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Prologue

“Why do I even bother?!”

Cherry Swirl kicked at a nearby rock as he wandered around the outskirts of Ponyville. Looking up at the sun, he chuckled humourlessly to himself as it beamed down on the town, reflecting the exact opposite of his mood.

The scrawny young unicorn sighed and sat down on a small haystack, musing over the events of the morning. Finally, after weeks of trying to summon up the courage to ask his neighbour Lily out, he had felt like he was ready. But as he entered the flower shop where she worked, it was as if his limbs had turned to hay and the moment he saw the pretty young filly standing at the cash register, he froze on the spot. One perfect smile from Lily was all it took, and he bolted.

“Why do I have to be such a scatter-mane?! I’ll never have what it takes!” He muttered to himself, his head held in his forehooves.

“She probably thinks I’m an idiot now.”

He sat there for a few minutes, just him and his thoughts. There was no way he could go see Lily now; no doubt she was wise to his feelings. She’d probably told her friends Rose and Daisy all about it by now: About how Cherry Swirl was such a timid little colt, he ran as soon as he looked at her. He’d be hearing about this from his roommates anytime now.

But what if she felt the same, he thought. What if she does like me the same way I like her?

“Rrrggh! What do I do now?!” He muttered aloud.

As he got up to continue his walk, he glanced to his left, seeing the dense and dark trees of the Everfree Forest. He gulped audibly as he walked alongside the fringe, sure to keep his distance. His mother had told him all sorts of stories about the Everfree: All about the monsters and strange beasts that live in it. About how nature gets along in the Forest without the

help of ponies: The plants growing, the weather changing, the animals living, all on their own. Those tales had fascinated him more than scared him, but then she told him the other stories. The stories of young foals and fillies who had wandered into the Forest and never returned. Of strange figures seen in the trees, of ponies dressed strangely, always just out of sight, always glanced just out of the corner of one's eye, before vanishing into the darkness. Of one particular thing that lived deep in the dark of the trees...

He shuddered as memories of these stories flooded his mind. Honestly, they're just pony-tales, he told himself. No reason for a grown stallion like himself to fear them. Shrugging, he turned to head down an alleyway back into town.

But any further thought was cut short as, without warning, something heavy landed squarely on his back, knocking him clean off his hooves. He yelled out in shock as he struggled against the weight holding him down. He felt his own hooves held down by the hooves of another, stronger stallion; no doubt that was what landed on him.

"Get off....me!" he wheezed out, squirming and heaving with all his might, but to no avail. Either this pony was a lot bigger than he felt, or he was insanely strong.

Cherry stopped his struggles, however, as something emerged from the Everfree Forest. A shadow, thin and lithe, moving among the trees, breaching the fringe of the foliage.

But he saw nothing more, as he felt something heavy and muggy pulled over his face, blocking his vision. Struggling with all his might, he doubled his efforts, heaving and bucking, desperate to throw off his assailant. In response, he felt further weight pressing down on his body, another few pairs of hooves holding his limbs and body still. He let out a muffled cry as he suddenly felt a stinging sensation on his flank, as if a blade was cutting marks into his flesh, just over his cutie mark. The pain was excruciating, even when the cutting stopped. He sobbed silently as he felt a warm trickle of blood run down his thigh, when a hoof pressed gently onto the cuts.

A chill went through his whole body, as if the hoof was made of pure ice. His eyes strained against the darkness that consumed his vision, as he tried

time and again to cry out. But his mouth was held shut by whatever they had put over his head.

Then there came a voice. The voice of a stallion, whispering gently into his left ear. The very stallion that pounced on him, perhaps. It was the last thing he knew before all consciousness and sense left his mind:
“Welcome. To The Herd.”

Chapter 1

The glow of Twilight's horn shone bright purple as the young unicorn levitated another book into her enormous bookshelf. Looking around herself at the massive Ponyville Library, with its shelves of books stretching all the way to the ceiling, she wondered to herself how anypony other than a unicorn could have managed it. Every day, there were dozens of books that need shelving, sorting, archiving, refurbishing, and those were hard enough with magic, let alone without!

She nodded with satisfaction as the last book floated up into place. Just as the glow of her horn dimmed and went out, there came the sound of a door closing, and that familiar voice:

"... Thanks, Ditzzy... Twilight! Mail's here!"

Spike, her ever-loyal dragon assistant entered the main room of the library, carrying a small stack of letters and parcels in one hand, and a small muffin in the other.

"Thanks Spike, just leave them on the desk. I'll get to them in a moment... Where'd you get the muffin from?"

"Ditzzy Doo gave it to me." Spike said, half-muffled through his snack "Looks like she brought breakfast with her again, and she must've been in a really good mood today, 'cos she just gave me one of her muffins."

Twilight smiled "Well, that's nice of her." Good old Ditzzy, she thought. One of the friendliest ponies she had ever met in Ponyville, though her googly-eyed expression could be distracting at times.

She headed over to the desk to check out today's mail. Levitating the stack of envelopes and parcels in front of her, she flipped through them one by one:

"Bills...junk...junk...ah, that new copy of 'A brief History of Equestria' I ordered, excellent...hmm, junk... Ooh!"

She stopped and singled out a small package that, unlike most of today's mail, was addressed directly to her, not to the library.

"These must be the photos Rarity was talking about!" Twilight muttered to herself, eagerly ripping the top from the envelope.

One by one, she levitated the individual photographs inside, and placed them each on the floor of the library. Spike wandered over to have a look for himself.

"Take a look, Spike. It's the pictures from Rarity's fashion-shoot last Monday. I helped her out a bit my modelling some of her outfits, so she agreed to send me a copy of the photos."

"Nice." Spike said, glancing at each photo in turn. "You look great in these ones!" He pointed to a series of photos with Twilight modelling a blue, wispy dress, with a turquoise trim.

Twilight grinned modestly "Heh, thanks Spike. It is kinda pretty, huh?" Together, she and Spike went through each photograph, critiquing the look and the style of the dress.

"Ooh, here's a good one of Fluttershy. Green really suits her..."

"Oh wow, I think I like these ones best."

"Any other reason, other than Rarity being the model?"

Spike blushed "Ahh, cut it out!"

Twilight frowned slightly at one photo "Hmm, look at that pony over in the background... there, y'see? Way back there. You'd think rarity would have spotted that..."

The critique went on for a good while before Twilight's stomach rumbled unexpectedly. "Oh, heh... Lost track of time there. How about some lunch Spike?"

The minute dragon nodded “Great idea! Want me to cook somethin’ up here, or shall we go out?”

“Let’s go out. I’m in the mood for a daisy and dandelion salad myself.” Twilight replied, as she gathered up the photos once again to put back in the envelope. But as she opened the envelope again, she noticed that something else was in there.

“Hmm? Oh, there’s another one in here...” She said to herself as she quickly levitated it out. As it floated in the air before her, she paused as she looked the photo over. Even at a glance, she could tell something wasn’t quite right about this photo.

“Hey Twi! You comin’ or not?” Came Spike’s voice from the porch.

The young unicorn shrugged and slipped the curious photo back into the stack of other photos. “Coming, Spike!”

After a hearty lunch of a heaped plate of hay-fries, complimented by a daisy and dandelion salad, Twilight returned to the library, as Spike hurried off to do some shopping for supper tonight. As she closed the door, her mind wandered once again to that curious photo she found in Rarity’s photoshoot. She hadn’t had a proper look at it, but something about it just seemed...off.

She quickly retrieved it from the stack and set it down on the table. Looking closely at it, she realised instantly what seemed to of about it.

It appeared to be a hastily taken photo of a pony, in the park just outside Ponyville, where Rarity’s photoshoot had taken place. It was slightly blurry and out of focus, and clearly zoomed in from a distance. But what unnerved Twilight about it was that the subject of the photo was her!

Was this some sort of joke, she thought to herself. What was the meaning of this photo? And furthermore, who took it? She could see just to the side of the photo, Rarity and the other ponies, standing oblivious of their covert photographer.

A sudden gust of wind from an open window blew the strange photo from her telekinetic grasp, sending it swirling through the air and face-down on the floor.

As Twilight stooped to pick it up again, her eyes grew wide as she saw another image on the other side of the photo. Picking it up, she saw that on the back, somepony had scrawled in black pen, a strange set of images. First, a circle, with an X scrawled through it. Beneath it, a crude drawing of an eye, with a strange word written beneath that, in a language Twilight did not recognise.

“...’V-vigilemus’? What in Equestria is that supposed to mean?!” she wondered aloud.

As she raised her head, she saw a sudden movement out of the corner of her eye. Squeaking in surprise, she looked to the window. Was it just her imagination, or did somepony just hastily move out of sight?

Peeking her head out the window, she looked around. No pony.

“Weird... I could’ve sworn I saw something.... Ehh, you’re working too hard, Twilight.” She reassured herself.

With a day of work to do, Twilight put the whole matter out of her head. For the rest of the afternoon, she dedicated her mind and attention to her studies and her library work.

But that strange word kept floating up from the depths of her mind.
Vigilemus. What did it mean?! Why was it written on the back of that photo? What did that strange symbol mean? And for that matter, who took it?!

These questions plagued her mind long into the evening, but she did her best not to let it intrude on her day to day life.

But that night, any semblance of “day-to-day” went straight out the window.

Around midnight, she stirred in her sleep, opening her eyes slightly. Was it just a dream, or did she just hear something downstairs? It sounded like somepony was moving about down there, walking around in the library.

She rolled over in her sleep. Probably Spike getting a midnight snack. She gazed out her window, up at the gentle glow of the moonlight. Clearly, Luna was doing her job well. She had graced the land with a beautiful full-moon tonight.

The noise downstairs increased, as more hoofsteps echoed through the hollowed-out tree. A chair groaned as it was dragged across the floor, mingling with the familiar sound of books dropping to the floor.

OK, there's no way I'm imagining this! Twilight raised her head, as she threw back the covers...

She then froze as a shadow crossed her window. Just for the briefest of moments, but definitely something. Something passed by, blocking out the light of the moon for a brief moment. From the shape of the silhouette, it appeared to be the head of a pony passing by.

She lay still, petrified with shock for a moment, before relaxing. It was probably just somepony out for a moonlit stroll, who just passed her window. Shrugging, she rolled over again, closing her eyes again.

Her eyes snapped open, however, as realisation flooded over her like a bucket of icy water. Her bedroom was in the top of the tree, about 10 metres above the ground.

A very groggy Twilight lumbered down the stairs to the kitchen the next morning. Her tired legs stumbled on the stairs from her room down to the ground floor, giving way on the last step. With a groan of mingled pain, exhaustion and frustration, she picked herself off the floor at the bottom of the stairs. After the incident with that strange shadow, falling asleep was out of the question for her. She had lain awake all night, her eyes wide open and fixed on her window.

The sight that greeted her arrival downstairs did little to raise her spirits.

Books lay stacked and heaped all over the library floor, whole shelves emptied onto the floor. Chairs were toppled, inkpots were spilled, once-neatly stacked scrolls lay scattered everywhere.

No question about it. Somepony had been in here last night.

“This is ridiculous!” Twilight shouted aloud for the third time that morning.

She and Spike had been busy clearing up after the events of the previous night. As Twilight scrubbed away at the inkstained carpet, Spike grumbled from behind a stack of books:

“Got that right! I was busy all week tidying this place up! Now it’s even worse than before! If I find out who this was…”

“My question is what did they want?” Twilight replied, spraying more cleaning foam on the carpet. “I mean, there’s no sign of who it could have been, and apart from everything being messed up and rearranged, nothing’s missing, so it wasn’t a burglar…”

“Yeah. Whoever it was, they must’ve had some really serious studying to do!” Spike said with a slight chuckle.

Twilight frowned at her assistant, trying her best to look disapproving of Spike’s quip, while inwardly grinning at his remark. Her horn glowed a gentle purple as she levitated a stack of books back onto their shelf. Spike may have meant it as a joke, but who knows? Maybe he was right, and somepony really did break into the library for a midnight read.

But there weren’t any signs of breaking in on the door, or the windows! Either their prowler was incredibly skilled in forced entry, or they had some other way of getting in.

Twilight blanched as sudden fearful thought came over her. What if they hadn’t broken in at night at all? What if they had been in the library beforehand, and just didn’t leave when it closed?!

She shuddered at the thought, quickly putting it out of her mind.

“Well, that’s all of the books.” She said, dusting her hooves on the carpet. “Spike, could you finish off cleaning the ink out of the carpets for me?”

Spike nodded, reluctantly grabbing a brush and bucket of water. “I guess so, but why can’t you do it?”

Twilight slipped her saddlebag round her waist, making sure her purse was inside. "I'm heading into town to get some supplies. If our prowling friend makes another appearance tomorrow night, I at least want to know who it is."

Spike thought this over in his mind, then nodded "Sure thing."

With that, Twilight opened the door and headed out, leaving Spike alone. The dragon brandished the scrubbing-brush like a sword, dunking it with great flourish and pizzazz into the bucket of water.

"Alright, inkstains. You've met yer match!"

"There ya go, missy!" Said Mr. Snapshot jovially as he helped slip a pair of small boxes into Twilight's saddlebag. "You need any help with the tripod?"

The unicorn shook her head. "Ooh, if you would, thanks. Just slip it on my back, under the strap."

The friendly old colt did just that. A small bag of coins levitated from Twilight's saddlebag and landed on the counter as she headed out of the shop.

"Thanks again, Mr Snapshot!" she called as she closed the door behind her and headed back to the library.

Now we'll see who our mysterious prowler really is! The cameras in their neat little boxes were a relatively cheap model, but she wasn't worried. As long as they took pictures, she'd be satisfied.

That afternoon, Twilight spent the majority of the day placing a clever little enchantment on the cameras. After many attempts, she sat down, sweat dripping down her face.

"That...that oughtta do it." She muttered to herself. "Now to test it."

She levitated one of the cameras onto a nearby table, unscrewing the lens-cap and pointing it at the doorway to the library. Standing to one side, she

walked slowly past the porch, passing the door and heading towards the bookshelves.

Her hard work was rewarded as she heard the gentle *Click* of the camera. She smiled; finally, she got it!

Trotting over to the camera, she waited patiently as a small sheet emerged from a slot on the bottom of the camera. She gently pulled the photograph free and held it suspended in front of her face. It clearly showed her walking past the door to the library.

“Perfect.” She muttered to herself, just as Spike emerged from the next room.

“Hey Twi. What’cha got there?”

“Oh , hi Spike. Just setting us up for tonight.” She replied, beckoning him to join her.

Spike stood by her side, looking at the photo “Uh huh... so what does this have to do with the prowler?”

“Well Spike, those supplies I mentioned earlier... It was these little cameras I just bought. I put a spell on them so that they’ll take a picture if anything goes through their line of sight. It wasn’t easy, but I think I got it right.”

Twilight’s horn glowed again as she stood the tripod up in the middle of the room, screwing one of the cameras onto the top, facing the doorway. The other camera, she deposited on her bedside table, with a small book holding one end up, so that it faced the window.

“What’s that one for?” Spike asked, pointing up to Twilight’s bedroom.

Twilight hesitated for a moment. She hadn’t told Spike about the shadow that passed by her window the other night, worrying that he might freak out more if he found out. She innocently smiled, shrugging.

“Er... Extra security. Just in case they came in through there. You never know...”

Hours later, the moon was high in the sky, gazing down on Ponyville. Twilight lay awake in her bed, tossing and turning. She was confident that if anything happened, if their mysterious caller returned tonight, all the evidence they need would be there. But she was still apprehensive, nervous. Even a little excited.

It'd almost be a waste, she thought, if they don't come back...
A sudden sound reached her ears. Her eyes snapped open. They were here!

She made to get up, her ears perked up, ready to hear the telltale clicks of the camera downstairs.

Click!

And there it was. Whoever I was, she had their face now!

Click!

Twilight felt a chill. That click was definitely closer.

Her gaze slowly turned to the small camera that lay perched on her bedside table. A shadow had fallen across the table, from the window.

There, framed in the window was the silhouette of a strange figure. Twilight froze with fear. It was coming in the window!

She shrunk back in terror as her eyes remained fixed on the strange pony, who stood motionless, as if staring back at her through unseen eyes.

Her heart was pounding. She wanted to scream, but her voice wouldn't work. He wanted to run, but she could not will herself to get up and flee from the terrifying sight.

But it did nothing. It didn't grab her, it didn't run away. It just stood there, occasionally shifting its balance on its obscured legs. Twilight remained stock still. What did this pony want?! Who was it?!

She watched as something appeared to grow from the back of the mysterious pony. At first a lump. Then it grew, stretching out, like some bizarre tentacle. Twitching and wriggling slowly, the tendril felt its way through the night air, before turning to point directly at Twilight.

Cold sweat poured down the unicorn's face and body. Never mind who this pony was! WHAT was it?!

The tendril slithered over the windowsill, snaking its way down the bed.

No. NO, get away! **Get back!**

Twilight pulled the covers over her head, quivering with terror.

Don't come any closer! **Get away!**

The covers were whipped back by some unseen force.

GET AWAY!!!

Twilight opened her mouth to scream, just as the tentacle wrapped itself around her head, shrouding her vision in darkness.

Chapter 2

“NO!”

The bright morning sun beat down on Twilight’s face as her eyes snapped open. All she could see was a blurry haze of colour, with a piercing white light above her.

Blinking a few times, the haze cleared and she looked around.

How in Equestria did I wind up in the town square?!

“...Wha..?” was all she could muster as she looked at her surroundings. She held her head in her hooves as a sharp twinge throbbed through her skull. She had never had a hangover in her life, but Twilight was certain that this must be what it feels like to have one.

Her limbs shaking with exhaustion, she stood up, holding her head low to ease the pain. Looking about more, she was relieved to see that the town square was empty. The last thing she’d need right now was other ponies asking what she was doing asleep in the middle of the street. The sun was still relatively low in the sky.

Mustn’t be much later than dawn.

As she headed home towards the library, a myriad of questions and puzzles ran through her head. Why was she in the town square? How did she get there? Why was she so exhausted that she felt like she would pass out at any moment? The last thing she could remember, she was lying in her bed, trying to get to sleep at around midnight. Then that sound disturbed her dozing, and she saw...

Her stomach clenched over as the memory returned to her. Last night, when she had heard that noise, and saw that...thing in the window. That strange figure, which had just stood there, framed by the moonlight. Who reached out with some sort of extra limb to... wrap around her...

Further speculation and rumination was cut off as she suddenly succumbed to a fit of coughing. As she hacked and wheezed, she staggered a few paces more before collapsing.

But as soon as it had begun, it passed.

Twilight got to her hooves; her ears drooped in a mix of fatigue and utter bafflement. Hardly like her to suddenly collapse in a fit of coughing. It hadn't been like she had swallowed something or she was choking; more like the sort of cough one gets with a bad cold, trying to hack up phlegm or mucus.

And yet, for all that coughing, she felt fine now!

"That's it!" she muttered irritably to herself "I have to figure out what's going on here. And I know the perfect place to start!"

The door of the library swung open and Twilight staggered in. The hollowed-out tree seemed ominously quiet, even for a library, at this early hour. Even given the circumstances, she couldn't help but smile as she heard the gentle snores of Spike in the next room. He'd be up and about preparing breakfast in about an hour, completely oblivious to anything that happened.

Twilight then hurried to the camera she had left perched in the hall, facing the doorway, eagerly casting her eye about the floor, hoping to see a pile of photos from last night.

"Nothing?"

The word echoed gently through the library. The camera hadn't taken a single photo all night.

The other camera!

She scurried up the ladder to the landing where she slept, pausing in amazement as she clambered onto the ledge.

Below the camera were piled dozens upon dozens of photos. *So it wasn't a dream after all.*

The unicorn levitated the heap of photos, neatly sorting them into a stack. She flipped through the photos one by one.

At first, it appeared that several of the first photos had merely caught animals outside the window, detecting their movement and snapping a photo. Many were very impressive, and could be worth much to a nature photographer, but Twilight callously tossed them aside. They weren't what she was after.

As she flipped through them, she saw in one, a strange shadow emerging from the bottom of her window frame. With every photo it moved further upwards, until it filled the window. As soon as the figure came into full view in the photos, the images began to take a strange turn. Several looked distorted or fuzzy, as if something was interfering with the camera. Many still had visual tears or appeared too dark or too bright to make anything out, or the colour was off. Equally many were clear, perhaps a little blurry. But from what Twilight could make out of the figure, some little part of her mind wished that these photos had been distorted too. What she saw was probably the last thing she would have wanted to see looking in her window.

It was like something from a very strange dream. Clearly some sort of pony, it seemed to have no semblance of a mane or tail. With fur a pale off-white colour, it stood out like a sore hoof in the camera flash. What gender the pony was, Twilight had no idea. Its shape hinted at neither mare nor stallion; too angular and sharp to be female, but too slender to be male.

It appeared to be wearing some sort of jacket, almost like a black suit. And was that a red tie hanging loosely from its neck? Or was it something else?

But what unnerved Twilight the most was its face. Or rather, its lack thereof. In every picture of the strange pony, only a blurry haze could be seen where its face should be.

As she flipped through these disturbing images, she watched the clouds in the sky behind the pony float past, as it remained motionless. Then, a small black lump sprouted from its back.

Twilight began to flip faster through the photos, as the lump grew into an appendage, like a fifth limb. It extended, projecting from its back, snaking through the air and out of the shot. She was reminded of some sort of monster of the deep, like the giant squids and octopi she had seen in old illustrations, reaching from the murky depths of the sea, grabbing poor sailor ponies from their ships, dragging them down to their doom.

As she flipped through the photos faster and faster, the static images came to some mimicry of hideous, animated life as Twilight frantically watched the image of the tendril retracting back towards its host, pulling something with it.

Twilight dropped the stack of photos as the tip of the tendril came into view, wrapped around her.

Silence in the library, save for the echo outside of ponies going about their lives as the town slowly woke up.

She slumped to the floor in a state of complete shock. With a gentle glow of her horn, she slowly gathered the fallen photographs up from the ground, placing them deftly on a nearby desk. There were many more photos, but she didn't want to see them. Part of her mind disagreed, but she did not want to know what It had done to her after dragging her, unconscious, from her room.

"What w-w-was that?" she whispered to herself, her voice quivering with terror. "Wh-what was that th-th-th-thing?"

"What was what thing, Twilight?"

She squealed in fright as a voice rang out from behind her. She spun round, her frazzled mane whipping about her face as she turned to see Rarity standing in the doorway.

Twilight breathed a great sigh of relief as every muscle of her aching limbs relaxed "Oh Rarity...phew, you scared me half to death!"

"Sorry, darling." Rarity replied as she dusted her hooves off on the mat.

“But I saw you through the window, and then I heard you talking to yourself about something...Good heavens, look at you! You look a complete fright!!”

The young unicorn stealthily placed herself between Rarity and the desk where the photos lay in a stack. She looked at her mane which hung frazzled and unkempt from her head, “Yeah, I...I had a bit of a... a strange night.”

Rarity trotted over to her friend “Oh, I know, I know. I saw you last night, and I thought to myself...”

“Wait, what?”

Rarity saw the confused look on Twilight’s face. “Don’t you remember, Twilight? You were out walking about late last night.”

The colour drained from her face as Twilight heard this. Had Rarity seen all this? Had she seen...It?

“I must say, you certainly were acting strange. I was dusting off a dress out the window- I was finishing for the night, y’know- and I see you walking down the street, like you were off to visit somepony! I called down to you, but I guess you didn’t hear me, because you just kept going...”

“And... was there anypony, you know...else?” Twilight asked, dreading the answer.

But Rarity shook her head, “No, you were on your own, which certainly seemed odd to me. Of all the ponies in Ponyville, I can’t say you were one I expected to see waltzing down the street alone at night! Don’t you know how dangerous that could be?!”

Twilight once again felt her legs give way beneath her, and she sat down hard on the floor. *This has long since passed ridiculous; we’re in downright scary territory now!*

“Although, not long after, I did see this other pony...”

Rarity was amazed at how quickly Twilight moved over to her, standing almost snout to snout.

“What other pony? Did you see somepony else?! What did he look like? Was he wearing a black suit?”

Gently pushing Twilight out of her personal space, Rarity cleared her throat and carried on “Ahem, yes, I saw another pony, trotting the same direction as you, not long after you passed my house...wait, pardon? Black suit, did you say?”

Twilight blushed. Had she said too much? “Oh, er...it’s nothing...”

The white unicorn sniffed “Well, they certainly weren’t wearing a suit, but they were wearing some sort of black coat, but it was too dark to see them clearly... Twilight, darling, are you sure you feel alright? You don’t seem yourself today.”

She sighed “It’s nothing...Like I said, I’ve...I’ve had a strange night.”

That afternoon, Mr Snapshot got one of the strangest requests of his time selling cameras. Twilight Sparkle, that charming young unicorn who worked at the library, came in and asked if he sold any video cameras, less than a day after she had visited last, buying two cameras and a tripod. Of course he did, he told her, and showed her the range of fine camcorders he sold at his shop. That was when she made a strange query. Was there any way she could carry a camcorder with her at all times, and film everything she does?

Now getting truly suspicious, Snapshot showed her a clever contraption that had just come in from the manufacturers. It incorporated a tiny video camera into a harness worn over the shoulders, with the camera held over the front, filming everything from the pony’s point of view.

Twilight immediately bought this specialist camera, depositing a large bag of money on his counter. With that, as quickly as she had entered, the young unicorn exited. Mr Snapshot stood in his shop, watching her go, now deeply confused about what she might be up to. Fillies these days.

Not far away, on the fringe of the Everfree Forest, a young squirrel skittered along the bough of a gigantic chestnut tree. Drat! No chestnuts in this one

either. His mother had told him it was the wrong season, but that didn't stop the young animal searching anyway.

But he paused as he felt the hackles on the back of his neck rise.

Turning his gaze behind him, he saw the dense, dark trees of the Everfree Forest. His mother had warned him to never go in there, at least, never alone. It was an unnatural place in Equestria, where nothing worked the same way as the rest of the land, whatever that meant. The little squirrel shuddered briefly before heading down the trunk of the tree, in search of some other snacks to round off the day.

Deep amongst those dark, twisted trees, something awoke, ready for another busy night.

Still hungry.

Chapter 3

A gentle breeze wafted through Ponyville as the afternoon gave way to the evening. As the bright sunlight began to dim, the pegasi fluttered about the town, lighting the streetlamps, bathing the town in a warm orange glow.

In a street just off the market square, five young ponies were seated around a table outside one of the many cafes dotting the town.

Rainbow Dash was the first to spot their sixth friend arriving. Waving a hoof, she motioned for Twilight to join her.

“Thanks, guys. Sorry I’m late; I had some things to take care of.” Twilight said as she sat down inbetween Applejack and Rainbow Dash.

“No biggy, sugarcube.” Applejack replied, “Yer just in time to order, I reckon.”

As if on cue, the waitress came out to take their orders. Their usuals: two dandelion and daisy sandwiches, a plate of apple dumplings, a cake tray (“with extra cupcakes!”), and a bowl of hay-fries.

But the waitress was slightly surprised when Twilight asked for her usual to be omitted. But hey, it was no business of hers. She just shrugged and headed off to process their orders.

“What’s up Twilight?” Rainbow asked, “Not hungry tonight?”

The unicorn shook her head. “Not really, no...”

“May it have anything to do with your...interesting accessory?” Rarity asked from across the table.

They all looked at Twilight, only just really noticing the peculiar contraption she had strapped onto her front. *If it took them that long to notice it, it must be doing its job well.* Twilight grinned sheepishly:

“Oh, you mean the harness? Well, it’s a little gadget I bought today. It’s a little video camera that I can strap to myself so I don’t have to carry it around...”

“A video camera? Neat!” Pinkie Pie chirped up, stretching across the table to look into the lens of the miniature camcorder “Hi mom! I’m on TV!”

Rainbow Dash gently pulled her back to her seat just as she began to make silly faces into the lens, “So what’s it for, Twilight? You shooting some sort of documentary or something?”

“Not exactly” Twilight replied, keeping her voice relatively low.

Her horn shone a soft purple colour, and her saddlebag popped open. A single photograph levitated its way out of the bag and landed squarely in the middle of the table.

“Y’see, things have been a little...strange for me recently. Rarity, you remember your fashion shoot with all of us a few days ago?”

Rarity nodded, looking closely at the photograph “Indeed I do. Was this taken there?”

“Yeah... Thing is, I have no idea who took it.” Twilight said.

Rarity levitated the photo in front of her face, examining it closely “Hmmpf, Well, it certainly wasn’t me. Look here, you can actually just see me over on the left. See?”

“So, you reckon somepony was secretly watchin’ us? Kinda creepy, if’n ya ask me.” Applejack asked, looking over Rarity’s shoulder at the strange photo.

“Well, yes.” Twilight continued, biting her lip “But I think... whoever did it was watching... me in particular.”

Silence descended on the table. Finally, Fluttershy spoke up in her timid little voice “But who do you think it is?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Rainbow Dash cut in, with the slightest hint of a grin. “Our Twilight’s gone and gotten herself a stalker!”

Rarity hacked and coughed in a most undignified way as she choked on her sandwich. “A stalker?! Good grief, you think so?”

“Well, it does say ‘we are watching’ on the back of the photo...”

Pinkie held the photo up, proudly showing the scrawled message on the back, to five very surprised ponies.

“...What?! How did you...?” Twilight asked, before sighing. *What’s the point?* This is Pinkie Pie she’s talking to. No doubt the explanation would just confuse her further.

Rarity took a look at the back of the photo, and recognition swept over her “So it does! I remember now, my parents made me study Old Equestrian in school...Vigilemus: ‘We are watching’- Or rather, the more accurate translation is ‘We watch’, but...”

She paused as she noticed everypony staring at her, flabbergasted.

“What?! I have a life outside fashion, you know!”

“Ahem... Okay, so we know what the word means...But what about these two symbols?” Twilight continued.

“Well,” Applejack spoke, pointing to the first of the crude images “This here’s obviously an eyeball... I’ll wager it just goes with the message. No idea what the other means, though...”

They sat back, each pondering in their own mind the meaning behind the strange symbol: The circle with the X scrawled through it. Was it a monogram? A signature? Some sort of alphabet or code?

“Food’s up!”

Everypony jumped as a nearby voice brought them each back to reality. The waitress had returned, laden with food.

“Oh...er, thanks.” Twilight said, blushing slightly. She watched as the other ponies all dug in with gusto. Granted, she didn’t feel like eating, but the food sure did look good.

“Are you sure you don’t want some, Twilight?” Fluttershy asked, nudging a dumpling in her direction.

But the unicorn waved down the offer “No really, I’m fine. You enjoy it.”

“Ehh, suit yourself!” Said Pinkie as she popped a third cupcake into her mouth, “Mmm, deeeelish!”

As they ate, Twilight debated in her mind exactly how much she should tell her friends. On one side, there was safety in numbers. But if they knew the details of who...or what, was following her, would they even want to get involved?

Don’t be silly, Twilight’s mind told her. These are the living forms of the Elements of Harmony we’re talking about! They’d never abandon you!

But she didn’t even know what they were up against. Whatever this... thing was, it was powerful, and potentially dangerous. And certainly NOT a pony.

As she mused, her mind began to wander. She looked around the town, watching the other ponies going about their daily lives, working, shopping, socialising. Why did she stand out? What was it about her that made her so...appealing to it? She shuddered as the word ‘appealing’ went through her mind. With that kind of phrasing, it just made it sound more and more like it really was a stalker.

Gazing about again, she watched the town go by, as her friends dined, oblivious to her brooding nature. She saw the pegasi finishing lighting the lanterns as the sun hung low in the sky. She saw the market day draw to a close as ponies packed up their stalls and headed home. She saw the pony looking in her direction from the other side of the square.

The one in the black fleece-jacket.

As Twilight noticed the pony, they seemed to realise that they had been sighted, and made a hasty exit round the corner.

“HEY!”

Twilight leapt up from her haystack seat and galloped in the direction of the leaving pony. Her friends watched, astonished as the usually calm and collected Twilight Sparkle suddenly ran off in the middle of a meal.

“Hey, Twilight! What’s up?” Rainbow Dash called.

“Where’s she off to?”

“Come back!”

But Rainbow was never one for speculation when action was an option. Bolting down her remaining food in record time, she spread her blue wings and sped off after her friend.

“Come back here!” Twilight called, as she gained ground on the pony. But he did not listen, sprinting like a scalded animal, through the streets of Ponyville.

As he turned a corner, Twilight got a brief glimpse at the stallion. She caught a few details before he hurried out of sight round the bend: a black jacket, pale brown fur, and a dark brunette mane.

Twilight skidded round the bend to find the street completely empty.

SLAM!

Her mane whipped round her face as she saw to the side, one of the doors on the street slam shut. *That must be him!*

Banging on the door with a forehoof, she shouted to him “Open up in there! I wanna talk to you!”

No answer.

Twilight was growing impatient “I know you’re in there!! Open his door right now!!”

Nothing.

Alright, enough is enough. Stepping a few paces back, Twilight focused her will on the door standing before her. Concentrating with all her might, she felt that family buzz of energy in her horn. Pointing it at the doorknob, she tried with all her strength to force the door open, but to no avail. It was locked and bolted from the inside.

As she moved further back, ready to charge the door and break it down, a sudden movement out of the corner of her eye caught her attention. She turned to just see something moving down the road. Another pony, and...was it beckoning to her?

She took a few steps in its direction before she realised the sheer stupidity of her actions. Really, the last thing one does when they see an unknown pony beckoning, is follow them!

Her head said stop, but her limbs apparently were not in the listening mood. Her legs carried her forward, approaching the pony, which slowly began to walk away, down the street.

Twilight followed, now very worried about where she might be going. She wanted to stop, but her body was no longer under her control. Her curiosity had total control over her body. She had to find out who this elusive pony was, and what they wanted!

So intrigued was she, that she failed to notice the door she had been trying to breach, creak open slightly, as a pair of green eyes watched as she went.

She followed the pony around the bend and came to an empty plain on the outskirts of the town. On one side were the backs of houses and shops of Ponyville, and on the other side, the one facing her, were the dark trees of the Everfree Forest.

CRUMPH!

Twilight cried out as she suddenly felt a great weight land on her back. She buckled under the weight and collapsed on her front, as her struggling limbs were pinned to the ground by four hooves.

“Nnnnggh!...Get off me!” She shouted to whoever had pinned her. In response, her face was pressed firmly into the ground before her, squashing her nose. A voice, masculine and whispering, said in her ear:

“Struggle, and it’ll take longer. And hurt more.”

Twilight instantly became stock still, more out of terror than obedience.

She gazed through teary eyes as she saw a trio of ponies seemed to materialise from out of the woods. Each had their face obscured by a strange white mask, with black markings around the mouth and eyeholes, almost like black lipstick and copious eye shadow. What their cutie marks were, Twilight had no idea. Their flanks were clearly visible, but another mark obscured them. A circle, with an X crossed over it, carved into their flanks, as if by a knife.

They stood in a triangle around her, as she lay flat on the ground, held down by an apparent fourth.

“P-please...” Twilight stammered. “Let m-me go... What do you want from me?!”

But the middle pony, a stallion with pale grey fur and a messy, brown mane, held a hoof to the mouth-hole on his mask, saying in a calm, gentle voice barely above a whisper “Sssh... he approaches.”

Before she could ask what he meant, her assailants turned to face the forest, bowing low as something emerged. As It came into view, Twilight blanched with fear so chilling, it may yet have frozen the very tears on her face.

It was him. Her mysterious visitor in the night. Silently, It strode forwards out of the trees on limbs far longer than any pony Twilight had ever seen. Almost twice as long as Princess Celestia’s. It’s impossibly skinny body appeared to be clad in a black suit jacket and white shirt underneath, with a red necktie around Its neck. Or was it some strange fur pattern?

Looking up to its pale head, Twilight gulped. No wonder none of the pictures managed to capture Its face. There was absolutely no face to

capture. No eyes, nostrils or mouth, just a blank surface, as if a fresh layer of skin had been stretched over its head.

As it approached the group, its legs seemed to shrink and stretch oddly with every stride, sometimes towering as high as the trees, sometimes just taller than an earth pony. Once it was among the masked ponies surrounding Twilight, its body lowered as its legs shrunk downwards. It now stood only a meter or so above their heads.

Twilight felt her head forced up as her mane was yanked backwards. Her neck aching from the strain, she gazed through her tears, straight up at the pale pony.

Once again, Twilight saw that strange shape emanating from its back, like a tentacle of pure darkness. The other masked ponies hastily backed away, still keeping their heads bowed low, as if in reverence. The black tentacle writhed through the still evening air, as it almost blended with the dimming sky.

It snaked through the air, slowly approaching Twilight's face. She closed her eyes.

She felt the clammy, cold, caressing touch of it, as it wrapped around not her head or face this time, but her horn.

The masked ponies watched in cold silence as Twilight's body suddenly doubled up, as if a sudden jolt of electricity coursed through her body, the moment the black tendril touched her. Her convulsions threw the pony pinning her clean off her back. He landed a few feet away, quickly getting to his hooves and bowing low, like his cohorts.

Twilight writhed in agony on the ground, her face contorted into a silent scream, as the tentacle remained wrapped around her horn. She squirmed and bucked as pain engulfed her entire body like a million hot knives piercing her flesh. In the confines of her mind, it was as if she was being stripped, violated, and forcibly drained of all thought, all emotion, all the happiness, love, fear, anger, despair, desire. All was being ripped clean from her mind, leaving nothing but the perpetual darkness.

The pale, faceless pony tilted its head back, its unseen eyes gazing upwards into the sky. Its limbs shuddered slightly as the black tentacle wrapped around Twilight's horn began to throb gently. With every pulse, both Twilight and It would twitch spasmodically, one in agony, the other, as if in some sort of orgiastic ecstasy.

"Twilight! Where are you?!"

The pulsating of the tentacle ceased as It and the masked ponies heard a nearby voice. Unwrapping its tentacle from her horn, It retreated a few steps, the assembled masked ponies rushing to its side, almost like frightened little fillies seeking comfort from a parent. In an instant, a great mass of writhing tendrils sprouted from its back, each wrapping around a different masked pony, engulfing them in its shadowy embrace. It drew them close as it stepped back from Twilight's twitching, semi-conscious form. It watched as a light-blue pegasus rounded the bend, her rainbow-hued mane fluttering behind her.

"Twilight, there you... **TWILIGHT!!!**"

Rainbow Dash landed by Twilight's side, an expression of shock and horror on her face. The violet coloured unicorn lay pitifully on her side, her body dripping with sweat, tears running down her face, her breath coming out in wheezing sobs.

"Oh no... Oh no, no, no, Twilight! Twilight, wake up!" she cried, trying with all her might to rouse the unicorn. But no amount of shaking or nudging got any response.

Then, Twilight turned her head and opened her eyes, looking weakly up at her friend. Sobbing silently, she pointed with a quivering forehoof in the direction of her pale, faceless assailant. It stood, motionless, as if watching her through invisible eyes, occasionally shifting its balance.

This was all Twilight could make out before her strength and willpower finally gave in, and she blacked out.

Rainbow looked nervously in the direction Twilight had pointed. The trees of Everfree stood before her; dark, silent and still. Nothing more, nothing less.

Hiding her fear, Rainbow heaved with all her might, hoisting the twitching, sweat-drenched form of Twilight onto her shoulders, and ran back towards her waiting friends in Ponyville's market square.

It, meanwhile, stood and continued to watch as the Pegasus and the unicorn fled back into the town. It turned around and, silent as ever, strode back into the trees. The harvest had been quite sufficient, even with the... interruption. It returned to its home, deep in the darkest region of the forest, satisfied.

For now.

Chapter 4

Rainbow Dash paced up and down the hallway, her hooves making small *clack* sounds on the linoleum floor. Her friends sat against the walls, waiting apprehensively. Fluttershy absent-mindedly tapped her fetlocks together, while on her left Pinkie Pie toyed with the gigantic pink bow that adorned her 'GET WELL REALLY SOON!' basket of cakes. Applejack sat wringing her hooves as Rarity groaned aloud at nopony in particular: "Oohh, I can't stand all this waiting!"

"That goes for the both of us, Rarity." Rainbow Dash replied as she strode up and down the corridor of Ponyville Medical Clinic (Emergency Ward), "Nurse Redheart said she'd tell us how she's doing soon, and that was, like, hours ago!"

"Oh, I hope nothing bad's happened!" Fluttershy squeaked.

"You mean, worse than finding one of our best friends passed out on the fringe of the Everfree Forest with nopony else around?" Rainbow murmured sarcastically.

The heads of the five ponies turned as there came that familiar squeak of an opening door. Their breath held in apprehension, they watched as Nurse Redheart emerged from the adjacent room. The white pony's face gave away nothing.

"Nurse! How's she doing?"

"Is she gonna be alright?!"

"What happened?!"

Redheart held a hoof to her mouth with a gentle "Sshh!" before joining the five worried young ponies.

"First off," She said, "I'd like to thank you all for bringing Miss Sparkle to me straight away. You did exactly the right thing."

Applejack pushed Rainbow Dash forwards “Wouldn’t have happened if Rainbow Dash here didn’t find Twilight when she did.”

“Heh, well what else could I do?” Rainbow Dash replied, bashfully waving her tail. “You’d have done the same.”

“Yeah, but not as fast as you, Dashie!” Pinkie replied, as she hugged her rainbow-hued friend.

“Well, you’ll be glad to know that she’s well on her way to recovery. She’ll be fine.”

The five ponies breathed a deep collective sigh of relief. Applejack stood forwards “So then, what exactly happened to her?”

The nurse-pony scratched with a forehoof at her pink mane “Well, we’re not sure, to be perfectly honest. Physically, the only thing strange about her is some strange marks that were on her horn, but they faded within hours...”

“Strange marks? Like what?” Rarity asked, standing up.

“There were four strange red welts that went down her horn, meeting at the tip and going the tip straight down to the base. At first we thought it was some sort of infection, but they faded away just an hour before you girls arrived.”

The five ponies wondered what this strange mark could mean, as Nurse Redheart continued:

“But other than that, it seems as if somehow, all her energy was sucked out of her. Her Vita energy, I mean.”

“Vita energy?” Applejack asked “What’s that?”

“It’s a sort of energy that Unicorn magic uses.” Rarity explained, she herself being a unicorn.

Nurse Redheart explained “Every conscious living thing in Equestria generates and contains a kind of magical energy, which is known as ‘Vita’,

after the Old Equestrian word for life. Unicorns have the ability to channel and manipulate this energy by using their horns as a sort of concentration point.”

“And whatever happened to her, it somehow sucked out all this Vita stuff?” Applejack asked.

The nurse shook her head “Not all. She still has a small amount left, and she’s already regenerating her former Vita energy. We’re doing what we can to help speed up the process.”

Pinkie stood up, her basket of goodies held in her teeth. “Sho Doesh dat mean we can go shee her now?” she asked around the handle of the basket.

“Certainly. Just don’t give her any grief. She still needs her rest.” Redheart said as she opened the door, allowing the ponies into the infirmary.

The spotless white room held that strange chemical smell of hospitals: The blend of medicines, disinfectants, and everything else needed to maintain a sterile environment. The ward was filled with beds, each made up with green sheets and a single white pillow. But only the one in the far corner was occupied.

As the group approached Twilight Sparkle’s bed, they finally got a good look at their friend. She lay on her side, eyes closed, and her coat messy and pallid. She was hooked to a strange device standing by her bedside. Some sort of metal contraption, covered with various dials and gauges and brass knobs and levers, with a large crystal held on the top. The machine was positioned by the opened window, so that the sun shone on the crystal, bathing the ward in multi-coloured light. A cable ran off the machine, leading to a clamp that was secured to Twilight’s horn.

“It’s a Vita–converter.” Came Redheart’s voice from behind the ponies “The crystal absorbs the excess Vita given off by nearby plants and animals, which is then pumped into her.”

“Neat! So she’ll be back and magicking in no time, right?” Pinkie asked as she put down her basket.

Nurse Redheart did not answer at first. Drawing the assembled ponies close to her, she lowered her voice “I’m afraid not. You see, this machine means we can help her replenish her Vita, but she’s still going to take a while before she can regain all her former magical ability. Whatever happened to her, it nearly drained all her Vita in one go. The stress of such a draining is incredibly painful, and that’s what caused her to pass out.”

“How can we be sure she’s still got any of this Vita stuff left at all?” Rainbow Dash asked in hushed tones.

“Well, she hasn’t been reduced to a crumbling, dried husk of a pony.” Redheart said in a morbidly matter-of-fact tone. Fluttershy ducked behind Rarity in horror at the thought.

“So, if you could, when we discharge her, please make sure she doesn’t over-exert herself. She’ll need to wait a few days for all her Vita to return completely, before she can fully do the magic she used to be able to.” With that, the white pony bustled out of the infirmary, leaving them alone, gathered at Twilight’s side.

A few moments passed in agonising silence, when Twilight’s eyelids began to flutter, and she groaned slightly.

“Hmm...huh?”

She opened her eyes slightly, and raised her head to look up at her friends. Her dim eyes shone for the briefest moment with sudden terror as she shrunk back from her friends and pawing weakly at the cable clamped to her horn.

“Twi! Sugah, calm down. It’s just us!” Applejack said, reaching out a comforting hoof.

The violet unicorn blinked a few times, and her eyes grew wide with recognition. Relaxing, she lay down again with a sigh, as she smiled up at the faces of her friends.

“Oh guys... I’m s glad to see you... Sorry about that, I thought you were...” She muttered weakly.

Applejack stroked her head gently “It’s okay, Twi, it’s okay. How ya feelin’?”

Twilight’s hoof rested on Applejack’s arm as she groaned “Ooohh... well, I can barely sit up, and my head feels like a piano landed on it.” She grinned weakly: *‘I should know...’* “So, how long have I been out?”

“About a day. Just long enough for me to put this together!” Pinkie replied as she hoisted her gift basket onto the table at the foot of Twilight’s bed.

She smiled as she saw the heaped cakes, muffins, sweets and pies of various colours and sizes in the basket “Aww, Pinkie, you shouldn’t have...”

“Of course I should have, silly!” Pinkie replied indignantly “How are you gonna get better without my treats to help you along?”

Twilight nodded in agreement “Of course. With your food, I’ll be fine in no time...By the way, where’s Spike?”

“He’s away on business, but he’s gotten the message about you. He should be back by tomorrow.”

The ponies sat in relative silence as the treats were shared out to all. Pinkie Pie made sure that Twilight got all the biggest and best servings. She’d need all the energy she can get.

But Rainbow Dash’s mind was on other matters. Ever the forward-thinker, she was trying to put together in her mind what may have happened to her friend last night.

“Hey Twilight?”

“Mmmph?” was Twilight’s muffled reply, as she spoke through a mouthful of cake. She hastily gulped “Sorry...Yes, Dash?”

Rainbow Dash hesitated, unsure about what sort of reaction Twilight may have from recalling the events of last night. *‘But hey’,* she thought, *‘surely all the others wanna know just as badly, right?’*

“So, do you remember... y’know, what happened last night?”

Twilight put down her slice of cake, her face growing serious. Rarity caught the sudden change in her mood “Now, Twilight, you don’t have to think about it if you don’t want to...”

“She’s right.” Applejack said, turning Rainbow Dash “It might be a bit soon to start interrogating her, don’cha think?”

“No, it’s alright,” Twilight said, sitting up in her bed. “I know you’re all curious. Besides, if we work together to figure this out, we might stand a chance.”

“A chance against what?”

“Against what’s been following me for the last few days. I got a good look at them yesterday...” Twilight replied, shuddering slightly as she began to remember her assailant.

“Well, you girls will remember that yesterday, not long after I told you about my whole camera thing, I suddenly ran off, right?”

They all nodded.

“Well, while you were eating, I spotted somepony staring at me from across the square...”

The five friends sat with undivided attention as they listened to their friend relate her account of how she chased the elusive pony she saw watching her, and how he mysteriously disappeared as they rounded a bend.

“...And that’s when I spotted another pony not far away. He was... beckoning to me. I know I shouldn’t have, but my curiosity got the best of me, so I went after him instead.”

“Oh fer Pete’s sake, Twilight! Didn’t anypony ever teach you about Stranger-Danger?” Applejack muttered, like a mother scolding her child.

Twilight twisted the bedsheets around her hoof “I know, I know! I dunno what came over me, I couldn’t stop myself!”

Rarity rolled her eyes: For all her genius and magic, Twilight could really be naïve sometimes. “So, where did this fellow lead you?”

“Out to the edge of town, by the Everfree Forest. But before I could do anything, somepony grabbed me and pinned me to the ground...” Twilight related, her voice beginning to quiver. “I tried to get free, but they just told me it would...hurt more if I struggled.”

“Wh-what would hurt more?” Fluttershy whimpered.

The violet unicorn bowed her head to hide the tears now beginning to form in her eyes. “I-I dunno... I also dunno how it could’ve hurt more! It was the most painful thing I’ve ever felt in my life...”

Rainbow Dash hesitantly asked “What happened, Twilight?”

“Well...when they’d pinned me down, this bunch of weird ponies came out of the forest... I couldn’t see their faces, they were wearing masks. Then, something else came out of the forest...Like something out of a nightmare!”

Twilight buried her head in her hooves as she sobbed uncontrollably as the horrible vision of that tall, faceless pony strode into her mind on its spindly, bony legs. Applejack leaned over and gently hugged her friend, as the others sat in silence.

“It’s alright, sugahcube. You don’t have to go on if’n ya don’t want to.” The blonde-maned pony reassured her.

“Besides, I think given the evidence, we can guess what happened...”

Rarity added grimly.

But Twilight was determined not to appear weak. Wiping the tears from her eyes, she sat up again and took a deep breath.

“Rarity, you’re the best artist. I’m gonna try to describe what that... thing looked like. D’you think you can draw it to my description?”

The beautiful unicorn nodded, as her horn gave off a gentle glow and a pencil and a sheet of paper floated out of her saddlebag. Holding the pencil ready she nodded “Go ahead, darling. But don’t push yourself too hard. The haggard look really doesn’t suit you.”

The other ponies watched over her shoulder as Rarity sketched out the figure as Twilight described it:

“...And really long legs...no, longer than that, longer!”

“Oh, you mean like The Princess’s?”

“No, longer than that... Like, not natural...”

Rarity shrugged and made the leg stretch off the page, wondering to herself how such a bizarre pony could even stand up straight on such long, thin legs.

“And a black suit you say?”

“Yeah, with a red necktie underneath.”

“What about the face?”

“Leave it blank.”

Rarity raised her eyebrow in suspicion. “Blank? So, you didn’t catch its face?”

Twilight shook her head “No, I got a good look. But there wasn’t any face.”

“At all? Nothing at all?”

Twilight shook her head.

Rarity held up the completed sketch for all to see. She turned it so that Twilight could get a good look. She gulped audibly and nodded.

“That’s him alright.”

“So... after it came out of the forest, what did it do?” Rainbow asked, somehow eagerly awaiting, and dreading, the answer at the same time.

Twilight gulped again and continued her story “Well, it came and stood in front of me. The masked ponies forced me to look up at it, and I saw...it was like some sort of tentacle, but impossibly black... like it was made out

of dark itself...It stretched out and the tentacle touched my horn...and then it..."

Any further speaking was drowned out as a fresh flood of tears poured forth. The others stood by uneasily as Applejack hesitantly rested a hoof on Twilight's shoulder.

"Okay, okay. You best stop there, Twi. From what the nurse told us, I reckon I know what it did."

The violet unicorn gazed up at Applejack as she explained:

"Nurse Redheart told us that whatever happened to you, it drained you of something called Vita energy. My guess is this... thing, whatever it was, somehow took most of your Vita."

Twilight nodded in understanding "That would explain a lot. Vita's generated by emotion and conscious thought, so it would explain why I passed out after... after it happened."

"But wait a minute!"

All eyes turned to Rainbow Dash, who had been silent thought during Twilights story. "When I found you, there wasn't anypony else around. No masked ponies, no suit-wearing pony with long legs and tentacles, nothin'."

"What are you talking about?" Twilight responded in confusion "They were standing right in front of me the whole time! That's what I was pointing at before I passed out! You're telling me you didn't see it?!"

"Believe me, Twi, if I saw that thing, I'd have remembered it!"

Twilight's head fell back to rest on the pillow. Just another enigma to add to this creature. *'This is getting weirder and weirder by the minute! Am I the only pony who can see it?'*

"What about that pony you saw in the market square?" Fluttershy asked, eager to steer the subject away from whatever may have attacked Twilight
"What did they look like?"

“Hmm... Well, I didn’t get a really good look at him...” Twilight mused, wiping the tears from her face for the second time that day. “Let’s see... it was a colt, and he had kinda pale brown fur... He was a brunette too; he had a longish dark mane and tail, kind of inbetween brown and black.”

Rarity’s eyes grew wide as something dawned on her “Was he wearing a black jacket?”

Twilight looked at her friend in confusion. Then it hit her “Ohmygosh, yes, you’re right! It was him!”

Rainbow waved a forehoof between the unicorns “Was who? Care to share with us, ladies?”

Rarity explained “Well, a few nights ago, I saw Twilight out walking around in the middle of the night, and a moment later, I saw another pony following her. I’ll bet it was that same pony you saw in the market square!”

Twilight turned to Pinkie, who had been nervously munching away at the remaining treats in the basket.

“Pinkie, you know everypony in Ponyville. Does that description sound familiar?”

Pinkie thoughtfully chewed on a pastille as she cast her mind back to see if anypony she knew matched that description “Hmm...lemme think... Not much to go on with that description... Nope, sorry, I got nothing.”

Silence fell on the group of friends as they digested this new information. Not a sound was heard in the ward save for the clatter of hooves in the outside corridor, and the gentle hum of the Vita-converter.

Suddenly there came a resounding ‘*thunk!*’ as Pinkie Pie smacked herself in the head with a forehoof.

“Oh, of course! Look at me! I’m a dope, I’m a nitwit, and I am a silly-pie!!”

“Pinkie? What’s up?” Rainbow asked, her head cocked to the side.

“I DO know that pony! I didn’t recognise the description because I’d forgotten about him! It’s been so many years since I last saw Tally Tome, I totally forgot about him!” Pinkie squealed in delight, bouncing up and down.

The ponies all looked to each other in bemusement as Pinkie continued to bounce about the room in delight. Twilight tilted her head in confusion “Tally Tome? Who...?”

“Oh, you wouldn’t know him, Twilight.” Pinkie interrupted, “He’s from before you moved here. His full name’s Talisman Tome but I call him Tally for short.”

“I think I’ve heard that name before... but didn’t he leave town years ago?” Rarity asked, turning the name over in her mind.

But Pinkie shook her head “Oh no, he’s still around. He’s not exactly the most sociable of ponies, though. But I sometimes deliver cakes and sweets to his house, and your description sure sounds like him!”

Twilight leaned forward in her bed, her hooves grasping Pinkie’s “Pinkie. Can you take me to see Tally? He might trust you more.”

Pinkie smiled reassuringly at her unicorn friend “Okey Dokey Lokey! First thing tomorrow, we’ll go pay him a visit. I gotta give him his usual cake delivery anyway, you can help me with it.”

“Tomorrow?” Twilight asked, her ears drooping slightly “Why can’t we go sooner?”

“Because you still need to rest, Miss Sparkle!”

The group of ponies jumped collectively as Nurse Redheart spoke up from behind them. The white pony pushed her way through to Twilight’s bedside, gently making her way through the ponies gathered around her bed.

“You should be fit to leave tomorrow, but until then, you need to rest!” She ordered as she re-fluffed Twilight’s pillow and tucked her in again. She turned and faced the others, ushering them out of the ward “Visiting times are over now, I’m afraid. Come by tomorrow around midday, and you can take her home then.”

They each gave a wave and a smile before they left, each saying their goodbyes.

“See ya tomorrow, Twilight.”

“Be sure to rest up, you’ll need your beauty sleep.”

“Get well quickly Twilight.”

“Yeah. Days just ain’t the same without ya.”

“And don’t worry. Tally will still be there tomorrow.”

Twilight smiled as she watched her friends leave. They were the best friends she could ask for. Always loyal, always willing to help, and always there for her.

“Well, Twilight...” She whispered to herself as she drifted to sleep again “I dunno what’s gonna happen next, but at least now your friends are by your side.”

She gave one last little yawn before she closed her eyes and snuggled down in her pillow, ready for a good, long sleep.

So deep in sleep was she, that she failed to notice as the doors of the ward opened again and a pony with pale brown fur and a dark mane, clad in a black hooded-jacket, entered the room. Glancing around furtively, the pony sidled up to Twilight’s bedside, and deposited on her table, a small, black leatherbound book.

With one last green-eyed glance in her direction, he hurried out of the ward, leaving no sound but the echo of his clacking hooves, and the gentle hum of the Vita-converter.

Chapter 5

Applejack once again smelt that familiar smell of hospitals as she entered the ward. The mix of medicine, disinfectant and soap. Followed into the ward by her fellow ponies, she waved to the far bed; the only one with an occupant.

“Howdy, Twilight! We’re here to take ya home!”

But there came no reply from Twilight, who lay on her front on the bed as she flipped over another page in a small black book that lay open before her. Her eyes were fixed on the pages, breaking her gaze only to allow for a brief bout of dry coughing. Around her, there lay about a dozen sheets of paper, covered with notes and calculations.

“Uh...Twi?” Applejack said again, a little louder as she approached her bed
“We’re her to take you home now!”

Apparently she heard that time, raising her head once her cough subsided, to greet her friends “Huh? Oh, hi guys. So, Nurse Redheart said that I can go then?”

“Yep.” Came Rainbow Dash’s reply, as she smiled at Twilight’s absorption in her book “Geez Twi! Not even out of hospital and you’re already back to the studying!”

Applejack, meanwhile, noticed with some concern that wherever there was a zero or an O in Twilight’s notes, it was crossed out with an X. Just like that strange symbol from the back of the photo.

“So, ah...” Applejack watched as Twilight made another note, pen held between her teeth. Here was no mistaking it: Every time she wrote an O or a zero, she would put the X over it, as if it was the perfectly normal way of writing. Coughing nervously, Applejack continued “So... what’cha got there, Twi?”

Twilight marked her place in the book by folding down the corner of the page, and flipped to the front of the book. Holding it up, the others peered closely at the two words written in black ink on the front page:

“Cog...Cognitio...Comm...?” Rainbow Dash read aloud, attempting to decipher the crude writing.

“‘Cognitio Communis’.” Rarity finished for her “It’s Old Equestrian again, I believe... Though I’m not sure what it means, I’ve forgotten a fair bit of my Old Equestrian. Wherever did you get it, Twilight?”

The violet unicorn closed the book, revealing a black, unmarked cover. “I’m not sure... I woke up in the morning, and it was right there on my bedside table!”

“You think it was...” Applejack hesitated for a moment “...Them?”

Twilight shuddered for a moment as she briefly recalled the silent, masked ponies that led her to that clearing outside Ponyville.

“Maybe...But if it was, then why’d they give it to me? What do they expect me to do with it?” she asked as she pushed back the covers and slipped out of the bed. She stumbled at first as her legs gave out for the briefest of moments. But she found her strength quickly and stood tall once again. “Aahhh, it feels good to be on my hooves again.”

Twilight closed her eyes a moment, straining to summon up her magical power. Her horn glowed a dim purple colour as the black leatherbound book slowly floated into the air, wobbling slightly.

“Allow me, Twilight.” Rarity quickly stepped in, the white glow of her horn’s magic mingling with Twilight’s purple glow surrounding the book. It became steadier in its floating and slowly lowered into Twilight’s saddlebag, which floated up to land on her back.

Twilight glanced at Rarity in confusion. The white unicorn shrugged slightly “Nurse Redheart’s orders, Darling. She says that you’ll need to keep magic to a minimum until you’re fully recovered.”

The group of ponies blinked in the sunlight as they closed the door to the Clinic behind them. Rainbow Dash fluttered alongside Twilight as she asked “So, what was in that book then? Or was it all written in Old Equestrian as well?”

But Twilight shook her head “No, I could read what it said clearly enough. But what it did say didn’t make much sense!”

The group strolled through the town, in the direction of Pinkie Pie’s home at Sugarcube Corner.

“I’ve only read about a third of it, and most of that was just pages of weird pictures, like a little foal’s drawings, with the occasional caption here and there. The rest of it just gets weirder. It’s like some scientific guide to something. It goes on all about Vita Energy, talking about its uses, just like one of my magic textbooks. But then it goes on about something called a ‘Dimensional Hourglass’”

“What in the hay’s that supposed to mean?!” Applejack wondered aloud to nopony in particular.

Twilight sighed “I wish I knew. Those pictures didn’t make things any clearer. I couldn’t make head or tail of any of them! It’s all a bunch of symbols, like eyes, globes, arrows, all sorts of strange stuff. I sure hope your friend can help us, Pinkie”

“No worries, Twilight!” Pinkie replied from behind “From what I know about Tally, he’s kinda into this creepy stuff.”

Twilight had to wonder what Pinkie meant by that. What exactly was he ‘into’? She turned his name over in her mind as they walked. Talisman Tome. She knew what both words meant: A tome is an old word for a book, and a talisman is some sort of charm that’s supposed to have some sort of magical power, often some sort of protective ability. Was he a magic student? *How could he be*, Twilight thought. *He’s an Earth Pony.*

She put her musings aside as she and her friends arrived at the colourful gingerbread house that was Sugarcube Corner. Pinkie bustled about the shelves, pulling a small trolley with her tail as she shoved whole stacks of cakes and sweets into a basket resting atop the trolley.

“Just lemme get his order together, “Pinkie called as she worked “and we can head over to Tally’s place, lickety split!”

Moments later, she returned to her friends, laden with a pair of baskets overflowing with all manner of cupcakes, doughnuts, muffins, pies, candy and general sugary goodness. Pointing to the lighter basket, she said to Twilight “You grab that one, and I’ll take the other.”

“What about the rest of us?” Applejack asked from beside a display of applecakes she was admiring “Y’all need us to carry anything?”

“Nah, just make sure we don’t drop anything.”

With that the group left the sweetshop and returned to the town, Pinkie in the lead with Twilight and the others closely behind.

The violet unicorn looked about nervously as she walked through the town. The fur on her neck stood up as she felt a feeling of anxiety. She just didn’t feel safe anymore, not even in her own hometown! Every street could have a masked pony just round the corner. Every window could have a figure peering from it, down at her.

Her nerves only became worse as she and her friends rounded the bend and came to that street where she had chased that pony, before he vanished into the house. Her memory conjured up images of the figure of a masked pony, standing near the end of the street, beckoning with a hoof...

“Twi? You feelin’ alright?”

She jumped slightly as she heard her name. Flushing a deep crimson, she looked to Applejack, who was looking at her oddly.

“OH! Erm, yes...I’m fine.”

“You just sorta spaced out there for a sec.” Rainbow Dash remarked as she followed Pinkie.

“Sorry” Twilight muttered, trying her best to regain her composure. But she could not help being nervous. They were so close to the clearing where it happened.

“C’mon Twilight!” Pinkie gave her a gentle nudge with a hoof as she passed, trotting to the line of houses on the left side of the street. Twilight took a deep breath around the basket clenched in her teeth, steeling herself, and followed her pink friend.

From the outside, the small bungalow appeared unremarkable. A grey-brown door, with misty glass windows either side. It looked like the lights were off inside. Pinkie knocked on the door with a forehoof, putting her basket down to call out.

“Special delivery from Sugarcube Corner!” She called in a singsong voice. There was no answer.

Pinkie knocked again, harder this time, as she shouted again “C’mon Tomey! It’s me, Pinkie Pie! I got your sweets for the week!”

“The week?” Twilight asked incredulously, putting down her basket “You mean he goes through all these sweets in a week?!”

Pinkie nodded, saying with a hint of concern “Yep. I keep telling him, someday his sweet tooth will be the only tooth left in his mouth. But he doesn’t listen, just keeps ordering more and more.”

She knocked louder again on the brown door, but to no avail.

“...Tomey?” Pinkie called with genuine worry. Trying the handle, she squeaked with surprise as the door swung open and she fell inside. Twilight and the others peered inside the house.

She helped Pinkie up and apprehensively stepped into the dark hallway. It was a small house, with only a single floor, with a long hallway with doorways alongside both sides, with an open doorway to a living room on the left. On the side as they entered, there was a low rack, where there hung on a peg a blue denim jacket, next to another empty peg. Twilight noticed that the jacket was strangely faded and moth-eaten, and covered with dust, as if it had not been worn for a great deal of time.

“Tomey?” Pinkie called quietly as she and her friends entered the hallway. It seemed deserted.

The group bunched closely together as they slowly walked through the corridor, into the living room. Shadeless lightbulbs hung from the ceiling, switched off and giving no light. The plaster on the walls had begun to crack and traces of rot showed in the corners where the walls met the ceiling.

“Good grief!” Rarity muttered to herself, “How can anypony live in such conditions?! It’s simply a mess in here!”

“Normally, I’d be the first to tell ya to get a hold’a yerself,” Applejack whispered “But I gotta agree. Doesn’t look much like anypony’s lived here for a while.”

As they gazed about at the strange state of the house, Twilight noticed with some amusement the scattering of sweets, cakes and other treats, all about the place. In one room there would be a half-full box of cupcakes, in another a bowl of lollipops, in another a cake-tray. Twilight giggled slightly as she entered the dining room, where she found a gigantic, half-eaten cake lying on the table in the middle. Her laugh rang ominously through the darkness of the room, and she quickly fell silent.

Another doorway caught the unicorn’s eye, just off to the side of the table. Peering around the doorframe, her jaw dropped.

From the floor to the ceiling, the walls of the room were covered in all manner of papers and photographs, haphazardly pinned all over the place. At least, any space on the walls not taken up by overflowing bookcases. The floor was similarly covered with stacks and heaps of sheets and books, with the odd bowl of sweets here and there, as well as a single double-drawer dresser against the right hand wall.

Twilight entered the room, treading carefully, so as not to disturb any of the papers that littered the floor. Looking down between her hooves, she saw that many of the sheets of paper were covered with strange, crudely drawn symbols, recognising many such symbols from the black book. Among the crude drawings, she saw that ever-present symbol, of the O with an X through it.

Scattered among the papers were a variety of books. Some were clearly old, bound in tattered cloth with worm-eaten pages. Some were much newer, with pristine dust-covers and crisp white pages, and several were little more than great masses of notes bound together with strings looped through punched holes on the edges. They were a strange mix of books, including compilations of pony-tales, horror stories and myths, as well as several she recognised from copies she held in her library, such as 'Ghost, Goblins and Ghoulis figures' and 'Mythological monstrosities'. But one string-bound bunch of papers caught her eye, labelled 'Cognitio Communis: The Collective Knowledge'

"Collective Knowledge?" She read aloud. *So, is that what that means?* The opposite wall seemed to hold most of the photos in the room. As she peered closely at them, her face grew pale. She'd recognise those masks anywhere. The photos showed images of the dark, twisted trees of the Everfree Forest. Among the trees could be seen those mysterious masked ponies, walking together in the blackness of the Forest.

Next to these pictures, there was a sort of collage of pictures of various ponies. All of them were unicorns, she noticed, including herself and many others she recognised, from around Ponyville. All these pictures had been seemingly crossed out in green pen, except her own, which remained blank, and another unicorn stallion that she did not recognise. His smiling image had been crossed out with a red marker pen, while hers remained devoid of any marking.

"Wh-what is this?" Twilight whispered in confusion. "Why am I on here?!"

"Twi?"

The unicorn jumped slightly as she heard Applejack's voice from behind her. Turning around, she saw the earth-pony framed in the doorway, gazing into the room in amazement.

"What the Sam Hill...? What's all this?" She muttered as she came in to join Twilight. Moments later, the others joined them in the room, looking around at the mess.

"Hey! My house is in this one!"

“Hmmpf, I must say, whoever took these could use a lesson in photography.”

“What’s with all the drawings all over the floor?”

Their aloud musings were cut short, however, as Fluttershy gave forth a terrified squeak. The others turned around to see her pointing fearfully at one photo on the wall, quivering like a leaf in the breeze.

As soon as Twilight saw it, she knew why.

There it was. That thing she dreaded the most. That huge, gangly, pale, faceless figure, in its black suit and red necktie. It was depicted walking through the clearing between the outskirts of Ponyville, and the Everfree Forest. Twilight recognised it as the very place where she encountered It that evening, where It... took her. It seemed to be walking out of the forest, followed closely behind by another pony of regular size, with grey fur and a brown mane, a white mask strapped firmly to their face. The photo itself appeared distorted and grainy, as if the camera was broken when the photo was taken.

The ponies silently looked at the image, eyes wide with horror at what they saw. Even with Twilight’s description, they were shocked at the sight of it. It looked unnatural, monstrous, as if from an illustration in a book of spooky pony-tales.

“So...that’s him, huh?” Rainbow Dash said quietly.

Twilight nodded dumbly.

“My stars...I’ve never seen anypony like it...” whispered Rarity timidly.

“If ya can call it a pony at all.” Applejack added.

Twilight just gazed, frozen with fear, at the tall, faceless pony in the photo. So, somepony else had managed to photograph It as well then. What connection did this Talisman Tome have to this all? Was he also being followed and visited in the night? Was he working with them?

“Oh!”

The six friends froze simultaneously as a new, unfamiliar voice suddenly came from behind them.

“Oops...” Twilight whimpered, as she slowly turned around to face the doorway.

A lightish brown colt stood before them, with a dark brunette mane that hung messily about his neck and face, rather long for a colt, but still short in a filly's

eyes. The black jacket that he wore around his shoulders failed to hide his rather thin and gangly frame, and his green eyes and agape mouth held that odd expression of blank, dull surprise that, somehow, only a young colt can pull off.

“...Well...This is unexpected...” He said.

He stared blankly at Twilight and the others, completely unsure how to react.

Twilight stared back, equally blankly. *Is this really him?* “T-Talisman...Tome?”

He nodded, eyes still wide with surprise “Uh huh... And you're Twilight Sparkle.”

Nodding, the violent unicorn stood up and reached out a forehoof to the brown colt. Hesitantly, he reached out a forehoof to meet hers with a gentle *Clack*, tapping together in the pony equivalent of a handshake.

“Talisman, We need to talk.”

Chapter 6

Talisman Tome bustled about in the dusty, messy dining room of his house, brushing the surface of the table clean with his tail as he callously pushed the half-eaten pie aside. He then proceeded to light all the lamps in the room, and draw the curtains on all the windows. The six ponies stood by and watched curiously as the colt pulled up six moth-eaten cushions, arranging them around the table.

In the awkward silence, Twilight felt compelled to offer assistance “Er...Do you need any help?”

But Tally waved her down, not even raising his head to look at her; he just carried on with putting out cushions around the table, calling out “No, no, I got it...Caught me at a bit of a bad time, y’see. If I knew you were coming so soon, I’d have done somethin’ about the mess... I’ve been a bit busy lately... Erm, help yerself to some sweets while you wait, if you want.”

Twilight looked about and saw a bowl of gumdrops on the floor right next to her. Not wanting to appear cold, she politely chewed on a few, while her friends did the same, politely, if hesitantly, helping themselves. Pinkie Pie, however, needed no second bidding and eagerly dug into the remainder of the discarded pie.

Twilight watched Talisman as he finished laying out cushions and sat down on one. “Have a seat...er, please.” He said, motioning with a forehoof. The unicorn sat down opposite him as her friends followed her example. In her mind, she was still sceptical about how this colt could help her. He honestly wasn’t what she was expecting. Granted, he had seen him before, but only briefly. When Pinkie Pie talked about him, she pictured some wise old stallion, well versed in ancient lore and legends.

His name only added to the image: Talisman Tome, a protective magical artefact and an ancient book. To instead find that he was a nervous, skinny colt, no older than she was, living in a squalid little bungalow... It did seem a bit of a letdown. *But, beggars can’t be choosers*, she thought. *He*

definitely has something to do with this, so maybe he can help me find some answers.

He sat down opposite her, nervously shuffling in his seat, "So...uh, I guess a good place to start is so we're all on the same level...so, can you tell is exactly what's been happening?"

"Hold it!" Rainbow Dash raised a hoof "I dunno about the others, but I think you're the one who needs to explain things first."

Twilight nodded "I agree. For starters, who are you, and why have you been following me? And what did you mean, 'If you knew I was coming so soon'?"

Talisman leaned forwards, as he took a deep breath and spoke: "Okay then... You already know my name, and no doubt Pinkie Pie's talked about me, right?"

Twilight nodded "Well, not much, but yes."

"Well, whatever...I'll start from the beginning. I'm Talisman Tome, my special talent lies in studies of ancient lore and old myths, as you can see." He stood up for a brief moment and turned his flank to the other ponies, showing a cutie mark shaped like a large old-fashioned book with a star on the front. "Now, A few months ago, a friend of mine and I read about a strange creature."

He grabbed an old, tattered book from a heap on his left, hastily wolfing down a cupcake on his way. Flipping it open to a certain page, he nudged it towards Twilight. The unicorn looked over the pages of the book, and felt a chill of fear. There he was again, that ever-present creature; the pony that was not a pony, devoid of facial features, with spindly legs longer than any pony. It was depicted in an old woodcut engraving. However, instead of being clad in a black suit and tie, he appeared to wear a long black cloak that draped over him, down to his knees. All around him were ponies of all ages and kinds, their faces contorted into terrified screams. From the creature's back several long, spiderlike limbs stretched out over the ponies, one limb grabbing a young Pegasus pony, pinning her to the ground.

"The story talked about a creature called the Slendermane. According to the stories, this creature would emerge from the darkest forests at night

and eat up anypony it crossed. It just seemed like a standard boogymare story, meant to scare little foals. But there seemed more to it to us. I dunno what it was,” Talisman said “But something about this legend really interested us. So, we kept studying it. Turns out a similar figure appears in a lot of stories and legends from all over Equestria. He always has different names, like the Tall One, the Faceless King, The Pale Knight, Der Ritter, Equitem, the list goes on. We got onto reading some really interesting stuff in some...interesting, books.”

“You mean like that black book you sent me?”

The pale colt grinned sheepishly “Heh...guilty as charged...But actually, that one’s a bit different. Anyway, we kept researching this legend, trying to find out everything we could. Then one night, I see something moving around in the Everfree Forest. So I go to check it out, and I see these ponies all standing in the middle of this clearing, wearin’ these weird masks.”

Twilight held a hoof to her mouth in silent shock.

“I just watched them for a while, but they just stood there, totally silent. I managed to take a few pictures, but when I got them developed...well...”

Talisman got up for a moment and entered the room off to the side, the one with the walls covered in photos. Moments later he returned, a photograph held in his teeth. Setting it down on the table, Twilight got a good look at the blurry image. There were the four ponies in masks, all standing in a clearing, as if forming the corners of an imaginary square. But in the middle of them, there stood the tall, faceless figure that haunted her so.

“Thing is, I didn’t see him there when I took the photo, but when I got it developed, there he was.” He continued nervously “It was that same creature I’d read about. I showed it to one of my unicorn friends, and he told me that he’d seen the creature too! He had spotted it walkin’ around in the woods one night when he was walking home from a party.

“So then, we both started heading out at night to try to spot this thing again. Only now, I could see him for real too... Every night we’d see him and those masked ponies just standing in a clearing in the woods. But one night, we get too close. They spot us...”

He paused for a moment, as if in thought. Yawning suddenly, he gasped to himself and hastily grabbed another cupcake from the dresser on the side of the room and wolfed it down. Licking his lips, he continued:

“Anyways, the masked ponies all freak out and rush us. In the scuffle, I manage to get away, and while I ran, I found this ratty old book -The book you now have, Twilight. But...” Talisman shrugged “I’m clueless on what that book means.”

Twilight raised a hoof as something came to her attention in Talisman’s story “Hold on... You said there was another pony researching with you, a unicorn. What happened to...?”

“But then,” Talisman quickly interrupted “Then, one night I’m out heading to do another investigation, and who do I see but our tall friend, and you, out for a moonlit walk.”

All eyes turned in surprise to Twilight. Her mind went back several days, to that night when she saw him for the first time, peering in at her through unseen eyes from the window. He reached in with its tendril of inky blackness and...

“Ah yes, I remember that night!” Rarity spoke up “I saw Twilight walking about at night a few nights ago, and then saw another pony following not far behind...Which was you, I presume?”

Talisman nodded, “I followed until the pair of you went into the Everfree Forest...I didn’t go in after you...not-not going in there again.”

“But wait...” Rainbow spoke up, “You say you saw Twilight and...that thing, walking together, but Rarity says she saw Twilight out walking alone.” She tapped her chin with a forehoof as she continued “Come to think of it, when I found Twilight outside the Forest a few days ago, she told me later that she saw Him standing in front of us, but I didn’t see anypony.”

“Really?” Talisman’ ears perked up “N-Now that is interesting...So, only certain ponies can see him, huh?”

Everypony sat back in silence, each dwelling on this newfound fact. As they ruminated, Talisman grasped a pen in his teeth and eagerly scribbled down notes on this discovery, next to previous notes that speculated theories on why he used to not be able to see him. Needless to say, these new discoveries fairly threw his old theories out the window.

A-anywho,” Talisman spoke up again, breaking the silence “There’s more. When Pinkie Pie came for my next delivery, I described you to her, in case she knew you. She told me, she said...’That’s Twilight Sparkle, Tally. One of my bestest friends, a real genius’.”

“Oh, Tally, stop it!” Pinkie Pie giggled “You’re embarrassing me!”

Twilight turned to Pinkie Pie “Why didn’t you tell me somepony was asking about me?!”

The pink pony shrugged “You never asked, silly!”

“Well, I thought it was mighty interestin’ to see somepony else involved with Him. And with Pinkie calling you a genius, I sent the book to you, ‘cos I hoped you’d be able to make sense of it.” Talisman finished.

Twilight’s ears drooped slightly as she smiled bashfully “Oh, well... I’m flattered, but I’m afraid I’m just as clueless with it as you...”

Silence once again descended on the assembled ponies. Pinkie Pie took advantage of the lull in activity to help herself to the bowl of gumdrops by Twilight’s side. As she chewed the gummy treat, a sudden thought came to her.

“Hold on a sec! If you wanted to see if Twilight could make sense of the book, why didn’t you just go and see her?”

“She’s got a point there, partner.” Applejack piped up.

“Well, ah...Y’know, I, er, didn’t want to draw too much attention to myself. I wasn’t sure if those masked ponies knew I was still watching them, you know?” The colt replied, nervously scratching at his mane.

Twilight raised an eyebrow at this reply. *Was there something else to it?*

“But that’s not the big question, no. The big question is ‘why?’” He continued, getting up and walking around the room until he was face to face with Twilight.

“Why you in particular? What is He after?” Talisman wondered aloud, looking Twilight up and down “Why are you so special?”

“To be honest, I was hoping you’d know.” Twilight replied, gently pushing the colt a bit further back from her.

“Well, I’d think it’s a bit obvious.” Rarity spoke up “Twilight wakes up after being attacked by this thing, nearly drained of all her Vita energy, and the next day, receives a mouldy old book that apparently belongs to those masked fellows, that talks a lot about Vita energy? I think the connection is rather clear.”

Talisman took up his pencil again and noted down the fact “Interesting, interesting...Vita energy, that’s the magical energy unicorns use to do magic, right?”

“Yeah, and since he attacked me,” Twilight replied “I haven’t been able to use my magic as much. But I’m slowly getting it all back.”

“Right, right...But still the question is still what do they want with her Vita...”

BONG!!!!

Everpony jumped in surprise as there came the ominous chime of a grandfather clock in the next room. It chimed another five times, and Twilight realised just how late it was.

“Six o’clock already?! How’d it get so late?” She muttered. She got up and dusted herself off “Sorry everypony, but I think I better be getting home. Thank you very much for your hospitality, Talisman. I’m kind of glad that there’s somepony else who knows about all this.”

“Makes you feel a little saner, huh?” Talisman retorted with a grin, which Twilight returned, “You’re welcome back anytime if you want to, y’know, look over my research. I’m pretty much always up, so stop by anytime.”

“Thanks.” Twilight replied.

“So, what do you guys think of him?” Twilight asked her friends as she returned to the library. She honestly did not know what to make of Talisman, never being a very good judge of character.

“Well, his house could do with a good clean for one thing. I mean did you see the rotstains on the walls?!” Rarity said indignantly, shuddering at the thought of the offending rot.

The other five laughed as they continued to discuss the strange little colt.

“He seem a little...well, jittery to y’all, or was it just me?”

“Yeah, he was kinda jittery. Like he was always a bit nervous about somethin’.”

“But he did seem to know what he was talking about.”

“And he was very friendly to us. I was worried he would be more reclusive than that.”

As they reached the massive hollowed-out tree of the library, goodbyes were said and the other ponies went on their way. Twilight watched them leave before turning and pushing the door open.

She barely had time to remove her saddlebag before the air was knocked out of her by something small and scaly.

“Twilight! You’re back! You’re okay!” Spike cried as he hugged her tightly. “What happened?! The nurse said that...”

But Twilight hushed his anxious words as she hugged him back, smiling. “Sshh, it’s alright Spike. I’m back now, and I’m fine.”

“But what happened to you?” Spike asked again “Nurse Redheart said something about you turning up outside the Everfree Forest or something.”

Twilight gently prised him loose and set him down. “You might want to get some food, Spike. I’ve got a lot to talk about, and it may take a while... Oh,

and just so you know, for the next few days, you'll be in charge of the library. I've got some work to do with a friend of mine."

"Anypony I know?"

She shook her head "I doubt it. He's pretty reclusive."

Spike nodded, before realisation hit him. *He?*

And so, Twilight began to relate to Spike everything that had been happening to her since the night when something trashed the library. Unbeknownst to either, at the window there watched two pairs of dark, masked eyes.

"Is she ready?" said one to the other.

The other shook his head "Not yet. Give her a few more days."

"But the more time she has, the more she knows! Can we really risk it?"

"It doesn't matter." The other masked pony replied, running a forehoof through his messy brown mane. "She'll just be another key for the gateway."

Chapter 7

Twilight's eyes twitched as she felt the warmth of the sun's glow on her face, as it shone through her window. Another beautiful day in Ponyville. But the beauty of Celestia's great work was lost on Twilight Sparkle. Grumbling, she raised her head and blew a few stray hairs out of her eyes. With heavy limbs, she slumped out of bed and lurched over to her mirror to examine the damage.

Not too bad, she thought as she looked herself over; especially considering she barely slept a wink last night. She had been filling Spike in on everything that had been happening to her since that night when she found her library a mess. He had sat at rapt attention as she detailed her strange night-time visitations, the strange objects she had been finding, and the - for lack of a better word - monster that had attacked her, that evening outside the Everfree Forest. The tall, faceless pony with the black tentacles; The Slendermane, as Talisman had called it. She had been reluctant to show Spike any of the pictures of it. She knew how weak his composure could be (He had been the only one to faint at the very sight of Nightmare Moon), but he insisted. He had gone silent for a few moments as he looked at the image, but regained his composure quickly enough.

By the time she had finished relating her story, it was well into the night, and long past Spike's bedtime. After she had put him to bed, Twilight had quickly followed suit, exhausted after a long, eventful day.

But even in the comfort of her own bed she could not find rest in sleep. Her mind tossed and turned as much as her body, going over everything she had learnt that day. Part of her was anxious and impatient to get back to researching the Slendermane over at Talisman's house, feeling that every moment she spent not trying to solve this mystery was a moment wasted. What had also kept her awake was fear, knowing that at any minute, that familiar pale head would appear at her window, reach in with a shadowy tentacle and take her away.

Twilight groggily levitated her hairbrush into the air, and calmed her messy, tangled mane as best she could. It took more effort than usual to control

the movement of the brush. *I mustn't yet have all my Vita back*, she thought.

Satisfied with her mane, she descended to the ground floor and shambled into the kitchen, where she found to her surprise and delight, a bowl of oatmeal, a stack of toast and a glass of orange juice, complete with straw, all set out for her. Resting on the bowl of oatmeal was a small handwritten note:

TWILIGHT,
GONE TO FETCH OWLOWISCIOUS FROM FLUTTERSHY'S HOUSE TO
HELP WITH RUNNING THE LIBRARY. HOPE YOU HAVE A GOOD DAY.
HAVE FUN WITH YOUR NEW FRIEND.
DON'T WORK TOO HARD.
SPIKE.

Twilight smiled. No matter what happened to her, she could always rely on Spike to make her feel better.

After a highly satisfying breakfast and a quick bath, Twilight closed the door of the library and headed down the street, clean as a whistle and feeling fresh as a daisy.

As she trotted leisurely down the streets of Ponyville, she once again had that strange feeling. She saw all the other ponies going about their daily routines, buying, selling, chatting, playing or just strolling around town. All blissfully unaware that anything out of the ordinary was going on. Blissfully unaware of the monstrous presence lurking, somewhere in the dark trees of the Everfree Forest.

Twilight passed through the more crowded streets of Ponyville, coming to the outskirts of the town, where the streets became sparsely populated and quiet. Rounding the bend, she came to that familiar, empty street. She noticed as she knocked on the door of Talisman's house, that the curtains were constantly down across the grimy windows.

Her head turned as she heard the door unlock before her and creak open slightly. A green eye peeked nervously out at her, before the door opened fully and Talisman stood before her in the doorway.

“Oh, hi Twilight...glad you came, I got some things that need talking about...come on in.” He said nervously as he headed back inside, Twilight following behind him.

As the unicorn entered, she noticed for the first time how brightly lit the house was. Every candle was lit, every light switched on. Even though the last time she was in the house, it was cast in an ominous darkness, this glaring brightness seemed even more unnerving for Twilight.

“Hey, Talisman, what’s with all the lights on? It’s a bright day outside, isn’t it a bit wasteful?” she asked, as they both passed through the dining room and into the photo room.

The brown colt answered over his shoulder as he began sifting through his papers “No, no. Daylight’s not enough...First rule in this house: When somepony’s in the house, all the lights go on. No dark, nowhere.”

“But why?” she asked, clearing a spot to sit down “Why do you need to keep it so...” A sudden thought hit her: “Talisman...are you...scared of the dark?”

He stopped sifting through the sheets of paper and photos and turned to face Twilight, blushing “Erm...yeah, I guess I am...Heh, never thought of it that way...”

A tense, awkward silence followed, so thick a knife would have trouble cutting it. Twilight Sparkle sheepishly pawed at the floor a moment, before clearing her throat to break the pause.

“Ahem...So, you said you had something to talk about?”

“Oh! Ah, yes...erm...where did I put it...C’mon, I just had it...” Talisman replied, resuming his search. After a moment he raised his head, holding in his jaws a thick scrapbook of sheets, bound together with string. Twilight recognised it as the book she had seen yesterday, labeled “The Collective Knowledge”.

“Y’see, I was flipping through my copy of the black book I gave you, just this morning before you arrived. Have, er...you had a chance to read any of it?”

Twilight nodded, sitting on the floor next to him “Some of it, yes. But I can’t make any sense of it. It was all going on about hourglasses and rifts and all sorts of things...”

He passed her the scrapbook, open about halfway into the book. “Read that part. I’ll tell you my thoughts when you’re done. “

Twilight peered at the scrawled words on the pages, copied word for word from that black book:

“...And so The Mighty came to me as I wandered, alone, in the forest. He spoke to me, telling of many great and terrible things. The Mighty spoke of the 4th world, wherein he had resided, and the rites by which a doorway may be opened between His and Ours, through the Dimensional Hourglass. By these rites he had been called forth, by whom he did not tell. But whomever it was, their rites were incomplete, for upon His arrival in our world, He was crippled and weak. But His mind was still intact and through our thoughts we spoke, as He told me of His desires for our world. He saw us, and the creatures that inhabited our world, and sneered at our weakness and impurity of form. The Mighty told me of the creatures of his world, of their perfection and purity. How I long to walk in that beautiful world.

And so we shall strive to obey The Mighty, to serve Him and restore Him to His former power. For only when He is restored to glory may He assist us in the Great Work. Only by Him may we shed ourselves of our shells of flesh and bone and ascend to beings of purity and perfection. Only by Him may our lands of Equestria be cleansed of imperfection and impurity and turned to a world of beauty. Only by Him may we attain Godhood.”

Twilight shakily closed the scrapbook as she finished the passage. She sat in silence for a minute or two as those words sunk in.

“So...what do you think?” Talisman said.

“G-God...hood...?” she stammered.

“I know, it’s weird, right?” He replied, an intrigued grin on his face “I’m still pretty in the dark about it myself.”

But Twilight wasn't listening. Her mind was racing, processing everything she knew about the vents that had led her to this point. Her visits in the night, her lost time, those masked ponies that lurked in the Forest, the Slendermane itself... *This is serious*, she thought. *Not only am I in danger from this thing, but all of Ponyville, perhaps all of Equestria could be in danger!*

It was then that she resolved herself: *Princess Celestia has to know.*

"Er... Twilight?"

Talisman's voice brought her back to reality as she saw his hoof waving in front of her face. "You alright there?"

"Hmm? OH! Yes...yes, I'm fine..." Twilight muttered, flushing crimson as she was caught daydreaming.

"So...anyways" the brown colt continued, standing up and dipping his head into a nearby bowl of chocolates. "Mmmph...s'cuse me... Readin' over this myself, it tells us a few things that could be useful: First off, whatever Slendermane is, it's not from Equestria. It's from this '4th world', wherever that is."

Twilight nodded and added to the brainstorm "Right...and It's weak... the book said that It was crippled... Whatever this Dimensional Hourglass thing is, it didn't work, so..." She paused as cold realisation flooded over her "So, they're...feeding It... That's what they need me for!"

She suddenly grasped Talisman around the shoulders as the stroke of inspiration continued "The Slendermane needs to have all its strength back before this Great Work can begin. So, they're taking Vita energy from other creatures...myself included...to feed It!"

Only then did she notice that Talisman had promptly frozen the moment she grabbed him. His tail and mane had gone bushy and stiff and a cold sweat dripped from his frozen face. Twilight quickly let go and stepped back, "Uh...sorry. You...okay?" *Odd*, she thought. *Not a fan of being touched either, huh?*

Talisman muttered a hasty response as he regained his composure
“Uh...yeah, sorry...Ahem, now, er...you were saying?”

Twilight continued “Er...well, I was just thinking. This Great Work they’re talking about...it reminds me of something I read about in an old Alchemy book.”

“What’s Alchemy?” Talisman asked.

“It’s an old philosophy from the time of the Magical Renaissance, about six hundred years ago. It tried to combine unicorn magic with science and chemistry. One of the central elements of the philosophy was something called the Great Work, which involved a system of stages through which material could be purified and made magically perfect.” Twilight put a hoof to her chin as she recalled the yellowed pages of that book in the Canterlot Library “I think...I think the stages were called the Blue stage, the Black stage, the Red Stage and the White Stage.”

The colt cocked an ear in confusion “But what does each stage mean? How does the Great Work..er, work?”

But Twilight just shrugged “No idea. It’s nearly impossible to find any mention of Alchemy in books other than references, and there certainly aren’t any guides or textbooks on the processes anymore. They were all lost over time.”

“Fascinating... But apparently somepony hasn’t forgotten it. Somehow Slendermane knows how to do it. And those Maskies are plannin’ on using it to purify the whole world!” Talisman added, feverishly scribbling down notes. “This is amazing stuff! Looks like I did the right thing trying to get your attention, Twilight. You’re a genius!”

Twilight grinned, turning to help herself to a bowl of chocolates to hide her blushing face “Heheh, thanks Tally.”

Talisman finished writing down their findings as he sat down beside her, grabbing several sweets for himself. As Twilight chewed on a caramel, she watched with raised eyebrows as Talisman wolfed down a whole mouthful of sweets at once!

Chuckling, she shifted the caramel to the side of her mouth and asked "I've been meaning to ask you: What's with all the sweets? It can't be good for you. Don't you eat anything else?"

He nodded "Yeah, sometimes, but I gotta keep my sugar up."

No wonder Pinkie Pie likes him, she thought. "But why?"

"Keeps me awake... Gotta stay awake, all the time."

Absent-mindedly, Twilight bit down on a chunk of chocolate as it melted in her mouth. *Stay awake? What makes him want to stay awake all the time? Does this mean he never sleeps?*

"No sleep for me." Talisman muttered, to nopony in particular "That's when they come for you, Slendermane and the Maskies..."

"Have they come after you before?" she asked apprehensively.

He grimly nodded, as his expression grew cold. "Why do you think I hardly ever go outside?"

Twilight gulped audibly as she swallowed her mouthful of toffee and chocolate. Maybe not a good idea to press the subject.

Several minutes passed in silence. The pair of young ponies sat quietly, making their way through the bowl of chocolates.

As she sat in silence, Twilight found herself looking at the scrawny little colt, as he chewed on a toffee. His slightly glazed eyes stared through his messy, brown mane, off into space, focusing on nothing in particular, as his mouth silently formed inarticulate words. It was as if he suddenly was imagining himself somewhere else, talking to somepony. An odd sight to behold, indeed.

Twilight suddenly felt a strange emotional connection with Talisman. It wasn't love, or even any sort of attraction; rather, it was a sense of pity. Whatever Talisman must have gone through in his encounters with Slendermane, it was apparent that it had taken its toll on his mind. Some subconscious cue felt as if she was compelled to help him, just as he

seemed compelled to help her. *What could have caused him to seclude himself from society, living alone in fear of going outside, or even being in the dark?*

Then she remembered. That other unicorn. The only pony on that noticeboard on the wall, apart from herself, that was not crossed out in green. Rather, it was crossed out in bold red marker. What could it mean?

“Hey...Tally?”

Talisman’s eyes lost the glazed quality and returned to focus as they looked at Twilight. “Yeah?”

The unicorn pointed a forehoof at the noticeboard, covered with crossed-out photographs of ponies. “That unicorn...the one crossed out in red. Who is he?”

He looked to the photograph of the young unicorn stallion, with his light green eyes and sort brown mane, combed back and around his ears. Clad in a blue denim jacket, a pair of sunglasses perched coolly on his mane he smiled as he sat under an autumn tree. Talisman smiled.

“That’s Thistle. He was an old friend of mine who helped me with my studies on the Slendermane. He was a folklorist, so when I started studying the Slendermane, he lent me all these books for my research. He could be a bit of a goof sometimes, but a great friend. Loyal to the end...” Talisman trailed off, grinning in reminiscence.

Twilight hesitantly asked “So...where is he now?”

“Dead. Long dead.” He replied.

Twilight was shocked by his bluntness. Feeling a slight knot in her stomach, she silently cursed herself for bringing up such a potentially touchy subject. Lowering her head, she muttered “I...I’m sorry.”

“Not your fault...” Talisman got up and walked over to the window. Pulling a curtain back slightly, a beam of sunlight shone through, illuminating the dust in the air. “It’s his.”

Twilight raised her head, noticing a strange sense of tension in his voice. "Whose?"

"His." He repeated. "The pony in the mask that's watching this house from across the street, and may have just spotted me looking at him."

Twilight knocked the bowl of chocolates over in her hurry to look through the curtains for herself. Pushing Talisman aside, she put her eye to the window and spotted a figure galloping down the street in the direction of the Everfree Forest. His coat and white facemask were unmistakable.

Without another word, Talisman stormed out of the room, rushing towards the hallway. Twilight remained staring through the window until she was jogged out of her stupor by the sound of the door opening.

"Talisman! Wait, stop!" she cried as she hurried to catch up with him. He had left the door wide open and was running full gallop after the masked pony. As she ran, Twilight noted how suddenly Talisman gave chase. *Does he recognise this masked pony? Do they have some connection?*

Talisman ran ahead, ignoring all else except the fleeing pony before him, and Twilight in turn chased after Talisman, desperate to ensure that he was not left alone, and neither was she

So focused were they on the chase, that neither noticed that they had passed into the dark thickets of the Everfree Forest.

Chapter 8

Twilight panted with exertion as she strained to keep Talisman in view. Through the darkness of the trees, she could only just make him out as he galloped ahead, after the masked pony.

In her mind, Twilight cursed herself for eating so many sweets when at Talisman's house. The sugar boost gave her plenty of stamina, but the bloat in her stomach was making her nauseous. It was only growing worse as she ran. Her limbs began to ache with exhaustion as she tried desperately to keep up with Talisman.

But being an earth-pony, he was naturally better built for long distance running. Slowly, slowly, his silhouette grew smaller ahead, until he vanished into the trees.

"Tally! Wait, slow down!" Twilight shouted, her breath ragged. But it was no good. Her limbs were burning from the strain, and she could run no further. Slowing to a trot, she staggered a few feet, leaning against a tree to catch her breath.

Looking around, she audibly gulped. She still remembered all the horror stories the others had told her about the Everfree Forest. Where, by some natural anomaly, the forest was completely autonomous, requiring no assistance from the outside world to grow and change over the seasons. She had ventured into the trees several times before, but only once alone. She didn't like to talk about that incident much. Being transformed into stone by a cockatrice had been one of the most terrifying and painful experiences of her life. At least, until the evening when the Slendermane came for her outside the fringe of the forest.

Twilight let out a low groan of frustration. *Great. Stuck all alone, in the middle of the Everfree Forest, my legs feel like they're gonna fall off any moment, I've lost Talisman...can anything make this any worse?!*

As if in answer to her silent question, there came a rustling in the trees a few yards away, punctuated by a low growl. She gave a small squeak of fright and trotted doggedly in the direction her friend had run.

“Tally! Where are you?!” she half shouted, half whispered. Her mind was in conflict: half wanting to find Talisman as quickly as possible, the other desperate to not draw unwanted attention from any of the strange creatures prowling about in the forest. “Talisman Tome! Where are you?!”

There then came a rustling from the dark undergrowth ahead. Twilight’s whole body froze as she heard it. The distinct sound of some creature moving about in the brush. Turning her ears towards the sound, she focused and strained to hear more movement.

There it was again! The rustle of a bush or shrub being moved against. And mingled in, almost inaudible under it, the *clomph, clomph, clomph* of equine hooves against the soft earth.

Unsure whether to be relieved or even more scared to hear another pony moving about, Twilight nervously tip-hoofed towards the source of the sound. In the near pitch-blackness, she felt the scratch of branches and thorns against her sides, as she pushed past a particularly dense bush.

As she pushed past, she stumbled against a protruding root on the ground and fell flat on her face.

In reply, there came from nearby a nervous “Sssh!”

Twilight looked up, spitting out a clump of dirt, and breathed a sigh of relief as her whole body relaxed. There he was. Talisman stood on the other side of the small clearing Twilight had stumbled into. He had raised a hoof to his lips, gesturing for Twilight to be quiet.

She nodded, getting back to her hooves as quietly as she could. She crept to join the colt’s side. He pointed with the other forehoof, at a large bush just off to his left. Twilight glanced, blankly, at the bush, unsure why Talisman was focusing on the bush. She jumped back a bit as the shrub suddenly quivered, as if a hidden creature had stirred inside it. Pointing again at the bush, Talisman drew his hoof swiftly back towards himself, then pointed at Twilight. He then formed a ring with his forelegs, as if grabbing some invisible object.

But Twilight merely cocked an ear in confusion. Rolling his eyes, Talisman silently mouthed to her, accentuating every syllable:

“He...comes out...at me...you...grab him.”

Twilight nodded in understanding, quietly moving to stand just in front of the bush, just off to the left, as the colt picked up a long stick in his mouth. Awkwardly tilting his head, he pointed the top of the branch towards the bush. He gave the shrub a small poke.

It remained still.

He jabbed again, a little harder.

The bush shook as something burst forth from its hiding place inside. Twilight pounced and grabbed the pale figure. As she felt it collapse to the ground under her hooves, she gave a triumphant “Gotcha!”

“Gotcha!”

Her ears perked. That was a new voice. Only one pony she knew had a voice that gentle and demure, even when shouting.

Her next thoughts shot out of her at the same time as any breath in her lungs as something landed on her back, winding her. This brought up again that familiar nausea that had come from her running on a full stomach.

“Get off her! Yaaagh!” shouted Talisman’s voice. Twilight felt her eyes bulge as a further weight piled ontop of her back.

For a moment, there was silence. Then, there came that sweet, gentle voice again:

“Oh! T-Twilight! Talisman! I-I’m so sorry...I didn’t mean to...I was just running after Angel and, well, the next thing I know, I was in the Forest and...”

Twilight gasped for air as part of the weight piled on her back subsided
“Oohh...F-Fluttershy...?”

Opening her eyes, she saw that familiar butter-yellow pony, her pink mane now dishevelled and frazzled. Dusting herself off, she continued to mutter timid apologies.

"I'm really sorry! I thought I saw Angel running through the bushes and I tried to catch him. A-and I guess I didn't see you and...Um, Mr. Talisman?"

There came a grunt from above Twilight's head.

"Erm...If you could, you might want to get off of Twilight. It's just, I don't think she can breath with so much weight ontop of her..."

The purple unicorn looked up and saw that familiar messy brunette mane, tickling her snout. Talisman's chin was resting just below her horn. She felt his jaw moving as he muttered some response, sliding off of Twilight's back to lie, prone, beside her, his dazed eyes looking into hers. Twilight suddenly felt a strange flush of warmth to her cheeks. *Was she blushing?*

Fluttershy watched the sight with a nervous curiosity, before she started as she felt a familiar tapping on her hoof. Looking down, she saw with a sigh of relief, that familiar white bunny, scowling up at her.

Lowering her head to nuzzle the tiny terror, she said "Oh Angel! I was so worried! You know, you really shouldn't run off like that."

"Wait a sec." Twilight said, raising her head "If Angel's over there with you...then who's trapped under my hooves?"

All eyes turned to the pale form that lay, unconscious under her. She got up and looked down, her eyes, dazed by the pileup, came back into focus. She smiled with grim satisfaction and triumph as she saw the familiar white mask.

"We got him!" Talisman muttered, as he got back to his hooves. "Good going!"

The pale stallion lay on his side, knocked out by the ambush His brown mane fell over the dark eyeholes of his strange mask, featureless ad white, save for black shadows around the eyes and lips, and small curved eyebrows above the eyeholes, also done in black ink.

“Who is that?” Fluttershy whispered, as if afraid of waking him up.

Twilight knelt by him “He’s one of the ponies that has been watching Talisman and I. He’s working with that monster that attacked me, the Slendermane. And he’s gonna tell us exactly what is going on.”

Talisman tried to suppress a grin as he asked “But...doesn’t he kinda have to be...y’know, conscious?”

Twilight glared at him a moment, before turning back to the stunned pony before her “Not to worry. I know a spell that should help. But first, Talisman, I need you to hold him down, so he doesn’t run for it when he wakes up.”

He nodded grimly and firmly places his forehooves on the pony’s back, pinning him to the ground. Twilight then leaned close to his face, her horn beginning to glow. Touching it to his pale masked head, there was a quick flash, and she raised her head back up again.

The pale stallion twitched an ear as he began to come around. Stirring, he gave a quiet groan and tried to raise his limbs. When he felt Talisman’s hooves holding him down, he gave a sudden buck wriggled about, desperate to get free. But the brown colt only redoubled his efforts in response, holding him down with even more force.

“Stop struggling.” Twilight said in a commanding tone “We’re not gonna hurt you. We just want to talk to you.”

But the masked pony continued to struggle, bucking and heaving with all his might. Twilight groaned and turned to Fluttershy, who had silently observed this strange exchange. “Can’t you do something?” she asked imploringly.

Fluttershy blinked a moment, still shocked slightly by the strange pony in their midst, but nodded eventually. Leaning close to the stallion’s ear, she said in a soothing voice “Please lie still. We just want to talk to you.”

Twilight was not surprised as the struggling slowly subsided, and the pony became calm. Fluttershy’s voice was renowned for its soothing, calming qualities.

“Thanks. Now listen,” She said in a calm, but stern voice “You’re in no position to fight us. You’re pinned down and outnumbered three to one. Four to one, if you count bunnies.” she added, nodding to Angel.

Looking straight into the eyeholes of the mask, she continued “Now, tell us just what you and your friends are planning, and why you are helping the Slendermane.”

A slightly muffled, reedy voice came from the blackened mouth hole “Slendermane... A nickname devised for our Master by unenlightened fools...What an insult!”

Twilight rolled her eyes “Alright then...what *is* his real name, then?”

“No idea. It’s impossible to pronounce with our vocal chords. The Mighty is from a world nothing like ours. The only link is the Vita Energy that flows through living things of both worlds.” He replied. “He promised us power beyond our wildest dreams, and all we had to do was help him regain his strength.”

“We know.” Twilight said “We read your little book.”

The colt suddenly began his struggling anew, nearly throwing Talisman off “So it was you! Give it back! That book belongs to us!”

Twilight stepped back, shouting to be heard over the pony’s cries “I don’t have it with me. And even if I did, I’m not gonna give it back to you, not after finding out what you plan to do with it!”

“Purifying the world,” he replied “Is the only way! This world is rotten, and only by ridding it of those who are making it rot, can we return Equestria to glory!”

“But what’s the point of purity if you’ve got nothing impure to compare it against?!”

“Erm...Twilight?” Fluttershy asked, speaking up for the first time in a while “...Er...what is this all about? What do you mean, purifying? “

Twilight nodded “It’s nothing for you to worry about, Fluttershy. Besides, me and Talisman are gonna find some way to stop all this from happening.”

Suddenly, the masked pony did something unexpected. He stopped his struggling for the briefest of moments, and then doubled over in uncontrollable laughter. Shrieking with mirth, he leered straight at the unicorn. “Ohohohohahaheeheeheehee!...oh...oh...You, you honestly think..Hahah...that you can do anything to stop us? Ohohoho, you poor, deluded fools!”

Twilight stepped closer, muttering “What’s that supposed to mean?”

He craned his neck forwards, his snout almost touching hers “It means that you’re too late to do anything, my pretty. The rite’s almost complete, and nothing can stop it now...there’s just one more bit we need to check off, and our Master will come to this world in his true form.”

“A-and...what is this last bit?” Twilight asked, dreading the answer.

A thin, pink tongue suddenly extended from within the mouth hole of the mask, running a sudden, swift lick up Twilight’s muzzle. “You, my pretty. You’ll be all ripe and ready real soon! Heeheehee!”

Twilight drew her head back in disgust. Wiping a hoof against her face, she watched in outrage as the masked pony before her giggled uncontrollably. He tilted his head up, to look Talisman in the face

“Just like that dopey unicorn we harvested last time! Thanks for him by the way, kid, you gave us a real head start! Hahahahaahaahaahaaa...!”

Talisman suddenly let go of the pony, who proceeded to curl up in mirth, and wordlessly walked over to a small rocky outcrop. Picking up a small rock in his mouth, he returned to stand above him, his eyes cold and unyielding.

“Talisman? What’re you...”

Without any warning, he took the boulder in his forehooves, raising it above his head.

“Tally, what...wait, NO!”

Twilight barely had time to look away before there was a sickening CRACK!, followed by an agonized scream. *Here comes that nausea again...*

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH! MY LEG!” screeched the masked stallion, as he doubled up in pain, cradling his crushed and crippled hind leg, which was twisted and bent at odd angles and bleeding profusely.

“TALISMAN! WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!” Twilight screamed. But the stallion did not listen. He raised the boulder up high once again, ready to strike another crushing blow.

“STOP IT!!!!”

Twilight, Talisman and the masked stallion turned to face Fluttershy, who watched the gruesome display from the sidelines. Her eyes were wide with shock, her coat, blanched and pale. A forehoof was raised in front of her face, covering her mouth, as if she had just sworn.

“Fluttershy...I’m sorry...I’m so sorry you had to get mixed up in all this...” Twilight began. But the yellow Pegasus ignored her, striding past her and kneeling at the side of the crippled, sobbing colt.

“Sshh...don’t cry...here, let me take a look at it...” she cooed, reaching out to examine the injury.

But the colt recoiled “Nnnngggh! Gettoff!...Go away, I don’t...need your pity!” he retorted, spitting out that last word like a bad apple.

Fluttershy sighed. She had had to deal with patients like these before.

“We’re all gonna die anyway...”

The words echoed through the clearing, cutting into everypony present like a knife. There was silence in the forest, save for the choking sobs of the masked pony that lay at their hooves, as he slowly slipped into unconsciousness again. Twilight was the first to speak:

“C’mon, everypony. I think it’s time to head back.” She said, her voice unnervingly level and calm.

She gave Talisman a none-too-gentle nudge and headed in the direction they had come. He followed, nervously, behind her. But there was one pony missing...

“Fluttershy, c’mon! We have to get back home now.”

But the Pegasus shook her head “It’s okay...if it’s alright, I’d like to take care of him...”

“What?!” Twilight shrieked incredulously “Fluttershy, he’s the one who brought the Slendermane into our world! He’s working to get us all killed!”

As she said this, she failed to notice Talisman shift nervously. But Fluttershy was adamant.

“Oh, I know...But maybe if I help him get better, he might change.” She said, as she hoisted the unconscious pony onto her back. Flapping her feathered wings, she took to the air, hovering for a moment.

Twilight rolled her eyes “Ugh...fine. But don’t let him leave your house! We need to find out all we can from him before all this goes down.”

Fluttershy nodded, and flew up above the treeline, in the direction of her cottage on the outskirts of Ponyville.

The two ponies followed suit, walking silently through the Forest, each immersed in their own thoughts. Talisman lagged behind, his head bowed as if in shame, his now thoroughly messy hair concealing his eyes. Twilight strode out in front, her anger and frustration mingling with anxiety and fear. In her head, she was already composing a letter to send to Princess Celestia, the moment she returned to Ponyville. She couldn’t wait any longer.

In the Ponyville library, Spike was lounging on the desk of the main reading room, his chores done for the day. Owlowiscious perched on the lamp by him, dozing contently.

Their naps were disturbed, however, by a loud tapping on the door. Rubbing his head, Spike grumbled and headed to the door, where he found a familiar grey Pegasus hovering before him, holding a small package.

“Urgent delivery from Twilight Sparkle.” Ditzzy said, her wobbling eyes staring off in opposite directions “She says not to read it, and to send it off to Canterlot immediately. I guess you’ll have a way, right?”

The dragon nodded and took the small package inside. Closing the door, he looked the package over. It felt like a large wad of sheets of paper, packed into a large envelope, with a small scroll attached to the outside. “Well, if it’s urgent, it’s urgent.” Spike said with a shrug. Placing it on the ground, he took a deep, deep breath and breathed a plume of green fire over the package, incinerating it in an instant. The ashes floated into the air and out the window, off to Canterlot.

Princess Celestia gave a low sigh. Sure, she was free to relax until dusk, when she would have to take the sun down for Luna, but until then, what was there to do? Luna was asleep, the guards were busy, and she had not had a report from Twilight Sparkle for almost a week now. She furrowed her brow in anxiety at this thought. Twilight was usually very diligent about her friendship reports. Was she having trouble? Was she working up to something big?

As if on cue, there appeared through a pipe in the wall, a wisp of ash that hovered into the room, and with a small *POOF!*, transformed into a new letter.

“Ah! Right on cue!” Celestia chuckled as she eagerly looked over the unusually large correspondence from her star student. Telekinetically lifting the scroll from the package, she scanned over it with eager eyes.

Dear Princess Celestia,

Today I am writing to you not on a discovery I have made about friendship, but an entirely different discovery altogether. One of the most terrifying discoveries I have ever made. I am still not sure what is going to happen, but rest assured, if left unchecked, it will mean disaster for all of Equestria.

For the past week or so, something has been following me. It has been watching me, and doing things to me. It has hurt me and does not seem to want to stop. I have encountered another young pony who has encountered the same creature, and seemed to be eager to help me. He was very helpful in determining exactly what is going on, but I am no longer sure how much I trust him. After the events of tonight, it is obvious that he is hiding something. I do not know who to look to, but you.

Enclosed is all the information that the two of us have gathered together, concerning this terrifying turn of events. If you could look over them, I would greatly appreciate any help in this matter.

I am scared, Princess. More scared than I have ever been in my entire life.

Help me.

Her eager smile fell. Tentatively opening the envelope, she extracted the first item, a small polaroid photograph. Levitating it before her face, her eyes grew wide as she saw the pale, tall, faceless figure that leered out through unseen eyes at her. Her entire body froze as she was overcome with a mix of fear and terrible, terrible recognition.

“I...Impossible...”

She turned back to the letter, and read out loud the final line, which was scrawled in hasty, untidy script:

“He’s coming for me.”

Chapter 9

The sun hung low in the sky as Fluttershy began her descent to her humble cottage, just outside the Everfree Forest. Opening her wings, she glided gently to the ground, landing as delicately and smoothly as she could. The injured passenger on her back made smoothness and delicacy a must, lest is broken leg becomes any worse.

As she trotted up the lawn to her cottage, she looked over her shoulder at the pony, still lying unconscious on her back. His hair had fallen, lank and knotted, over his facemask. His tail was clumped together by clotted blood that seeped from the deep gash on his thigh, which dangled limply over Fluttershy's side.

"Hmm...this is honestly a new experience for me...." She muttered aloud to nopony in particular "Most of the time, I don't have to treat anything bigger than a dog or cat. Still, a patient is a patient... And you need help especially. I mean, it's a long flight to the clinic in town..."

She continued talking to herself, occasionally addressing the limp form on her back, as she pushed the door open and headed inside. Gently, gently, she hoisted the unconscious pony off her back, and lowered him onto the couch, careful to prop up the broken leg with a pillow.

"There we go. Now, let's get you some bandages." She said as she bustled off to her cabinets.

As she busied herself in the medical cabinet, she failed to notice that the colt had begun to stir. Groaning slightly, he raised his head. Gazing about a moment, he took in his strange new surroundings. A small, wooden cottage, humbly decorated, with a distinct smell: a gentle, sweet smell, like a mix of freshly baked pastries, animal fur, with the slightest hint of the sterile smell of medicine. But any further rumination was cut short as an intense, stabbing pain shot through his leg. He doubled over in pain, grunting slightly.

“Now now, lie back down. You need to relax,” called Fluttershy’s voice from the next room. “I’ll be right there with your bandages.”

The masked colt almost considered making a run for it. But any time he tried moving his leg, that same stabbing pain shot through him. So, he humoured his hostess and obediently lay back, trying to relax.

He then felt an uneasy tingle on the back of his neck. Opening his eyes again, he saw a pair of long ears just peeking over the top of the couch. Craning his neck, he saw a small, white rabbit, standing on its hind legs, paws on hips, scowling at him.

“What do you want, furball?” The masked pony croaked weakly “Get lost!”

Moments later, Fluttershy returned, a fresh roll of white bandages held in her teeth, and a small bowl of water balanced on an outstretched wing, complete with a sponge floating in the water. A thin metal splint lay on her other wing. She placed the bowl on a wooden footstool that sat next to the couch, and put the roll of bandages on the ground.

“Now Angel, please move aside. Give our guest some space.” She said to her white companion.

The bunny gave one last disapproving scowl at the masked pony and hopped off to his own hutch. Fluttershy smiled as she watched him leave “Oh, don’t mind Angel. He’s always like that... Now, please relax, you’ve lost a lot of blood.”

The colt flinched as he felt the wet sponge press gently against his wound. As Fluttershy cleaned the dried blood from his fur around the wound, she hummed a tune to herself. But not a word came from her masked patient. The timid Pegasus smiled slightly at the thought that she may have found a pony even less talkative than herself!

“So...um, if it’s alright, can I ask you your name?” she said at last, the awkward silence even getting to her.

But he just stayed silent, any change in emotion hidden by his white mask. He just lay on the couch, twitching every now and then if Fluttershy touched his wounded leg in the wrong spot.

The Pegasus coughed nervously as she finished cleaning the dried blood from his leg. She picked up the roll of bandages, holding one end in her teeth, "Now, this might hurt a bit, but I need you to stay as still as you can. Can you do that?"

He nodded silently, and Fluttershy went to work. Holding the metal splint against his leg, she slowly wrapped the bandages around, securing it in place. As she wrapped, silenced reigned between the two ponies. Never much of a fan of awkward silences, Fluttershy once again tried ease her patient into conversation.

"Erm...So, why do you wear that mask? Is it some sort of symbol of..." but she trailed off as he turned to face her, his blank, dark eyeholes staring back at her. She gulped and continued her work. Her eye was caught by the colt's flank. His usual cutie-mark was obscured by a symbol that as cut into his skin; a rough circle, crossed by an X. She made a mental note to ask him what it meant if he ever felt like speaking.

After what seemed like an eternity of awkward silence, Fluttershy finished his bandages and gently lowered his leg back onto its pillow. "There you go. Now, just stay off that leg and you should be alright in no time." She said gently, to no reply.

Clearing her medical apparel away, she sat down on a small cushion next to the couch. The masked colt just lay, silent, on the couch, the only sign that he was still awake being when he swept the hair out of his eyes with a forehoof.

"If it's alright...erm, maybe you might be a bit more comfortable if you take the mask off...Here, let me..." she raised a hoof to remove the white facemask.

But the colt threw out a hoof of his own and struck her arm away from his face. Fluttershy recoiled with a squeak, holding her forehooves close to her body as if she had touched a burning iron "I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I-I didn't know it was that important to you...I mean, it's okay if you keep it on, I was just curious, oh dear..."

Grunting slightly from the sting in his leg, he rolled over until his back was facing Fluttershy. The young Pegasus hung her head, letting her rose-coloured mane fall over her eyes, hiding her blushing face. She was used to patients being stubborn or uncooperative, even aggressive at times. But it felt different when the patient in question was a pony just like her. It just seemed to hit harder. It was as if a close friend was shouting at her, or a sibling had just struck her.

“Erm...I-I’ll go get some food going...” she muttered timidly, her voice barely above a whisper. Getting up, she trotted into the kitchen and out of view.

A few minutes later, she returned, a tray held in her teeth. On it rested a bowl of hot soup and a spoon, and a small loaf of bread rested by its side, with a cube of butter and a knife. *Nothing like hot soup to cure what ails you*, like she thought.

She balanced the tray of food on the footstool next to the couch and sat back on her cushion, no longer even trying to start a conversation. After what seemed an eternity, the masked colt rolled slowly over, gasping again as he gingerly shifted his leg. He gazed down at the steaming bowl of soup that lay before him, a humble loaf of tough bread by its side.

“Why?”

Fluttershy raised her head as she heard that reedy voice emanating from behind the mask. She smiled slightly: was he finally opening up a bit? “Oh, well...soup works well as a comfort food, and often I slip some medicine into it to help make recovery go smoother...”

“No, that’s not what I meant.” He cut her off “I mean, why help me? Does this mean that you’re sympathetic towards our cause?”

“Well, actually, erm...I honestly think that what you and your friends are doing is bad... Even if it means that Equestria will be made a better place...well, don’t you think you’re going about it the wrong way?...I-I mean, if it means hurting so many other ponies to reach it, is it really worth it?”

“A few impure souls to get a world of purity. I’d say that’s a fair exchange, miss...er...”

“Fluttershy. Just Fluttershy, n-no ‘miss’. And to me, anything that causes other ponies to suffer isn’t worth doing, no matter how great the result could be. Especially if it’s my friends who are getting hurt. But anyways, that wasn’t your question was it?” She added, getting back to the subject at hand “I chose to help you get better...well, because I wanted to. I can’t stand to see a pony in pain, you see. It doesn’t make any difference what they did; if they need help, I’ll give it to them.”

Her piece said, Fluttershy sat back, slightly surprised at herself. How was she able to speak so freely and openly with this strange colt? Sure, she was alright speaking with her friends, but most of the time she’d clam up and never speak with strangers. She didn’t even know his name, or his face for that matter!

“The masks are the symbol of our order.” The colt spoke up again, grudgingly “It marks our allegiance to our Master, our willingness to surrender our identity in the name of His cause. Once they are on, we can never take them off.”

Fluttershy smiled again, finally getting her answer “Oh, I see...But how do you eat then?”

When she got no reply, she coughed nervously and continued “And, what about that sign you...er, put over your cutie-mark?”

He turned to glance back at his flank, at the symbol carved over his cutie-mark. “It marks out the ones who have been enlightened by The Mighty. We cut it into our flesh as a sign of dedication, and as a symbol of abandoning our old identities by putting it over the one other thing that shows our identity, our cutie-marks.”

“Oh.” Fluttershy replied, grimacing slightly at the idea of cutting something into one’s flesh “B-but, doesn’t it hurt?”

“It’s worth it.”

The yellow Pegasus shrugged, wondering what sort of pony would be so willing to scar themselves like that . “Um...if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to get some food for myself. I’ll be right back.” She got up again and trotted through to her kitchen, calling back in a slightly singsong voice “Eat your soup now, before it gets cold!”

She bustled about the worktop, putting together a small meal for herself: of a bowl of the remaining soup, a few slices of white bread and butter, and a mug of hot chocolate, complete with a blob of whipped cream and a straw. Her ear perked up as she heard his voice again from the other room.

“So...once I’m all healed, does that mean I’ll be let go?”

“Well, actually...” she replied, slightly hesitantly “Twilight told me to make sure you stay here. I think she wants to ask you more about what you and your friends plan to do. So I’m sorry, but you’ll have to stay here. Besides, it’ll take a few days for you to heal enough to leave. Don’t worry...I’ll take good care of you.”

“Huh...Well, if I’m stuck here, I may as well be comfortable... You’re a kind soul, Fluttershy. I’ve never met a pony quite like you.”

Fluttershy smiled bashfully, her flushed cheeks blending with her hair
“Oh...uh, thank you...”

Beneath his pale mask, the colt also broke into a hidden grin. Some ponies were just too easy. Of course he would have to wait. Until the unicorn was ready, there was no much he or his cohorts could do but wait. So he would humour this young filly. *Let her play doctor to her poor sick patient. She might prove useful.*

However, in the overly-illuminated home of Talisman Tome, the mood was a far cry from the relative calm of Fluttershy’s cottage. A tense silence gripped the house as the door creaked open and Twilight staggered in, tired, nauseous and in an incredibly bad mood. Her hooves echoed on the wooden floor, a little louder than usual as she stomped into the living room and slumped on the couch.

Talisman followed in, his head hung low, ears drooped. Twilight had remained ahead of him the entire walk back, saying nothing, not even looking back at him. *To be perfectly honest*, he thought to himself, *I think I'd prefer her to just yell at me and get it over with!*

He made to join Twilight on the couch, but as he approached, Twilight raised her hind legs up and lay across the entire couch. The colt took a step back, standing guiltily in front of her.

"Alright Talisman." Twilight said, her voice deceptively level. Pausing for a moment, she coughed for a moment before continuing "Start talking. What was that all about?"

He rubbed the back of his mane "You mean me runnin' off into the forest?" he said, hoping to steer the conversation away from...

"I mean you trying to smash that pony into a pulp with a rock!" she snapped.

His ears drooped further "Oh, yeah...that. I guess...I guess I kinda lost my temper there..."

"No, no, losing your temper is throwing things across the room!" Twilight replied "Trying to *kill* somepony is a little more than losing your temper!" She got up, stomping forwards until she was nose to nose with Talisman "Now, you've got some serious explaining to do. That unicorn friend of yours. What happened to him?!"

Talisman gulped, "I told you...h-he died. The masked ponies got him."

She glared into his eyes "I know that part. But that masked pony said that he had...ugh, harvested a unicorn before. He even thanked you for something. Now, tell me everything."

He had hoped that he could have avoided this, for several reasons. For one thing, it was a bit of a painful memory. It's never easy remembering your best friend being slowly drained of life before your eyes...especially with what he had to do at the end. But another little reason was Twilight Sparkles's potential reaction. If she knew what was in store for her, would she still want to investigate?

Taking a deep breath, Talisman stepped back from the unicorn mare and sat down on the ground "Alright...Let's see...so, there was me and Thistle, in the Everfree Forest. We'd been watching the masked ponies again tonight. But when me and him turn to leave, I step on a twig..."

Talisman froze as he felt the twig snap under his hoof. The cracking sound echoed through the clearing. He looked up at Thistle, who stared back at him with a look of pure horror. The illuminating glow of his horn hastily went out "...Busted."

There came voices from the clearing behind them, mingled with the sounds of hooves running here and there

"What was that?!"

"Somepony's watching us!"

"They're over there! After them!"

Talisman gasped as he saw the silhouetted forms of several ponies rushing in their direction. Taking instantly to his hooves, he called back to Thistle "C'mon dude! Follow me!"

He nodded and galloped in his wake. The pair ran through the trees, branches and brambles scratching at them. Looking back for the briefest of moments, Talisman saw the pale white masks of the ponies, hot on their hooves.

He took a sharp right, Thistle following behind. They ducked behind a broad tree trunk, crouching low as possible. Talisman tried desperately to keep his breathing as quiet as possible, but to no avail. It came in ragged wheezes as he struggled to stay calm. Thistle was no better. Eyes frantically glancing about, he quivered on the spot, trying to keep his own breath from coming out in shaky sobs. His denim jacket was torn and scuffed all over from the frantic run through the undergrowth.

Both ponies froze, however, as there came the familiar *clomph, clomph, clomph* of hooves on the ground. Backs pressed against the tree trunk, they listened as they listened to the voices that emanated from the other side of the tree.

“They can’t be far. I know they went this way.”

“Then hurry up and find them! They saw us! We can’t let them tell anypony!”

The sounds of the masked ponies came closer, as they fanned out to search. Thistle gulped silently, shuffling sideways around the trunk of the massive tree, as one of them seemed to be coming around the trunk. It was not until he felt his hoof step onto a thin, wiry tail, that he realised his mistake. Then everything happened at once.

The masked pony spun around on the spot, crying out as Thistle stepped on his tail. Both jumped back as their eyes met. But the masked one got his composure back sooner, lunging forwards at the unicorn.

“Tally! HELP!” he shouted as the pony landed ontop of his back. His legs gave out from underneath him and he collapsed to the ground.

“I got him! Over here!” the pony shouted victoriously. Quick as a flash, the other three masked ponies hurried around the trunk to where he was. In the rush of activity, Talisman had managed to jump into a thorny shrub that lay nearby. Gasping with pain as several thorns embedded themselves in his flesh, he peeked through the foliage.

There, he could see Thistle, pinned down by the hooves of two of the masked ponies. He bucked and heaved, desperate to be free, but they were strong. They determinedly held him down, while the other two masked ponies came around the trunk, with another figure with them.

Talisman felt his blood run cold. It was that strange, faceless creature. On gaunt, skeletal limbs, It strode in the wake of the masked ponies, only just taller than Its cohorts. It turned Its blank visage to look down at Thistle, who lay frozen in fear as he looked up at the monster that had so haunted his dreams ever since he saw it illustrated in that storybook.

Both he and Talisman could only watch in petrified terror as the back of the hideous thing began to shift and ripple. A small black lump appeared to sprout from Its back and extend out into a thin, black tendril.

Talisman did not bother to blink back the tears which now flowed freely down his face as he watched the black tendril snake through the air towards his friend. He wanted to help him, he wanted to rush in, buck those masked ponies out of the way, grab Thistle and run for it, back to Ponyville. But his limbs were seized up from a mix of exhaustion and sheer terror. He could only watch in horrific fascination as the tendril inched closer and closer to Thistle's face. The unicorn turned his head and gave one last teary-eyed look to his friend, before the tendril looped around his horn.

It was as if his body had been hooked to a massive battery, as he bucked and writhed. His face contorted into a silent scream, his eyes rolling in their sockets. His clothes were scuffed and shredded even more as he slammed onto the ground again and again, his sunglasses lying shattered on the ground. As he squirmed and convulsed, the black tendril pulsated, as if something was passing from Thistle's body and up the tendril into It. With each pulse, both Thistle and It twitched: the former in agony and pain, the latter in pleasure and satisfaction, like one enjoying a sumptuous meal.

Talisman watched for several more minutes as the faceless thing continued to drain Thistle. With every minute of the sick ritual that passed, Thistle grew more pale and thin, while Its limbs grew less skeletal, stretching further up, as Its coat grew subtly more bright and pale.

By the time the creature had drained Its fill, it was almost twice as tall, almost taller than one of the Royal Princesses. Its tendril relaxed its grip on the unicorn's horn and retracted into Its back once again. Then, without another word, the masked ponies and the faceless thing turned around and returned to the darkness of the trees. As he stumbled against an exposed root, one of the masked ponies failed to notice as a small, black book fell out of his jacket pocket. It lay on the ground behind him as he silently followed his cohorts.

It was several minutes before Talisman could work up the courage to leave his hiding place. His quivering limbs carried him into the small clearing, silent once more. With a twinge of nausea, he looked down at what was left of his friend.

Thistle resembled something out of a grave. His coat, once an earthy tan colour, was now a sickly pale colour. His once bulky frame had become skeletal and frail, as he lay curled up on the ground. His eyes were rolled up in his head and his mouth hung open. His mane and tail, once thick and brown, was shedding around him.

But he was not dead!

His hoof twitched as he looked feebly up at Talisman. His mouth moved silently, forming unheard words.

Talisman leaned in close to Thistle's head and heard the faintest whisper escape those cracked and pale lips:

"...Kill me..."

He leapt back. Somehow, Thistle was still alive, after his ordeal. If one could call this living.

"...Kill me...please...do it..."

Talisman grimaced at the pitiful and disgusting sight. His limbs twitched weakly as he scuffed the dirt with a forehoof.

"Please...Kill me." Thistle wheezed again, a little louder.

The colt gulped. He had to. In this state, Thistle may as well be. Stepping forwards, he looked away from his friend at his feet, and placed both forehooves ontop of his head. Thistle's skin felt as thin and flimsy as pastry under his hooves.

"...Th...thanks..."

Talisman closed his eyes, preparing to do the unthinkable "I'm sorry...I'm so, so sorry..."

With a push, he leaned all his weight onto his forehooves and pushed down.

CRRRUNNNNCCCCHH!

Twilight held a hoof to her mouth as she coughed and hacked again, struggling not to vomit. “Y-you...killed him?”

Talisman sat down on the floor, nodding pitifully “He was as good as dead anyway. It was an act of mercy for him...”

He slumped forwards until his head rested on the floor. His voice held the slightest hint of a sob as he said “I can still feel it...His skull, just giving way under me...”

Before the unicorn could say another word, her stomach heaved without warning. Putting a hoof to her mouth, she staggered to the kitchen and hung her head over the sink. *Here come those sweets...*

After a few minutes of spectacular vomiting, Twilight took a deep breath, soaking her head under the tap. Leaving the water on to wash away the contents of the sink, she took another deep breath and headed back into the living room. As she left, she failed to notice the subtle streaks of blood in the sink, mingled with what was once her lunch.

When she returned, she found Talisman in quite a state. He lay on the floor in a fetal position, his hooves up against his chest. Twilight watched the pitiful display as the young colt curled up on the floor, quivering and muttering to himself. All this time, she thought he was just a strange little colt. But this story shed a little light on his current state of mind. At least, now she knew the point when he had snapped and turned into the twitchy, paranoid wreck that lay before her.

“So...is that why you didn’t tell me?” She said, her voice barely above a whisper.

He snapped “You try talking about mercy-killing your best friend! It’s not exactly a walk in the park!”

Twilight stepped back “Okay, okay...I’m sorry. I didn’t know...”

Talisman got up and silently walked over to a bowl of sugarcubes that rested on the low table in the middle of the room. Dipping his head into the bowl, he emerged with a white cube held in his teeth. He slurped noisily on it for a few moments. "I-I guess yer wanting to leave now. Go ahead, I understand...Not exactly comforting, knowing your study partner is a murderer..."

He hung his head, his brunette mane hanging over his eyes. *Here it comes, he thought. She'll agree and leave, and she'll start researching on her own. And I'll be back to square one...*

But his inner voice was cut off as he felt a pair of soft, violet forelegs wrap around his shoulders and draw him into a gentle embrace. Opening his eyes, Talisman saw the back of Twilight's dark purple mane, as she held him close to her, like a mother embracing a child. His limbs froze stiff against his side as a bead of cold sweat ran down his snout. She was hugging him. Twilight. Was. Hugging. Him.

After a moment, Twilight broke the hug and looked at Talisman, a gentle smile on her face "You numbskull."

Talisman could only look back at her, dull surprise in his eyes.

"You really think I'm gonna abandon this, just because you did what you had to? Granted, you did...kill Thistle. But like you said, it was an act of mercy. You might remember, the Slendermane tried to drain me before." She shuddered as she remembered the horrific experience. "I know how he felt. If I had to go through any more of that, I...I probably would have preferred to die."

Twilight stood up, determination burning in her eyes "And that's why I'm going to stick by you, and see this through to the end. I'm not going to let that monster get away with what he did to me...what he did to Thistle." She stamped a hoof as she said in a voice, clear and purposeful "I'm going to stop those masked freaks. I'll stop their Great Work, before they hurt anypony else. And wherever that Slendermane monster came from, I'm gonna make sure he goes back there, and stays there for good!"

She held out a forehoof to Talisman, who still lay on the floor. She looked down at him, her face set in a grim smile "What about you. Are you still in?"

Talisman looked up at her. He saw her determination burning in her eyes. He marvelled at her strength and tenacity, her stubborn refusal to give up. Even in the face of sheer horror, even against unnameable horrors from beyond the farthest walls of reality, she stood her ground. Rubbing his eyes, he got to his hooves and tapped a forehoof to hers. He returned her resolute grin in full.

“Just try to stop me.”

Chapter 10

The streets of Ponyville were abuzz with activity as ponies bustled hither and yon among the dozens of stalls that had been set up in the main square. There was always a stall or two in the square almost everyday, but today was special: It was the town's designated Market Day, when vendors would come from all over town, some even coming from outside Ponyville, to sell their wares. Stalls and tables of all kinds were set up all about the crowded square.

Applejack cast her eye around at all the other vendors that dotted the square, from her spot behind her apple stall. There were Lily, Daisy and Roseluck, the three local florists, the scent of their flowers wafting all around. There was Colton Vines, his table groaning under the dozens of bottles of grape-juice and wines that sat atop it. There went Pinkie Pie, bouncing about with a basket firmly strapped to her head, offering free samples of Sugarcube Corner's finest treats. And those were just the ones she knew! Dozens of other stalls were set up, eager to make a name for themselves in Ponyville. It was probably Applejack's favourite day of the month.

But the workhorse was brought back to the business at hand as two familiar mares approached her stall.

"Howdy Fluttershy, hey Rarity. How y'all doin'?"

Fluttershy smiled in reply "Oh, I'm just getting some new food for my animals. How is business for you, Applejack?"

She shrugged "Eh, a bit slow at the moment, but things usually pick up round midday. How 'bout you, Rarity?"

"Well, I honestly just came to get out of my shop for a moment. But then I spotted Fluttershy, and just had to say hello, so I'm just sort of tagging along now!"

“Heheh, nice.” Applejack chuckled “Well, I think I saw a fabric stall round here. Might find somethin’ you like there. So, y’all just come by to say hi, or are ya gonna buy somethin’?”

Fluttershy nodded “Actually, yes...two dozen apples please, Applejack. And eight apple fritters as well.”

Applejack raised an eyebrow “Eight? Sure thing...but that sure is a lot of food for one pony. You got a guest or somethin’?”

Fluttershy blushed slightly as she passed a small stack of coins to her friend. Guest was not honestly what came to mind. Patient, maybe, or even prisoner, but not guest. “Um...I suppose you could say that...”

But before Applejack could press her further about her guest, Rarity piped up “Ooh! I completely forgot, Fluttershy! I ran into Twilight Sparkle on my way here, and she told me to tell you that she was coming by later today to see you. Didn’t say why, though...”

“Maybe she just feels like payin’ a visit?”

“Perhaps. Though I daresay, she could do with a visit herself. She looked dreadful! Probably hasn’t had a good night’s sleep in days, poor thing.”

Rarity looked about a moment to make sure no other ponies could listen in on their conversation. She muttered quietly “Personally, I think she’s really letting this whole matter get to her too much. She’s working too hard!”

Applejack nodded “I gotta agree with ya there. I’d know better than anypony how rough it can be if you work yerself too hard” she said, hanging her head in embarrassment. She still has not forgotten the events of the last Applebuck Season.

“Hmm...yeah, maybe...” Muttered Fluttershy. She had a good idea why. “Anyway, thank you, Applejack...Erm, there is one more thing, actually.”

“Sure thing, Fluttershy.”

She leaned in closer, as if conspiring some great secret “I-I was wondering if you knew if there were any stalls here today that sell...Tarot cards?”

Applejack's ear tilted in confusion, but Rarity was the one to speak up, looking at Fluttershy as if she had just sworn "Tarot cards?! Goodness, Fluttershy! What on earth are you doing looking up something so spooky?"

Applejack raised a hoof "Erm...Beggin' yer pardon, but what the hay are Tarot cards?"

Rarity turned to her blonde-maned friend "It's a sort of deck of cards that, *apparently*, can tell the future. But it's all superstition, really! Just a parlour trick some ponies use to impress their friends or con some quick Bits on the street. But whatever could you want with such a thing, Fluttershy?! Surely you of all ponies can't be into...er, that sort of thing!"

Fluttershy cowered slightly. It was not for her. She did not even know what Tarot cards were herself! But she drew herself up and quickly fabricated a story "Well...er, I...read about them, yes, read about them in a storybook...and I was kind of interested in the idea. So I thought I'd buy uh...myself, some cards of my own, just to see what they were like. So, er...would anypony here sell them?"

Applejack scratched her chin. She had to admit, whatever these Tarot cards did, Rarity made them sound like something Fluttershy definitely would not be into. But who was she to judge? It just sounded like some harmless game, like dripping candle-wax into a bowl of water and pretending to tell the future by what shapes the wax makes. "Well shoot...I reckon you should head over to Oddity and Curio's stall, over there by the fountain. But be careful, those two are a mite...well, odd."

Fluttershy nodded, closing the flaps on her saddlebag as she put the last apple in. She gave one last "Goodbye." before fluttering off in the direction of the stall in question. Applejack and Rarity watched as the Pegasus flew away. "Well now, what do you suppose Fluttershy could ant with something as morbid as Tarot cards?" Rarity asked.

But Applejack just shrugged "Eh, don't fret about it none. Everypony needs a hobby, I guess."

Fluttershy landed on the dirt road that led up to her humble cottage, the weight of her saddlebags making her crouch a bit lower than usual upon landing. As she pushed the gate open, she mused on the strange cards she had just bought down at the market earlier that day.

As she had headed home, she had taken the liberty of opening the little black drawstring bag the cards came in, and look at the images drawn on each one. Many of them were hardly different from standard playing cards as Fluttershy knew them, but with different symbols. Instead of clubs, spades, hearts and diamonds, these cards were separated into swords, cups, disks and wands. And each suit had an extra court-card in it; as well as the standard king, queen and knave, there was also a knight. Also, rather than just having depictions of the number of suit-objects in the name of the cards, they were strange pictures of landscapes, buildings and ponies, each working the number of suit-objects into them. She remembered the “Three of Staffs”, which depicted a cloaked pony looking over a vast landscape, with two staffs stood up in the ground on their left, with a third staff on their right. The pony’s tail was curled around this third staff.

But in addition to the suit cards, there were a number of other cards mixed in, with no suit. Instead, they had names like “The Fool”, depicting a young wandering colt who looked up at the sky, blissfully unaware that he was nearing the edge of a cliff; or “The Star” which depicted a unicorn knelt by a pond, with an enormous star in the sky over her. Fluttershy smiled slightly at these cards in particular. A few of the cards did frighten her a bit (She almost fell out of the air as she saw “The Dragon”), but several had very beautiful images on them, printed in exquisite detail.

At first, she had been apprehensive about purchasing anything for her strange, masked patient. Rarity’s description of the cards only heightened her hesitation. But she reasoned with herself: They were just a game. Twilight had told her, only unicorns could tell the future, and even then, they could only be born with prophetic ability, which in itself was extremely rare. It was not something that could be taught, and certainly there existed no object that could be used by non-unicorns in lieu of genuine prophecy or clairvoyance. Not to mention, he himself was an earth-pony. What harm could he do with them? They were just cards, after all.

As she closed the door, she heard the masked pony call "So, did you get them?"

She nodded as she replied "Yes, I did. I hope they're what you were looking for."

She extracted the small bag from her saddlebags and brought them over to the couch where he lay, his bandaged leg rested on the armrest. He sat up as she deposited the cards before him. Loosening the drawstrings, he pulled out the first few cards. Gazing over them, he looked up to Fluttershy.

"They're perfect. Thanks."

She smiled as she went to the kitchen to empty her saddlebag's remaining contents "I'm glad to hear that. Oh, I hope you don't mind, but I was told Twilight was going to visit today...I guess she wants to talk to you again."

He sighed through his mask. "Still determined to fight a losing battle, is she?"

Fluttershy returned to the living room and sat down on a cushion "Well, I don't know about that...B-but Twilight is certainly not the type to give up on anything. When she sets her mind to something, she'll never stop... To be honest, that's probably what I like most about her."

But any further conversation was stalled as there came a sharp knocking on the door. Fluttershy jumped slightly at the sudden noise, but composed herself quickly enough and went to open the door.

"Hello? Who is...Oh, it's you, Twilight!"

She held the door open as the unicorn entered "Yeah, hi Fluttershy. So, where is he?"

The Pegasus was slightly taken aback at the less-than-cordial greeting "Erm...he's over on the couch...Where's Talisman?"

"He's back at his house. He, er...wasn't feeling well." Twilight replied. Lying to Fluttershy...she felt low as a dog. Truth be told, she did not feel safe bringing Talisman with her to speak with their masked guest. Last time they

were together, Talisman has crushed his leg with a rock! Who could guess what else he would do if he had the chance?

Twilight sat down on another of the many cushions lying about, facing the couch where he lay. She noted with some surprise how relaxed and at ease he seemed. Of course, with such a blank mask, she could hardly even tell what he was thinking. He could be fuming or weeping for all she knew. So focused was she on his face that she failed to see him slipping a little black drawstring bag under one of his pillows. Fluttershy decided to give the pair their privacy, and trotted upstairs to check on her animals.

“Well, hello again, miss Sparkle. To what do I owe the pleasure?” he sneered.

Twilight frowned “Cut the jokes. I want to talk to you about what you and your friends are up to.”

He sighed “Why, whatever do you mean?”

“You know just what I mean! I know that you and your friends want to bring the Slendermane into Equestria...y’know, in its ‘true form’ or whatever. But just how are you gonna do that? How does it work?”

He did not reply. He merely rolled over, his face to the back of the couch. After a moment, there came a slightly muffled “Why should I tell you?”

“Well, no offence but you’re not exactly in a position to bargain. You’re stuck in here until I find out everything I need to know, one of your legs is broken, and you have no way to reach your friends in the Forest. Cooperate, and then we’ll talk terms.”

The masked pony just chuckled “Ha! There’s no way I’d betray my comrades. They know the rites well enough to carry them out without me. I’m just a guide. You’d have to torture me if you want me to talk!”

Twilight rolled her eyes “Oh please. Even I wouldn’t stoop low enough to resort to torture.”

He shrugged “Well, have fun failing to delay the inevitable then.”

The unicorn glared at the colt. Why had she ever been so naïve to think she could get anything out of him? Silence passed between the ponies. Twilight looked around the cottage, as if seeking inspiration from her surroundings. She could hear Fluttershy busying herself upstairs, talking gently to some small animal. Then she had an idea. A malicious grin appeared on her face as it grew.

“You know, there are other ways to convince a pony to cooperate...How long did Fluttershy say you’d have to stay until your leg was better?”

The colt rolled back over, his curiosity piqued by the sudden change of tone in her voice “She said it would take a few days before I could be up on my hooves.”

“Hmm.” Twilight mused. It wasn’t something she’d wanted to resort to, but desperate times call for desperate measures “You know, Fluttershy is about the only pony in Ponyville who’d be willing to treat you. All I need to do is take you away from...”

“You really think you can get to me with such idle threats, my pretty?”

Twilight glared at him angrily again, her hackles rising with her voice “It’s not idle! And don’t call me that!”

Under his mask, he smiled “You’d never be able to get Miss Fluttershy to stop treating me. She’s far too kind-hearted. You might think you have me as a prisoner, but I’ll be honest, she’s been treatin’ me like a poor little foal who’s sprained his ankle.”

Her eyes grew wide in response. She knew Fluttershy was a kind soul who was friendly to any creature, but surely even she must have her limit? She knew what he was planning, didn’t she?

He saw the look on her face. He had her right where he wanted her now. “Oh yes, she’s been a lovely little hostess to me. She’s fed me, bandaged me up, made sure I was as comfortable as possible...”

“Be quiet.”

But the colt continued his relentless tirade. He was getting to her. Perfect, "In fact, just today she even went and got me a present. A little get-well gift, if ya like. You should hear her, fawning over me, day and night: 'Oh, here, let me change those bandages or you!'" He simpered in a cruel parody of Fluttershy's voice "Oh, how are you feeling today? Would you like something to eat? Would you like another pillow?"

"Quiet!"

"If I didn't know better, " The colt continued, his voice dripping with malice "I'd say she's starting to like me. She'd probably give me a goodnight kiss if I let her! You got nothing to use against me..."

"SHUT UP!" Twilight screamed in the colt's face.

Her eyes shone with fury and frustration. Before she knew what she was doing, there was a flash of light and the colt was in mid-air, his body surrounded by a magenta aura. The exertion was unbearable, but her sheer anger and desperation kept her from passing out from exhaustion. She snarled up at the colt who floated before her "Now you listen to me, buddy. I didn't want to go here, but if it's what it takes, I'll do it!"

Fluttershy's pink-maned head peeked down from the upper floor "Erm... Twilight? What's... Twilight! You've got your magic back!"

Twilight blinked, dull surprise all over her face as she recognised her sudden burst of magic. Her Vita was back!

But even this ray of good news did little to calm her mood. She growled in his face "I don't know if you're aware, but I have a direct link to Princess Celestia herself. She knows what's happening to me, I've sent her notes, and bits of my research. Now, you'd better start talking, because all it takes is one letter to Canterlot, and I can have the Princess here in a matter of minutes. I'm sure she has much more effective ways of encouraging somepony to talk."

Inside, she was cringing. She had never had to pull rank on anypony, and to be honest, it felt horrible. It was as if she was taking advantage of her special connection to the Princess and misusing it. But she was through being lenient.

“So, are you going to cooperate?” She said, in a cold, unforgiving voice barely above a whisper.

“Or do I have to get the Princess involved?”

The silence that followed was so thick, the sharpest knife would barely make a dent in it. The colt lay on the couch, staring through blackened eyeholes into the glaring, violet eyes of Twilight, her face contorted with anger, her chest heaving with exasperation. Fluttershy had watched the exchange from the stairs, and only now spoke up, her voice hardly audible.

“T-Twilight? Could you, maybe...y’know, c-calm down a...”

“Stay out of this Fluttershy!!” Twilight shouted back, pointing a hoof at the pegasus.

Fluttershy cringed, as if Twilight had thrown something at her. It certainly felt like that to her. With a whimper, she hung her head “T-Twilight...I-I’m...”

Then it hit her. Twilight lowered her hoof and turned to look up at her. She felt a pang of guilt as she realised what she had just said. She had just verbally assaulted her friend, the most gentle and timid pony in Equestria. And now she was on the verge of tears. She felt lower than an insect “Fluttershy...I’m so-...”

But before she could finish, Fluttershy had scampered upstairs, whimpering, desperate not to let her friend see her crying. There was a slam of a door, and then silence.

Twilight stared dumbly at the stairs. Her mind was still trying to keep up with what she had just done. It felt like she had crushed an animal’s head beneath her hoof. She felt dirty, unclean. What had driven her to do that? What could have possessed her to shout at one of her greatest friends? Her horn’s glow faded away, the colt dropping to the floor as the telekinesis wore off.

“Well, that was dramatic.”

The colt’s voice brought her attention back to him. Her voice was still caught in her throat, and she could only stare at the masked pony, who lay at ease on the couch.

“Now, correct me if I’m wrong, but you said that you sent some of your research to the Princess?”

Twilight nodded dumbly.

“Would this happen to include....photographs of my Master?”

Again she nodded.

Beneath his mask, the colt’s face broke out into a massive grin. “Oh, thank you. Thank you so very, very much. You may have made my job a whole lot easier.”

Her voice returned suddenly “Wha-? What do you mean?”

“You’ll find out soon enough. News travels fast round here. I’ll just say this: If you wanted her help...”

He leaned close to her, his voice a conspiring whisper:

“You shouldn’t have done that.”

Twilight’s mind whirled with activity. What had she just done?

Without another word, she got up and headed for the door. She had had enough for the night. Her mind was a maelstrom of uncertainty, with more questions than ever. Why would Celestia not help? Had something happened to her? Was she in trouble?

She gulped as a chilling thought appeared: Was it her fault? She had been the one to send her research evidence to her. Did this do something to her?

Before she left, the colt’s voice rang out again “Just who can you go to now, Twilight? Who can you trust? That’s a question you should ask yourself over the next few days.”

The door slammed furiously as Twilight left, unable to listen to any more. The colt giggled to himself, a horrible, high giggle. It was just too good.

Could things be going any smoother?! He looked down at his broken leg. Well, yes, he thought. Maybe a bit smoother.

With a content sigh, he retrieved the Tarot cards from their refuge under the pillow and began to lay out a strange formation.

He first lay out a ring of cards, starting with the Emperor, then the High Priest, the Lovers, the Chariot, Strength, the Hermit, Justice, Death, Temperance, the Dragon, the Star and finally the Moon.

“The circle is formed.” he said in a low mutter.

In the centre of this ring, he placed the four aces in a cross shape, placing the Knight of Swords upon it.

“The altar is prepared.”

Finally, he arranged three more cards outside the circle, The Fool, The Hanged Mare and The Judgment, in a triangle.

He looked in satisfaction at the completed formation. Most ponies insisted that Earth ponies had no magical ability... He pitied those who believed such lies. They had not been enlightened by the wisdom and power of The Mighty. From the 4th World, He had brought His own magic, teaching it to the worthy. Among this knowledge was the secret power that lay behind the cards of the Tarot. Opening up a communication lattice would be child’s play!

One by one, the colt placed more cards on the formation, muttering under his breath strange words. He would place the card down, then tap it with a hoof, reciting another stanza of the strange, alien chant his Master had taught him.

As he placed and tapped the final card, the Knave of Disks, upon the triangle, his head was suddenly wracked with a sharp twinge of pain.

“The way is open!” he groaned, feeling his mind connect to the communication lattice. Shutting his eyes, he strained as he probed about

the lattice, a single thread weaving through many, seeking out somepony who was listening.

“Sir?”

Another voice echoed in his mind. He smiled with satisfaction as he made the connection to the other. “Excellent, somepony’s there! How are the preparations going?”

“As planned,” The other voice said enthusiastically “What happened? Where are you?”

He groaned “I’ve been...apprehended. I’m in the small cottage that lies just outside His Forest. They got me first, broke my leg.”

“What?! But how can we go on with the plan without you?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be alright to leave in no time. The pony who has me under guard is a weak one. Getting her out of the way will be easy enough. And I bring good news!”

“Sir?”

He grinned as he spoke “First of all, we can cut out any worries of Celestia interfering. She’s found out about us.”

“Found out? Isn’t that a bad thing?”

“Normally yes, but with The Mighty, things are a little different.” he said, his voice dripping with glee.

“How so?”

“Let’s just say The Mighty has awoken before, and leave it at that. The other good news is, we can push the rite ahead of schedule.”

“Really? Why?”

“Her Vita has begun to return faster. Emotions are rather running high here. I give it until... oh, about this weekend, and she’ll be all ready to harvest.”

The voice on the other end grew excited “And that’ll be it then? He’ll have enough power to return?”

Though the other could not see it, the colt nodded “In full. Then the Great Work can begin. Advance our work from Caeruleus to Nigredo phase.”

“It will be done, sir. No turning back now, I guess... Should we come to get you?”

“Be outside the cottage in two nights time. I’ll be ready by then.”

“Until then, Master.”

With that, the communication lattice fell silent. The masked pony let his link break from the interwoven threads, as the spell faded from his mind. Sweat dripped from all over his body as he panted from the exertion.

“H-how do...unicorns...do this sorta...thing...?” He trailed off as he collapsed into exhausted sleep.

Chapter 11

Twilight sat in the dark of her bedroom, her head hung. Her eyes had sore, red rims around them, brought on by several days lack of sleep, and tears leaving tracks down her cheeks. She had stopped crying a few minutes ago. She couldn't cry anymore. She was out of tears.

On the ground before her lay two sheets of paper. The first was a familiar-looking scroll, the broken wax-seal stamped with the royal seal. It lay open at her hooves, next to the other, the front page of a newspaper.

Rubbing her eyes, Twilight read through the scroll again, written not in the round, swirly writing of her mentor, the Princess Celestia. Instead, it was written in a more thin and subdued style, with much more old-fashioned language.

She read over the scroll for the third time, before gazing off into space. To think it was not even noon yet.

She had awoken in her usual spot in the middle of the library room, in her makeshift bed. It had been the first decent sleep she had gotten in several days now, ever since her talk with her masked 'friend'. Throughout the nights she had tossed and turned, mulling over his words, desperately searching for any sort of discernible secret behind his words. When this failed, she would simply lie down and try her best to get some rest. But even on the rare occasion when she could clear her mind of the maelstrom of theories and worries, his voice would echo through the darkness of her mind:

"Just who can you go to, Twilight Sparkle? Who can you trust?"

What did he mean by that? Why had he said that? She had been through everything with her friends by her side. Even her days as a loner in Canterlot, she had Spike with her. She trusted each and every one of them with her life. Why would she suddenly no longer trust them?

For that matter, what had he meant about the Princess? She had sent her all her research to Celestia in hopes she might know more about the whole problem than she did. What if she did? What could she know?

But for the first time since the conversation, she had been able to completely clear her mind and get some much-needed rest. When she awoke that morning, she even found herself smiling! She felt invigorated, rejuvenated and like she could take on the Slendermane Itself in hoof-to-hoof combat!

Then there came that ever-familiar *belch*! Followed by a brief glow of green. Celestia had replied!

Twilight raced downstairs to the library's main room, where she found Spike picking up a scroll. But something was different. The parchment was a different colour, it was much paler. And she distinctly remembered that the letters Celestia sent her were always sealed into scrolls with a seal of red wax.

The seal on this scroll was a silvery white wax.

"Oh, mornin' Twilight. Here, this just arrived for you..." Spike began as he saw his friend's bed-haired head peep round the door.

Before he knew what was happening, Spike found himself on the floor, several feet away from where he had been standing.

Twilight suspended the scroll before her face. Ignoring the dragon she had essentially just body-checked, she hastily broke the seal of the scroll, undid the blue ribbon that wrapped around it, and unfurled the message:

"To Ms. Twilight Sparkle.

Enclosed is this morning's edition of the Canterlot Enquirer. For the sake of sister of mine, as well as thyself, I hope that thou hast some sort of explanation for these happenstances.

Yours faithfully,

Her royal highness

Princess Luna."

As she had unfurled the scroll, there came a gentle thud as the aforementioned newspaper landed between her forehooves. She hastily levitated the paper before her.

"Twilight...? What's up?" Spike asked as he got up. As he stood on tiptoes to read the scroll or the paper over Twilight's shoulder, he was taken aback as she once again pushed him aside. Without a word, the unicorn ran upstairs to her bedroom once again, the newspaper and the note fluttering around her head like some strange birds.

She shut the door, shut the curtains and sat down in the centre of her room. Unfolding the newspaper again, she felt a chill through her whole body as she read the front page:

Strange goings on in the Royal Palace- Celestia no longer fit to rule?

The mental health and wellbeing of her royal highness, Princess Celestia, has been called into question today, as the order came for a lockdown of the entire Canterlot Castle.

The Princess had been seen by members of the castle-staff beforehand, pacing up and down the corridors of the castle, apparently unaware of anypony other than herself. For several days prior to the lockdown, Princess Celestia had been seen to be notably less calm and collected than she is known to be- She had been locking herself in her quarters for whole days at a time, and muttering to herself.

The nature of the lockdown order only adds to this mystery. The stated reason for the lockdown, as written by the Princess, was "To keep Him out". The peculiar nature of this order has led many to question the legitimacy of the order, believing it to be a practical joke of some kind. But palace officials have been quoted as saying that "The royal Equestrian seal and the Princess' signature rather speak for themselves." Since the time the order has been given, word has spread via the palace staff of the Princess exhibiting strange behaviours, such as pacing up and down

the corridors, muttering incoherently, ignoring anypony who tempts to make contact with her. A recurring theme appears to be a mysterious person, referred to by the Princess as "Him".

A statement from the Royal doctor reads "We have reason to believe that her Highness' current mental instability stems from a recent mental shock. Her symptoms- Anxiety, mental regression, dazed expression, incoherent mutterings of an enigmatic "Him"- all point to a recent recollection of a repressed memory from previous life. I can assure you that all that can be done is being done to return her Highness to a sound state of mind. "

Until such a time that Princess Celestia is deemed fit to rule again, Princess Luna has stated that she will be taking over all royal duties henceforth. In a further statement, she assures everypony that the passage of the sun and the moon will not be affected as she will take control over them in her sister's stead. However, due to the time consuming nature of ruling over Equestria, and controlling both celestial bodies, all Royal Courts or royal functions shall be cancelled until further notice."

Twilight let both the letter and the newspaper fall to the floor as the glow of her horn dissipated. She let her head hang, her purple hair hiding her face. There came a gentle *plip, plip, plip* as fat, wet tears left tracks down her cheeks, falling to land on the unfurled scroll at her hooves. She did not bother to hold back her tears, but she could not bring herself to weep or wail. There was no point.

That was it, then. Her last hope of rescue. Gone. With the masked pony's words, Twilight had been anxious for any sort of help from the Princess, any letter of comfort or advice. Instead, her well-meaning actions had only made matters worse!

But what was it the doctor had said? 'Repressed memory'? Twilight pondered to herself through her tears: Has Celestia seen this creature before? If so, just how old was it?!

But if the princess had repressed the memory of it, as the doctor theorised, then that would mean that whatever encounter Celestia had had with the

Slendermane, it was so horrifying, so terrible, even the Princess felt the need to never think of it again.

And I reminded her. Twilight slumped on the floor of her room, her body twitching gently with each silent sob. I brought this on her. *I sent her those notes about It.* She felt low as a dog. No, lower...lower than the lowest form of protoplasmic life there was! The masked one's words echoed through her mind once more:

"You may have made my job a whole lot easier...If you wanted her help, you shouldn't have done that."

"She...she just wanted to forget about...H-Him..." She muttered aloud, her voice wracked with grief "...And I brought it back...I m-made her remember...My teacher..."

And with that, she did the only thing that came to her mind. She put her arms over her head, lay on the hard, wooden floor, and cried. She had no idea how long she lay there, weeping to herself. But by the time she opened her eyes, the sun was hanging low in the sky. *Must be close to four in the afternoon.*

As she paced up and down the room like an animal caged, she thought to herself about everything that had happened. Ever since she had begun to study this monster, this...thing, there had been nothing but trouble. Her friends had done so much for her already. They had gone out of their way to help her. Pinkie had introduced her to Talisman Tome. Talisman had offered her his research, the use of his home, purely out of the goodness of his heart, as well as the hope that she could help him. Fluttershy had volunteered to watch their masked prisoner, completely disregarding her own safety or wellbeing. *Well of course they would,* Twilight reasoned. *They're your friends, it's what they do. It's what she and her friends had always done: Go out of their way to help each other. why wouldn't they help you now?*

Well, because of what's happened because of their help. I made the others get in deep with this whole ordeal. Too deep. If I'd just left well enough alone and left them out of this, they wouldn't have to go through all this. They wouldn't have to be able to see It.

She then thought of Talisman, that strange little colt, who had willingly broken what may have been years of solitude to help her. A smile almost crept upon her lips as she remembered his shy, awkward demeanour when they first met each other. Despite his peculiar behaviour and other general eccentricities, she had to admit, that gangly colt was rather growing on her. She sighed...And what had she done in return? Other than deprive him of his solitude and make him recollect terrible memories, nothing. He had never been in danger before he met her. He wasn't a sacrifice or a potential victim. But he was working with her, the final ingredient those masked ponies needed, and that had made him a threat that needed to be dealt with. Because of *her*, *he* was in danger of losing his life, along with what remained of his sanity.

And Fluttershy. Twilight cringed as the memory came back to her. Poor, dear Fluttershy. She still felt horrible for what she did to her. The pony, from the pure kindness and goodness in her heart, had volunteered to take care of the masked colt, despite her fear of him, simply because she wanted to help. And what had she done in return? She had yelled at her. The gentlest, kindest pony in the world, and Twilight had verbally assaulted her without a second thought!

She felt like hitting herself. She wanted to punch herself, buck herself, kick herself, whatever it took. She was the worst friend ever. "All my friends did was help me, and all I did for them was hurt them more...Oh, I don't deserve them..."

"Now that's just stupid!"

She raised her head as she heard a voice. Looking to the doorway, she saw the door wide open. In the frame was Spike, with a look of incredulity on his little face. Strangely though, he was smiling also. A gentle, if slightly sarcastic smile.

"Geez Twilight, no wonder the Princess wanted you to study friendship. You really can be a novice about it sometimes." He said as he approached his friend. Before Twilight could open her mouth to protest, Spike had grabbed her huddled form in his arms, and gave her the warmest hug his body could muster. His short arms only just wrapped around her waist, but Twilight felt herself breaking into a loving, kind smile. She wrapped her hooves around him in a return of his comforting embrace.

“Don’t you get it, Twilight? It doesn’t matter whether you deserve friends or not! The point is, you have friends, and they’re willing to go out of their way to help you!”

“But Spike...” Twilight began “All it’s doing is getting them too involved...I-I don’t want to see them hurt...”

“Hmph, you’re still not getting it, are you? The mark of a true friend is that they are there for you, no matter what happens! Element of Loyalty, remember?” Spike said, pointing with a claw to the framed picture that rested on Twilight’s dresser. It was an old photograph of her and her friends, all huddled together, laughing at some long-gone joke. “Just because Rainbow Dash represents it, doesn’t mean your other friends don’t have it as well!”

Twilight gazed at the picture. Memories flooded her mind, of all the good times she had had with her friends. All the adventures, all the parties, all the battles fought with them by her side. She did not want them to end. “Think about it, Twi. You told me that if this...thing, comes to power, it could destroy all of Equestria. That means you, me, everypony we know. If you really care about them, you would let them help you stop It, so you can all keep on living, right?”

Twilight looked back down to the tiny dragon that knelt by her side, clutching her in his arms, hugging her like a little brother. Really, for a baby dragon, Spike could be remarkably perceptive. It was in that moment that everything became clear. Wiping the tears from her red eyes, she got up off the floor. Glimpsing herself in the mirror, she saw a dishevelled mare staring back at her, through red-rimmed eyes, peering through matted, messy hair. Her horn aglow with magic, she drew a brush hastily through her mane and scrubbed her face with a washcloth.

“I know what I have to do. Thanks Spike...Thanks for getting me thinking straight again.” Twilight said in a strained voice. She gave Spike one final hug on her way out, and she trotted down the stairs and out the door. Spike watched as she left, the fire in her eyes renewed. “That’s my girl.”

Twilight strode down the road through Ponyville, looking about at everypony she passed. Spike's point remained at the top of her mind: if she does nothing, if she is determined to not let her friend help her, then all these ponies, all of Equestria, is as good as dead. She had read old stories of beings who claimed to be able to 'purify' the world, when all they really did was destroy everything and anything in it. She could not let that happen. As a team, she and her friends were unstoppable. She knew this from experience. Their kinship and teamwork were what defeated Nightmare Moon, and Discord too. With this in mind, she took a left and headed towards the outskirts of town, towards Fluttershy's cottage.

"If we are gonna stop this thing, I'll need to talk to Fluttershy." Twilight said aloud to herself "After what I put her through, she deserves an apology..."

As she saw the familiar little cottage in the distance, she picked up the pace and broke into a gallop. She sprinted up the walk, across the little bridge over the stream, and skidded to a halt outside the door.

Knocking with a forehoof, she called out "Fluttershy? It's Twilight...I-I need to talk to you...It's about what happened a few days ago."

She waited for the sound of the door unlatching, going over in her mind what she would say. She'd tell Fluttershy that she was sorry for shouting at her. That it was stupid of her, and she had not been thinking straight.

A minute passed. No answer. She knocked again. Another minute, still no answer.

Twilight went around the back of the house Maybe Fluttershy was in the garden or something, tending to her animals.

She wasn't.

Twilight's worry only increased as she saw that the back door of the cottage, which led to the garden, was wide open. She felt a twinge of fear as she passed through the doorway into the cottage.

The entire room was shrouded in darkness, the only light coming in from the windows. Chairs and tables were overturned. Pottery and glassware lay

shattered on the ground, trampled into the carpet along with stray food-pellets and any other knick-knacks.

“What on earth...?” Twilight muttered as she oversaw the damage. There had been some sort of struggle here...but why?

Her eye was caught by a tiny note that lay on the floor by the couch. Hesitantly, she levitated the scrap of paper to hover before her eyes.

“TE ANTE TEMPUS”

Beneath the scrawled Old Equestrian words, Twilight saw it. That ever-present symbol, the crossed-out circle

Twilight stood stock still with shock. She did not need to understand Old Equestrian to know what this meant. He had recovered. He must have tried to escape. And when Fluttershy tried to stop him, he must have...

The unicorn gulped, unable to finish the thought. She did not want to think what he may have done to her friend.

As she looked about frantically, her eye fell upon a strange pair of lines scuffed in the carpet. They seemed to lead out the door, where the same lines were scuffed in the dirt. In the dirt, next to these lines, clear as day were two sets of hoof prints.

She sprinted out the door, following the tracks as they led away from Fluttershy’s cottage. They wound past the path, and into the dark, tall trees of the Everfree Forest.

“I’m coming, Fluttershy!” Twilight shouted aloud, before galloping full pelt into those dark trees.

If only she had moved a little slower and quieter as she had passed through the back garden of Fluttershy’s cottage.

She may then have heard the strange sound coming from the ground. More specifically, a patch of earth with rather loose soil. It was a muffled, if frantic, scratching sound, as if something was trying to dig its way from

underground to the surface. That, and a tiny, weak, timid voice, squeaking up from the ground.

“He-lp....mm...mmeeeeeee....”