking the hydra on the base of its tail and causing it to yelp.

“Are you okay?” Ditzzy Doo asked, the gray pegasus daring to fly a little closer to the black alicorn.

“I’m fine, but you need to get to the castle. It’s the only safe place right now.”

The gray pegasus didn’t argue, but she did bow respectfully once before turning to leave. Dinky Doo also offered a thank you, the little purple unicorn twisting around in her mother’s legs so she could smile and wave back at Nightmare Moon. The alicorn couldn’t help herself, and offered a similar smile and a wave in return.

Still, it was a short-lived moment, as the sound of crashing trees and wood drew Nightmare Moon’s attention back to the task at hand. In the time Nightmare Moon was fighting the first hydra, the rest of the creatures that were coming out of the Everfree Forest had reached Ponyville. There were hydras, Cerberi, Scorpions... but the worst that Nightmare Moon could see were the Lupus Minors racing through the Ponyville streets.

“Horse-feathers, there are too many to fight one at a time.” Nightmare Moon cursed to herself as she circled and took an assessment of the situation. She could easily handle any of the monsters one on one with the full extent of her magic, but while she was fighting one, the other monsters would have free reign to attack, injure, and eat other ponies.

If she was going to save as many ponies as possible, maybe save them all, she needed to fight all the monsters at once. Draw their attention away so the residents of Ponyville could flee. But, she couldn't be in that many places at once.

Or could she?

For a moment, Nightmare Moon remembered how she had infiltrated Celestia's castle, how she had become a whole group of soldiers. She could divide herself, divide her magic, and that would allow her to face down every monster at the same time. It would let her protect the most ponies.

Yet there was a danger to it. The more Nightmare Moon divided herself, the more vulnerable she would be. An alicorn's strength, resilience, and near immortality was caused by the sheer amount of magic an alicorn could contain. It meant she had more than enough magic to divide herself, but the more she divided herself, the weaker and more vulnerable each piece would be.

It would not only put her at a great disadvantage to the monsters, but if her clones got too badly hurt... or if too many of them fell... she could easily get herself...

For a moment, Nightmare Moon hesitated, wondering if it was really smart to make herself that vulnerable. Yet, her ears continued to pick up on the panicked screams and sounds of destruction. The ponies... they needed her help, and she made up her mind. Shutting her eyes, Nightmare Moon called on her magic, drawing it up to its peak before she began the quick but delicate process of subdividing her magic, and thus herself.

=====

“Come on, this way!” Rainbow Dash called, waving a hoof as she led a group of panicked ponies through Ponyville. The group followed the directions to a T, rounding a corner as they galloped into the center of town. A few more directions from Rainbow Dash, and the group of ponies was running up the road to the castle.

Dash watched the group for a few moments to make sure there weren’t going to be any stragglers before she looped around and flew to the town hall.

Soon after Zecora had been dropped off by Nightmare Moon, the zebra had met up with Twilight. The unicorn immediately took it upon herself to organize the evacuation of Ponyville, calling on her friends for help as she saw them. The six ponies and one zebra were now doing everything they could to ensure everypony got out safely.

“Okay, I found everypony on Horseshoe street and got them out. What’s next?” Rainbow Dash asked, landing beside Twilight. The unicorn was currently looking over a table, littered with maps and lists as she levitated a pencil in her magic, at the moment quickly crossing off Horseshoe street from a map of Ponyville.

“Good work Dash, but now I need a fresh scouting report. Fly up and see where all the monsters are. I need to know what streets we need to clear next.” Twilight replied, much like a field general ordering her troops.

And Dash was more than willing to follow those orders, snapping her hoof up into a momentary salute, before zipping skyward. With her trademarked speed, the pegasus was soon high above the town, looking across the panic stricken Ponyville as she took quick mental notes of where the monsters were.

It was a bad situation. The two hydras still hadn’t gotten too deep into the town, but the other monsters were starting to spread into areas that hadn’t been evacuated. Rainbow Dash saw one cerberus getting close to the clinic, where Applejack and Rarity were working to help evacuate the patients. The three headed, black furred, red eyed, size-of-an-elephant dog lumbered through the streets, sniffing at the ground, following the thick scent of ponies.



And that cerberus wasn't alone. There were others on the hunt around town, and they were spreading quickly. Not only that, there were Scorpions too. Like the Ursa Minor, the Scorpions were constellation beasts, magical in nature, and obscenely huge. The key difference was, while the Ursa Minor was bear like, the Scorpions were like scorpions, and they had a preference for having ponies for breakfast. The Scorpions were crawling across the Ponyville buildings, using their claws and tails to try and strike at the ponies that still lingered in the streets, and smash anything that got in their way.

But the worst, the absolute worst thing attacking the town, were the Lupus Minors, constellation wolves. They weren't big monsters: a Lupus Minor was about the size of an average pony. Yet, what they didn't have in size, they made up in ferocity and speed. While the average pony was able to outrun or out maneuver the larger monsters, the Lupus Minors had the speed and skill to chase down an average pony.

And that was what one Lupus Minor was about to do. Rainbow Dash saw two little fillies running as fast as their hooves could take them, a Lupus Minor chasing them down. The fillies had about a two block lead on the Lupus, but, due to their small size and short legs, the constellation wolf was catching up quickly.

Dash didn't hesitate a moment as she flew down to intercept the monster. It was a deadly race, but one Dash would win. Just as the Lupus Minor managed to catch up with the fillies, Dash soared in and tackled the beast, sending it flopping down the street while the pegasus rolled once and jumped back to her hooves, skidding to a stop in a move that would have made the Wonderbolts proud.

As the wolf reeled from the sudden sky attack, Dash chanced a glance over her shoulder, looking at the two fillies. It was a pair of fillies she was familiar with, Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon.

"You two need to get out of here! Now!" Dash snapped, turning her gaze back forward as the Lupus Minor recovered from the pegasus' tackle.

"Come *on* Silver Spoon, we got to *go*!" Diamond Tiara stressed, trying to pull her friend off the ground. Silver Spoon, however, wouldn't budge; she was too scared. She had dropped down onto the ground, covering her eyes

with her hooves as she cried out for her mother, and nothing Diamond Tiara could say would be able to get her to move in time.

“Seriously, you two have to GO!” Dash yelled, taking a few anxious steps back. The Lupus Minor was back on its paws, and was creeping in slowly towards the three ponies. It licked its lips once, its sickly yellow eyes with the red iris focused in on them. Dash lowered herself down and spread her wings, meeting the beast’s hungry gaze as she put herself between it and the fillies. The beast offered a growl, lowering itself down as it prepared to pounce.

Dash puffed some air out through her nose, pawing at the ground with a hoof defiantly. The pair glared each other down for a time, each waiting for the other to make a move.

"So, are you all bark and no bite or what?"

The beast took Dash’s taunt and leaped out, claws and teeth bared as it pounced on the cyan colored pony. The constellation wolf, however, soon found itself the victim of another sky-bound attack, a figure plowing into the wolf’s side. Both it and the wolf zipped across the street, crashing into a nearby market cart like a wrecking ball.

Dash, Silver Spoon, and Diamond Tiara watched anxiously to see what had just saved them, only for the wolf to climb out of the wreckage first. It shook itself, tossing off a few shreds of wood that lingered in its coat before it turned its focus back on them. Something the wolf shouldn’t have done, as a smoky, star sparkled mane reached out from the wrecked market cart and grabbed it by the hind leg.

The Lupus Minor was then promptly flung down the street, its star-field body crashing into a cart full of hay while another figure pulled itself out of the wrecked market stall near Rainbow Dash. Nightmare Moon winced a bit as she folded her wings, moving to the center of the street as she put herself in front of Rainbow Dash.

“Get them out of here,” The alicorn ordered, keeping her eyes focused on the far end of the street as the Lupus Minor crawled out of the hay wagon it had landed in, the wolf growling and starting to charge her down.

“NOW!” Nightmare Moon snapped, wings unfurling as she stood to meet the constellation wolf’s charge.

Dash’s bewilderment from what was happening ended with that snap of words. In a single, fluid move, she scooped up Silver Spoon and Diamond Tiara, carrying one filly on her back while she held the other in her front two hooves. Rainbow Dash then soared skyward, making sure she and the fillies were a safe distance away before she dared to look back.

And what Dash saw almost made her drop Diamond Tiara, the filly she was carrying in her front legs. There had to be dozens of Nightmare Moons all across town. Copies of the black alicorn fighting and distracting the many different monsters as the town’s residents fled, all of them moving towards the town center or in the direction of the castle.

Rainbow Dash could only stare for a moment, trying to count all the Nightmare Moon’s she saw. It was only the crying and fussing of the fillies that reminded Dash of what she was doing. Yet, despite the fillies’ complaints, she began flying towards the town center instead of the castle.

She could take Silver Spoon and Diamond Tiara to safety in a second. First, she had to tell Twilight what was going on.

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“Hurry, Rarity, we got to get all these here patients out of the clinic!”

“I am *doing* my best to hurry, Applejack!” The unicorn replied, “But we can’t forget the medicine they need!”

Much like the unplanned sleepover the pair had at Twilight’s, Applejack and Rarity’s conflicting personalities were coming to the surface. The farm pony had gotten straight to the most important thing of helping Nurse Redheart load the patients into a wagon she was going to pull with the help of Big Macintosh, who was already hitched up. Rarity, on the other hoof, was using her eye for detail to gather any and all medical supplies they would need to make sure the patients didn’t get any worse once they reached the castle.

It was a moment where the two conflicting personalities had worked together flawlessly, each able to focus on their own tasks which were both equally important. Still, Applejack had just helped the last patient into the wagon, a pony with a busted up leg, and was now waiting for Rarity to finish getting the last of the medical supplies.

“Girl, get that flank of yours in gear! We don’t know how long before them monsters-”

*THHRRACCK!!*

Applejack’s head snapped to the side, the loud crashing noise drawing her attention. For a moment, it looked like the sound hadn’t come from anywhere, but, as Applejack watched, another crash reached her ears. That second crash was followed a few moments later by something bursting through the wall of a nearby shop, charging across the empty street, and slamming into the buildings on the other side.

The thing that had barreled across the street was a cerberus. A elephant sized creature with three hungry heads, beady red eyes, and a notorious appetite for ponies.

“Horse-apples!” Applejack cursed. “Big Mac, start pullin’ the cart!”

“Eeyup!” Was all the big stallion offered, putting his weight into the hitch. The cart budged, and began to roll down the street, but it moved painfully slow. Rarity came galloping out of the hospital just in the nick of time, jumping into the cart with the last of the medical supplies.

“I thought you were going to wait!” Rarity half-whined as she looked over the edge of the cart, glaring at Applejack as the farm pony trotted alongside.

“We were, but that was before that huge cerberus came barrelin’ through the side of a building!”

“A cerberus!?” Rarity gasped, looking back to see the three headed dog, only for another gasp to escape her throat.

“What, what is it?” Applejack asked, turning to look at the cerberus. That was when the farm pony noticed that the cerberus hadn’t just barreled through the side of a building because it felt like it. The beast was fighting with something, something it had tackled as it barreled through one wall. Something it had slammed against the wall on the other side of the street.

A something that was currently lying limply on the ground, a something that looked awfully familiar.

“What in the hay is *Nightmare Moon* doing here!?”

“I don’t know Applejack, but we have to help her!” Rarity argued, jumping out of the wagon.

“*Help* her?! Why exactly should we help *her*?” Applejack half-shouted as she skidded to a stop, she and Rarity standing in the middle of the street while Big Macintosh pulled the pony-filled cart further away.

“Because she needs our help!” Rarity retorted, her horn glowing as she took some fabric banners from a nearby shop and transfigured them into a strong, sturdy length of rope. “Or would you like to explain to Twilight that we let Nyx get eaten by a monster?”

“Ah... ah shoot.” The farm pony cursed, stomping a hoof before grabbing the rope from Rarity, and tying it around the end of her tail. “Fine, but I’ll be the one doing the helpin’. You go with Big Macintosh and Nurse Redheart, make sure them injured and sick ponies get to the castle safely. I’ll do my best to help out here.”

“And you promise you’ll be okay?”

“Take it from the Element of Honesty; ain’t no overgrown mutt goin’ get the better of this rodeo pony. Besides, they need you more than I do.”

“All right, but be careful Applejack.”

“I will,” Applejack replied, watching Rarity run to catch up with the cart. The farm pony then lifted a hoof to her head, giving her hat a gentle tap to make sure it was secure on her head before she turned her attention back to the cerberus.

Applejack took a moment to focus herself, taking a single deep breath and releasing it before she began galloping down the street. As she galloped, she began working and spinning her tail, getting her lasso to form a perfect circle in the air above her. The speedy farm mare closed the distance between her and the cerberus quickly.

Nightmare Moon was lying limply against the wall she had been smashed against, and the cerberus was just about to dig into the first pony meal it had ever gotten a chance to enjoy. Its center head began to reach out, fangs dripping as prepared to take the first bite.

Applejack, however, didn't let the monster even get a taste of Nightmare Moon. She tossed out her lasso, the loop of the rope soaring around the center head's muzzle. The farm pony then stopped, took the rope in her teeth, and pulled, causing the lasso's loop to shrink. The rope forced the cerberus's mouth shut, and, before the beast could properly react, Applejack pulled hard on the rope, turning the beast away from Nightmare Moon.

With the cerberus and her now facing one another, Applejack resumed her galloping charge, keeping her rope in her teeth. The cerberus too charged, its attention now fully focused on the orange farm mare that dared to attack it. The center head of the beast still had its jaw shut tight by the lasso, but the creature's other two heads were more than willing to bite down on Applejack, given the chance.

The farm pony, however, wasn't about to give the monster that chance. When the cerberus was close enough, Applejack leaped up into the air. The timing of the jump letting Applejack land directly on top of the cerberus's center head, which she used as a spring board to jump up onto the creature's back. Applejack then spun around, taking her rope in her teeth as she pulled back. The cerberus's center head was draw upward by the rope, and Applejack was able to use the rope to keep herself on the creature's back.

"Come on, little doggie, let's see how ya do against a rodeo mare!" Applejack grunted out around the rope in her teeth, and the cerberus was more than willing to put the farm pony to the test. It began to buck like a

rodeo bull, trying its best to dislodge the pony that was standing on its back.

Yet, it was a fight the cerberus was destined to win. While it bucked and tossed for several seconds, the cerberus's center head struggled against the rope around its muzzles. The rope held for a time, but eventually gave up the ghost and snapped.

With the lasso broken, Applejack lost the one thing she had to keep herself anchored to the monster. The next time it bucked, she was thrown several feet up into the air. The orange pony toppled through the air like a rag doll, flailing her legs as she tried to right herself.

For a time, the farm pony was looking skyward, but with some effort, Applejack was able to turn herself around. Just as the farm pony was starting to drop back towards the ground, she was able to look down, a fresh panic rising in her chest.

The cerberus seemed to be wearing a smile on its lips as it positioned itself beneath the farm pony. It opened its jaws, waiting patiently for the meal that was going to be dropped right onto its waiting tongue. Still, in fighting Applejack, the cerberus had forgotten about the opponent it had been fighting earlier.

Nightmare Moon charged down the street, throwing herself into the cerberus' gut like a hoofball linebacker. The three headed beast stumbled, whining from being hit in the stomach and having the air knocked from its lungs. As the creature was trying to recover, Nightmare Moon looked up at Applejack, positioning herself so that the orange farm pony landed first in her mane, sinking down through the magic to the alicorn's back.

"Applejack, are you okay?"

"I... I reckon I am." She replied, slowly pulling herself up, only for the farm pony to put her hoof down on a tender spot on Nightmare Moon's back, causing the alicorn to wince.

"But it looks like you aren't," Applejack added, jumping back to the ground so she wouldn't hurt Nightmare Moon any more.

"It's nothing, just a bruised rib."

"Bruised rib!? Now wait an apple pickin' minute! I thought you were like the princesses, and ain't they immortal?"

"We're immortal because of the amount of magic magic inside us. It's that magic that allows an alicorn to live so long. But, right now, I've split myself and my magic amongst a number of copies. Each is still fairly powerful, but with my magic divided as it is, I'm more vulnerable."

"So it's the amount of magic you alicorns have that makes you so darn tough? Huh... I guess that makes about as much sense as anything else. Still, how many copies of yourself have you made?"

"A few dozen, enough to distract and fight most of these monsters, buy some times for everypony to escape," Nightmare Moon replied, watching as the cerberus recovered from being tackled in the gut. "I've gotten a few of the monsters to flee back to the Everfree Forest, but. there are still so many of them left."

"How do we get rid of them?"

"They're here because they've realized Celestia's gone, and they thought they could make an easy meal out of the ponies here in Ponyville."

"I get ya. We put up too much of a fight, they start figurin' we ain't worth the trouble," Applejack said, tapping the top of her hat to make sure it was secured on her head. "Well, how much more punishment you think this here cerberus can take before it turns tail?"

"Not much, but this bruised rib is making it hard for me to breathe." The alicorn admitted.

"Well, don't you worry none. The two of us together will whip this dog back to the hills." Applejack assured her, gathering up what remained of her rope and tying it into a fresh lasso.

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One of the Nightmare Moon clones banked, staying aloft in the sky as she looked over the monster-ravaged Ponyville. The evacuation was continuing slowly. A lot of ponies had gotten out and to the castle, but there were still a lot that needed help. The monsters had spread all across town, leaving pockets of ponies trapped or fleeing for their lives.

Twilight and her friends were managing to lead the pockets of ponies to safety, but only if the small army of Nightmare Moons kept fighting the monsters, sending them back to the Everfree Forest, or distracting the beasts long enough for the ponies in danger to escape. So far, no pony had been hurt, thanks to the many clones who were still working valiantly, bearing the brunt of the monster attacks on their own.

The Nightmare Moon in the sky had taken up the duty of scouting, keeping a constant eye on what was happening. The clones didn't share a consistent mental link, but by using a bit of magic, the scout in the sky could send messages to the Nightmare Moons on the ground, telling them of ponies in imminent danger.

Turning and banking again, Nightmare Moon searched the streets for any bright colored spots, the natural coloring of ponies very easy to spot against the simple cobblestone streets of the town. One splotch of color drew the alicorn's attention, a bright pink standing in the very center of an intersection, with a Lupus Minor creeping up on it from behind.

It was Pinkie Pie... and she didn't see she was about to be attacked.

With no time to alert another one of the clones, the Nightmare Moon in the sky tucked her wings and went into a dive, going to save Pinkie Pie herself. The constellation wolf, however, was very close, and even as the alicorn dropped out of the sky like a stone, the wolf jumped, launching itself at Pinkie Pie.

It attacked, bit down on part of her... and then Pinkie Pie exploded, a burst of confetti and streamers erupting from the pony's body before a second explosion filled the street intersection with a green cloud of smoke.

Spreading her wings wide, Nightmare Moon managed to slow her quick descent, landing just outside the cloud of smoke. Planting her hooves firmly on the ground, she then beat her wings to drive away the smoke. As the

green cloud was carried away, the alicorn saw what remained of the strange double explosion.

The Lupus Minor was passed out on the ground, fast asleep. What Nightmare Moon had believed was Pinkie Pie was actually a fabric dummy, one of the training dummies from the castle's guard room. Stepping forward, Nightmare Moon gently nudged what remained of the fake, fabric pony. As she was investigating the strange doppelganger, a hay bale with a pair of fake glasses, nose, and mustache hopped up behind her.

"Aw, only got one that time."

Nightmare Moon turned to look at the weirdly disguised hay bale that was behind her.

"Pinkie Pie!?"

"Yeperooni!" The pink earth pony replied, allowing her head to poke out of the hay-bale as she used a hoof to remove the gag glasses.

"What... is this?"

"A distraction."

"Distraction?" The alicorn echoed, cocking an eyebrow.

"Yeah! When Twilight was giving everypony something to do, I asked what I could do, and she wasn't sure at first, but then she thought of something, and told me about all these training dummies she saw up in your castle. So she said I should make some surprises for the monsters, because I have a special talent for being a distraction and making distractions.

"But isn't that silly?" Pinkie Pie continued with a giggle. "I mean, my special talent is throwing amazing parties, not being a distraction! Still, these meanie, mean monsters don't deserve a party, so I decided to try what Twilight suggested. I ran and got some of these fake ponies, and filled them with my patented confetti, streamer surprise. Then Rainbow Dash said I should make the fake ponies a prank, and fill them with some sleeping powder from the joke shop.

“And I was like ‘Whoa, that is such a GREAT idea!’, so I did it. Now I’ve been leaving my special surprise ponies all over town to distract the monsters, and whenever any of those nasty monsters bite down on one of my surprise ponies, they get confetti, streamers, and sleeping gas!”

“Do you need any help?” Nightmare Moon asked.

“Nope, I got this. Still, just so you know, you can tell my fake ponies from the real ones by their flanks. None of my surprise ponies have cutie marks. That, and they’re made of fabric, but that’s kind of hard to see from a distance. These dummies are really life-like!”

Nightmare Moon couldn’t keep herself from laughing a little, “Well, keep up the good work then.”

“You too Queen Nyxie.” Pinkie Pie chirped before pulling her head back into her hay bale disguise and bouncing off down a street. The alicorn just shook her head, smiling as she spread her wings and took off into the sky. The scout clone quickly sent word to all the other clones, telling them about Pinkie Pie’s decoys. Thus, whenever any of the clones saw a cloud of green smoke and confetti shoot up from Ponyville’s streets, they would crack a smile.

Yes, the world really could be ending, and Pinkie Pie would still be Pinkie Pie.

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Cheerilee’s muscles and lungs were burning, the mulberry earth pony starting to reach the end of her endurance after running for so long. Still, she forced herself to continue galloping, for she couldn’t afford to slow down even a little bit.

When the monster attacks started, she had come across a Scorpio entering a park. While the teacher’s first instinct had been to turn tail and run in the opposite direction, she soon noticed the monster had seen some of her students, fillies and colts who were playing in the park. Little ponies unaware of the looming danger.

The teacher's love of children rose to full force, the mare galloping to the park and jumping right into the path of the Scorpio. She hopped around, waved her hooves, and probably made herself look partially demented, but it had done the trick. She distracted the orange-colored constellation monster, drawing its attention away from the children, and to her. Cheerilee then ran, and, for a time, had managed to stay ahead of her hungry pursuer.

Panting heavily, Cheerilee rounded a corner and chanced a glance back, checking to make sure she was keeping ahead of the Scorpio. It would prove, however, an inopportune time for Cheerilee to look over her shoulder. On the street ahead, a vegetable cart had been overturned, its contents spread across the street. Cheerilee's hoof landed on top of a carrot, causing her to roll her ankle and topple forward.

The mulberry pony hit the ground hard, the impact knocking the wind from her lungs and making her vision swim. Still, knowing what was pursuing her, Cheerilee forced herself back onto her hooves, attempting to continue to run only to wince when she put weight down on her front right leg. She had sprained her ankle, badly, and despite the adrenaline in her system, it hurt too much to put any real weight on the injured joint.

Looking back, Cheerilee saw the Scorpio round the corner, the arachnid constellation beast snapping one of its pony-sized claws shut threateningly. It rounded the corner, approaching Cheerilee as the school teacher backed up, limping each time she was forced to put weight on her sprained ankle.

Unable to escape, the teacher could only watch as the Scorpio drew closer, looming over her as it opened one of its terrible pincers. Cheerilee could only shut her eyes, swallowing nervously as she muttered a small prayer, hoping that, if she was going to die for protecting the children, that it would at least be over quickly.

*"AAAUUGGGHHHHHH!!!"*

Cheerilee's eyes snapped open, her vision filled with black, swirling indigo, and stars. An audible gasp escaped Cheerilee's throat as she backed up a few more steps, coming to realize that Nightmare Moon was being held in the Scorpio's pincer, a pincer that should have been squeezing down on the mulberry pony.

The alicorn grunted, legs kicking and wings flapping as she struggled to free herself. Finding a much larger pony in its pincer than it had expected, the Scorpio's mouth clattered eagerly as it drew the alicorn closer.

Still, not one to be eaten twice in one day, Nightmare Moon called on her magic. With a sharp snap, a small bolt of lightning struck the creature on the joint where its pincer joined to its arm. The joint sizzled and turned black under the strike, the Scorpio dropping Nightmare Moon with a pain-filled hiss as it retreated back a few steps.

Nightmare Moon managed to twist herself in the air enough to land on her hooves, horn glowing as she grabbed hold of the Scorpio's tail. She then lifted the insect constellation beast in the air, beginning to swing the beast around in a circle by its tail. After building up enough momentum, Nightmare Moon released her hold on the beast. The Scorpio soared through the air in a high arc, flying clear of Ponyville and eventually crashing down back inside the distant Everfree Forest, scaring up a number of birds from the trees.

"Don't you *ever* try to lay a claw on my teacher ever again!" Nightmare Moon barked at the beast, even though it was far out of ear shot. She then lowered herself down to her knees, panting heavily as a few tremors ran through her body, signs of the alicorn becoming acquainted with her latest injuries. Cheerilee moved up beside the alicorn almost immediately, opening her mouth to ask if Nightmare Moon was all right, only to be interrupted by a similar question.

"Are...are you okay, Miss Cheerilee?"

"Yes, I am. Thank you," the teacher replied, though her voice was shaky, not from facing Nightmare Moon, but from how the black alicorn was acting. The alicorn Cheerilee knew was a monster, that's what all the old stories said. But... a monster wouldn't have saved her from a Scorpio like that... or asked if she was okay, while ignoring her own injuries.

"Good... I'm glad I got here in time," Nightmare Moon offered before taking in a deep breath, grunting and gritting her teeth as she forced herself back onto her hooves. She stumbled a few times, almost falling over once. She

was only able to get back to her hooves because Cheerilee rushed to her side, lending the alicorn what little support she could.

“Nigh- I mean, Nyx, you’re hurt,” Cheerilee said. “We need to get you to Nurse Redheart, and-”

“Th-there’s no time,” Nightmare Moon replied, finally managing to stand on her own four hooves. “There... there are other monsters that I have to take care of, but first I need to make sure I get you to the castle.”

“But-”

“I’ll be okay, Miss Cheerilee, I promise. Almost everypony has made it to my castle, and the monsters have started to run away back to the Everfree Forest, at least the ones that I haven’t tossed back out myself,” The alicorn reassured. “It will be okay, but I can’t rest yet. Now, you can’t run anywhere on that ankle. I’ll fly you to the castle, but then I have to go back out to help clear out the rest of the monsters.”

With that, the alicorn’s horn glowed, lifting Cheerilee up onto her back. While the mulberry pony obviously didn’t like the thought of Nightmare Moon doing anything in her injured condition, she didn’t protest. She instead just gave the alicorn a thankful smile and a nod, doing her best to stay balanced on the alicorn’s back as Nightmare Moon spread her wings and took flight.

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Nightmare Moon leaned against a nearby building, closing her eyes as she took a moment to rest. The fight for Ponyville was still being waged, and while the other clones of her continued to fight, this one copy needed a moment to rest. She had just beaten back a cerberus, sent running back to the Everfree Forest, but the fight hadn’t been one sided. It had taken a lot to beat back that one cerberus, and this clone of Nightmare Moon was too weak to even stand on her own hooves, needing to lean against the building for support.

And if a predator is good at anything, it's sensing when its prey is weak.

A low growl caused Nightmare Moon to open her eyes, seeing that a trio of Lupus Minors were now standing around the alicorn. Each constellation wolf was bent low, bodies tense as they prepared to jump out and attack. Nightmare Moon strained, trying to find the strength to face these new enemies... but she couldn't. She was too tired... she needed more time to rest, though it was time the Lupus Minors were not going to allow her.

Shutting her eyes again, Nightmare Moon hung her head. She would be first clone to fall, but that was okay.

She had learned, during her time impersonating a troop of soldiers, that by cloning herself she made herself weaker, but she had also learned that injuries the clones received didn't just go away. Each wound would have an effect on her real body when she made herself whole again, though the effects would be dull. Major injuries on a clone would become minor injuries for her real body, but if a clone died... Nightmare Moon feared what that would do when she made herself whole again.

Still, the alicorn *guessed* she could survive if a few clones lost, though it would put her in pretty bad shape when she became a single mare again. But if losing those clones meant she protected more ponies, gave more ponies a chance to escape and flee to the castle... then it was worth it in the end.

So... losing one clone would be all right. She could stand losing one... she hoped.

The Lupus Minors seemed to sense Nightmare Moon's surrender, one licking its chops while the others sneered and inched closer, getting ready to pounce.

"DON'T YOU DARE!"

Nightmare Moon's eyes snapped open, turning her head to the source of the voice. It was a voice that was strong, firm, and commanding, but it was also a voice the alicorn knew. A voice that was normally soft and gentle, the voice that belonged to the most compassionate and gentle pony in Equestria.

It was Fluttershy's voice, the yellow pegasus standing between the Lupus Minors and Nightmare Moon... and she was mad.

"I don't care *how* many of you there are! I don't care *how* big your fangs are or how sharp your claws are! You will not, I repeat, will. Not! Hurt! Her! You got THAT!?"

The Lupus Minors took an anxious step back, glancing between each other. One of the three wolves, however, found courage to face Fluttershy, starting to inch towards the pegasus. Fluttershy, however, turned her gaze upon the wolf, and opened her eyes wide, the orbs becoming as hard and cold as steel. The wolf froze up almost immediately, rigid as stone.

It was 'The Stare', and Fluttershy wasn't holding back.

"Now," Fluttershy began, stepping towards the wolf in question until barely an inch separated her nose from its own. "You are going to take your two buddies here, go back to the Everfree Forest, and I NEVER want to see you in Ponyville again."

The Lupus Minor wilted, whimpering as it glanced over at the other two constellation wolves, who were offering no support.

"Well, what are you waiting for!? SHOO!"

With that simple word, the three constellation wolves bolted, running back towards the Everfree Forest with their tails between their legs. Fluttershy kept her hardened gaze fixed on the wolves until they were several blocks away before she softened, the yellow pegasus returning to her usual, caring nature.

"You... didn't have to do that," Nightmare Moon grunted, as Fluttershy turned around.

"And you didn't have to help us fight back the monsters," Fluttershy replied, offering a gentle smile as she took flight and hovered near Nightmare Moon's head. "But you did, and, because of you, a lot of ponies are safe. I'm really proud of you, Nyx."

"Hasn't Twilight told you? I don't like being called Nyx."



“Really? She calls you that all the time.”

“She does?”

“Yes, I don’t think I’ve ever heard her call you anything but Nyx, and, for what it’s worth, I’ve never called you Nightmare Moon either.”

“Even after everything I did, you still call me Nyx?”

“Nightmare Moon was a bad pony, and you’re not a bad pony, Nyx. You’ve just made some bad decisions.”

“Bad decisions... now *that’s* the understatement of the millennium.”  
Nightmare Moon grunted as she managed to take her weight off the wall she had been leaning against, getting back to her own four hooves.

“Answer me this, Fluttershy: how many bad decisions can a pony make before she is a bad pony?”

“It doesn’t matter how many. If a pony is willing to apologize and do what’s right to fix her mistakes, then she’s never a bad pony. You’re a good pony, Nyx, and do you want to know why?”

“Why?”

“Because only a good pony would have come out here and faced down an army of monsters to protect the ponies she cares about.”

“You are kind as always, Fluttershy, the kindest pony in Equestria. Perhaps even too kind, but I appreciate your words none the less.” Nightmare Moon said before sucking in a deep breath as she spread her wings. “Still, I cannot ask you to keep the monsters away as I rest. I will retreat to the town square for now, and when my strength has returned I will fly out again.”

“There aren’t many monsters left, Nyx. You should just rest and let us handle it.”

"I cannot, and I will not let you put yourselves in danger fixing my mistake. This monster attack is my fault, and I will do whatever I must to set it right... once I've caught my breath."

With that Nightmare Moon took flight. Fluttershy watched as the Nightmare Moon clone joined a few others as they flew towards the center of town, shaking her head sorrowfully.

"Oh Nyx..."

=====

The monster attack was finally starting to draw to a close as noon rolled around. All the ponies in Ponyville had been evacuated, the last few stragglers having cleared out an hour before. The only ponies that remained were Twilight and her friends, the ponies staying to help the many copies of Nightmare Moon fight off the monsters.

And at ten minutes past noon, the last Hydra was chased out of town. The four-headed monstrosity was running back into the forest like a crying baby, leaving in its wake a trio of Nightmare Moons who hovered in the air alongside Rainbow Dash.

"Yeah, you *better* run!" Dash called, snickering to herself as she looked back at three copies of Nightmare Moon, who all looked significantly worse for the wear than the pegasus. "Come on, let's go meet up with all the other yous back at the town hall."

The Nightmare Moons nodded, the three alicorns banking and following Rainbow Dash back towards the center of Ponyville. There, just outside the town hall, a small army of Nightmare Moons had gathered. The three black alicorns that flew with Rainbow Dash joined the crowd of their clones while the cyan pegasus landed by her friends, who were just outside the front door of the town hall.

"Last hydra sent packing." Dash proclaimed proudly.

"Good." Twilight offered with a nod, checking something off on a piece of paper. "That should be all the monsters. Still, Rainbow Dash, I want you and Fluttershy to sweep through town and make sure everything is clear. I

don't want to bring any ponies back here until we're sure that all these things are gone."

"What about us, Sugarcube?" Applejack asked.

"You take Rarity, Zecora, and Pinkie Pie, and head up to the castle. Tell everypony there that we think all the monsters are gone, and that it should be safe to come back fairly soon."

"And what about you?"

"I'll stay here until Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash have finished sweeping the town, and then come meet you at the castle with them and Nyx," Twilight assured as she stepped away from the table, which had been her command center throughout the long morning.

All her friends nodded, each quickly heading off to their assigned tasks as Twilight moved towards the crowd of Nightmare Moon clones.

"Are there any monsters left?" The closest of the clones asked.

"No, I think we got them all. You can pull yourself back together now."

All the Nightmare Moons nodded, each turning into an indigo cloud before the clouds began to gather into a single cloud a few feet in front of Twilight. After a moment of swirling, the single cloud materialized Nightmare Moon... only for the alicorn to collapse on the ground a moment later with a painful whinny.

"Nyx!" Twilight yelled, quickly rushing over to the alicorn. "Are you okay?"

Nightmare Moon coughed, struggling to pull herself off the ground.

"I'm... fine... it's just... when my copies....came back together... all the injuries my clones received... are now affecting me."

"All the injuries?!" Twilight exclaimed, looking over Nightmare Moon as the alicorn lifted herself off the ground. She truly was in horrible shape. Her body was littered with cuts, she wasn't able to put weight on her front right leg, and one of the alicorn's wings hung limply at her side. On top of it all,

Nightmare Moon's breathing was labored, as if every breath caused pain to shoot through her body.

"We... we got to get you to Nurse Redheart right away."

"No... I'll be fine," Nightmare Moon argued. "You'll need... need me here in case.... there are more monsters."

"No, I'm sure we got all of them. You should got to the castle and lie down before you-"

"TWILIGHT!!!"

The unicorn turned her head skyward, seeing Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy flying towards her in a rush.

"What is it?" She called up to them.

"There's one left, a Lupus... but it's way bigger than the others!"

"Where is it?"

"It's coming this way!" Fluttershy answered, pointing a hoof. Twilight brought her head forward, and felt her blood turn to ice in her veins. Charging down the street towards her and Nightmare Moon was a Lupus, but it was not a Lupus Minor. No, this was a full grown Lupus Major, a constellation wolf as large as Nightmare Moon and four times as ferocious as the smaller, younger Lupus Minors that had been terrorizing Ponyville.

The beast barreled towards them like a run-away locomotive, closing the several blocks distance at a speed that rivaled even Rainbow Dash's. The two pegasi in the air were shouting for Twilight and Nightmare Moon to get out of the way, and Twilight couldn't deny her first instinct was to run.

But then Twilight glanced over at Nightmare Moon. The alicorn was barely able to stand and probably couldn't fly. There was no way she could get away, and Twilight wasn't going to leave Nightmare Moon to the wolf. She wasn't going to abandon her, not again.

Unwilling to flee, Twilight furrowed her eyebrows and put herself directly in front of Nightmare Moon. She lowered herself down, beginning to call on her magic as she prepared to fight. She was, after all, a unicorn that had handled an Ursa Minor, and the Lupus Major, while more vicious, was a lot smaller.

The Lupus Major was almost upon her, but Twilight was ready. She'd wait for the creature to leap up, and then she'd catch it in her levitation magic and throw it back down the street. It wasn't easy to levitate things so big, but she knew she could do it. She wouldn't let an overgrown wolf lay a paw on Nightmare Moon.

Twilight gritted her teeth as the lupus got close enough to pounce, the constellation wolf throwing itself into the air, lunging at the unicorn. It was bearing its fangs and its claws were extended, ready to grab hold of pony. Twilight was just about to unleash her spell when a cloud of indigo shot past her, snapping at the wolf like a whip and knocking it back several feet.

"Get out of here!" Nightmare Moon ordered, "I'll handle this."

"No! I'm not-"

"THIS ISN'T A DISCUSSION!" Nightmare Moon bellowed, her mane swirling. Before Twilight could shout another protest, the indigo cloud of magic and stars lashed out, encasing the unicorn as well as Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy. The alicorn's eyes then glowed white, three bright flashes coming from inside her mane.

The three mares were gone, and as Nightmare Moon panted from the exertion of magic she turned her attention to the Lupus Major, which was slowly walking towards her with murderous intent in its eyes.

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Twilight blinked, shaking her head as her mind tried to grasp what had just happened. One moment she saw Nightmare Moon getting attacked, but then her vision had been blocked with the alicorn's mane. The next moment Twilight was looking out over Ponyville.

“Where... what!?” Twilight asked, starting to look around. She, Rainbow Dash, and Fluttershy were at Nightmare Moon’s castle, standing on top of the gatehouse. The gallows that Twilight had almost been hung from were removed, torn straight from the wall by the castle’s mistress.

“How the hay did we get here?” Dash asked as the blue pegasus jumped up and began hovering in the air.

“Argh, Nyx! She must have teleported us away from the fight!”

“But, Twilight, does that mean she’s still-”

All three mares quickly turned their heads in the direction of town. From their position on top of the gatehouse, they could see glimpses of Nightmare Moon as she fought with the Lupus Major in the center of Ponyville. The alicorn was standing off from the wolf and was on her hooves, but from her movements it was apparent she was injured, tired, and at a major disadvantage.

“What is *thinking*?! She’s going to get herself killed!” Twilight shouted, undoubtedly wanting to scold Nightmare Moon for what she was doing. Still, her anger was completely drowned in concern as Nightmare Moon disappeared behind a building in Ponyville, the Lupus Major following soon after.

And for a time, the mares were unable to see a single sign of the black alicorn, and their worries only increased. Then, there was a sign. From between a few buildings, Nightmare Moon’s swirling mane began to rise, lifting and pooling in the air above town. It grew and grew, becoming a threatening cloud that began to crackle with energy.

The energy and magic built up for a little while longer, and then its power was unleashed. A single, thick burst of lightning arched down, cutting the air and causing a thunder clap that could not only heard but felt by all the ponies hiding in the castle.

The strike of the thunder threw up a dark cloud of smoke where it struck, further obscuring any hope of Twilight seeing what was happening. The waiting became torturous, the unicorn so worried and focused on trying to see something that she was practically rooted in her place.

For several minutes, nothing happened. The dust that had been thrown up began to drift on the wind, and the dark cloud that was Nightmare Moon's mane fizzled and disappeared as well. Twilight began to hyperventilate, her mind starting to fear the worst. She wanted to run, to make sure Nightmare Moon was okay... but she was terrified by the thoughts of what she might find.

The first sign of life came from the Lupus Major. Twilight saw, at first, only glimpses of it. The creature was, however, running away from Ponyville. It was limping, one of its legs injured, but the beast still managed an impressive pace.

The constellation wolf only stopped once, glancing back at Ponyville for a moment and kicking some dirt in the town's direction, before disappearing back into the forest.

The next sign of life came a few minutes later, which had felt like a torturous amount of time for Twilight. It was Dash who saw it first, the pegasus calling out and drawing Twilight's attention to another part of the town. There, a black figure had just rounded a corner, and was now slowly limping up the road to the castle. The figure moved agonizingly slow, and looked to be in a lot of pain, but she was there... and she was alive.

Twilight didn't waste a single moment, breaking into a gallop. She ran down the steps that connected the top of the gatehouse to the courtyard below, and she began pushing through the tightly packed crowd of ponies who had hidden in the castle's safe embrace during the attack.

With a few final grunts, Twilight pushed her way out of the crowd several minutes later, running through the open castle gates only to slide to a stop, a gasp escaping her throat.

Nightmare Moon was just a few yards away, still continuing her slow limp towards the castle gates. To Twilight, it looked like the alicorn was on the verge of falling. She winced with each step, each breath was labored and painful, and her injured wing dragged on the ground beside her. The Lupus Major had left the alicorn with several fresh wounds, though they were almost lost amongst the alicorn's existing injuries.

Her armor and what remained of her eye shadow were gone, leaving Nightmare Moon simply a black mare. Even the alicorn's mane seemed injured. The usually full, flowing, star speckled mass of indigo was pale and sickly, and came off of Nightmare Moon, not like a consistent cloud, but in thin trails and wisps.

"What did you do?" Twilight asked, the alicorn looking as if she was moments away from keeling over. For a moment the alicorn didn't reply, just continuing to limp towards the castle. It wasn't out of rudeness, but from the sheer fact that she was finding it difficult to breathe. Still, once she had gotten a little closer, Nightmare Moon stopped, gasping a bit before finding her voice.

"I... I couldn't let you... attack the Lupus... it might have... hurt you. I was... fighting it... but... it pinned me to the ground, I ... I couldn't make... the Lupus let go. So... I shocked us both.... with a bolt of lightning."

"But why would you do that? Why did you teleport me away? I told you I could handle it!"

"Because... I didn't want to see you... I didn't want to see anypony... get hurt. I... I can bare the pain. It's... better for me to be hurt... if it... means... I can protect... the ponies I care about."

Nightmare Moon grunted as she brought herself through the castle gates, limping into the courtyard, where the entire town populace was watching. The ponies made a wide path for the alicorn, much like they did when she passed amongst them before. This time, they stepped aside not just from fear, but also from respect.

The alicorn, however, stopped in the center of the plaza, wavering as she struggled to stay on her hooves. She took in a number of deep breaths, and then looked out across the surrounding sea of ponies.

Everypony...they were all safe. She had managed to protect them, and... she almost thought they were looking at her with concern, instead of fear and loathing... but then again she was feeling rather light headed. It was enough to make the black alicorn smile and shed a few tears of happiness.

She did it... she kept them safe... she had kept them all safe.



"The... the creatures of Everfree... have been driven back. Ponyville is safe... you may return... to your homes," Nightmare Moon called out, trying to give her voice strength. She then took another step, intending to go back into the castle. Yet, the alicorn did not make it five more steps before her foot caught on an uneven stone.

Nightmare Moon fell, teetering over and hitting the ground hard. Audible gasps cascaded across the courtyard at the sight of the alicorn falling over and lying so motionlessly on the ground. Still, none of them moved to help her, many glancing anxiously amongst each other. They didn't know what to do, whether to help or not.

The only one that did not hold back was Twilight. The purple unicorn was at Nightmare Moon's side almost instantly, looking over her in a panic.

"Nyx... NYX! Wake up!" Twilight shouted, putting her head down beside the alicorn's mouth. She was unconscious, but she was still breathing... but the breathing was weak. Twilight began to hyper-ventilate, nudging Nightmare Moon's head. The alicorn, however, didn't rise, her breathing only becoming weaker.

"Don't... don't you worry, Nyx. I'll get you inside, and get you patched up," Twilight assured her, the unicorn stepping back, trying to call on her magic. "I'll carry you inside and get you bandaged... just like when I found you in the forest. You'll be okay."

Twilight found concentrating difficult, the exhaustion of a long day and the stress of her own emotions making it hard to focus on her magic. Still, she managed to lift Nyx up, holding the alicorn a few feet above the ground in a levitation spell. Twilight then turned to the crowd watching her, noticing that some of them were frozen in shock.

"Quick, somepony find a first aid kit or something! She needs help!"

Yet, despite Twilight's call for help, nopony moved. They just stood there, watching with mixed emotions. Some of them couldn't bear to look Twilight in the eyes. Others were confused and surprised. Some even looked on in anger and disbelief, as if she was doing something wrong.

Angry tears began to brim in her Twilight's eyes as she glared at the crowd of ponies, the sea of eyes that were watching her every move.

"What are you doing?!" Twilight screamed at the crowd, making a number of them step back anxiously. "She needs help! She's hurt, and she got hurt protecting us! I know... I know you're scared of her... but she needs help!

"Please... please... we can't let her... please, I need help! I can't... I can't help her by myself. I'm not a doctor, I'm not even a nurse... I need help... she needs help! PLEASE!"

Twilight was crying openly at this, her begging eyes searching for somepony, anypony that was willing to help her. Those nearby, however, choose to turn away, unwilling or unable to meet Twilight's gaze... the gaze of a mother who was terrified she was about to lose her daughter.

"You... YOU MONSTERS! SHE JUST SAVED YOU... SAVED YOUR CHILDREN... WHY WON'T YOU HELP?!"

Before Twilight could snap or break down, she felt a hoof on her shoulder.

"Don't worry Twilight, we're here."

The unicorn snapped her head around, smiling through the panicked tears on her face. Floating in the air beside her was Fluttershy, the yellow pegasus offering a very gentle and reassuring smile. Behind her were other ponies willing to help; they had been behind her the entire time, always willing to help. Rainbow Dash, Rarity, Applejack, Pinkie Pie, and Zecora stepped out from the crowd, along with other ponies as well.

Nurse Redheart stood with saddle bags laden with medical supplies, and Cheerilee was beside the others carrying a first aid kit she had been using to tend to ponies with very minor injuries. It took her longer, because she wanted to speak with her daughter first, but Ditzzy Doo also came up, ignoring her own injured wing. The mailmare was ready to do anything to help the mare who saved her daughter's life.

These were only the first, other ponies starting to step out from the crowd. Some Twilight recognized, others she didn't, but that didn't matter at the moment. They were there, willing to help her... to help Nightmare Moon.

“We need to get her inside, and start tending her wounds,” Nurse Redheart explained. “Twilight, continue to levitate her gently as gently as you can, and try to keep her as still as possible. Rainbow Dash, I need you to go back to the clinic in town. Find your way to the surgery room, and open a big, blue cabinet. Inside will be a big, black bag. I need you to get that for me as quickly as possible.”

“You got it,” The cyan pegasus said, quickly zipping off towards Ponyville.

“The rest of you, help clear a path. We need to get her inside.”

Everypony nodded, most running ahead to clear a path to the castle gates. While she waited for the others to make a path through the crowd, Twilight lowered Nightmare Moon, drawing the alicorn close enough she could nuzzle her cheek.

“You’re going to be all right,” Twilight assured to the still unconscious alicorn, “I promise, you’re going to be all right.”

# Chapter 19

## Recovery

Ponyville had survived the monster attack from the Everfree Forest, but not unscathed. The town had been ravaged. Yet, through it all, the most important part of Ponyville, its residents, had survived. Some had been hurt, but no pony had suffered anything worse than a couple broken bones. They were, however, injuries that would heal in time, and everypony was honestly thankful to be alive.

For the first couple of hours, most ponies chose to remain in the safe embrace of Nightmare Moon's castle. Very few were able to find the courage to venture outside the castle, and none got very far before their nerves and fears drove them running back to the stone fortress.

The ponies of Ponyville could not stay sheltered in the castle forever, though. After giving everypony time to rest and recover, the Mayor of Ponyville, Ivory Scroll, called on every willing and able pegasus. The fastest of the pegasi were tasked to fly out to the rest of Equestria, warning the kingdom that the monsters were now a much greater threat as well as seeking aid for Ponyville. The rest were tasked with taking an account of the damage the town had suffered.

The news of which buildings were destroyed and damaged began to stream into the castle, and the news was grim. Many homes and businesses had been utterly crushed, some families losing everything except their lives and loved ones. Other buildings were on the verge of collapse and would require extensive repair to be made habitable again. It was news that left many ponies sobbing, though through the tears they clung tightly to their friends and families, thankful that the only thing lost in disaster were material things.

Yet, despite the dark reality, glimmers of hope shown through. While she could not compare with Twilight, the Mayor began organizing the town's populace. Under the khaki-colored mare's guidance, fresh life was breathed into Nightmare Moon's castle. Halls, which had been hollow and lifeless that morning, once again bustled with ponies coming and going in

every direction.

It was fairly chaotic, but Ivory Scroll kept things under enough control that progress was being made. The monster attack had ended just after noon, but by the time the sun was nearing the western horizon, the castle had undergone a transformation.

To those who were without a roof over their heads, the castle became a refuge. The guard barracks, guest bedrooms, and larger hallways became a temporary home for those ponies who had lost everything or were too scared to leave the castle. Cots and sleeping bags filled every available inch of space, some ponies happy to lay down on the floor with just a blanket and pillow. The beds in the castle were reserved for the sick and injured, but no pony complained. Most were thankful just to have a safe place to rest, protected from the dangers outside by thick stone walls.

For those who were hungry, the castle became a place to find a filling meal. Ponies who were willing to share their stores of food gave purpose to the castle's kitchen. Simple, warm, and much-appreciated meals were quickly prepared and passed out to the hungry. They ate in the castle's dining room, which was filled well-past capacity.

To the ponies who were injured, both before and during the attack, the castle's medical chambers once again became a place of healing. While Nurse Redheart tended to Nightmare Moon, [Nurse Tenderheart](#) and other volunteers tended to the needs of the sick and injured.

Overall, the castle, which had once been a place of fear and dread, had become a safe haven in a terrible storm of doubt and uncertainty, a place where a pony could find rest, food, medical aid and, most importantly, some peace of mind. The castle's thick outer walls, which were being dutifully patrolled by volunteers, provided a sense of security to those who feared the monsters would return in the night.

It would take some time for Ponyville to recover from the attack. Until then, the citadel was a stable rock in a sea of doubt and fear.

Yet, amongst the hustle and bustle that now filled most of the fortress, there was one hallway and room many purposefully avoided, even if it meant going along a much longer route through the corridors. A hallway

where, on one side, there was a large pair of doors emblazoned with a royal seal of a crescent moon.

It was the hallway just outside the throne room of Nightmare Moon.

It was in this hallway that Twilight Sparkle waited. She sat on the floor, her back and head resting against the wall's cold stone as she stared at the ceiling. Inside the throne room, Nurse Redheart and Fluttershy were tending to Nightmare Moon while her friends and the other ponies that had helped get the alicorn into the palace had moved on to other tasks.

She was the only one not doing anything... and it was a fact that nipped and chewed at the back of the unicorn's mind. Twilight felt she should have been doing something, *anything*, like helping the mayor organize the relief efforts, as she had during Winter Wrap-Up, yet the mare just couldn't bring herself to step more than five feet away from the throne room doors.

Twilight wanted to be inside the throne room, if just to be there for Nightmare Moon. Nurse Redheart had insisted she stay outside though, turning the hallway into an impromptu waiting room. Twilight had protested, but Redheart wouldn't budge. She explained in no uncertain terms that, while she sympathized with Twilight, she couldn't have the unicorn in the room in case something went wrong.

Shifting her gaze away from the ceiling, Twilight looked out at one of the nearby windows. The sky was starting to shift from a pristine blue to a warm, welcoming orange. A picturesque sunset, one that at least distracted Twilight from her concerns. She took in the spectrum of colors, staring for a long time before the creaking of hinges drew her attention.

Twilight's ears turning to listen before she snapped her head in the direction of the noise. It was the throne room doors, the giant slabs of wood cracking open. Nurse Redheart was the first to step out, carrying not only her medical saddle bags but the doctoral bag she had Rainbow Dash fetch from the clinic. Fluttershy closely followed the medical pony, the pegasus carefully closing the door behind her.

"How... how is she?" Twilight asked, afraid of what the answer would be.

"She was gravely injured, Twilight. We did what we could to tend to the

wounds. She's stable for the moment, which is a start. The next few hours are going to be critical, though... it's all up to her now."

"Can... can I go see her? Is she awake?"

"Yes, but don't take too long. She needs her rest," Nurse Redheart advised. "I need to go check on the other ponies at the clinic, but Fluttershy will be right outside the door if you need her."

Twilight nodded, watching as Nurse Redheart began walking towards the medical center where they would help Nurse Tenderheart with the ponies who needed medical attention. Fluttershy landed beside the door, placing a hoof on it and nudging it open before turning her eyes on Twilight.

The unicorn swallowed nervously, afraid of what condition she would find Nightmare Moon. Still, Fluttershy's reassuring smile gave Twilight some courage and, after taking a deep breath, Twilight slipped through the open door into the throne room.

The stained glass windows were still broken, although they'd been covered with banners from another part of the castle, keeping the cool evening breeze out. Gentle white light came from the gemstones embedded around the walls, though many of them were covered with thin pieces of fabric so that there was a comfortable dimness to the room.

Near the center of the space, a makeshift bed had been assembled. Blankets, pillows and soft cushions had been scavenged from all around the castle, since the only bed big enough for an alicorn was up in her private chambers. A bed that was too big to be moved unless it was disassembled.

Still, the bed served its purpose, providing a soft place for a wounded pony to rest. Nightmare Moon looked to be asleep; her eyes were closed and her breathing, while weak, was consistent. Her mane was beginning to look a little more like it used to and, most importantly, all of the alicorn's injuries had been treated.

Her injured wing was wrapped and set in a sling while her the numerous cuts had been disinfected and bandaged. It wasn't exactly top quality medical work, but Nurse Redheart and Fluttershy had done amazingly well

considering the lack of the supplies and the fact they treated Nightmare Moon in the castle throne room. They had considered putting her in the medical chambers with the others, but not only was there not enough room but Redheart had believed it would be best to treat Nightmare Moon someplace private.

Moving across the room, Twilight brought herself up beside Nightmare Moon. She didn't want to wake the alicorn up, but at the same time she wanted to be someplace close. She wanted to be there when Nightmare Moon finally did open her eyes.

Thankfully, the temporary bed that had been assembled for the alicorn was far bigger than it needed to be. While Nightmare Moon took up the center, there was plenty of space on the corners for a pony to lie down, and that's just what Twilight did. Drawing herself up onto the corner, she laid herself down, head on top of crossed forelegs, beside the black mare's head and watched the alicorn sleep.

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Twilight wasn't sure when she had fallen asleep, but she woke when she felt a gentle tap on her shoulder. Her eyes needed a moment to focus and clear, but after a few moments the unicorn was able to properly register who had woken her up.

"Mayor?" Twilight muttered groggily, rubbing one of her eyes.

"I'm sorry to wake you, Twilight, but can I talk with you outside?"

"Of course," the unicorn replied, carefully getting up from the bed. She looked back at Nightmare Moon, the alicorn still sleeping off her injuries. Despite the bandages, Twilight noticed the alicorn's mane looked fuller than it had when the unicorn had first come into the throne room. It was something that brought a little bit of relief to Twilight's mind, letting her believe that Nightmare Moon was in fact recovering.

A small cough from Ivory Scroll, the mayor, reminded Twilight of who had woken her up, the pair of mares slipping out of the room and into the adjoining hallway.



"I do apologize for disturbing you. I know you're worried about her." The mayor said once the throne room doors were closed.

"It's okay," Twilight reassured as she gave the mayor a gentle smile. "She's getting better, and that's all that matters. Now, what did you want to talk about?"

"There are a few things, actually," the Ivory began, leading Twilight over to a window and pointing outside with a hoof. "First, I wanted you to see that."

Twilight followed the mayor's pointing hoof, trying to see what was so important. Still, Ivory Scroll seemed to be pointing at nothing. The window in question offered a fairly beautiful view of the castle courtyard, where a few ponies were walking back and forth. She could see part of the castle's outer walls, and beyond that the sun hanging just above the far horizon, setting the sky ablaze with the warm colors of dusk.

"Um... what am I supposed to be looking at?"

"The sunset."

"What about it?"

"Twilight, it's a little past ten. In the evening," Ivory explained flatly. "The sun should have gone down over an hour ago. Ponies are starting to worry."

"Oh..." Twilight muttered, only now realizing she had slept longer than she'd thought. "Yeah... I guess that's the problem when there is only one alicorn in Equestria. I'm sorry, but I doubt Nyx is going to be strong enough to handle moving the sun and moon for at least a few days."

"That's why I wanted to talk to you. I've been asked to enquire as to whether the Elements of Harmony can be used to free Celestia and Luna. We believe that, since Nightmare imprisoned them, if she wer-

Twilight bristled and interrupted her. "You want me to use the Elements of Harmony on Nyx!?"

"No, I don't mean it like that," Ivory quickly corrected. "What I meant to say

was; is it possible for the Elements to undo Nyx's banishment spell?"

Twilight's anger cooled as quickly as it had ignited, the gears in the unicorn's mind turning as she looked out at the sunset.

"I don't know... maybe... I'd need to ask Nyx how the banishment spell works. Maybe then my friends and I can use the Elements of Harmony to bypass it, but I can't ask Nyx anything until she wakes up."

"I understand," The mayor said gently. "When I realized the sun wasn't going to set, I sent out several messengers to tell the rest of Equestria what's going on. The pegasi weren't happy, since they had only just gotten back from taking my last set of letters. Thankfully, Rainbow Dash pep talked them into flying out again, and the messages will, hopefully, keep most ponies from panicking."

"Hopefully," Twilight echoed, turning away from the distant, perpetual sunset. "So, was that everything?"

"For the moment, though Applejack caught me on my way here. She was taking a break from the kitchens and wanted me to try and get you to eat something. From what she says, you haven't had a bite all day."

"Thank you, but-" Twilight began, trying to politely refuse the mayor's offer, but her grumbling stomach betrayed her. "Well... maybe a sandwich."

Ivory smiled as she and Twilight turned and walked down the corridor. After a while, the pair made their way into the castle's dining room. Despite the late hour there were still several ponies mulling about, some undoubtedly having their internal clocks thrown out of sync by the halted sunset.

"It looks like Applejack really did a great job keeping the kitchen busy," Twilight remarked, noticing the number of ponies still eating at the dining table. "It was a good idea to ask her to lead the kitchen crew."

"Yes, it was, and the ponies helping her have really been going all out. The food itself is pretty simple and bland, but its filling and the kitchen crew is working quickly enough to keep most ponies fed," The mayor answered as the pair walked across the hall, getting into the line. They were served fairly quickly; not too many ponies were eating so late at night, after all. The

mayor and Twilight then made their way to the room's huge, singular dining table.

Twilight licked her lips, sniffing at the food as she and Ivory sat down.  
“MMmmmmm... this smells so good.”

“Yes, it does,” The mayor offered with a little laugh before taking a bite from her meal. Twilight was about to do the same, only to feel a tap on her shoulder. When the unicorn turned, she saw a particular mulberry pony standing beside her, a pair of saddle bags resting on her sides.

“I hope I’m not interrupting you, Twilight,” Cheerilee said as Twilight turned to face her.

“Don’t worry about it. How are you doing?”

“I think I’m going to have nightmares for a few weeks thanks to that Scorpio, but I’m fine otherwise. I just wanted to give you something.” At that the teacher bent her head back, reached into her saddle bags and pulled out a small stack of papers.

“What are these?”

“Well, after what happened, I thought some of the fillies and colts around the castle needed something to do, something to keep them from getting bored and to keep them from thinking about what happened. Now, I don’t know *how*, but your friend Pinkie Pie managed to find a bunch of art and craft supplies. The little ponies spent part of the afternoon drawing... and I thought you’d like to have a few of the pictures they made.”

Twilight glanced at the stack of papers that had been set down beside her, using her magic to pick them up. She looked at the first one, a rather crude crayon drawing. It depicted a small, blue, stick-figure pony standing with two larger ponies, with squiggles of grass beneath and a big, happy sun in the corner. The kind of image you’d see hanging on a school bulletin board.

But what made Twilight stare was what had been written on the picture. Above the drawing were the words “To Nightmare Moon” while the bottom had “Thank you for protecting my family.”

Twilight flipped to the next picture in the pile. It was a better drawing, and she could actually recognize the ponies in the picture. She saw Applejack and Nightmare Moon standing on top of a defeated Cerberus, which had little swirls for all six of its eyes. The text below the image read: "Thanks for keeping my sister safe. Get well soon Nyx. From: Apple Bloom."

There were only a hoof-full of drawings in the stack, but they all shared a similar theme. They were warm wishes and 'thank you's' for Nightmare Moon.

After going through the whole pile, Twilight couldn't help but look back at Cheerilee, disbelief on her face.

"Did you..."

"Tell them to do this? No. It was Apple Bloom, actually. She started doing her picture, and when the other little ponies asked what she was drawing, some of them wanted to do it too. I didn't have a thing to do with it.

"Though... if you don't mind," Cheerilee began, reaching into her bag and pulling out a folded piece of paper, which she set on the table where the stack had been a few moments before, "Would you give this to Nyx, please? That... that one's from me."

Twilight smiled, taking up the folded piece of paper and adding it to the stack of crayon drawings. "Of course. And... thank you, Cheerilee."

"It's the least I can do, Twilight. Now, I'm going to go and try to get some sleep but, if you need my help with anything, just ask, okay?"

"Okay," Twilight replied, the unicorn watching as Cheerilee walked off before turning back to the stack of papers she was holding in her magic. Twilight took extra care to set the papers down where they wouldn't get dirty, her smile widening as she did so. She then proceeded to eat her dinner quickly, wanting to make sure she and the papers were there when Nightmare Moon woke up.

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Nightmare Moon groaned. She didn't know how long she had been asleep,

but that really didn't matter to her at the moment. She was stiff all over, and any attempt to stretch and relieve that stiffness only made the alicorn realize how sore she was. She was lying on something soft but uneven, which was only moderately comfortable at best.

For a moment, the alicorn was content with just rubbing the side of her head against whatever she was lying on, trying to relieve a small itch. Yet, as Nightmare Moon became properly acquainted with how horrible she felt, the thing that pressed itself to the front of her mind was how dry her mouth was. Without even thinking, she licked her lips, hoping for a glass of water.

And as if by magic, she felt something near her mouth, a familiar and gentle voice speaking softly near her. "Here, Nurse Redheart said I should get you to drink this when you woke up."

The thing that was near her mouth was a straw and, after fumbling with it for a moment, Nightmare Moon got her lips around the straw. Soon, the cool, crisp freshness of water was slipping over her tongue. Water had never tasted so good and the alicorn greedily drank it, not only to wet her mouth but also to sedate her thirst. She sucked the glass of water dry in a matter of seconds.

When the cup was empty and the straw was moved away from her mouth, Nightmare Moon attempted to lift her head. She winced as the joints in her neck popped and cracked, but she forced her head up all the same before opening her eyes. She saw she was in the throne room, taking notice of the bed she was lying in. Nightmare also noted that she was practically covered from head-to-hoof in bandages and that her wing was held against her side in a simple sling.

"How are you feeling?"

Nightmare Moon turned her head, looking in the area near where her head had been lying. There, looking back with an honest and relieved smile, was Twilight.

"Sore..." Nightmare Moon replied as she laid her head back down.

"Well, you *did* get hurt pretty badly," Twilight admitted, standing up. With some careful maneuvering, the unicorn put herself right beside Nightmare

Moon's head, close enough that she was able to bend her own head down and gently nuzzle Nightmare Moon's cheek.

"I'm so glad to see you're awake. You had me worried."

"How long have I been asleep?"

"Don't worry about that right now," Twilight answered, raising her head as she began to call on her magic. From nearby, a pitcher of water floated into view, the unicorn refilling Nightmare Moon's glass before holding the straw up to her mouth a second time. The alicorn drank the glass of water again, though not as quickly as before.

"Thank you," the alicorn said quietly when she had finished the second glass.

"Do you want some more?"

"No," Nightmare Moon replied with a weak shake of her head. Twilight didn't press the issue, setting the empty glass over by the pitcher before turning her attention back to the alicorn.

"Are you hungry? I could go get you something from the castle kitchens."

"I doubt there is much in there that hasn't spoiled since the Children of Nightmare left."

"Actually, I hope you don't mind, but the mayor and a bunch of other ponies have been using the castle as a kind of refugee camp. A lot of homes got damaged and destroyed during the monster attack, so they've been staying here."

Nightmare Moon let a thin smile creep onto her face. "I don't mind. Actually... it's nice to hear this castle can be used for something good."

"So, do you want me to get you something?"

"No, I'm not hungry at the moment, but how is everypony?"

"They're fine," Twilight answered softly, "Thanks to you."

"I only bought time. It was you and your friends that got everypony out safely."

"Something we couldn't have done without you to hold back the monsters. You helped save lives, Nyx... you made me so proud."

"Proud... how can you honestly be proud of me?" The alicorn said as she shifted her gaze to the far side of the room, unwilling and unable to look at Twilight. "After everything I've done... you should hate me, just like they all do."

"You've made mistakes, Nyx, but they're mistakes you've tried to fix," Twilight assured as she lifted a hoof and ran it once through Nightmare Moon's mane, the magic flowing around her hoof like water.

"Nothing that I would have needed to do if I hadn't been such a foal. You were right... you were right all along. I didn't have to be Nightmare Moon. I didn't have to listen to Spell Nexus, or become what Celestia feared. Nopony could have forced me to do anything at that point.

"But... but I was so angry... so angry at you," Nightmare Moon began, her voice beginning to tremble as she fought back tears. "You *let* Celestia take me... you *abandoned* me... and I *hated* you for it. I *hated* you so *much*."

"And I thought the only reason you would abandon me was if they were right... if they were all right... that I was Nightmare Moon," Her voice had dropped to a whisper, the alicorn pausing a moment. Twilight opened her mouth, trying to offer the alicorn some comfort, but Nightmare Moon continued speaking before Twilight could utter a single word.

"So I played the part. Like a stupid little filly in a stupid little school play, I played the part of the monster. I played the role because I thought it's what I had to do, because that's what went along with what Nexus told me and Celestia feared."

"But I can't be Nightmare Moon... I won't be the mare I once was. That, however, doesn't change what I've done. You and all of Equestria should just hate me... hate me and despise me just like the real Nightmare Moon... because that's all I deserve."

"No," Twilight said, interrupting the alicorn firmly. "No, that's not all you deserve. You deserve more than that, and I don't hate you."

"You're lying... just like you were lying to me before. You *have* to hate me. I've been the worst daughter in the world... you should hate me."

"But I don't, Nyx."

"You have every reason to!" Nightmare Moon snapped, her rage directed more at herself than it was at Twilight. "I disowned you, I locked you in a dungeon, and I almost let Nexus kill you! Your life would be better, simpler, happier if you had never found me in the forest... I ruined everything, and you *should* hate me! You should loath and fear me like every other pony!"

"I don't hate you Nyx, and I never will."

"Why... why don't you!?"

"Because, Nyx, I'm your mother, and a mother will always love her daughter, no matter what."

Nightmare Moon shut her eyes tight. She was trying to hold it back, trying to keep strong, but it was all for naught. Twilight had broken down the emotional dam the alicorn had built up inside herself. All of the pain, guilt, and confusion she had been bottling up inside was released, flooding the alicorn's mind.

And so she wept. Nightmare Moon wept openly as she blubbered out apology after apology. Not since she had been a filly had Nightmare Moon let her tears flow so freely. She cried and apologized for everything she had done, for everypony she had hurt, for being so stupid, and for all the things she had put Twilight through.

She cried, and Twilight took it all in. The unicorn did her best to comfort the mare she called her daughter, getting in as close as she could and nuzzling the side of the alicorn's head. It had been easier for Twilight to comfort Nightmare Moon when she was still a small, little filly... but Twilight did her best. She did everything she, as a mother, could do to soothe her daughter. She even cried right alongside Nightmare Moon.



The tears that spilled from the pairs eyes, however, were not just tears of sorrow. Some were tears of shared pain, for the things they had done wrong. Yet others were tears of joy, the pair sharing in an embrace they had been denied for so long.

After several long weeks, Twilight knew, without a doubt, that she had her daughter back.

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Nightmare Moon cried for a long time, but with Twilight's presence the alicorn eventually calmed down. She had cried herself dry, of both her tears and the emotions she had bottled up inside. In all, she felt better because of it. Still, as Nightmare Moon's eyes dried, a single haunting question bubbled to the top of her mind... a question that the alicorn couldn't ignore.

"Twilight... who am I?"

"What do you mean?" The unicorn asked gently.

"I don't know any more. I was supposed to be Nightmare Moon, but then I became Nyx and even when I tried to be Nightmare Moon again I just couldn't do it. Now, I can't be either. So... who am I?"

Twilight was silent for a time, needing to not only process the question but also carefully choose her response. Her eyes wandered to the side, the unicorn taking a few deep breaths to steady herself before beginning to speak.

"I honestly can't say. Everypony needs to decide for herself the kind of pony she is going to be, and you have to figure that out on your own. The only thing I could tell you is what I see."

"Then what do you see, Twilight? I want the honest truth."

"I suppose... I see a mare who is neither Nyx nor Nightmare Moon... or, actually, I see a mare that is a bit of both, if that makes sense," Twilight began, having trouble grasping onto exactly what she was trying to say. Thankfully, Nightmare Moon was patient and didn't press or rush Twilight.

She simply waited for the unicorn to compose her thoughts.

“Let me put it another way. Back when you were Nyx, you were... a little sensitive.”

“I was a crybaby and a coward,” Nightmare Moon corrected flatly.

“Okay, yes, but that wasn’t entirely your fault. You *were* young... and you had been through a lot, even before I found you in the forest. I doubt any filly could go through what you did and not be a *little* traumatized.

“But... you’re not like that anymore,” Twilight continued, smiling a little. “The Nyx I knew... she would never have been able to fight off the monsters like you did. Only a mare like Nightmare Moon would have been able to what you did.”

“So... even you finally admit I’m Nightmare Moon.”

“No,” Twilight corrected, “let me *finish*.”

“Sorry,” the alicorn apologized.

“It’s okay, but you’re not the *real* Nightmare Moon. If you were, you would have the courage to face the monsters, but no reason to. Nightmare Moon, the real Nightmare Moon, she cared about herself first and everypony else second, if at all. If you were really her, you wouldn’t care about what happened to Ponyville.

“But the Nyx I know *does*,” Twilight said as gave the alicorn a gentle, reassuring touch. “She cares about other ponies, even putting them before herself. She cared about her friends enough that she performed in the Spring Festival Play, despite the fact I told you no. You were there for them, even though you knew you’d be in trouble later.

“It’s because of that compassion that you were willing to fly out and throw yourself in harm’s way to protect Ponyville.

“So... I guess I’d say you are a bit of both, perhaps even the best of both. But, as I said before, that is only what I see. It’s up to you to decide just what kind of pony you want to be.

“And, by the way, I’m not the only one that thinks you’re not Nightmare Moon.” Twilight said, her horn glowing. After a few moments, the unicorn presented a stack of papers to Nightmare Moon, holding them so the alicorn could see what they were. It was the crayon drawings Cheerilee had given to Twilight, the one on top the drawing from Apple Bloom.

“Are... are these really for me?”

“They are,” Twilight answered, letting Nightmare Moon levitate the drawings for herself as she began flipping through them. Along with the picture from Apple Bloom there were drawings from Sweetie Belle, Scootaloo, and Twist. There were even a few from other ponies in her class, acquaintances who never really liked nor hated her. There was also one from Dinky Doo, a crayon drawing of the alicorn zapping a hydra on the flank.

“There’s this as well,” Twilight continued, holding it out a carefully tri-folded piece of paper, “It’s a letter from Cheerilee.”

Nightmare Moon shifted her gaze, setting down the crayon drawings and gingerly suspending the letter in the air. She unfolded it, noticing the words were written in Cheerilee’s hoof-writing. Her eyes moved to the top of the page, where she began attentively reading each line.

*Dear Nyx,*

*Earlier today, when some of the fillies and colts I was watching started making get-well cards for you, I felt that I needed to offer a few words of my own to you. The first of which are ‘Thank You’; thank you for saving my life. When that Scorpio was about to get me, I had given up hope of coming out of that alive, let alone being able to teach again, but you swooped in and saved me, and I thank you for that.*

*I also wanted to say I’m sorry. I still remember what you said to me that night. When I let you play Nightmare Moon in the school play, I never meant it as an insult. I called the original Nightmare Moon ‘wicked and dastardly’, but those words were never meant for you, a filly I called my student.*

*Your friends came to me at one time, back when you were making the night last forever. They asked me about you, asked why you were doing what you were doing. Their families weren't telling them the whole truth and I could tell they were worried. I told them the truth that I believed at the time: that you were confused about who you were, that you just needed some time, and you would eventually do the right thing.*

*Thank you for proving me right and, though you may now be an adult, I will always treasure the time you were in my class. While some of the students didn't appreciate your curiosity, I found it refreshing and I hope that you never lose that drive to learn.*

*So, again... thank you.*

*Your Former Teacher,  
Cheerilee*

"It's hard, sometimes, changing who you are, changing what everypony sees," Twilight explained as Nightmare Moon stared at the letter and pictures. "Before I came to Ponyville... I was a bookworm with almost no real friends. But I changed... I started studying friendship, and I helped my friends just as much as they helped me. We've all grown a little because of the friendship we share. And you taught me what it takes to be a mother, to care for somepony like a daughter.

"It may seem impossible, but you can do it," Twilight said confidently. "You've already started. These fillies and colts, they don't see you as the Nightmare Moon anymore. They see you as the pony who saved their friends and families. You can be the mare you want to be."

"Can it... can it really be that simple?" Nightmare Moon asked, lowering the papers as she looked back at Twilight. "Do I just decide who I want to be?"

"No, it will be a lot of work and it may take a long time to be the mare you want to be. The first step, however, is answering that question: What kind of pony do you want to be?"

"I... I want," Nightmare Moon began, speaking slowly as she had to think deeply about the question. "I don't want to be Queen. I don't want to be a

mare that ponies are afraid of. I want to be a pony with friends, with real friends, not servants or subjects. I want Spike and Owlowiscious to be my brothers, even if they aren't ponies themselves. I want to be a mare that makes you proud... I want to be your daughter.

"And I... I want to be called Nyx again. I know I can't go back to being the filly I once was, but I still want that to be my name. I don't want to be called Nightmare Moon. I... I want my name to be Nyx."

Twilight smiled, resting her head on Nyx's head. "Well, to me, it sounds like you want to be a pretty amazing mare."

"Of course you'd say that," The alicorn replied, laughing a little to herself, "you're my mother."

"Yes, but that doesn't make it any less true," Twilight countered with a chuckle. Still, after that bit of laughter, Twilight glanced up at the throne room's covered windows, and the smile withered on her face.

"Nyx?"

"Hmmm?"

"You remember earlier, when you asked how long you were asleep?"

"Yes."

"The honest answer is that it's been a little over half a day."

"Half a day!?" Nyx tensed, trying to sit up from her bed. Twilight, however, used a bit of magic to keep the alicorn down.

"Nyx, you're in no condition to be moving around."

"But, what about the sunset? I need to lower the sun and raise the moon. Horse-feathers, if it has been half a day since I passed out that would make it almost five in the morning."

"It's... actually closer to ten," Twilight admitted.

“Ten!? It’s supposed to be light by now! I missed the entire night!” Nyx panicked, again trying to sit up while Twilight held her down.

“That doesn’t change the fact you’re not strong enough right now to even consider handling the sun and moon,” Twilight snipped sternly before letting her voice soften. “Honestly, I doubt you’ll be strong enough for a while.”

“But what about Equestria?”

“That’s something I wanted to talk to you about. Nyx... can you release Celestia and Luna?”

“No,” Nyx answered all too quickly.

“Nyx, they are the only ones-”

“Do you know what you’re asking me to do? If I let them go... I’ll take their place. They’ll banish me to the moon for what I’ve done. I stole their throne and their kingdom, and that was *after* they each gave me a chance to stop. They each offered me mercy, and I attacked them anyway. If I let them go now...”

Twilight gently shushed Nyx, nuzzling the side of the alicorn’s head. “I understand why you’re scared, but Celestia... Celestia was wrong to take you away from me before, and I was wrong to let her do it. Still, Equestria needs them back. What if the monsters attack again while you’re like this? What if it takes you weeks, or months, to get strong enough to move the sun and moon again?”

“I know,” Nyx begrudgingly admitted. “I know I need to let them go... and a few times I started to release them, but I don’t want to be banished again. It was hard enough the first time. I... I have memories from when Luna was trapped in the moon, when I was just her twisted reflection. I spent those years plotting and loathing. I planned to do so many horrible things.

“It was horrible. I wasn’t in pain, but I was cold and lonely. When I was just part of Luna, I had my rage and anger to keep me warm. But, if I go back now, I won’t have any of that. All I’ll have are my memories in Ponyville... and my regrets.

“But the worst part is that, by the time I’d be able to free myself, you’d be gone. Apple Bloom, Scootaloo, Sweetie Belle, Twist, Owliscious... you’d all be gone. The only one who would still be around would be Spike.

“I... I don’t want to go back.” Nyx said weakly, tears pulling at her eyes. “I don’t want to be alone again.”

“Shhhhhh,” Twilight softly soothed, doing her best to calm Nyx. “I know, I don’t want to see you get banished either, but you need to release them. Equestria needs them.”

“But...”

“I promise, Nyx. I promise you that I will *not* let Celestia take you away again. I’ll figure out some way to convince her. I’ll make her understand. I’ll do whatever it takes to make sure you don’t have to be alone for another thousand years.”

Nyx looked away from Twilight, unable to stand the unicorn’s expectant eyes. She fought with it internally. She was injured, but she was still a full grown alicorn and she knew Twilight couldn’t force her to say or do anything about the spell. But... she knew Twilight was right. Equestria was in danger when there wasn’t an alicorn available to tend to the heavens or protect the ponies... and she was in no condition to handle either task.

It was a bitter truth, but one she couldn’t deny.

“The banishment spell... I came to understand it after I was banished by the Elements of Harmony. It’s simple to cast, hard to break, harder to crack, but easy to undo. It’s like a cell door without the key; the only way to get out is to smash the door or pick the lock. The Elements of Harmony smashed Celestia free and when I, or rather, Luna, escaped the moon, managed to slowly and carefully undo the spell, picking the lock when the stars were in proper alignment.

“But for the thing or pony that cast the spell, their magic is the key to the lock. Even you, without the Elements of Harmony, could undo the locks as long as you have a bit of my magic to act as the key. We could free the princesses within the hour.”

"That's good.

"I know, but can we wait a little while... just a few hours?" Nyx asked, looking at Twilight with pleading eyes. "You promise you won't let her banish me, but I'm still scared. If we're going to release Celestia and Luna, and if you can't stop them, I want one last memory. Just one last, good memory... something I can hold onto if the worst should happen."

A comforting smile formed on Twilight's lips. "Equestria can wait a couple hours. You can have that good memory, even though I promise it won't be your last. So... are you hungry? I could go get us something to eat from the castle kitchens."

"That... that does sound nice, and... after we eat... could we read a book together, like we used to?"

"Of course," Twilight said as she carefully stood up from the bed, trying to keep her voice strong, though it had an audible quiver. "What story would you want to read?"

"You pick, Twilight... you always pick the best stories."



# Chapter 20

## Judgment

Being imprisoned in the sun is an experience most ponies would find utterly torturous. The bright, glowing orb was pictured by many to be made of swirling fires that would singe, burn, and utterly cremate anything that drew too close.

Yet, to Celestia, the sun was as much a warm embrace as it was her prison. The magic of the banishment spell took everything that made the princess and mixed it with the arcane energies of the sun. It was like Celestia had been stitched into the sun, like a patch sewn onto a piece of fabric. Although she had been made part of it, she was still able to identify where she ended and the sun began. The same was true for Luna, which was why the moon took on a dark silhouette of a unicorn head. The sun had probably done the same, but no pony could look straight into the celestial sphere long enough to be sure.

Escape from the sun was possible, but it took very delicate work and timing for an alicorn to free herself. Celestia had already made a number of attempts, feeling and probing the magic that held her, but an understanding of the spell would not be sufficient. She would need help, an alignment of the planets, stars, or some other celestial event that the sun princess could exploit to hold part of the spell open while she unlocked the rest.

Yes, escape was possible, but it was a tedious, drawn out game of waiting for the time to be right and for the heavens to align.

Unless she was freed by another...

Just as Celestia was exploring a certain aspect of the spell with her magic, she felt it starting to unlock. It was not like when she had been freed from the sun by the Elements of Harmony; when that had occurred, the elements had burst through the binding spell just as they were purifying Luna. This time though, the spell was unlocking itself. She wasn't being rescued or freed... she was being released.

Celestia could not ponder this for much longer as the last of the binding spell evaporated away. She was released and, as the spell was designed, she found herself being carried back to Equestria. In just a few seconds, the sun princess felt her physical body take shape. She felt the ground beneath her hooves; she could smell and taste the clean, fresh air of Equestria as it filled her lungs; she could feel the cool chill of evening on her coat.

Opening her eyes, Celestia found herself smiling as she took in her surroundings. She was in a large, elegant room she did not recognize. The stone walls, columns, floor, and ceiling were made of a dark stone. The ceiling itself was dotted with gemstones in a near-perfect depiction of the nighttime sky. She had materialized facing a set of large window frames with traces of glass and metal on their edges. Through those openings the sun princess could clearly see the beautiful lands of Equestria stretching to the horizon.

“Sister?”

Celestia turned her head to the side, her smile widening as her gaze met Luna’s. The younger princess had also been freed, and was obviously a little surprised.

“Luna, are you all right?” Celestia asked gently.

“Yes... I’m fine. Did you freed me, Sister?”

“No, I had no hoof in this. It would seem we were both released early.”

“You were,” a voice replied. It was a voice that Celestia recognized all too well, though its owner was a pony she wasn’t sure she was ready to face.

“Twilight Sparkle...” the sun princess offered quietly as she and Luna turned. The purple unicorn was standing just a few feet away from them. There was nopony else in the throne room, though the princess did take notice of a pile of cushions, blankets, and pillows in the center of the room.

“I trust that it was you and your friends that defeated Nightmare Moon and freed my sister and I?”

"No, it wasn't," Twilight replied. "The same day you two were banished, Nyx took the Elements of Harmony away from my friends. I was trapped in the dungeon at the time, so they tried to use another mare as the Element of Magic. From what I've been told, it didn't turn out well."

"I'd imagine it wouldn't. The connection shared between friends is what gives the Elements of Harmony their strength; it is along those lines the powers from the virtues are able to mix and flow together. Still, if Nightmare Moon stole the Elements of Harmony, and you and your friends didn't defeat her, how were you able to free us?"

"I didn't free you. Nyx let you go."

"Let us go?" Luna echoed, she and Celestia glancing at each in confusion before looking back at Twilight. "Why would Nightmare Moon do that?"

"Because she's not the monster you and that cult made her out to be," Twilight said firmly. "Now, before you say a single word about her or what she's done, I have something I want to say. Something I need to say, and I hope you're willing to listen."

"I am, Twilight," Celestia answered, neither smiling nor frowning as she spoke. "I am going listen, for if I had just listened to you before than we may have been able to avoid much of what has happened. What did you want to say?"

With that, Twilight began, telling both Celestia and Luna everything that had happened over the weeks they had been trapped in the sun and moon respectively. She held nothing back, speaking of both the good and bad Nightmare Moon had done, though Celestia noticed Twilight was focusing more on the good the black alicorn had done.

All the while the princesses listened intently, Luna's expression running a spectrum of emotions while Celestia's face remained stoic. Yet both of them listened and hung on every word Twilight spoke, waiting until they were sure she had finished speaking.

"That... is a very interesting story, Twilight," Celestia commented, keeping her voice flat. "I am glad to hear that Nightmare Moon has come to her senses and that she agreed to assist in our release, even though you were

the one that undid the seals. However, I find it hard to believe that she was so injured that she could not manage the spell herself.”

“Well then, maybe you should see for yourself,” Twilight countered, the unicorn turning and trotting to the far end of the room. She gently poked her head out the door, speaking to somepony in the hall before coming back in. As she walked back to the princesses, another figure followed in her wake, stepping gingerly with a slight limp.

Nyx kept her head hung low, trying to make herself as small as possible. She did not lift her eyes to meet Celestia or Luna’s, seemingly content to stare at the floor while keeping Twilight between herself and the princesses.

“Is... is she going to be all right?” Luna asked, unable to keep herself from staring at all of the bandages wrapped across Nyx’s body.

“Nurse Redheart says she should make a full recovery, but this should prove that I’m telling you the truth,” Twilight snipped, fixing her glare on Celestia.

“I never meant to imply I didn’t believe you, Twilight,” Celestia corrected. “I just found it hard to believe Nightmare Moon was in such poor condition. It would seem, however, you weren’t exaggerating about her injuries.”

“No, I wasn’t,” Twilight continued, the student maintaining her firm tone, despite being in the presence of the mare who was both her princess and teacher. “Nyx helped me free you; I couldn’t have done it without her. She also wants to return Equestria to you. She renounced her title as queen over a week ago and returned control of the government to the ponies you appointed.”

“If that is true, why did she not free us sooner?”

“She doesn’t want to go back to the moon. She was afraid that, if she released you, she’d be imprisoned for another thousand years.”

Celestia took in a breath, steadying herself before speaking. “That... may not be an unfounded fear.”

“Sister!” Luna snapped, her voice echoing with shock and disbelief. “After everything we just heard, you aren’t considering-”

“I don’t want to, Luna, please believe me when I say that. It would not be for as long as before; she certainly does not deserve another thousand years. However, while Ponyville was saved, much of Equestria will be calling for justice, and it’s our duty as the Princesses of Equestria to ensure justice is carried out. I’m not saying it’s a certainty, but... it may be what the ponies demand.”

“No!” Twilight snapped, stamping a hoof. “I am *not* going to let you send her to the moon!”

“Twilight-”

“NO! I won’t let you touch her! If you have to punish somepony, then punish me!”

The room fell silent at this, all three of the alicorns staring at Twilight with different levels of disbelief.

“Twilight, certainly you don’t mean-”

“I do, Luna,” the unicorn replied, flicking her gaze to the moon princess before quickly returning it to Celestia. “If Equestria demands that somepony be sent to the moon, then send me there in her place.”

“No! Twilight, what about your friends? What about Spike?” Nyx argued. “You can’t just abandon them all like that... not for me.”

“You don’t deserve to be sent to the moon, Nyx. No pony does, but if somepony has to go, I would rather it was me.”

“No,” Nyx said firmly, stepping around Twilight and putting herself between the unicorn and the sisters. “Those actions were my own. You don’t know how much it means to me that you’re willing to accept the blame, but I can’t let you do it. I’m an alicorn; you’re not. There’s no telling if you’d even survive being banished to the moon, but I can.... I survived last time and I can do it again.”

“But-”

“Do you remember what you asked me a few hours ago? Do you remember asking me what kind of mare I wanted to be?” Nyx asked softly, bending her neck down so her head was near Twilight’s.

“Yes,” the unicorn answered.

“I’ve thought of one more thing I want to add to that list. I want to be a mare that protects the ponies she cares about. I’ve hurt a lot of ponies, Twilight. Maybe not directly, but it’s because of me a lot of bad things happened. I don’t want to hurt anypony ever again if I can avoid it.

“But I want to do more than that. I want to make up for what I’ve done. I want to do whatever I can to make sure the ponies I care about never get hurt, so that my friends and family can continue to live and be happy.”

“Right now, it’s more important for you to be here for your friends, for Spike and Owlowiscious. Most of Equestria hates and fears me but, to them, you’re the hero that once defeated Nightmare Moon. You’re the Element of Magic and, if Equestria needs the Elements of Harmony again, your friends will need you to be there.

“So let me take the punishment. Let me take the punishment that I not only deserve but the Children of Nightmare deserve. I promise, I can bear the weight. I can live long enough to fix what I’ve done wrong, to make up for what I’ve done, but I would never be able to forgive myself if I let you take my place right now.”

“But Nyx-”

“Thank you for always being there for me, Twilight. You’re the best mother I could have ever asked for,” Nyx whispered, leaning in a bit closer and nuzzling the side of Twilight’s face, “but... I have to do this.”

With that, the black alicorn turned, sitting down directly in front of Celestia and Luna while bowing her head in respect.

“Princess Celestia, Princess Luna, Rulers of Equestria, Regents of the Sun and Moon respectively... I surrender to you. I have wronged you and

Equestria, and I know that there is no way to change the past. What I have done can never be undone, so I await justice befitting my crimes.

“All I ask, as my final request, is that you hold no ill will against your student or any ponies who were once poisoned by my magic. Lay all their sins and misdeeds upon my shoulders, and allow me to bear them by myself. Let me defend them and take the punishment they should not have to endure.

“Promise me this one thing, and I will accept my fate, even banishment to the moon, without question.”

“Are you sure about this, Nightmare Moon?” Celestia asked, her voice barely louder than a whisper. “Do you truly want us to lay all that's happened, even the things beyond your control, on your shoulders?”

“Yes,” Nyx answered firmly. “As an alicorn, I can bear the burdens no other pony can. I threw myself in the way of a Lupus Major to protect Twilight because, while the beast wounded me, it could have easily killed Twilight. The pain I endured saved not just one life but lives all over Ponyville. It's far better for me to be wounded if it means somepony, anypony, can continue to live and be happy.

“I can be bruised, battered and beaten but, as long as there is still breath in my lungs, I will continue to protect ponies. I will protect them, because what can kill them I can survive, because what hurts them is but a scratch for me, because it's the *one* thing I've been able to do right.”

Celestia and Luna glanced at each other before looking back at Nyx. They were silent for a long time, Luna unable to take her eyes off of Nyx's determined stare. The sun princess, on the other hand, noticed a small flash out of the corner of her eye, and after glancing in that direction for a moment, she turned her attention back to Nyx's gaze, the black alicorn looking at the princess as if demanding she be sent to the moon.

“Nightmare Moon,” Celestia began, “Though it pains me, you must face judgment for your crimes against Equestria and us, the Royal Sisters. This judgment, however, shall be deferred.”

“Deferred?” Nyx and Twilight echoed in disbelief.

“Twilight has spoken on your behalf but, before proper judgment can be laid, more voices must be heard. So I would ask my sister, Princess Luna, to seek out other voices, to find others to speak of what you have done. Then, I will entrust her to decide Nightmare Moon’s fate.”

“Really?” Luna asked in disbelief. “You... you trust me to do that?”

“I do, Sister.”

A small smile formed on Luna’s lips for just a moment as her gaze lingered on Celestia but, as the moon princess looked away, it faded. “I accept the task you have entrusted me with, Sister, and I will do as you suggest. I will go out and learn from Ponyville the kind of mare Nightmare Moon has been... Then I will decide what punishment, if any, is needed.”

“Can you at least promise me you won’t banish her to the moon?” Twilight asked.

“The only thing I can promise is that I’ll be as fair as possible,” Luna replied. “If Nightmare Moon has done enough wrong to condone being banished to the moon, then that will be her punishment. However, I will not ignore the good you say she’s done.”

Twilight nodded, though the anxiety in Twilight’s eyes made it clear she did not entirely like the answer she had been given. The unicorn, however, did not press the issue, turning to comfort and reassure Nyx while Luna shifted her attention to Celestia.

“Where can I expect to find you, Sister, while I am out speaking with the ponies of Ponyville?” the moon princess whispered so that only Celestia would hear.

“I will remain here with Twilight and Nightmare Moon, if only to make sure my student does not start to panic and worry about what will happen.”

“Good, because I do wish to speak with you about this before I give my final decision. Still... that is for later. Right now, what I need is a pony who can be honest with me, so I can be sure what Twilight says isn’t being tinted by her care for Nightmare Moon.”



“Then, Sister, I might have a suggestion of which pony you would want to speak with first.”

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Applejack yawned, lying down in the shade of a tree just outside the walls of the castle. The orange pony had been working since the wee hours of the morning, keeping the ponies in the castle kitchen churning out a bunch of good, wholesome food. Still, after the last apple bucking season, the farm mare was a little more aware of her limits. She had gotten the Cakes to take over the kitchen while she took an early afternoon nap, although the sun was still hanging just above the western horizon.

The farm mare was just about to doze off, her stetson resting over top of her face, when she heard the patter of hooves coming up beside her.

“Excuse me, I'm looking for Applejack,” a voice asked, one Applejack found familiar, but couldn't place.

“Well, ya found her,” the orange pony answered, not bothering to move her hat out of the way. “But, if ya'll don't mind, could ya come back later? I was just settlin' in for a nap.”

“I realize you are tired; from what Twilight has told me, you've been working yourself to the bone helping in the kitchen. However, if I could ask for just a bit of your time...”

Applejack grumbled a little, using a hoof to lift her hat. Her eyes fell on the pony who was interrupting her nap and, a moment later, Applejack was on her hooves, straightening her hat and brushing a few blades of grass off her leg.

“P-princess Luna. Shoot, I didn't know it was you.”

“It's okay, Applejack,” the moon princess assured, “you have every right to be tired. If you want, I can come back later.”

“No... ‘course not, Princess,” Applejack said, bowing her head respectfully. “Just... well... I reckon I'm a little surprised. I thought you were... you know, on the moon...”

“Celestia and I were released just a little while ago by Nightmare Moon, if you can believe it.”

“Well, honestly, I think I can,” Applejack replied as she rose up from her bow. “Still, shouldn’t you and Celestia be up in Canterlot? I’d imagine you two have a lot of work to catch up with.”

“Yes, being away from the capitol for as long as we have has undoubtedly caused a great deal of work to build up, especially since Equestria had a queen for a short span of time. However, there are matters we have to deal with here in Ponyville first.”

“Like what?”

“Applejack, you are the Element of Honesty, correct?”

“I reckon I am.”

“Then I need you to tell me about Nightmare Moon, tell me what you honestly think about her and, think if you have time, I need your help to find other ponies to do the same.”

“I reckon I can do that,” Applejack offered with a smile as she laid back down in the shade of the tree, “But, if ya’ll don’t mind, could we just talk here? I’ve been on my hooves all mornin’.”

“I don’t mind in the slightest.”

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Normally, Nurse Redheart would have been the pony to tend to Nyx. The alicorn needed some of her bandages changed and wounds cleaned to make sure they didn’t get infected. However, Luna and Celestia had come to a silent agreement that they didn’t want everypony to know they had returned, at least not until they were able to decide what to do with Nyx.

That, and Nurse Redheart was still busy tending to the sick and injured with Nurse Tenderheart and Fluttershy. Instead, Twilight was doing her best to tend to Nyx herself, glancing back and forth constantly to a medical

hoofbook Redheart had given her, which specifically detailed the proper procedure for cleaning and changing bandages.

Nyx herself was laid out on her makeshift bed. The alicorn had wanted to stay awake, a little anxious of lowering her guard around Celestia. Twilight, though, had assured her that Celestia wasn't going to do anything and Nyx let herself drift off to sleep. With the addition of a sedation spell from Celestia, Nyx slumbered peacefully as Twilight worked on changing the alicorn's bandages.

Celestia stood by her student, the white alicorn doing what she could to help with the task of checking Nyx's wounds. She held the materials Twilight needed, and collected the used bandages and cotton balls as they accumulated. For several minutes the pair had worked in silence, but as Twilight was replacing a bandage on Nyx's side, Celestia chose to break the silence.

"Twilight... may I ask you something?" Celestia asked softly, as if her words were unwelcome in the quiet that had befallen the room.

"Yes," the student replied, taking some of the fresh medical supplies from Celestia's levitation spell.

"Who do you blame for what happened that night?"

"Which night?"

"The night the Children of Nightmare finished their spell. Who do you blame for what happened? Do you blame the cult for finishing the spell? Do you blame me for taking Nightmare Moon away and giving them the chance to ponynap her? ...Or do you place the blame elsewhere?"

"I don't blame you for what happened," Twilight replied as she placed the bandage and began to use some medical tape to secure it in place, "and, while they were the ones that caused most of this, I don't blame the Children of Nightmare... not completely.

"If anything, I blame myself for letting it all happen. I don't know if I could have convinced you that you didn't have to be afraid of Nyx, but... I don't think I can ever forgive myself for not putting up more of a fight."

“And is that why you were willing to take her place?”

“I promised Nyx that I wasn’t going to let you take her away from me again, and I meant it,” Twilight answered, turning her attention to the next of Nyx's bandages, carefully peeling it away so that it the wound could be disinfected and the bandage replaced.

“Twilight... I’m sorry about what I put you through that night,” Celestia replied softly as she took the spent bandage and magically passed Twilight the disinfectant and a fresh cotton ball. “I do not deserve your forgiveness. What I did, I did with the best of intentions, but my actions were still inexcusable.”

“Honestly... I’m not entirely sure I *want* to forgive you for that night,” Twilight admitted as she touched the cotton ball to Nyx's wound, the alicorn wincing slightly in her sleep. “But... I do forgive you, Celestia.”

“Might I ask why?”

“Because everypony needs to be able to be forgiven... because we’ve all done things we wish we could undo.”

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“So, she was able to take the Elements of Harmony from you without even lifting a hoof? And then she just let you go?”

Applejack nodded, obviously a bit embarrassed. After talking for a time under the shade of that tree, the pair had gotten up and started walking towards town. She and Luna were getting close to Ponyville at that point.

“It wasn’t like we made it difficult. I reckoned that, as long as we found another unicorn who’s good with magic, we’d be able to beat Nightmare Moon. Trouble was, the only one we could find was an annoyin’ show pony named Trixie. She’s not as good as Twilight, but we hoped it would be enough. Still, even after all that magic mumbo jumbo, it didn’t look like we left a scratch on Nightmare Moon and we were plumb exhausted for our effort.”

“While it is true that the magic is an important part of the Elements of Harmony, it is but another source of power. The strength of the elements come from the ties that bind, for it is through those that the power of the virtues you and your friends represent can come together.”

“The ties that what now? I don’t recall us being tied together when we first used the elements.”

Luna chuckled, coming to a stop. “Never mind, Applejack. We’re getting close to town, and there is something I need to do before we get there. Do you mind stopping for a moment?”

“Not at all, Sugarcube. What’cha got to do?”

“First, I have one more question to ask. If you were given the responsibility of deciding how Nightmare Moon was to be punished for what she’s done, what would you do?”

The farm pony blinked a few times then looked away from Luna, scratching the back of her neck.

“Well... shoot, you had to go and ask something hard like that.”

“All I ask is for your honesty, Applejack. You don’t have to explain why, I just need to know what you would do.”

“Well... I reckon... I don’t know. She did do some pretty nasty things, but this new Nightmare Moon has also done more than her fair share of good, ‘specially during that monster attack. Personally, I’d be inclined to go easy on her, but that’s because she’s settled any debt she had with me.

“But yeah... honestly, I’m probably not the pony to go askin’ ‘bout this,” Applejack admitted.

“I only desired your honest answer, and you’ve given it,” Luna assured. “Now, I need to speak with other ponies about Nightmare Moon, but I would not like Equestria to know my sister and I have returned just yet. We’ve been lucky that we haven’t passed another pony on this road, but I need to keep myself hidden once we get into town, at least from the general public.”

“Well, I reckon you know better than me what’s best in this situation. Thing is, how you goin’ to be hidin’ yourself? Can you transform yourself like Nightmare Moon?”

“No, those skills and powers were developed by her while I... we were imprisoned in the moon. While I have the knowledge to do it, I lack the power she and my sister possess to perform that level of shape shifting.”

“So then, what’re you gonna do?”

Luna smiled, letting her horn glow. For a moment, nothing seemed to be happening, but then the alicorn slowly faded away like a ghost before disappearing entirely. It was a sight that left Applejack a bit bewildered, the farm mare looking around before anxiously putting a hoof out

“Ow!”

“Oops, sorry Princess!” Applejack apologized, quickly drawing back her hoof.

“It’s okay, you just poked me with your hoof.”

“So, you just goin’ to stay invisible like that and follow me into town?”

“Yes. When you’ve found somepony you want me to talk to about Nightmare Moon, then I’ll need you to pull them into someplace private where I can make myself visible again. Oh, and it’s best not to talk to me directly when I’m like this. Ponies might think-”

“I’ve gone and lost mah marbles,” Applejack chuckled.

“I wouldn’t have worded it so bluntly, but... yes.”

“Well, kind of weird knowin’ I’m being followed by an invisible princess, but like I said, I reckon you know what yer doin’. Now, I think I’m goin’ to show you to Rarity first. She’s the only one of us that Twilight told the full truth to after she found Nightmare Moon, ‘cause she needed Rarity’s help.

“Then please, lead the way.”

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“Hey Rarity, you home?” Applejack called as she held the door open, as if letting some other pony into the shop even though there appeared to be nopony there.

“Right here, Dear.” Rarity answered, trotting out from the back room with spools of cloth in her magic. “I’m just making some blankets and the like for all the ponies stuck living at the castle. The blankets they got from the guard barracks keep them warm, but they’re made from *such* horrible, itchy cloth. I don’t know *how* those ponies are getting *any* sleep at all. So I decided I was going to use some of the old fabric that’s just been lying around in the back to make some blankets, since I can’t use it for dress making.”

“Why can’t you use this fabric for dresses? It looks fine to me.”

“It’s a matter of quality, Applejack. The thread count on these bolts is far too low for proper, fashionable dress making. It was a little mistake by my supplier, one they rectified by sending me the correct fabric and letting me keep these. I’m just glad I finally have a use for them,” Rarity replied as she set the supposedly lower quality fabric down. “Now, what can I do for you?”

“Well, I got somepony that needs to ask you a few questions, if you can spare the time.”

“Oh, I love chatting while I work, but may I ask who wants to ask me questions?”

“That would be me,” Luna replied, letting her invisibility enchantment fade. Rarity visibly jumped at the sound of the third voice in the room and could only look on with wide eyes, her vision locked on the moon princess that had just appeared in her shop.

“Princess Luna... is in my shop?” Rarity said, her mouth hanging open.

“Uh oh. Princess, you may want to brace yourself.” Applejack commented, the farm mare taking a step back.

“What for?”

"Princess Luna... is in my shop.... PrincessLunaisinmyshop!" Rarity repeated, talking faster and faster before the unicorn suddenly bolted. Her magic was flying in all directions as she adjusted, beautified, and cleaned the front room of her boutique at speeds that would impress even Rainbow Dash. Applejack and Luna had to jump out of the way a few times as a great number of things floated about the room. Within a minute of feverish, panicked, and magic-driven cleaning the shop was utterly spotless.

"Your Highness," Rarity finally offered, doing her best not to pant after her magical spree, an attempt to maintain the demeanor of a proper mare. "It's a privilege to have you in my shop, even though I *do* wish Applejack had given me a little more warning."

"Sorry Rare, but she kind of just dropped in on me too. In fact, she was only released from the moon just a little while ago."

"Released? By whom?"

"From what she says, Nightmare Moon went and let her and Celestia go."

Rarity smiled. "Well, that's good to hear. I was expecting it would happen sooner or later, but I'm surprised she didn't wait until her injuries had healed. The poor dear really got beat up during the attack."

"You knew that Nightmare Moon would release me and Celestia?"

"Well, I can't say I knew for *sure*," Rarity admitted. "But... oh, how best to put this? I can say that I knew there was a very, *very* good chance she would do it, and I hoped that she would."

"But you didn't know for certain."

"If I may be so bold, Princess, it's my personal opinion that you can *never* be absolutely sure about anything, at least when it comes to ponies."

"What makes you say that, Sugarcube?" Applejack asked.

"Why, personal experience of course," Rarity said with a toss of her head. "Remember when I made you your gala dress? I was so absolutely *certain*



you'd all love the first dresses I made, but... well, you recall how *that* turned out."

Applejack laughed a little. "Yeah... still can't figure why I thought galoshes would go with a gala dress."

"You're a practical pony, Applejack, so you consider function over form. You thought it might rain, so you wanted to be prepared." Rarity reassured with a gentle smile before turning her gaze back to Luna. "Still, that wasn't the first time I've created something I thought my client would love, only to find out that, sometimes, their opinion of my work was quite the opposite."

"And, over time, I've just learned that you can't be absolutely sure of anything when it comes to ponies."

"A good lesson," Luna offered. "Now, while you say you can't be absolutely sure, I would like to know how you would answer one question, Rarity."

"And what question would that be?"

"If you were given the responsibility of deciding how Nightmare Moon was to be punished for what she's done, what would you do? How would you punish her? Or would you simply forgive her for what she's done?"

Rarity was silent for a moment, pressing her lips together as she contemplated the question. She then began to frown a little, as if she wasn't liking the answer that was forming in her head.

"In all honesty, Princess, I'm torn. There is part of me who would want to forgive Nyx. Besides Twilight, I was the only pony in town who knew what Nyx really was and even then I found her so darling. She'd bounce over to my shop from time to time, eager to be taught some lesson about being a proper mare, and I was more than eager to teach."

"But... she also locked up my sister. She locked Sweetie Belle in a dank, cold dungeon, and worried me sick. Scootaloo's parents came and told me that Nyx did it to try and protect Sweetie Belle and her friends, to make sure her advisor, Nexus, didn't do something worse to them after those three managed to sneak into the castle. Still, I laid awake a lot of nights

wondering if Sweetie Belle was safe. That, and I suppose you can't ignore all the ponies across Equestria that will want some justice...

"So... I guess... I guess my answer would be that Nyx probably needs to be punished. Perhaps put in jail for a time, but I wouldn't dare assume I know how long such an imprisonment should last. While some ponies may call for justice, I personally think some leniency would be prudent, given the context of the situation.

"Then again, I'm a dress maker, not a judge," Rarity admitted. "In either case, I hope I've answered your question."

"You did," Luna nodded with a smile. "But perhaps you would like to talk of less serious things. You mentioned that Nyx used to come over to your shop to learn things from you. Would you mind telling me about it?"

Rarity perked up almost immediately, grateful that the conversation had shifted to a more pleasant topic. Soon the dress maker was telling short but energetic stories of some times Nyx had been over at her shop, either with Sweetie Belle and the other fillies or having come over on her own.

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After tending to Nyx's wounds, Twilight had been content to just lie next to the black alicorn. Now, however, Nyx had been asleep for awhile, and Twilight needed a moment to stretch her legs. Getting up gingerly, Twilight stretched her tight muscles and chose to walk over by Celestia. The sun princess had moved over to the throne room windows after they had finished tending to Nyx, and was currently looking out at the horizon.

"I'm going to get a late lunch from the castle kitchens. You want me to bring you something?"

"No thank you, Twilight. I'm not hungry at the moment."

"Even after being in the sun for six weeks?"

"Being imprisoned in a celestial body like the sun and moon isn't like being locked in a jail cell. The body knows no wants or needs beyond sleep. It

desires no air to breathe, no water to drink, and no food to eat. All the body truly needs is sleep.”

“Well, good to know if I ever get banished to the moon,” Twilight joked weakly, trying to break the stiffness in the air with the very weak bit of humor. “Still, would you mind watching Nyx while I’m gone?”

“I will keep an eye on her,” Celestia replied, turning to look at the unicorn, “but before you go, Twilight, might I ask you something?”

“What is it?” The unicorn asked.

“Why does Nightmare Moon call you 'mother'?”

Twilight smiled a little, glancing back at the sleeping alicorn. “Because... I guess that’s what I became for her. I was the one that found her in the forest and brought her back to the library, sent her to school, helped her with homework, rescued her when she got lost in the Everfree Forest...

“Honestly, when I first took her in, I never intended to do more than just take care of her until I could figure out if she was actually Nightmare Moon or not. I probably would have written to you as soon as I found out, but I was afraid to call you in too early. She... she looked too much like Nightmare Moon, and I was worried you’d banish her to the moon. I guess I didn’t want to see a filly that small become the new Mare in the Moon... well, unless she really was Nightmare Moon.

“So I stayed up late every night trying to understand the spell that was cast, except I never was able to figure it out and. Then, as time went by, I stopped trying. I guess it didn’t matter to me anymore, whether she was Nightmare or not. She was... just my Nyx,” Twilight concluded.

“And she is truly blessed to have a pony like you taking care of her, Twilight. Should you ever have children of your own, I know they will grow up well.”

“I already have a child, Celestia. Though I may not be the one that brought her into the world like a real mother, Nyx is still my daughter.” Twilight retorted quietly as she turned, heading towards the throne room door so that she could go downstairs and get lunch. Celestia chanced a glance at

the unicorn just as she was slipping out the door, before turning her gaze back to the horizon as a heavy sigh escaped her lips.

"What kind of pony separates a mother from her daughter?" Celestia whispered to herself.

=====

"So, I would ask you three, what would you do if the responsibility fell to you to decide Nightmare Moon's fate? Would you offer forgiveness, or would you say she needs to be punished? And, if so, what is befitting of her crimes?"

After leaving Rarity's, Applejack and Luna had gone back to the castle. With a little searching, the farm mare found Rainbow Dash, Fluttershy, and Pinkie Pie, guiding her friends to one of the castle's empty guard towers.

Luna had revealed herself when all the mares had been gathered, and there was the usual chain of questions of how she had escaped the moon and the such. Still, Luna cut through the chatter gracefully and asked the question she desired, leaving Rainbow Dash, Fluttershy, and Pinkie Pie glancing between each other.

"Well...um, it may just be me, but... uh, I would forgive her," Fluttershy quietly admitted.

"Fluttershy, after all she's done, you can't *seriously* say you'd just forgive her!" Rainbow Dash argued.

"Then may I ask what you believe should be done, Rainbow Dash?" Luna asked.

"Hey, don't get me wrong. It was cool how she helped us out during the attack, but I saw what her eternal night was doing to a lot of ponies. When Applejack said we should try and find Trixie, I was the one that flew out to a lot of the other towns nearby to see if anypony had seen her. I gotta tell ya, there were a lot of ponies that were taking the whole eternal night thing pretty hard, and that was just the first few *hours* of night."

"Would you, if you could, banish her to the moon then?"

“Well... not exactly. I mean, that’s kind of harsh. Maybe lock her up in a dungeon or jail or something for a few years.”

“Years?!” Fluttershy voiced in disbelief. “Rainbow Dash, you only lock up a pony for that long if she’s done something really horrible like setting some other pony’s house on fire or... or... deliberately hurting another pony!”

“And bringing two weeks of endless night to Equestria isn’t really horrible?”

“Well... okay... that was pretty bad, but she hasn’t hurt anypony. I mean... she did have the chance to hurt us, after we tried to use the Elements of Harmony with Trixie... but she didn’t do anything. She didn’t lock us up, she didn’t hurt us... she just let us go and took the elements.”

“But what about Twilight?” Dash argued. “Nightmare Moon kept her locked up in the castle dungeon for weeks, and Twilight didn’t do anything wrong... though I still say we should have used one of my awesome escape plans to rescue her.”

“Rainbow, those plans were half-baked and you know it,” Applejack snipped.

“Yeah, and half-baked plans are like half-baked cakes; no pony likes them because they’re all soggy in the middle and-”

“Still,” Dash continued, interrupting Pinkie Pie before she could go on one of her wild chains of thought. “All I’m saying is that, while Nightmare Moon helped saved Ponyville, she did a lot of things that hurt all of Equestria. Even if you only made her stay in jail for one minute for every pony in Equestria, that would still add up to years, I think.”

“No! No no no!” Fluttershy argued as she shook her head, the yellow pegasus staying quiet but still showing more fight than she usually did. “You punish bad ponies, but you forgive good ponies who do bad things. Nyx isn’t a bad pony.”

“Fluttershy, she threw Equestria into what could have been an eternal night. She locked up Twilight and three little fillies, and she stole the

Elements of Harmony from us. She also banished Celestia *and* Luna to the sun and moon! That's a *lot* of bad decisions."

"But you're ignoring all the good decisions she's made! She raised the sun, she saved Twilight and she defended Ponyville. She's earned our forgiveness. Besides, how do you think Twilight would feel if Nyx was locked up for years?"

Dash lowered her ears, her strong stance deflating a little. "I... didn't think about that."

"Rainbow Dash makes a point, Fluttershy." Luna said, defending the cyan pegasus' side of the argument. "There are many in Equestria that undoubtedly want to see Nightmare Moon punished, if only for the things we have laws for."

"And stealing a princess's pet phoenix is probably against the law too, but Celestia forgave me for that," Fluttershy pointed out. "Nyx is *not* a bad pony, she just made a few bad decisions and she's fixed everything she did wrong without anypony asking her. I would forgive her."

"One who wields unmatched compassion, wishing only to grant forgiveness," Luna commented, looking at Fluttershy before turning to face Rainbow Dash, "balanced by one who embodies loyalty, not only to her friends, but all of Equestria. I am beginning to truly see why you ponies were able to bring such great power to the Elements of Harmony."

"However," the princess continued, turning her eyes onto a particular pink pony. "I have not heard from you, Pinkie Pie. Would you forgive Nightmare Moon, or see her punished?"

"I'd forgive her," Pinkie Pie chirped with a smile.

"And might I ask why?"

"Well, if I locked her up or banished her, then Nyxie couldn't come to the super fun-eriffic 'Thanks-For-Saving-Ponyville-From-A-Bunch-Of-Scary-Monsters' party!"

"You planned a party for her?" Luna asked incredulously.

Pinkie Pie nodded. "You bet, Dashie; after all, my special talent is throwing parties. That, and I wanted to ask if Nyx would try turning me into a cake."

Luna lifted an eyebrow. "Turn you into a cake?"

"Oh yeah. See, Nyx turned Fluttershy into a tree, and it was so cool, and I wanted her to turn me into a cake, but then Twilight took Nyx away to get lunch, and I figured, now that Nyx is all big like Nightmare Moon, she has to be even *more* wonderful at magic, and turning me into a cake would be easy-peasy."

"But would you not be worried about somepony trying to eat you?"

Pinkie Pie blinked a few times, confronted with an aspect of cake-ification she hadn't considered.

"I never thought about that. Huh... I wonder what I'd taste like. OOOH! Okay, I still want to be turned into a cake, and then I want somepony to taste me, but only taste part of my mane or tail, not any other part of me. Then I want to be turned back to normal so that the pony who tasted me can tell me what I taste like as a cake!

"Because it would be really cool if I found out I tasted like cotton candy, or chocolate -OH!- or even strawberry! And I can regrow my mane. After all, that's the part of me I have to get cut at the salon anyway, especially when it gets too long and starts getting into my eyes."

Rainbow Dash couldn't help but snort, putting a hoof to her face as tired to keep herself from laughing. "Pinkie Pie... you are SO random."

=====

Nyx groaned, waking up to her still-very-sore body. She didn't know why she was awake at first, but after a moment of lying there groggily, the alicorn took notice of something bothering her eyes.

It was a bright light, one that was managing to seep through her eye lids enough to be an irritation. She opened her eyes, only to shut them quickly again. Whatever light had woken her up was painful and shining directly in

her face. Recovering from the sharp light, Nyx lifted a hoof to shield her face and lifted her head a little before daring to open her eyes again.

The light that had awoken the black alicorn was a reflection, a shimmer from the sun that was bouncing off something in the room to hit her in the eyes. That something was Celestia's crown, the alicorn still lingering by the throne room windows, though she had moved since Nyx had fallen asleep.

The alicorn would have possibly gotten up, tried to move herself so the light wouldn't be in her eyes. Yet, as the alicorn began trying to shift her weight, she realized two things: First, she still was really, *really* sore; second, Twilight was sleeping next to her.

The unicorn had dozed off beside the alicorn, finding a free spot on the bed of seat cushions and table cloth. She was nestled into the area of Nyx's neck, sleeping like a filly curled up in a parent's embrace, even though Twilight was the mother in the pair's relationship.

So, unable to move and wishing to get back to sleep, Nyx was left with only one option.

"Um... Celestia?"

"Yes?" Celestia asked, glancing over at the black alicorn.

"Could you move a little, please? Your crown's making the light shine in my eyes..."

The white alicorn actually turned her head at this, only now noticing the intense white-spots of light that seemed to dance around the room as she moved her head, the reflections and refractions cast by her crown and its jewels.

"Of course," Celestia responded quietly, taking a step as she moved to the other side of the windows, out of the direct sunlight. She then stopped and looked back at Nyx, asking gently, "Is that better?"

"Much, *yawn*, thank you," Nyx replied, laying her head back down. Still, even as the alicorn tried to drift back to sleep, she brought her neck a little closer into her body, smiling as she nuzzled at the sleeping unicorn gently.



“She only just fell asleep,” Celestia offered, turning her gaze back to the horizon. “She only left your side for a moment, when she had to go fetch lunch.”

“What was for lunch?”

“She brought back some celery soup. She thought you might like some when you woke up. It’s lying there by your head.”

Nyx shifted, taking notice of the bowl of cold soup sitting on the floor next to the makeshift bed she had been set out on. She smiled at it.

“I wish she would have woken me. I would like to have eaten it while it was warm... it’s one of my favorite meals.”

“I find it interesting you count such a simple, plain soup among your favorites. Did you not eat finer things as Equestria’s Queen?”

“I did... but the reason it’s my favorite isn’t because of how it tastes. This and a daffodil sandwich were the first things I ever ate... and it was a meal Twilight gave me when she first brought me back to the library. It... it’s a meal that makes me think of her.” Nyx replied, letting her gaze shift to the sleeping Twilight.

“It’s not the most delicious meal... but it has...”

“Sentimental value?” Celestia finished softly, glancing again at Nyx.

“Yes,” the black alicorn replied, laying her head down. She would have drifted back to sleep, but after a few moments Nyx began to smell something. It was the soup, except... it smelled warm. Lifting her head again, the alicorn found some trails of steam very gently rising up from the soup. She also noticed a few lingering bits of magic fade away from the edges of the bowl.

Nyx looked at Celestia, the sun princess offering a gentle smile as the last sparks of magic faded from her horn. Celestia then turned her attention back to the horizon, staring at the perpetual sunset as the gentle clatter of a spoon against a bowl began to fill the room.

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After leaving Pinkie Pie, Rainbow Dash, and Fluttershy, Applejack had let Luna stay in the castle guard tower while she brought other ponies to talk about Nyx. Some spoke well, and at times Luna requested that Applejack find ponies that would speak poorly of the black alicorn, if only so she could hear a proper spectrum of opinions.

Like Rainbow Dash, there were ponies that felt Nyx did need to be punished in some way, though a majority of them felt that such a thing also needed to be tempered with mercy. Cheerilee was among such ponies, the school teacher thinking of the situation as she would a student breaking a rule in the classroom. The rules applied to everypony, and thus everypony needed to accept the consequences of their actions.

There were also those like Fluttershy, who wished only to offer Nyx leniency and forgiveness. Ditzzy Doo was almost as adamant as Fluttershy that it would be better to forgive the alicorn.

Finally, there were those who were in no way swayed by what Nyx had done, who blamed the alicorn for the monster attack. They believed that banishment to the moon was a just reward for the pony who usurped Equestria's throne. Those ponies also made it a point to mention that unless Nyx was banished, what was stopping her from trying to take over Equestria a second time?

After one such harsh pony had said his two bits, Luna thanked him. She and Applejack watched the stallion leave, the farm pony glaring coldly as while making a mental note to charge him extra the next time he came to her apple stand.

"Well, he was certainly adamant, wasn't he?"

"Bull-headed if you ask me," Applejack retorted with a huff.

"His opinion is valid, Applejack, even if you don't agree with it."

"I ain't sayin' his opinion isn't valid, I'm just sayin' he has rocks for brains."

Luna laughed a little. "Well, I suppose you are allowed your opinion as well. Still, I do believe I have heard enough. Thank you for your assistance, Applejack."

"Ah' shoot, I was glad to help. Still, if you don't mind me askin', have you decided what you're goin' to do?"

"No... if anything, I feel that I am more unsure than I was this morning," Luna admitted with a sigh.

"Well, shoot. Sorry I couldn't be of more help."

"No, Applejack, you were very helpful. The fact this decision has become difficult for me is a sign that I have come to understand this new Nightmare Moon better. I just... don't know what I'm going to do."

"Well, I'm sure you'll think of somethin'. After all-"

"Hey Applejack!"

The orange pony snapped her head around, she and Luna looking at the steps of the guard tower as four fillies came running into view, each wearing a red Cutie Mark Crusaders cape. Apple Bloom, Sweetie Belle, Scootaloo and, the group's latest addition, Twist, scampered up into the tower, barely giving Luna time to make herself invisible.

"Well hay there, Sis, what are you four doing out here this late?" Applejack asked.

"Pinkie Pie told us that we should come talk to you, that you were askin' a bunch of ponies about Nyx," Apple Bloom answered.

"Well, I reckon I was."

"Why didn't you come talk to us then?" Scootaloo asked.

"Yeah, we're Nyx's best friends! Why wouldn't you come talk to us about her?" Sweetie Belle added.

“Sorry. I guess y’all just didn’t cross my mind,” Applejack said with a smile, glancing to where Luna had been standing a few moments before. “Still, I reckon I should go ahead and let you four get your word in, since you went through the trouble of chasin’ me down. Now, what would y’all want me to know about Nyx?”

With nothing but that single question, the four fillies were off, talking about everything that they could about Nyx, as if they had been thinking about that very question the whole time they were looking for Applejack. They told of how good she was at games, how smart she was, how she and Twist helped the other three with school work when it got hard, how awesome she was at magic.

It was an endless stream of things, each some small event or nuance about the little black filly that the four called their friend. Through it all, Applejack felt the smile on her face slowly growing larger.

“And...” Apple Bloom tried to continue a few minutes later, though she looked around at her friends anxiously. “I can’t think of anything else.”

“I can think of something,” Twist said cheerfully. “Nyx is a really good friend.”

“Personally, I reckon that all you little fillies are really good friends,” Applejack stated. “And thank you for runnin’ me down to tell me all of this, but it’s gettin’ late. You four should be gettin’ back to your families, and that includes you, Apple Bloom. I don’t want to get back to the farm and hear from Big Macintosh you were late gettin’ back.”

The four fillies hung their heads a bit but did as they were told, making their way down the stairwell that led down from the top of the guard tower. Applejack stood and watched the four cape-wearing Crusaders leave. Once she was sure the fillies were out of earshot, Applejack gave her hat a nudge as she smiled.

“If you wanted to know about Nightmare Moon, Sugarcube, those are the four fillies that’ll give you the honest truth,” Applejack said, assuming that Luna was still hiding invisibly nearby. “The others and I, we knew her because of Twilight. Those four ... they are her real friends, and real friends are the ones that know ya the best.”

=====

Celestia's horn began to glow gently, the alicorn shutting her eyes as she stretched out her magic. She had been watching the clock carefully and, when the time was right, she reached out to the sun. While she and Luna wanted to keep their return a secret, it was important that the sun and moon were put back on schedule.

The princess' bond with the sun made setting it as simple as reaching out to an old friend, or perhaps to a child. The sun would, on some days, be willing to slip off to its slumber beyond the horizon. On other days, it would fuss and refuse, but every day Celestia found a way of coaxing it down so that the moon could rise. She had done so for a thousand years, and did it again tonight... even if she could feel the lingering magics of Nyx, who had tended the sun in her absence.

The sun was willing this evening, the orb ready for a long rest after being in the sky for so much longer than usual. It began to sink below the horizon with only the slightest guidance.

Celestia's attention was drawn away when she heard the doors to the throne room open. For a moment it looked as if nopony was there, but she could hear hoof steps against the floor. Once the door was closed, Luna slowly bled back into visibility, the moon princess crossing the room to sit by her sister.

"I see that they are sleeping," Luna whispered, having noticed Nyx and Twilight were asleep on the bed.

"Nightmare Moon needs her rest, and Twilight has been so worried I would be surprised if my student hadn't exhausted herself. Though, in honesty, her concerns of what we might do aren't unwarranted."

"Despite our powers, Celestia, we are still just ponies, and at times we make mistakes just like any other. Our emotions get the better of us, and we make bad decisions. It was my jealousy of you that, a thousand years ago, led me to make the worst decision of my life and, once that decision was made, it took the Elements of Harmony to set things right."

“That does not excuse my actions, Luna.”

“I never said it did,” the moon princess corrected, “but you know you did something wrong, Tia, which means you can work to make it right.”

“Perhaps I can. So, were you successful in learning about Nightmare Moon?”

“I was. I learned much about both the filly she was before, and how she is currently viewed by the residents of Ponyville.”

“Have you decided what you are going to do?”

“I believe I have,” Luna answered gently, growing slightly quieter. “I think it's for the best, but I can't be sure. I actually wanted to talk with two more ponies first before I really decide.”

“And they are...?”

“I need to speak with Nightmare Moon, but only after discussing this with you, Celestia. You've been with Twilight and Nightmare Moon all day. Surely you have noticed a few things.”

“I have,” Celestia replied, a stern coldness on her face. “Much like Twilight and her friends, I am one of the few who has seen the true Nightmare Moon. The one I was forced to banish, who desired the night eternal, and who banished me to the sun last year during the Summer Sun Celebration. I knew the monster, and it was why I feared her. Feared that she would once again come to threaten the kingdom, to threaten not just the ponies I care about but my family as well.

“Yes... I have seen the true Nightmare Moon,” Celestia continued, a smile starting to form on her lips as her eyes softened, “and the alicorn who lies in this room is not the same mare. They are much alike, both in form and power. They share similar memories and history, but I can now truly see that they are not the same.

“For, Sister, while you have come to know Nightmare Moon as she was seen by Ponyville, I have today come to know how she is seen by the pony

that cares for her the most," Celestia offered gently, looking over her shoulder as her eyes fell to the sleeping form of Twilight Sparkle.

"To my faithful student, she has only known Nightmare Moon by another name. Through her eyes, the alicorn that now sleeps beside her is not a monster, and was never a queen. She is a daughter, one that Twilight is willing to do anything to protect. I have, honestly, never been prouder of my student. Though, perhaps it is better to say my former student. I cannot be sure Twilight will ever be able to look upon me as her teacher again, considering what I tried to do. My actions are inexcusable, possibly unforgivable..."

"I think, Sister, that an action is only unforgivable if we choose to make it that way," Luna corrected softly, leaning against Celestia's side. "By calling something we've done unforgivable, we do nothing to try and change it. We let the mistake we made define who we are, even if it isn't the pony we want to be.

"But everything is forgivable in time. Anypony can earn redemption. They have to be willing, and sometimes they need help and a lot of time... but almost anything can be forgiven in time."

Celestia bent her head down, bringing it next to Luna's as she smiled. "Forgiveness. Truly, if there were meant to be a seventh Element of Harmony, it would be an Element of Forgiveness. I will work to earn my forgiveness for what I've done."

"You will not work alone, Sister," Luna replied. "It was my past, my bad decisions and the wrongs I committed that turned me into Nightmare Moon. This alicorn inherited all of my sins, whether she wanted them or not, and it is a burden that I intend to, at least in part, take back."

=====

Nyx glanced anxiously over her shoulder. Twilight was being shown out of the room by Celestia, the white alicorn whispering something before sending the unicorn outside and closing the door with her magic, sealing it with both physical locks and magical barriers.

Swallowing nervously, Nyx turned her head back forward. The makeshift bed where she had lain all day with her injuries had been moved away, the center of the throne room completely devoid of any furniture. She stood in the center of the room, and in front of her was Princess Luna.

The moon princess, despite being smaller than the black alicorn, stood with a firm, serious expression, wings spread, her back to the room's broken windows.

The moon princess gave off the air of leadership and power, her body language announcing that, at the moment, she stood in the room not as a younger sister or a friend. No, in this moment she stood as a Royal Sister of Equestria, as the Regent of the Moon... and as the one about to pass judgment on Nyx.

"Nightmare Moon, you stand accused of high treason against Equestria. You have committed crimes against the ponies of this kingdom as well as me and my sister, the Princesses of Equestria. You have brought about two weeks of eternal night to this land. You unjustly imprisoned one adult mare and three young fillies. Your agents, the Children of Nightmare, spread fear through the land and almost succeeded in executing an innocent unicorn. Above all, you usurped Equestria's throne by imprisoning both my sister and I in the sun and moon respectively.

"Do you deny these crimes as I have spoken them?"

"No... I do not," Nyx answered, hanging her head as everything she has done was verbally thrown back in her face.

"Before I pass my judgment, Nightmare Moon, I would ask you one question. Are you willing to answer it truthfully?"

The black alicorn replied with a simple nod.

"Earlier, just before you surrendered yourself to Celestia and me, you said something to Twilight Sparkle. What did you say?"

"I simply told her that I had decided what kind of mare I wanted to be."



“And what kind of mare are you? Who are you? Are you Nightmare Moon, or are you Nyx? Are you the filly Twilight took care of, or are you the mare I used to be?”

Nyx swallowed a moment, glancing over her shoulder to the closed throne room doors, beyond which she knew stood Twilight Sparkle. The black alicorn then smiled, turning her eyes on Luna as they filled with a firm conviction.

“I am both Nyx and Nightmare Moon. I am Nyx, the daughter of Twilight Sparkle. I am Nyx, the friend of Scootaloo, Apple Bloom, Sweetie Belle, and Twist. However, I am also Nightmare Moon and, despite my dark past, I am now a mare with the power to stand up and defend the ponies of Equestria. A mare who is not about to let anything, be it a monster or natural disaster, take away those I care about.

“But while I am both, the name I choose as my own is Nyx,” The black alicorn finished with a stomp of her front right hoof. And, for a moment, the throne room was silent, the last echoes of that proclamation lingering in the air before dissipating into the night.

Luna shut her eyes, listening as the last traces of the word faded. She then took in a deep breath, and when Luna next opened her eyes, both them and her horn glowing.

“Then, Nyx, I lay my judgment upon you.”

# Chapter 21

## The End of the Nightmare

Twilight paced anxiously outside the throne room doors. She could hear Luna and Nyx talking from the far side of the door, but could not make out what was being said. No matter how intently Twilight listened, all the words just sounded muffled. She even tried putting her ear right up against the door, but it didn't help.

Celestia had whispered, just before shutting the door, that "It would only take a few minutes". Well, it *had* been a few minutes, and Twilight's patience was running thin. What was Luna going to do to Nyx? She needed to know.

The unicorn was so wrapped up in her thoughts that she almost didn't notice the seams of the door beginning to glow. She did notice, however, and it spawned greater concerns in her mind. What was going on? Was Luna passing her judgment? What could she be doing that would be producing that much light? All these questions danced inside Twilight's mind and, almost instantly, Twilight's thoughts flew to the worst case scenario.

They were banishing her! Luna was banishing Nyx to the moon for another thousand years!

That had to be what was happening! Twilight was sure of it, and quickly began to buck and beat on the throne room doors, trying to get in. She needed to convince the princesses that banishing Nyx to the moon wasn't the answer. They could lock her up in a dungeon, banish her from Equestria. At least then she could still be with Nyx or go visit her.

But the moon?! She couldn't go visit the moon. In her growing worry, Twilight called on her magic, trying to teleport herself into the throne room, only to feel her it falter. Somepony was stopping her, interfering with her magic. Twilight could only guess it was Celestia; the sun princess was probably standing right on the other side of the door, making sure the unicorn couldn't get inside.

With her magic blocked, Twilight resumed bucking and beating at the door, screaming at the top of her lungs to be let in. She raged for what seemed like an eternity until the light finally faded, the cracks along the door growing dark.

It was a sight that made the air in Twilight's lungs feel like solid rock.

She dropped to her flanks and sat there, staring up at the door she had been unable to get through. She... she had failed. She had failed Nyx again. She had let Luna take her daughter away, and she hadn't been able to do anything to stop it. The unicorn felt her eyes starting to tear up.

Why hadn't she insisted on staying in the room? Why had she let Celestia lead her outside? She should have been there, should have stayed with Nyx. Why did she trust Celestia? Why hadn't she...

Twilight jumped when the throne room doors opened, Celestia poking her head out.

"Twilight, we're-"

Like somepony had struck a match and thrown it into a tinderbox, Twilight's anger exploded. Her mane was consumed with fire and her coat turned a white-hot. She rage shifted, screaming so loudly that her voice echoed throughout the halls of the castle, making anypony that could hear her stop dead in their tracks and listen.

"YOU BANISHED HER!!! After all she's done YOU BANISHED HER!!!" Twilight bellowed. She began grabbing at anything she could, ripping bricks directly out of the wall and hurling them at Celestia.

"Twilight!" Celestia said firmly, the alicorn wielding her own magic as she caught the volley of stones.

"Why didn't you let me SAY GOODBYE!?!"

"Twilight!"

"That's why you didn't want me in the room! You didn't want me to stop

you! She didn't deserve this! She didn't deserve t-"

Celestia furrowed her eyebrows, spreading her wings as her horn began shining with a blinding intensity. The alicorn threw out her magic, the arcane energies washing over Twilight like a tidal wave. Twilight's own magic was overwhelmed, her rage shift ending as the unicorn's magic was washed away by Celestia's.

"Twilight, we *did not* banish her to the moon," Celestia said, finally able to get a word in.

"YOU... you... you didn't?" Twilight said, her voice changing an indignant scream to a disbelieving whisper.

"No, we didn't."

"But, the light... and you were taking so long. What were you and Luna doing if you weren't banishing her?"

Celestia let a smile blossom onto her face before sliding back through the throne room doors. "Come see for yourself."

The unicorn followed her into the throne room and began to look around. She wasn't sure what she was supposed to see, but Twilight searched for Nyx. However, her gaze was drawn to another figure.

At the far end of the room stood Princess Luna, but the moon princess had undergone a drastic transformation. She had grown as tall as Celestia and her hair, while still the same color, glistened like a creek swirling beneath the night sky. It had also grown much longer and now flowed freely, as if caressed by a non-existent breeze.

In all, Luna truly looked like a Ruler of Equestria and the Regent of the Moon, with a regal beauty equal to Celestia's. Twilight couldn't tear her eyes away for several seconds, as dumbfounded as she was saw Celestia for the first time. Yet, when she was finally able to look away, the unicorn turned her gaze downward, noticing a black mass on the floor just in front of Luna.

A little black filly, with a unicorn horn, pegasus wings, purple hair, and a few

lingering bandages lying lazily across her flank.

“N... Nyx!?” Twilight said breathlessly, her mind struggling to grasp what she was seeing. It was at that moment Twilight felt a gentle nudge to her side. Looking back at Celestia, the white alicorn gave Twilight a single nod, silently assuring that what the unicorn was seeing was real.

That single gesture was all Twilight needed. She burst into a full-on gallop, racing across the room. She dropped down to her knees beside the little black filly, who was passed out on the floor. Twilight embraced the filly, nuzzling her head while wearing the biggest smile that would fit on her face.

As Twilight embraced Nyx, Celestia and Luna moved closer, standing side by side as they watched silently. Luna was still a bit shorter than Celestia, and nuances in facial structure, physique, and coat, eye, and hair color made the two easily discernible. Luna, however, truly looked like she was not only a Princess of Equestria, but that she was Celestia's sister

“But... but I thought... how could she?” Twilight finally managed to ask, looking up at the sisters.

“Alicorns are different from normal ponies, Twilight, and not just because we have both wings and horns,” Luna explained. “We are also different because we are very closely tied to the magic we wield.

“Our immortality and strength come from magic, but so does our maturity. That was why, after I was saved by the Elements of Harmony, I was so much smaller than Celestia. The Elements of Harmony took away much of my capacity for magic, and thus I became younger, a pony barely mature enough to be considered a young adult.”

“So what did you do?” Twilight asked.

“I took back what was mine,” Luna answered, a comment that could have been said harshly instead uttered with a careful gentleness. “The power Nyx possessed was never her own. Nexus’s spell gave her the portions of my power that remained in the shreds and supplemented what was missing by drawing in raw magic from Equestria itself.

"I took most of that magic for my own, since it was mine to begin with, and I dispelled what remained so that I would leave Nyx the way she was before the cult ponynappped her.

"I also," Luna continued, her gaze shifting to the passed out filly, "took back the memories that never should have been hers. The memories of being trapped in the moon and everything that happened before you found her in the Everfree Forest. She will know that she had those memories at one point, but she will not be able to clearly recall anything beyond that. She will, at best, remember the facts about our shared past, the same facts that anypony else would know.

"To put it simply, Twilight, I took back what was mine and mine alone."

"So, will she remember everything else that's happened?" Twilight asked cautiously.

"Yes, Nyx must live with the decisions she made for herself. Everything she has done she will remember, for it was the events of these last few weeks that helped her discover the kind of mare she wants to be. I will warn you, however, that Nyx can no longer think like a mature adult anymore. Much like her body, her mind is once again youthful, the mind of a child."

"But I thought you were going to punish her. Banish her to the moon, or-"

"Nyx is willing to make up for what she's done," Luna interrupted, maintaining her gentle tone while still silencing Twilight, "and she's worked to fix her mistakes. Those are signs of a pony that deserves a chance to redeem herself, not one that needs to be punished."

"But what about the rest of Equestria? They know Nyx was Nightmare Moon. If they see her-"

"Do not doubt, Twilight, that Nyx will have to face those she has hurt," Luna explained, her voice taking on a warning tone. "There are those across Equestria, even in Ponyville, that will strongly disagree with what I've done, but that is something Nyx must face. It is a consequence of her actions.

"But what if somepony tries to hurt her?" Twilight asked nervously, once again imagining the angry mob she thought should have formed at the

Spring Festival.

“She is an alicorn, Twilight. Even as a filly she is much more durable than most ponies. However, if any pony gives you too much trouble, I am simply a letter away,” Celestia assured calmly.

“And, for the moment, you let us worry about what Equestria thinks,” Luna added. “If there are any ponies that do not agree with what has been done, then they can come and voice their concerns to me. It was, however, my decision to make, and I stand by my belief that this is for the best.”

“So you’re going to let her go, just like that?” Twilight asked, finding the situation almost too good to be true.

“No,” Luna stated firmly, her lips bending down in a frown. “There is one other part of her punishment, and it involves *you*, Twilight Sparkle.”

The unicorn winced, clinging more closely to Nyx as she began to dread what the now-much-larger moon princess was going to do. A few tense moments passed, the moon princess’s hard gaze falling on Twilight as she leaned in close. Luna then began to speak, her tone serious, yet not threatening.

“Twilight Sparkle, I hereby place Nyx in your care. You shall be her legal guardian and it will be your responsibility to ensure that she never again becomes Nightmare Moon. You shall watch her as she grows up. I want you to ensure she laughs, plays, learns, lives, and has friends. I ask that you help her enjoy the childhood that was almost lost to her, and make sure she becomes the mare she wants to be.

“Think you can do that?” Luna asked, letting her voice slip into a more pleasant tone as she smiled mischievously. It took a moment for the unicorn to process what she had been ordered, but the moment her brain connected the dots Twilight nodded her head furiously.

The unicorn then proceeded to hold and nuzzle Nyx, her face locked in a huge smile as tears rolled down her cheeks. It was a scene Celestia and Luna watched silently for a while before Celestia leaned into the moon princess, whispering so quietly that only Luna could hear.

“Good job, Sister.”

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Celestia and Luna departed for Canterlot soon after, planning to announce their return to Equestria in the morning. News would spread across Equestria quickly and, if Twilight knew Pinkie Pie, the earth pony would probably throw a “Celestia and Luna are back” party as soon as she found out.

For the moment though, Twilight only focused on one thing: Going home with a certain filly alicorn. The library had survived the attack and, at the moment, Twilight wanted, maybe even needed, to have Nyx to herself for a little while.

After sneaking out of the castle, Twilight quickly strode through the empty streets of Ponyville. Upon entering the library, Twilight was thankful to find Owlowski wasn't there. She did see Spike, but he had fallen asleep in the middle of the floor, dozing off in the middle of his chores. It was a sight that really made Twilight feel like she was home, a single, simple familiarity. Taking a moment, Twilight levitated Spike's basket down from the bedroom, ensuring the baby dragon was sleeping comfortably before she took Nyx upstairs.

Having her magic drained away had knocked Nyx out, though it was something Twilight was a little thankful for. If Nyx had woken up at the castle, it would have been more difficult to get the alicorn back to the library without drawing attention. At the moment, however, the filly was still asleep, and Twilight carefully levitated the little alicorn into her bed. Twilight then gently nuzzled the filly, intending the touch to be a gentle good night.

Nyx, however, stirred, groaning a little as she opened her eyes. Confusion flashed across her face as she looked about the room. When she noticed Twilight and how big the unicorn seemed to be, the filly looked down at herself, gaping in disbelief at her, once again, tiny body.

“How are you feeling?” Twilight asked.

“Okay... kind of-” Nyx began to answer, only to squeak a little and lift a hoof to her throat. Her voice was back to the way it was, something that only



confused the filly even more while drawing a small chuckle from Twilight.

It was no surprise that Nyx asked what had happened, and Twilight explained how the alicorn had become a filly again. It was an explanation that Nyx listened to intently, hanging on Twilight's every word until the very end, when Nyx asked, "So... Luna took it all back?"

"What was originally hers, but you should still remember everything that happened recently."

"I... I do remember," Nyx admitted, "but it's weird."

"How is it weird?"

"I can remember. I remember how I used to think, how I used to know all sorts of things, and I remember what I did, but it feels like it was a nightmare. It's like I went to sleep, dreamed all those things, and now I've woken up."

"Luna said that, like your body, your mind has reverted to a younger form. Still, you do know that everything really did happen, don't you? You do realize that it wasn't a nightmare."

"Yes," Nyx admitted, hanging her head a little as she was reminded of all the things she had done. "I know what I did. So, what happens to me now? Are Luna and Celestia going to take me away again?"

"No, they aren't."

Nyx glanced up, confusion in her eyes. "Then... are they going to banish me to the moon?"

"No, they aren't," Twilight said again, beginning to smile.

"Are they going to punish me at all?"

"Yes, they are."

"W-what are they going to do?"

“They are going to make you stay here, and be my daughter,” Twilight answered, offering a big toothy grin. The filly’s eyes lit up in disbelief, the alicorn unable to contain her joy as she leaped out of bed and tackled Twilight. The pair were soon lost in a fit of giggles, Twilight getting revenge for being tackled by playfully tickling Nyx.

It was the kind of fun both of them had been missing. Twilight knew Nyx would grow up eventually, that someday she would once again become a tall, regal alicorn with enough power to move the sun and moon. Still, for the moment, she was utterly happy to have her daughter back, to be able to enjoy raising and caring for Nyx for longer than just a few months.

After Twilight finished tickling Nyx, she helped the alicorn back into bed. Like the many nights before Nyx had been taken away, Twilight carefully tucked the filly into her bed, kissing her daughter on the forehead.

“Welcome home, Nyx,” Twilight spoke sweetly, sneaking another kiss on Nyx’s cheek before the unicorn crawled into her own bed and used magic to turn off the lights.

In the dark of the room, Nyx yawned and snuggled into the covers of her bed, her eyes drifting as she waited for sleep to overtake her. It was strange to be a filly again, for her mind to be like it had been before.

Her eyes were once again playing tricks on her, the filly taking notice of strange shadows around the room that caused a twisting sense of fear to build in her chest. She felt defenseless again. Without all the power she’d had as a grown up, the world was once again a threatening place.

It was a *lot* easier to be brave and courageous when one possess enough magical power to fry almost anything with lightning.

Despite the fact that the world was a scarier place than when she was an adult, Nyx still found a reason to smile. She turned her gaze over to Twilight, the unicorn lying in her own bed. She had a mother that loved her more than anything, one that she knew would never abandon her. She didn’t have to be a queen or a monster anymore.

She could just be herself.

Yet, as Nyx watched Twilight, a thought crossed the filly's mind. It was a silly thought, a stupid thought, but one that made her anxious all the same. It was a thought that came from her younger mind, and it made Nyx worry, even though it was a concern that an older mare would be able to disregard.

"Um...Twilight?"

"Yes, Nyx?" The unicorn asked as she lifted her head off her pillow.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"I know Luna already gave me her judgment, and I'm glad to be a filly again, but... well... I did do a lot of really bad things. So, I was wondering, and if you say yes I promise I won't get mad, but... am I grounded?"

A snort of laughter escaped Twilight's throat before the unicorn could stop it. While Nyx wasn't sure what Twilight found so funny, the unicorn regained her composure quickly and said, with an assuring tone, "No, you're not grounded. You've been though a lot, and I think you've learned your lesson."

"Really?"

"Yes, now don't worry about it anymore and go to sleep."

"Okay," Nyx replied, stifling another yawn as she laid her head down and shut her eyes. Going from being a full adult mare back to a filly was a tiring experience and, before long, Nyx had drifted off to sleep.

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*BURRRRPPP*

Twilight's eyes slid open, the unicorn waking up to the familiar sound of Spike burping up a letter. It was a sound Twilight had longed to hear for the several weeks she was locked in the castle's dungeons. Sitting up, Twilight stifled a yawn before slowly slipping out from her covers and making her

way to the staircase.

Spike had been abruptly woken up by his own belch but, by the time Twilight had gotten to the library's main floor, the baby dragon was already out of his bed and reading the note.

"Morning, Spike."

The baby dragon visibly jumped at the sound of the unicorn's voice, spinning on his heels. Still, the short moment of surprise was quickly replaced with joy. "Hey Twilight, I thought you were going to stay at the castle last night."

"I was, but... a couple things happened. Now, what does the letter say?"

"It's great news; Celestia and Luna are back!"

"Oh, I already knew that," Twilight replied nonchalantly as she began crossing the room, heading towards the kitchen.

"Yeah it's-" Spike began, only to stop and look at Twilight quizzically. "Wait, you know? How do you know?"

"I'll tell you over breakfast, Spike," Twilight replied. "Now, would you go upstairs and wake Nyx?"

"Nyx is upstairs!?" The baby dragon exclaimed, looking towards the library staircase.

"Don't tell me you're scared of her, Spike; she's just our Nyx."

"Twilight, she's a alicorn ten times my size that can shoot *lightning bolts*. I mean, she did save your life, so that makes her okay in my book. I'm not scared, but I'm not stupid either; I don't want to be the one to find out if Nyx woke up on the wrong side of the bed. How in Equestria did get her into the bedroom anyways? She's too big to fit up the stairs... well, unless she turned into a cloud or something. Then she could probably fit anywhere."

"...Spike, just go get her."

“All right, all right, I’m going,” Spike grumbled, already climbing up the stairs while Twilight made her way into the library’s kitchen. With her unicorn magic, Twilight began drawing out ingredients for a nice, hearty breakfast. It would be Nyx’s first breakfast back at the library and Twilight wanted to make it a good one. That, and she’d missed dinner the evening before, so the unicorn looked forward to enjoying a big meal as well.

Opening the cupboards, Twilight levitated out some bowls and basic ingredients. She was feeling like pancakes and, thankfully, they had all the ingredients for the only pancake [recipe](#) Twilight knew.

“Let’s see,” Twilight mused to herself as she remembered the recipe, “flour, sugar, cinnamon, baking powder, milk, vegetable oil, water, vanilla, butter. Good, looks like I have everything I-”

**SLAMMM!!!**

Twilight almost dropped all the ingredients she had been levitating in the air, but managed to keep a hold of everything... except the bag of flour, which dropped to the floor like a stone and threw up a huge white cloud upon impact, filling the air with a smoke screen of white powder.

Twilight hacked and coughed as the flour settled, the front of her body covered in white dust, as was much of the kitchen. It was a sizable mess, one that Twilight could only frown at before turning her eyes to the kitchen door, where Spike was smiling back sheepishly.

“Oh... uh... sorry Twilight.”

“It’s fine,” the unicorn huffed, “though I would like to know *why* you just burst through the door like that.”

“Twilight, Nyx is a filly again!”

“Yes, I *know*, Spike,” Twilight replied as she shook her body, trying to throw off the flour that was covering her.

“Wait, you knew that too? When did all this happen?”

“Yesterday evening. Luna was the one that changed her back.”

“But why would Luna-”

Twilight cut the baby dragon off, putting a broom and dustpan into Spike’s claws. “I’ll explain while we clean up this mess.”

The baby dragon nodded and, as the pair worked, Twilight filled spike in everything that happened. There were a couple times the unicorn had to back up and repeat herself but, by the time the kitchen was clean, the baby dragon had a fairly strong grasp on what had transpired.

“So... Nyx is mostly back to the way she was, but she still remembers everything that’s happened? And at the same time, Luna’s now as big and tall like Celestia, because she took back the power Nyx had?”

“Pretty much.”

“Wow... a lot happened yesterday.”

“Yes, it did,” Twilight answered as she threw the last bit of the spilled flour away. “Now, would you please go upstairs and get Nyx while I start on these pancakes?”

Spike nodded, scampering out of the kitchen while Twilight turned her levitation spell on the pancake ingredients, beginning to carefully measure out and pour them into a mixing bowl. Soon, the batter was perfect and Twilight was cooking the first pancake on the stove. Feeling just a little adventurous, the unicorn chose to forgo using a spatula and tried to flip the pancake with just her magic.

*SQQQQUUUUUEEEEEEE!*

The sound of Nyx’s voice made Twilight jump for a second time that morning. The half-cooked pancake, which was being lifted up by Twilight’s magic, soared skyward, flipping and turning in the air before it came back down. With a thick splat, the uncooked side of the pancake landed on Twilight’s head, the white batter sliding down her face as the unicorn furrowed her eyebrows in annoyance.

“Twilight, Twilight!” Spike chanted as he and Nyx came running through the

kitchen door, only for both to come to a stop dead in their tracks.

“Whoa, Twilight, you trying to cook that pancake on your head?” Spike joked, which only drew a frown and an annoyed glare from the unicorn.

“No, I’m not,” Twilight grumbled as she levitated the pancake off her head and grabbed a wet rag from the sink, starting to clean off the lingering batter. “Now, why did I hear a scream?”

“Nyx has her cutie mark!”

Twilight’s annoyance disappeared as she lowered the wash rag from her face. “She does!?”

“Yeah!” Nyx chirped back, turning to the side. “See?”

Twilight leaned forward a little, eyes focusing on Nyx’s side. Her cutie mark was a single, simple image: A night-blue shield. The shield itself was a kite shield, which had a square top and sides, with a bottom that tapered off to a single point. The blue color was steely, with a slightly lighter-toned metallic highlight.

“Isn’t it amazing?” Nyx asked.

“Yes, it is,” Twilight answered. “Did you just get it?”

“No, and that’s the thing we couldn’t figure out,” Spike explained. “I saw it when Nyx climbed out of bed, and I’ve never heard of a pony getting a cutie mark while they were asleep... well, unless their special talent is sleeping. Anyways, that means she had to get it before she went to sleep last night, but she doesn’t remember seeing it before she woke up.”

“We were wondering if you know when it showed up, and if you know what it means,” Nyx added.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t. Maybe Celestia knows.”

“Why would Celestia know?”

“She stayed with me and Nyx most of yesterday, so maybe she saw

something. Spike?”

The baby dragon smiled, slipping out the kitchen door and appearing a few moments later, quill and paper in his claws. “Ready.”

“Dear Princess Celestia, I hope you are having an easy time settling back into Canterlot,” Twilight began as Spike wrote down the letter. “I know you must be busy, but we discovered this morning that Nyx has her cutie mark, but we do not know when it appeared. I was wondering if you, by chance, noticed anything yesterday, since we know that Nyx did not have her cutie mark before the attack. Your Faithful Student, Twilight Sparkle.”

“Twilight... Sparkle.” Spike echoed, finishing the letter. In a flash of emerald fire the scroll was gone and, after a little encouragement from Nyx and Spike, Twilight began a third attempt at making pancakes. As Twilight cooked, Spike and Nyx tried to guess what the filly’s cutie mark meant, Twilight joining the conversation once she had three plates stacked high with light, fluffy pancakes.

“You really think that’s what it means?”

“Oh yeah, that *has* to be what it means,” Spike assured as Twilight put a plate full of pancakes in front of him. “Twilight will back me up.”

“Back you up on what?” Twilight asked as she set down Nyx’s plate.

“I think Nyx’s cutie mark means her special talent is being tough.”

“Really?”

“Well, think about all the stuff she did when she was Nigh-, I mean... when she was big. She fought back a bunch of monsters and beat Celestia. A pony has to be tough to do all that, and shields are tough.”

“But Applejack, Pinkie Pie, and Fluttershy helped me fight all those monsters, and Celestia wasn’t really trying to beat me when we fought,” Nyx pointed out as Twilight sat down at the table with her own plate of food.

“But you still beat her.”



“I’m sorry, Spike, but, if you’re right, then wouldn’t Nyx’s cutie mark have appeared after she defeated Celestia?” Twilight pointed out as she watched the baby dragon drown his pancakes in maple syrup.

“Well, I guess you’re-” Spike began, only for his cheeks to puff out. A moment later the baby dragon belched, a cloud of smoke swirling and forming into scroll. The letter dropped out of the air a moment later. It took a quick bit of magic for Twilight to catch the scroll, but she managed to save the message from landing on top of Spike’s syrup drenched pancakes.

“So, does Celestia know?” Nyx asked, completely ignoring her pancakes for the moment.

“Just a second, let me read,” Twilight countered, unrolling the scroll.

*To My Faithful Student,*

*Things are busy around the palace, mostly because everypony wants to celebrate that Luna and I have returned. Still, it is good to be home and we are settling back in.*

*As to your question, I do believe I know when Nyx gained her cutie mark. It was yesterday, when she was surrendering herself to me and Luna. It was just after she finished speaking that I noticed a flash of light coming from her side. I was unable to see the mark at the time, due to Nyx’s bandages, but I do believe that was when Nyx’s cutie mark appeared.*

*Hopefully you find that helpful, and I offer my congratulations to Nyx.*

*Sincerely,  
Princess Celestia of Equestria*

*P.S. Luna offers her congratulations as well.*

Twilight’s mind was slipping back, remembering that moment in time. She had wanted to stop Nyx, but she had surrendered herself to Celestia and Luna all the same. It was then, at the end, that Nyx had spoken what could have easily been her final words.

*"I can be bruised, battered and beaten but, as long as there is still breath in my lungs, I will continue to protect ponies. I will protect them, because what can kill them I can survive, because what hurts them is but a scratch for me, because it's the one thing I've been able to do right."*

"So, what did Celestia say?" Spike asked through a mouthful of pancake.

"She remembered seeing a flash of light, and she thinks that's when Nyx got her cutie mark. If she's right, then I think I know what your special talent is."

"What is it?" Nyx asked anxiously.

"I think your special talent is protecting other ponies."

"Protecting other ponies..." Nyx echoed quizzically.

"Yes, like how you protected Ponyville from the monster attack. Like how you were willing to surrender yourself not only to make up for what you had done but the things done by the Children of Nightmare. Like a shield," Twilight continued, pointing at Nyx's cutie mark, "you are willing to put yourself in danger to protect ponies, no matter who they are."

Nyx glanced down at her cutie mark and then turned to look at her pancakes, staring at them while the thought of her special talent rolled around in her head. The filly then looked back at Twilight, obviously a little worried. "Um... Twilight? If my talent is protecting ponies, does that mean I have to fight monsters right now?"

Twilight chuckled before shaking her head.

"No, you don't have to worry about fighting monsters right now. You're just a filly, and Luna took away most of your magic. Though, even if you *did* have all your powers, I *still* wouldn't let you fight anything from the Everfree Forest."

"Why?"

"Because I don't want to even *think* about you fighting anything until you're at least my age. Besides, while protecting other ponies is a good special

talent, you'll have to wait a few years before I let you do anything that dangerous."

A smile spread onto Nyx's lips. The filly would have probably jumped out of her seat in joy from not only having a cutie mark, but having Twilight think it was good. Still, while the filly kept herself contained to her chair, she quickly began expressing her joy while eating her pancakes. Each fork full was consumed with a huge smile. Even the filly's chewing was happy.

"That *is* a nice special talent," Spike commented after taking a drink of water to wash down a bite of pancake, "but I think that makes me kind of right."

"Right about what?" Twilight asked.

"Well, Nyx's special talent. I mean, to be good at protecting ponies she has to be pretty tough."

Twilight laughed a little, about to take her first bite of pancake. "Well, I think it takes a little more than *just* being tough, but-

*KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK*

The unicorn sighed, wondering if she would get to eat breakfast at all that morning through all the interruptions. Twilight had every intention of ignoring the pony at the door, but a second set of knocks forced the unicorn to set fork down and step away from the table. Upon reaching the front door, Twilight opened it to reveal a pink earth pony with bright blue eyes.

"Hey Pinkie Pie."

"Twilight, what *are* you doing inside?"

"Trying to eat breakfast. Why?"

"You silly filly, if you want to eat breakfast you should come to the party!"

"What party?" Twilight asked, only for Pinkie Pie to point a hoof. Twilight stuck her head out of the library door and saw that, a few blocks away, the streets of Ponyville had been transformed, decorated with banners and

flags that featured suns and moons. Ponies were outside, the streets completely packed. Twilight could even hear music in the air, though it sounded like it was coming from several blocks away.

“What’s all that about?”

“It’s my ‘Celestia and Luna are back’ party!” Pinkie Pie answered with a bounce. “A pegasus came from Canterlot this morning and told the mayor that Celestia and Luna were back, and then she told Ditzzy Doo, and Ditzzy Doo told Carrot Top, and then Carrot Top told Mr. Cake, and then Mr. Cake told me and Mrs. Cake, and I was so happy and excited I started planning a party right then and there!”

“Wait, so you threw a party together already?”

“Of course!” Pinkie Pie replied. “I mean, I put together a party just as big for when we saved Luna, and I barely had any time then! This time I actually had ponies to put up decorations, and I got punch made, and I have five cakes baking!”

“Wait, how do you have five cakes baking? There’s only one oven at Sugarcube Corner.”

“That’s easy, Silly! I just used other ponies’ ovens.”

“I guess that would make sense,” Twilight replied, though she was honestly expecting a much stranger answer from the pink earth pony.

“So, are you going to come to the party?”

“Actually, I may not, Pinkie Pie.”

“Awwww, why not? I mean, it’s going to be so terrific and I’d think you, more than anypony, would be happy that Celestia and Luna are back!”

“I am happy, but I wouldn’t want to make Nyx stay here at the library by herself, and it’s not really a party she would probably like to go to. While it’s a party for Celestia and Luna coming back, there have to be some ponies out there celebrating the fact that they think Nyx is gone.”

“Oh, everypony already knows about Nyx.”

“They... do?” Twilight asked, swallowing nervously.

“Yeah. The message Celestia and Luna sent out said that Nyx let the princesses go from the sun and moon, and that they punished Nyx by taking away her powers and putting her in the care of a pony that would make sure she wouldn't be a threat to Equestria ever again, a pony Celestia trusts completely.

“And,” Pinkie Pie continued, “Celestia doesn't trust any pony more than you, so I *knew* Nyx was staying with you. That, and a couple of ponies saw you leaving the castle last night with a little black filly. Still, Celestia's punishment sounds so silly. Anypony that knows you and Nyx would know that the idea of her living with you isn't a *real* punishment!”

Twilight found herself smiling as she silently thanked Celestia and Luna. The princesses had told Equestria the full truth about Nyx, but had done it in such a way that most of Equestria would believe the filly was actually being punished. To the common pony, it sounded like the alicorn was being carefully guarded and that her powers had been taken away by force.

Yet the residents of Ponyville, who knew Nyx better, could see the full truth. Most would be angry that the filly got off so easily, but some would be happy to know Nyx was back with the unicorn that cared about her. It was probably a foal's hope, believing all of Equestria wouldn't find out the full truth soon or later, but Twilight was thankful for what the princesses had done all the same.

“It does sound like a lot of fun, Pinkie Pie, but I think Spike, Nyx and I should just spend today together.”

Pinkie Pie smiled knowingly. “Okay Twilight, I hope you three have fun! Oh, and if you change your mind, you're welcome to stop by the party and get some cake.”

“I'll keep that in mind,” Twilight replied, about to slip back inside the library when a thought struck her. “Hey, Pinkie Pie?”

“Yeah?”

“Do the Cakes have any parties planned in Sugarcube Corner over the next few days?”

“Not that I can think of... why?”

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“Spike... Twilight!?” Nyx called out, the filly slowly descending the stairs of the library’s main floor.

It had been a few days since Celestia and Luna’s return, a few fun days the filly had spent with Twilight, Spike, and Owlowiscious, getting back into a normal routine. It hadn’t all been peaceful, a few ponies coming to the library to argue with Twilight that Nyx needed to be locked up or even taken away from the unicorn. Twilight, however, proceeded to chew out and slam the library door in those ponies’ faces, always reassuring Nyx that she didn’t deserve any of the punishments they were demanding.

It had been okay until about three ponies came at once, fully intending to take Nyx by force and lock her up until they could convince Celestia she needed to be banished. It had been a tense evening, but Twilight had won in the end. Then, to make Nyx feel better, the unicorn broke her usual rule, reading Nyx two stories before bedtime.

Nyx had been so excited that she made herself stay up for both stories, which resulted in her sleeping in. It was almost ten in the morning and, while Nyx wasn’t surprised to see Twilight and Spike weren’t in bed, she was surprised to find they weren’t in the kitchen or the library’s main room.

“W-where is everypony?” Nyx asked herself after checking most of the rooms. For a brief moment, a flicker of fear sparked inside the filly, her more youthful mind betraying her. She couldn’t stop herself from wondering if she had been abandoned again, but she dispelled the thought with a firm shake of her head.

She knew Twilight wouldn’t just leave her like that. Not now, not ever.

That still left Nyx wondering where everypony was, and she began to search the library. It was when she was in the library’s basement that the

rapping of a hoof on wood reached the filly's ears.

Somepony was knocking on the front door. For a moment, Nyx wasn't sure whether or not she should answer the door, remembering some of the ponies who had come to the library who felt she had gotten off easy. Nyx, however, realized that the pony at the door could be Twilight or some other nice pony, so she decided to at least see who it was.

Galloping to the door, Nyx's horn began to glow. She had to fumble with the handle for a moment, needing to get better acquainted with her now much weaker magic, but the filly got the door unlatched all the same and used her nose to push it open.

"There you are!"

Nyx jumped back, a small "eep!" escaping her throat as she retreated into the library. The party pony of Ponyville, Pinkie Pie, had been standing right on the library door step and caught Nyx off guard. Even after startling the filly, Pinkie Pie quickly zipped inside and got right up beside Nyx, giving the filly a playful noogie.

"I was so worried you were going to go and sleep through the party, but Twilight said I couldn't wake you up until it was eleven. I thought that was kind of sad, since you've missed so much fun already, but then I heard somepony moving around. So, I guessed you were awake, decided to try knocking on the door, and I was right! Now you can come to the party earlier, and have so much fun! I bet if we really try really hard, we can make up for the hour you were a sleepy McSleeperhead!"

"Pinkie Pie, stop it!" Nyx half-giggled, half-whined as she escaped the earth pony's relentless but playful noogie. "What's going on? What party?"

"Oh, my 'Thanks-For-Saving-Ponyville-From-A-Bunch-Of-Scary-Monsters'-party, and guess who is the guest of honor?"

"Twilight?"

"Noooo~." Pinkie Pie replied with a sing-song voice.

"... Rainbow Dash?"

“*giggle* No!”

“... Applejack?”

“Not even close.”

“...Fluttershy?”

“....wow, you *really* need to practice at guessing games. It’s *you*, you silly filly!”

“M... me?”

“Well *duh*. Yeah, Applejack and Rainbow Dash and Twilight and Fluttershy all helped, but *you* were the mare that really saved the day. You went and broke yourself into all those clones, and then you flew around helping ponies like an army of super heroes! You brought lightning down with big KA-CRACKS, and you bucked with some KA-POWS, and threw some of the monsters back into the forest with a NEEERRR-THOOOOM!!! It was so totally amazing!”

“It was?”

“Yep! Now come on, everypony we know is over at Sugarcube Corner, and they’re going to be so excited to see you! Well, it’s actually more everypony you know. I know everypony in Ponyville, and Sugarcube Corner is too small to really fit them all. That, and a lot of ponies I know are being mean-meanie heads. Some actually heard about the party, and came to tell me I shouldn’t be throwing it, that you didn’t deserve a party. How mean is that?”

“Still, all of *my* friends and all of *your* friends are there, and there are some other ponies too.

“Now, come on!” Pinkie Pie chirped. Before Nyx could react, Pinkie Pie had slipped a hoof under the filly’s belly and, with a single swift motion, popped Nyx up into the air. When the filly came back down, she landed on Pinkie Pie’s back. Pinkie then reared back and began to gallop through the streets, Nyx holding on for dear life.



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“WE’RE HERE~!!!” Pinkie Pie sang as she burst through the doors to Sugarcube Corner, startling a number of ponies around the room with her sudden arrival. After barely dodging a few ponies unfortunate enough to be in her path, the pink earth pony skidded to a stop in the center of the room, a slightly shell shocked Nyx holding tightly to the pink pony’s back.

When Nyx dared opened her eyes, her vision was met with a Sugarcube Corner decked out in party decorations, complete with streamers, banners and balloons. Nyx could even see a cake, which had been decorated with a simple but recognizable rendition of a grown up version of herself standing over a defeated Lupus Major, which had X’s over its eyes and its tongue sticking out comically.

Most importantly, Nyx saw the friendly, smiling faces of ponies, something she had sorely missed during her time spent as a Nightmare. There wasn’t a whole lot of ponies; the room was maybe halfway full, but it was still more than Nyx expected. Twilight and her friends, Cheerilee, Scootaloo’s parents and a few other mares and stallions from the community were in attendance. There were even a few faces Nyx didn’t recognize, but even those ponies seemed happy to see her.

It wasn’t just the adult ponies though. Before Nyx could really recover from being whisked through Ponyville by Pinkie Pie, the alicorn filly found herself at the bottom of a pony-pile. Apple Bloom, Scootaloo, Sweetie Belle, and Twist had jumped up, clearing Pinkie Pie’s back and tackling their friend in a fit of laughter and giggles.

“Guess Twilight was tellin’ the truth! You *are* back to normal!” Apple Bloom cheered as she pulled herself out of the pile of equines, the others quickly getting back to their hooves as well.

“Must be weird not being all grown up anymore,” Scootaloo noted, “but it’s good to have ya back, Nyx.”

“Th-thank you. It’s really good to be back. I missed you all so much,” Nyx said with a smile, though it was a grin that quickly withered into a frown as the filly hung her head.

“Listen... I’m... I’m sorry fo-for... you know... locking you in a dungeon...”

“Don’t worry about it,” Apple Bloom reassured as she placed a hoof around Nyx’s shoulders. “We know you were just tryin’ to protect us, even if it was kind of borin’ being locked up.”

“Yeah, it’s totally- HEEEEYYYYY!” Scootaloo said, quickly zipping over to Nyx’s side. “Since when did you have that?”

“Have what?” Twist asked, tilting her head quizzically to the right side.

“Nyx has her cutie mark!” Apple Bloom chirped with a bounce.

“Really?! What is it?”

“Oh, I know; it’s a shovel!” Apple Bloom said matter of factly.

“No, it doesn’t have a handle. I say it’s an arrow head.” Sweetie Belle argued.

“It’s not shaped right to be an arrow head. Uh, maybe it’s a... uh...” Scootaloo began, only to be cut off.

“It’s a shield,” Nyx said with a proud smile, despite the quizzical looks from her friends.

“A shield? What kind of special talent do you have that gives you a shield for a cutie mark?”

“Twilight says my special talent is protecting other ponies, even when I have put myself in harm’s way, like how I protected Ponyville during the attack.”

“Whoa, that’s a pretty cool. It’s not as cool as Rainbow Dash’s cutie mark, but still cool,” Scootaloo said with an approving smile.

“But... I can still be a Crusader, right?” Nyx asked.

“Of course!” Sweetie Belle chirped. “After you made Twist a Cutie Mark Crusader, we’ve started a new policy. Ponies who already have cutie

marks are allowed to be members as long as they help members who don't have cutie marks discover their special talents. Though, you'll have to work pretty hard to keep up with Twist. She's been helping us out a whole bunch."

"Aw, I just bring snacks," Twist admitted, rubbing the back of her neck.

"But the snacks you bring are great, and you also help us find more things to try out for our special talents," Apple Bloom pointed out.

"Hey," Scootaloo began, "maybe one of our cutie marks are like Nyx's! Maybe we should try defending other ponies."

"But, what can we defend ponies against?"

Nyx felt a bit of unease rising up in her chest, the filly not wanting to let her friends go running into Everfree Forest to try and defeat one of the monsters she had chased away. It was then she noticed a piñata, shaped like a hydra, hanging off a hook in the ceiling.

"You know," Nyx began, a sly grin starting to form on her face, "that big hydra looks pretty mean and scary. We wouldn't want it hurting any ponies here at the party..."

"Yeah... it *is* pretty big and nasty..." Scootaloo agreed, rubbing her chin. The other four fillies soon caught onto Nyx's idea and, with large smiles, the five friends shouted out in unison, scaring half the ponies at the party.

"CUTIE MARK CRUSADERS PIÑATA MONSTER SLAYERS!!! YAY!!!"

The Crusaders, now numbering at five energetic fillies, quickly ran off to find a blindfold and stick so that they could crack open the piñata... or, rather, defend the innocent party goers from the paper-mache monster that just *happened* to be filled with candy.

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"No cutie marks, but this candy is great," Apple Bloom said, the five fillies of the Crusaders sitting at a table. Nearby, the broken remains of an piñata lay scattered across the floor. Scootaloo had been the one to bring down

the brightly colored paper-mache hydra, which had been *such* a threat to the party and all ponies in attendance. It was a glorious explosion of candy and the other fillies and colts that were at the party cheered as they scrambled to get their share of the bounty.

“So, Nyx,” Sweetie Belle began, after swallowing a piece of candy, a small chocolate. “what was it like to be queen?”

“I honestly didn’t like it that much,” Nyx answered, sticking her tongue out at the sour memory.

“Really? I mean, wasn’t it cool to live in that big castle and have all them servants workin’ for ya?” Apple Bloom asked.

“The castle was nice, but all those ponies always expected me to be like the real Nightmare Moon. That, and they always tried to get me to wear make-up and armor, and I don’t like that armor.”

“Well, the food was good, wasn’t it?” Sweetie Belle asked.

“Sometimes, but the castle cook always made my food too fancy. I’d ask for a sandwich and the chef always turned it into an art project.”

“But those pastries he made were really good!” Scootaloo exclaimed, “Even after Sweetie Belle sat on one.”

“I still can’t believe you ate that...” Sweetie Belle commented.

“What? It was still good, just a little squished,” the orange pegasus defended before popping another small candy into her mouth. Still, Sweetie Belle wasn’t ready to drop the issue so quickly and, within moments, she and Scootaloo had gotten into a discussion about when it was and wasn’t okay to eat a dessert. Apple Bloom, Twist, and Nyx weighed in from time to time, but the trio mostly just sat back and grimaced as Scootaloo openly admitted that she would eat a pastry even if it was dropped in the mud, after brushing off most of the dirt anyway.

It was during this conversation that Nyx noticed a glint out of the corner of her eye and looked to her side. A familiar pair of fillies were coming in the front door of Sugarcube Corner, the shimmer of light coming from the tiara

that one of the fillies was wearing.

“Isn’t that right, Nyx?”

The filly alicorn shook her head, looking back at her friends. “What? Sorry, I wasn’t listening.”

“I was asking if it was cool to have a magical mane like Celestia’s,” Sweetie Belle repeated.

“I thought we were talking about what Scootaloo is willing to eat.”

“We were, but then Apple Bloom said something about the mane and tail you had when you were all grown up, and we started talking about that. Weren’t you listening at all?” Twist asked before taking a bite of taffy.

“Sorry, I got distracted, but yes, I guess it was pretty cool.”

“I wish I had a mane like that,” Sweetie Belle admitted. “It was so pretty.”

“Pretty nothing, I just wish I could get my mane to *do* things,” Apple Bloom countered. “I could get to the cookie jar Big Mac hides on the top shelf if I had a mane like Nyx did.”

As her friends shifted into a conversation about the benefits of having a magical mane, Nyx excused herself a moment. After trotting around the party for a while, Nyx found Twilight talking with the mail-mare, Ditzzy Doo, near the punch bowl.

“Are you sure it’s okay?”

“I don’t mind at all,” Twilight assured. “I’d be happy to help Dinky with her magic.”

“Thank you, Twilight. My little muffin has just been so excited about magic since she played you in that spring play. I know she’ll be so excited to hear you’re willing to teach her.”

“Um, Twilight?” Nyx quietly interrupted, seeing a small break in the conversation.

"Oh, hey Nyx, are you having fun?"

"I am, but... why are Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon here?" the filly asked, glancing over to see the two bullies standing in a corner, not really interacting or playing with anypony else at the party.

"I know you don't like them, Nyx, but I asked them to come."

"Why would you want them here?"

"Do you remember what you did to them when you first became an adult?" Twilight asked, her tone becoming more parental and stern.

Nyx flattened her ears against her head, remembering how she had singled out the pair of fillies and practically blamed them for her resurrection.

"Yes... I remember."

"Don't you think they deserve an apology?"

Nyx frowned, glancing over at the pair of fillies that had been the bane of her existence when she was in school. "I guess... but what if they don't want to accept my apology?"

"Then that's their loss," Twilight answered, giving the filly alicorn a gentle nudge with her hoof. "Now, go on."

"Okay..." Nyx partially pouted as she started to walk across the room, not looking forward to the conversation at all. Thoughts of how Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon would react began flitting about in Nyx's head, and she couldn't foresee it turning out very well. Still, Nyx made her way over to them all the same. She didn't like it, but Twilight was right; she needed to apologize to everypony for what she did, and that included Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon.

"Oh look, Silver Spoon, it's Equestria's 'glorious' queen," Diamond Tiara mocked as the pair noticed the black filly walking up, her words dripping with sarcasm. "What do you want, *Your Majesty*? Oh, wait, let me guess. You want to humiliate us in front of everypony in town, *again*. Or maybe

you want to take my dad away, *again*.”

“I... I...” Nyx fumbled a little, feeling Diamond Tiara’s accusing gaze. Once again, Nyx was having to deal with her younger mind. When she was Nightmare Moon, she wouldn’t have taken that kind of lashing, but as a filly...

Well, as a filly she didn’t want to take it either. She felt guilty; Diamond Tiara’s words were scalding, and she couldn’t deny that part of her wanted to break down, but that didn’t mean she had to. Sure, she was a filly again, but that didn’t mean she had to go back to being a crybaby and a coward too.

She wasn’t going to wilt and wither like she would have before. She would be brave and face her fears. If she could face a bunch of big monsters, then she could handle a couple of bullies.

“I wanted to say I’m sorry.”

Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon glanced at each other, the pair obviously not expecting that to be the reason why the alicorn filly had come over to talk to them.

“Sorry? *Sorry!*? Like, who do you take us for? We’re not stupid! You hate us almost as much as we hate you, so why would *you* be sorry?” Diamond Tiara snipped.

“Because what I did wasn’t right, and... and it doesn’t matter if I like you or not. You still deserve an apology.”

“Well, thank you sooo much. That makes things, like, sooo much better.”

Nyx felt herself bristle a little. “I was just trying to be nice. Why did you two even come anyway, if you hate me so much.”

“We just wanted to see how lame this party was going to be, and get some free cake. Now, why don’t you go and be *nice* with your blank flank friends?” Diamond Tiara dismissed, waving Nyx off with a hoof. “We don’t need your sympathy, *Nightmare Moon*.”

Nyx furrowed her eyebrows, trying to fight the urge to flip Diamond Tiara upside down with her magic. It was a part of her old personality, her Nightmare Moon side, that remained despite Nyx's return to fillyhood. More than once, as a full grown mare, Nyx had proven she had a quick temper. It was the temper that made her lash out at her guards and servants when they disobeyed or questioned her, the temper that made her want to strangle Spell Nexus's scrawny neck for almost killing Twilight.

It was a temper that now remained with Nyx, but one she managed to wrangle before she did something she'd regret. She had given her apology, and if those two wanted to be snooty and mean then that was their business. Turning on her hooves, Nyx began walking away, doing her best to do it calmly. She wanted to deny bullies the pleasure of knowing they had gotten under her skin, yet she couldn't keep herself from stomping a little.

Nyx was so wrapped up in being angry at Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon that she almost walked right past Twilight, the unicorn having to step on Nyx's tail to catch her.

"Did you apologize?" Twilight asked firmly, keeping her hoof on the filly's tail.

"Yes," Nyx replied with a mixture of a grumble and whine, "but they didn't accept it."

"That's fine," Twilight assured, releasing Nyx's tail and letting the filly turn around. "What matters is that you did the right thing. Now, why don't we go cut the cake?"

Nyx allowed herself to smile a little, her anger over Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon subsiding as she walked with Twilight over to the dessert table. She didn't need Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon to like her; she had Twilight and her friends.

That, and the cake looked delicious.

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"Well Sister, it seems that most of Canterlot is taking your transformation



well,” Celestia offered as she and Luna strode through the royal castle, having a short respite between meetings and announcements. It had been very hectic for the Royal Sisters, trying to balance the work that needed to be done while with the number of public appearances they had to make. “They take it as a sign of Nightmare Moon’s defeat, that I ‘conquered’ the great monster and reclaimed my power. It may not be the proper truth, but I see no point in correcting them.”

“An honorable motive, Sister, but I fear that the ‘proper’ truth will come out in time. Some ponies from Ponyville have already sent letters to me about the fact that Twilight isn’t *punishing* Nyx as they think she should. A letter from one Regal Cut said that his daughter, Diamond Tiara, was invited to a party for Nyx.”

“A party?” Luna echoed quizzically.

“From the invitation I received, it was a ‘Thanks-For-Saving-Ponyville-From-A-Bunch-Of-Scary-Monsters’ party, thrown by the bearer of the Element of Laughter, Pinkie Pie. If memory serves me right, the party is going on right now.”

A small chuckle escaped Luna’s lips as she thought back to day she had first met the six friends. “I know Pinkie Pie does throw very grand parties, having attended one myself. I hope Nyx enjoys it.”

“Speaking of Nyx, I must admit I was curious about something. I feel you made the best decision for Nyx and Twilight, taking back your power and memories, but-”

“You want to know how I did it?”

“Yes,” Celestia replied. “It isn’t a spell I’m familiar with.”

The smile slid from Luna’s face, the younger princess choosing to focus on the corridor ahead. “It was a spell created out of dark jealousy and ill-intentions. My plans to try and keep the moon in the sky began before I properly became Nightmare Moon, and I knew that I wouldn’t be able to resist you and the sun for long, considering you are my elder and superior, at least in terms of power.

“So I studied and developed a spell that allowed me to steal magic. Flowers, trees... ponies... I stole not only their arcane power but, if I came across a pony with a unique knowledge of magic, I could steal that knowledge as well.

“I used the spell to build up my power,” Luna admitted, hints of disgrace flitting in the moon princess’s words. “When I had enough knowledge and magic gathered, I used it to transform into Nightmare Moon. I infused myself with the power and became a monster that could easily stand against the mare you were a thousand years ago. It... it is a horrible and dark art.”

“Do not worry yourself, Sister; all that is in the past, and you found a way to take that spell and put it to good use.”

“I didn’t want Nyx to have to live with the mistakes I made. I wanted to take it all back from her... and that desire made me think of that spell for the first time in centuries. I had almost forgotten it completely. It hadn’t crossed my mind since I became Nightmare Moon. Perhaps that is why Nyx does not know of the spell. It is a small miracle if that is true, that she only knows the things I thought about when she and I were one and the same.

“Still, once I did remember the spell, I knew that was the best thing I could do for her.”

“It was the best outcome we could have hoped for, I believe,” Celestia agreed. “Many in Equestria may still fear and despise Nyx for what she did but, as long there are those who see the good in her, I’m sure she will be able to find her way.”

“That, and you didn’t mention to Twilight you’ve put a couple royal guards undercover in Ponyville to make sure Nyx doesn’t get attacked by an angry mob,” Luna added knowingly.

“Just a precaution, nothing more.”

“Don’t worry, Sister. Your secret is safe with me,” Luna assured as the pair reached their destination. It was the castle dining hall, which was already filled to the brim with ponies. Another celebratory meal, hosted this time by the elite of Manehattan, who were more than eager to welcome back the

Royal Sisters.

Celestia and Luna took their seats at the head of the table. The Mayor of Manehattan, along with a few of the city's biggest business ponies, had the privilege of sitting right next to the Royal Sisters and, after the princesses offered some welcoming words, lunch was served.

The business ponies around Celestia and Luna were soon lost in a discussion about the economic impact of Nightmare Moon's short-lived reign. It was a conversation the princesses only half listened to, Luna eagerly digging into her food after the long morning while Celestia picked and nibbled at her meal.

"What's wrong, Tia? Aren't you hungry?" Luna whispered quietly before putting a forkful of food in her mouth.

"I am starving, but I already ate too much at breakfast," Celestia whispered back, not wanting to draw the attention of the nearby business ponies.

"After what we've already eaten today, I honestly shouldn't be eating anything more than a green salad, and that's *if* I don't want to have to skip dinner."

Luna laughed to herself. "I still say you worry too much about your weight, Celestia."

"You may be able to eat whatever you want, but, as you may recall, I've always had to be a little more conscious of my figure," Celestia snipped, glancing to her side as a servant came up beside her. He whispered something into the sun princess's ear before quickly retreating.

"What's wrong?" Luna asked, pausing with a fork in front her mouth.

"It's Spell Nexus," Celestia whispered. "He's broken into the castle dungeons."

"Broken *in*?"

"He's distraught because of the role he played in Nightmare Moon's resurrection, even though it is my understanding that he and all the other Children of Nightmare were being influenced by parasitic magic."

“So he broke into the dungeon to reprimand himself?”

Celestia nodded, taking up her napkin and gently cleaning her mouth. “Yes. Spell Nexus has always been a little over dramatic; you should have seen him this one time when he was still my student. He accidentally broke a vase in the castle and was sure I needed to banish him from the kingdom. He can be such a drama queen at times.”

“Don’t you mean ‘king’?”

“No, queen,” Celestia corrected with a small grin. “Don’t tell anypony else, but he has a very high pitched scream.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“I am going to leave you to entertain our guests while I go convince Spell Nexus he does not need to imprison himself in the dungeon,” Celestia answered as she stood from her seat. “That... and, if I know him, I’ll also need to convince him that he doesn’t have to resign from his positions.”

“Do you want me to save you a piece of dessert? It’s supposed to be cloud cake, your favorite.”

Celestia winced, coming to a stop just a few steps away from her throne. After a few tense moments, the sun princess cast a glance back at Luna. “Save me one small piece... a *small* piece, Luna.”

Luna nodded, watching as Celestia left before going back to her meal. Then, when a servant drew close, Luna waved the mare over, leaned in and whispered quietly as she smiled devilishly.

“Please be sure to save my sister a large, corner piece of cloud cake with as much frosting as possible. Actually, why don’t you just set aside one of the cakes for her, and make sure it’s delivered to the bed chamber this evening.”

“Of course, Your Majesty,” The servant replied, quickly scuttling away while Luna placed a forkful of food in her mouth, imagining just how Celestia would react when she found a whole cloud cake in her bedroom and

wondering if her sister would be able to resist eating it.

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Twilight had a weary smile on her face as she walked back to the library. Spike and Nyx were passed out on her back, the all-day party having utterly worn them out. Beside the unicorn strode Rarity, who was carrying dozing Sweetie Belle her back.

"I think that even Pinkie Pie is tired after today," Rarity said, her own exhaustion apparent in her voice. "I, for the first time ever, saw her walking up to her loft instead of bouncing."

"Yeah, but it was still a lot of fun."

"That it was, Twilight, that it was," Rarity agreed. "Still, there is something I wanted to tell you before I forget."

"What is it, Rarity?"

"Well, at the beginning of all this, I thought you were crazy taking care of a filly that could, and turned out to be, at least in part, Nightmare Moon. And not just because of Nyx, but because of you as well. I know you've taken care of Spike, but I always assumed you got help raising him from Celestia."

"Well, she and some of the professors at the school."

"Exactly. I was worried about what Nyx really was and your safety, but I was also worried that you didn't realize what you were getting yourself into. Taking care of a filly is a lot of responsibility, and Spike is really more of your assistant since he's capable of taking care of himself."

"But what I wanted to say is that I've never been happier to be proven wrong. I think you've really have what it takes to take care of Nyx."

"Thanks, Rarity. That means a lot coming from you."

"Just don't let it go to your head," Rarity warned. "You may have done well so far, but you can't let your guard down either. Trust me, if you don't keep

an eye on a little filly, she'll get into trouble faster than you can imagine. I still can't believe Sweetie Belle was able to get into my golden fabric to make her crusader capes without me even noticing."

Twilight giggled a little, having heard more than once about the kind of trouble Sweetie Belle could cause for her sister. "I'll be sure to keep that in mind."

"I hope you do," Rarity remarked as the pair reached an intersection in town. "It would seem this is where we part ways for now. Good night, Twilight."

"Night, Rarity," Twilight replied, watching the white unicorn take a few steps down the other street before she started to walk in the other direction. Within a few minutes Twilight had reached the library and, after tucking both Spike and Nyx into bed, the unicorn slipped downstairs. Summoning a scroll and ink jar to her side, Twilight began to write in the candlelight.

*Dear Princess Celestia,*

*I just wanted to thank you and Luna again for letting Nyx stay with me. While most of Equestria may not be as welcoming to her, I can assure you that, after today's events, Nyx has friends among the ponies in Ponyville. Ponies who are willing to see her for who she is, not who she was.*

*The one thing that I've learned from raising Nyx is that if anypony wants to change for the better, they can, especially if they have help from good friends. When I first saw Nyx, I was, just like you, afraid that she was Nightmare Moon, the real Nightmare Moon. Even after I quickly discovered her, at the time, timid personality, I was still afraid of truth, and I realize now that I was actively denying all evidence that pointed to who she was, just to alleviate my own fears.*

*And yet, despite all that happened, things didn't turn out as dark as they could have. From what I've heard, even when she was fully resurrected, Nyx wasn't the Nightmare Moon from the legends or the books. The time she spent with me as my daughter, the time she spent with her friends, had changed her for the better. She did not let herself become the real Nightmare Moon and I believe that she never will.*

*And if Nightmare Moon can become a better pony, then I think anypony can.*

*Your Faithful Student,  
Twilight Sparkle*

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*The End*

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Special Thanks Music

Pen Stroke and Batty Gloom would like to extend special thanks to the following people

- For their efforts pre-reading and editing the story -

ActionScripter  
Nightsong  
Lightsideluc  
Kim Fluttershy Dykas  
All others who devoted any time pre-reading

- For making the story's beautiful artwork -

Valcron

- For hosting the story -

Sethisto & Equestria Daily

*We would also like to extend a special thanks to everyone who made fan-art, fan-music, and any fan-content for the story. You honor us with your creative talents.*

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## *From The Desk of Pen Stroke*

*I hope everyone enjoyed Past Sins. This story became much larger and more popular than I could have ever hoped or imagined, and it's been a learning experience having something garnering this much attention. I've never rewritten a story after I've put it out to the internet, but with so many readers I wanted to make sure Past Sins was the best it could be, and I thank you all for being patient as Batty and I have done our best to take your comments and use them to improve the story.*

*Still, the journey of Nightmare Moon finding her redemption, beyond being zapped by a rainbow, is over... for the moment. Batty and I both realize there are more stories that could be told in this alternate version of Equestria that has taken shape, though like the show itself this long, more dramatic story will likely yield short, one-shot, slice of life kind of stories if he and I decide to continue things.*

*For the moment, however, Batty and I need a break. Past Sins needs time to age and gently sink into the archives of Equestria Daily. Don't worry though, you'll see me and Batty around soon enough, but for the moment you should go enjoy some other stories about brightly colored ponies.*

*So, again, thanks for reading and I hope you enjoyed the story.*

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Questions, Comments, Concerns?

[pen.stroke.pony@gmail.com](mailto:pen.stroke.pony@gmail.com)

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I do not own the intellectual properties this fan-fiction is based on.

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