

# Creeping Darkness

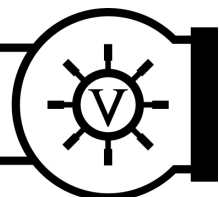
Pen Stroke

Assisted by Batty Gloom

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**PONY FICTION VAULT**



*Journal Entry 1*

*After just barely managing to regain my sanity, I've decided to begin this journal as a means of keeping myself anchored. It will also let me keep some sense of time. Every time I take a break from my typewriter, I will write a journal. It may not be much, but each entry will let me keep track of how long I've been here, in this place where there is no sun, no moon, no stars, and no clocks to keep track of time in the same way.*

*My name is Alan Wake. I'm a writer, and I'm currently trapped in a shadowed world I know only as the Dark Place.*

*My first encounter with the darkness came when my wife, Alice, was taken by an malevolent sentience known only as the Dark Presence. The presence wore the face of an old woman in a mourning gown, a Barbara Jagger, the love of Thomas Zane, a poet who has helped guide me in my fight against the darkness.*

*The Dark Place is a realm where the creative works of authors, song writers, poets, and likely others can change reality with their work. Thomas Zane, when his love Barbara drowned in Cauldron Lake, tried to use the power of the Dark Place to bring her back. He succeeded, though only in bringing back Barbara's body. She, however, was hollow... a vessel only to the Dark Presence... darkness filled her heart.*

*The Dark Presence sought to escape this place, which was both its home and prison. It had tried twice before, and I was to be its third attempt. The Presence took Alice and then tempted me with the power to change reality, to write Alice back into my life. The Dark Presence became my editor, and slowly twisted my words, mind, and work so that the story I was writing turned into a horror story, at the end of which The Dark Presence would be unleashed on an unsuspecting world.*

*By some miracle and the help of Thomas Zane, I was able to escape the Dark Presence before I finished writing the story. I became the main character in my own novel, fighting against the darkness until the very end when I managed to end The Dark Presence using a broken light switch, the Clicker. I was then able to give a happy end to the horror story, returning the ravaged town of Bright Falls back to normal while also saving Alice.*

*But to do all that I had to pay the ultimate price. That's the way the Dark Place works; everything has a price. To return Bright Falls to normal and to save Alice, I allowed myself to remain trapped in the Dark Place where its strange nature and magic tore at my mind. I was insane for a time, but through the strange, dream logic of this world I managed to regain my sanity.*

*That brings me to this moment, to where I am beginning the first entry of this journal.*

*I have begun work on a new story, a sequel to "Departure", which was the story I wrote while under the influence of the Dark Presence. It's entitled "Return", and hopefully I can use "Return" to write myself out of Cauldron Lake and back into Alice's arms.*

*In truth, it's my only hope of escape.*

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### *Journal Entry 9*

*A horror story with a happy ending... not the easiest thing to get right. Even the ending to "Departure" was bittersweet, as I was forced to remain here.*

*The darkness demands that it is right. I just can't slap "And Alan escaped the Darkness and lived happily ever after" on a page and find myself on the shore of Cauldron Lake. No... the story has to work, the story has to be real. I have to somehow please whatever sentience controls The Dark Place in order to free myself from it with the story.*

*And that thought nags at the back of my mind. The Dark Presence was the master of this place, the one that sent the shadows out. The one who turned the honest, simple folk of Bright Falls into the Taken. It was the Dark Presence that took Alice and wore Barbara Jagger's face. Yet... if that was the case, now that the Dark Presence is gone it should be easier for me to escape. Without its master, the Dark Place should give life to my words without resistance.*

*Yet there is resistance... there is an editor... and it isn't the Dark Presence I came to know and defeat. The Dark Place isn't just in Cauldron Lake... it isn't just a lake... or even an ocean. It is a world that lives between worlds, the shadow of the universe, of creation... of everything. And not just the universe I know, but of others as well.*

*Perhaps I didn't completely defeat the Dark Presence, maybe parts of it linger in this world and that's what is resisting me. Maybe the Dark Presence I defeat wasn't alone, that there are others in this place who can control the darkness and would seek to use me to escape.*

*Or, maybe, the Dark Presence is the Dark Place... maybe they are merely one and the same, and the Dark Presence can only enact its full power through a puppet, like Barbara Jagger.*

*I don't know which is true... none of the options are what I would consider good. All I can do is focus on my writing. The sooner I finish "Return", the sooner I will be able to escape.*

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### *Journal Entry 27*

*I have used my typewriter to create a number of short horror stories, allowing myself to explore the darkness. To come to understand the rules that dictate it and to simply get fresh supplies, like more batteries for my flashlight or more paper for the typewriter.*

*They have a strange nature... these short stories. I begin one, and then suddenly find myself away from my typewriter, standing wherever I set the story to begin. Once I find my way back to the cabin, I can hear the typewriter ticking away in the upstairs study, as if someone was hammering out words as fast as possible.*

*Yet the moment I open the door to the study the typewriter grows silent and I find nobody there. It's as if all the short stories I write end with me returning to my typewriter, returning to my efforts to write my way out of the darkness.*

*It makes me fear how "Return" itself will end if I must always return to this place.*

*And as I explore the darkness, I find that I have very little control beyond what I hope to find. It's as if the story goes into auto-pilot, and I as the protagonist am just along for the ride. It's like I'm on the other side of the mirror, not the one writing but the one being written.*

*A cold chill runs down my spine when I start to wonder who is my writer.*

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#### *Journal Entry 34*

*My fears were realized today... I am not alone in the Dark Place. Someone else is here, and I can't tell who it is. She could be another soul trapped in the dark like me, another Dark Presence, or even the same Dark Presence I once defeated wearing a new face.*

*She hasn't tried to attack me yet, but like Barbara Jagger she whispers in my ear. She taunting me with promises of escape and a happy reunion with Alice. I have yet to see this figure, but I have been given a name. Nightmare Moon. Honestly, it sounds like a name you give to some villain in a children's cartoon... but when you've seen the things I have you know that names don't mean a thing. After all, calling this the Dark Place isn't the greatest stroke of creative genius.*

*It's a simple name, childish... but there is no denying how well it fits.*

*Nightmare Moon whispers, promising me my freedom and my return to Alice if I will write for her. She asks me to use my words to plunge another world into darkness, one that has somehow invited her wrath.*

*It is an offer I can't deny is tempting me. I miss Alice, Barry... I miss seeing the sun... but part of me knows I could never do what it asks. First, I can't trust her... especially if Nightmare Moon just turns out to be a mask for a or the Dark Presence. The Presence*

*that wore Barbara Jagger's face promised me the same thing, that I could save Alice by writing her back to life in my story... but in the end the story was only going to ensure its own escape into the world.*

*Secondly, I don't think I could bring myself to plunge another world into darkness. I have seen the horrors of the darkness... it is a curse I would never invite upon even my worst enemies.*

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#### *Journal Entry 41*

*Nightmare Moon continues, trying to sway me to write for her. She not only whispers in my ear, but tempts me with other things. I find pictures on the cabin's doorstep, gifts that show the world Nightmare wishes to take over. Maybe she's trying to prove to me it deserves to be overtaken by the darkness, or that it isn't my world so I don't owe it any favors.*

*Equestria... another strange name and its residents are even stranger. Ponies, unicorns, and pegasi in a rainbow of colors. Again, I'm reminded of a children's TV show. Still, I relish the pictures. The warm colors, the bright images of the blue sky and sun... they are welcomed beacons of hope in the dark. They help me continue on, to continue to struggle, allowing me to believe that, in time, I will be able to see Alice again.*

*Still, one thing worries me. Since I freed myself from my insanity I have not seen or heard from Thomas Zane. The poet is the expert of the Dark Place. He's managed to survive here for decades, and can manipulate it in ways I can't even imagine. He is the only reason I'm sane at the moment... and yet he hasn't appeared to me.*

*Perhaps it means that Zane doesn't think I need his help anymore, that I'll be able to find my way back to the light and to Alice. That, or the Dark Place has figured out how to keep him away from me.*

*Whatever the reason, I can't focus on that right now. I have to keep working on "Return".*

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#### *Journal Entry 43*

*I have been struck by writer's block on "Return", and I can't push myself through it. Whatever I write past a point gets wiped from the page. The Dark Place isn't accepting my work, and I know why. It's sub-par, childish... it's the same reason why I had a writer's block for so long before going to Bright Falls with Alice. For some reason, I just don't know what to write next.*

*While I try to figure out what to write for "Return", I've distracted myself by slowly learning more about Equestria through my short story driven journeys outside the cabin. It's a world of magic, a world that plays by different rules than my own.*

*Unicorns are able to use magic. There are such things as manticores, hydras, and dragons. To top it all off, the ponies are ruled by a pair of immortal alicorns named Celestia and Luna. God-princesses, with the magical power and duty to make the sun and moon cross the sky.*

*If they have that kind of magic there... maybe they have an answer. Maybe they can give me an escape that doesn't require me to write myself back into my own world with "Return". At the moment, it's a more viable option. I have no clue when or even if I'd be able to push through my writer's block and finish "Return".*

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### *Journal Entry 51*

*I have done the unthinkable... I have released the darkness and Nightmare Moon.*

*In hopes of freeing myself I used my short stories to learn more and more about Equestria, but what I didn't realize was the cost of that knowledge. Everything that I write that changes reality comes at a cost, that is the way the Dark Place works. It is a rule I had forgotten about, which is now coming back to bite me.*

*By letting myself learn more about Equestria, I incurred a cost. That cost was a weakening of the veil that separated that world from the Dark Place.*

*And now that veil has become torn. This has released Nightmare Moon, allowing her to return to the world with the darkness under her command. Her presence is still weak... much like how Barbara Jagger was weak when Alice and I first arrived in Bright Falls. Still, it will not take long for her to gather her strength. All she needs to do is find a writer, an artist, anyone that can create and she will have a means of taking over that world.*

*Still, I have come up with a plan... well... I'd call it a plan. Barry would probably call it the insane ramblings of a crazy person. I don't think I'd argue with him at this point.*

*Nightmare Moon needs someone to create art for her, to write for her, and any pony she finds to do this in Equestria won't know how to fight back. Thus, to hopefully save that world from the darkness, I'm going to give her what she wants.*

*I have started a new story, about Equestria, the ponies and Nightmare Moon's return as a master of the Dark Place. I have become what Nightmare Moon needs, a writer whose words can give her strength in that reality.*

*Still, by allowing myself to become the writer she needs I will hopefully be able to stop her. I know what to expect, I've been through the situation first hand. I have experienced it all before, which means I should be able to out-manuever Nightmare Moon and use the story to destroy her or, at the very least, seal her back in the Dark Place.*

*All I need is a horror story with a happy ending... thankfully one where I won't have to play the part of the main protagonist.*

*No, that role is reserved for another... one who has also faced Nightmare Moon before. It's the jewel of hope in this dark situation I unintentionally created. Nightmare Moon was already defeated in Equestria once before, cast into the Dark Place by something called the Elements of Harmony. From what I've been able to learn, the Elements were wielded by six ponies... one of which is a unicorn named Twilight Sparkle.*

*Again... I can't help but gawk at the name and wonder what kind of world Equestria is where such a name could actually be considered commonplace.*

*Names aside, I will do everything I can to help Twilight defeat the Darkness. She will be the story's protagonist, her friends the supporting characters. They will have to face trials, horrors, and the Taken... it is a horror story after all.*

*Still, by helping them from my place at the typewriter I should be able to give them the tools they need to defeat Nightmare Moon and the darkness. And, maybe in the process I will learn how to free myself from this place... come to understand the rules of the Dark Place enough I will be able to finish "Return" and embrace my wife Alice again.*

*The title of the story is "Creeping Darkness", and it will begin as my story did. With a nightmare.*

Twilight Sparkle galloped through the forest, the only source of light coming from her horn. The Everfree Forest was never known as a welcoming place. Between hydras, Poison Joke, and the rest of the forest's mysteries it was a place most ponies avoided. Still, on this night the forest was at its worst. A thick mist hung in the air as a stiff wind caused the branches of the canopy to shift and groan. Shadows danced around, each one looking more threatening than the last.

The unicorn chanced a look back over her shoulder, searching for whatever she was running from. Why she was in Everfree, what was chasing her and why... these were all facts that escaped Twilight at the moment. Still, those facts weren't important. She knew all she needed to know. She was running from something dangerous, and that her only hope of survival was at the end of the path ahead, a pillar of light that reached up into the sky from the ruins of the Ancient Castle of the Royal Pony Sisters.

Eyes up on the light, Twilight didn't see the path ahead. Her hooves caught on an exposed root, and at such a dead gallop there was no hope of recovery. Twilight fell, the impact with the ground knocking the wind from her chest and forcing the light from her horn to go out.

For a moment she laid there, feeling out her body for any injuries as she breathed deeply, trying to return the air to her lungs. Despite the sourness in the spot where she hit the ground, Twilight didn't feel anything broken. Getting back to her hooves, she looked into the darkness and felt fear grab at her heart.

As fast as she was able to, the unicorn attempted to relight her horn, but the magic wouldn't comply. Magic takes a calm mind, steady concentration... and Twilight had neither as panic grew inside her. She needed the light; she didn't know why but she knew she needed the light. Another one of those strange thoughts that would not leave her head, even though she didn't know its source.

Finally, the magic took shape, the point of light at the tip of her horn radiating out. Grunts and groans from the shadows greeted the unicorn's ears as shadowed figures retreated back into the darkness. These were the things hunting her, chasing her in the night... the things she had to beat to the light in the ancient castle.

With a deep breath, Twilight struck back into a gallop, though only chancing glances at the pillar of light in the distance. The rest of the time she kept her eyes focused on the ground, on the path ahead, to keep herself from tripping again. But the next danger Twilight faced would not be from an exposed tree root or stone.

The path banked to the right ahead, and as Twilight followed it a shadow-wrapped figure loomed out of the darkness. Twilight had never seen something like this, where shadows would continue to linger on a pony even while they were standing in direct light. Still,



she couldn't focus on the shadows further as the stallion had a large ax secured to his side by a harness, an ax he was beginning to swing in her direction.

Putting all her weight into her hooves, Twilight managed to skid to a stop as the ax head fell down in front of her... had she been moving just a bit faster or had taken just a moment more to notice the dangerous stallion the blade would have met with flesh. Instead, it sunk into the soft ground of the path ahead, mere inches from Twilight's hooves.

The shadowed stallion struggled to remove the ax from the earth. For how long, Twilight wasn't sure. She did not linger to find out, bolting by the ax-wielding pony and breaking into the fastest gallop she could muster, even as her legs began to tire from the effort.

Yet, even as she left the stallion behind her, he reappeared on the path ahead, taking another swing with his ax. Twilight ducked beneath the attacks, feeling aged blade brush against her hair. Another close call, and one that only made Twilight's heart race faster. Her hooves found fresh speed and energy from the adrenaline in her system as she powered on to the pillar of light.

Again and again the shadowed figure popped out from the darkness, appearing from behind trees and bends in the path. The ax swings kept getting closer and closer, and despite how hard Twilight tried to run the stallion always seemed to get ahead of her. She was the only pony on the path, so either the stallion was very good at running through the trees or there was more than one ax-wielding maniac out to get her.

Neither thought offered any comfort for the unicorn.

Rounding a bend, Twilight caught sight of a clearing in the distance formed by a river, which flowed lazily through the forest. A river she and her friends had crossed once before, aided by the sea serpent with a moustache obsession. It was a sign she was getting closer to the castle. A thought that, for a moment, let hope flutter in her heart. Maybe she could make it.

A roar from behind killed the hope in Twilight's chest. Looking back, she could see the ax-wielding stallion was now chasing her in a full sprint. No longer hiding in the forest, his hooves slammed against the ground and his eyes glowed a haunting yellow. He began to bear down on Twilight, the stallion's greater speed allowing him to close the gap.

Twilight turned her head forward, urging her legs to carry her faster even though they were at their limit. She could clearly hear the hooves of her pursuer, the sound slowly growing louder as he inched closer and closer. Tears began to pull at Twilight's eyes, fear overcoming her. She chanced another look back, seeing that within a few moments the stallion would be close enough to strike her. His ax, flashing in the light from her unicorn horn, carried specks of blood.

Wrenching images played in Twilight's mind as her hooves hit the cool water of the river, the path crossing the river along a shallow part barely hoof deep. This stallion was going to kill her and a fear-driven imagination was filling Twilight's head with how the horrible murder would take place.

And again the path reached up to act against her. A stone in the river caught Twilight's hoof, and she splashed down into the shallow water. She turned over, eyes narrowing as she saw the ax-wielding stallion jumping into the air. The blade of the ax began to move down, its target clearly set on the purple unicorn.

A single loud bang disrupted the scene. Between Twilight and the stallion a burning red light crossed into the air, trailing behind it a heavy smoke. The thing then exploded with a blinding brightness. Twilight forced to shut her eyes. She heard a howl of pain come from where the stallion had been a moment, and Twilight never felt the edge of the ax reach her.

Once her eyes had recovered Twilight chanced a look, seeing the stallion was gone. The burst of light that had exploded between them was gone as well, but the trail of smoke it left behind guided her eyes to the far bank of the river. There, a figure stood bathed in light from behind. It was enough that Twilight could only barely make out a silhouette of the figure. She could tell he wasn't a pony, perhaps it was another monster that lived in the Everfree Forest.

The figure lowered its arms, a tool in each hand. The left hand held a flashlight, its beam pointed in Twilight's face and further blinding her to the creature's true shape. The other held another item Twilight didn't recognize, possibly the source of the explosion of light that had somehow driven away the ax wielding stallion.

"The Taken are weak in the light. Burn off the darkness and then strike."

The unicorn struggled back to her hooves, the hard landing in the river hurting more than her previous tumble in the forest. "Wh... what?"

"I don't have much time. The Darkness is already gathering its strength again," the light-bathed figure offered, his voice male but not necessarily strong. It rung with a tremor of urgency. "I can only tell you so much. The Taken are weak in the light. Burn off the the darkness and then strike. You are only safe in the light. Focus your light to burn off the darkness and blind the Taken."

"Wait, who are you? What is going on?"

"Stay out of the shadows... that is where the darkness is strongest. Don't trust anyone in the dark. You are only safe in the light," the figure offered, the light behind him starting to fade. Twilight jogged forward a bit, wanting to know more from this creature that seemed to understand why she was just attacked. Still, when she reached the far bank of the shore the light and the creature were gone, as if they had been one and the same.

Lighting her horn, Twilight looked for any sign of the creature. There were, however, no tracks on the ground or any sign of where the light had come from. It was there and then not, like the puff of steam that comes from your breath in the cold of winter.

A snap of a twig made Twilight spin, her light falling on another shadow-enveloped pony. This seemed to be a mare, carrying a sharp knife in her teeth. Twilight backed up, the murderous intent in the mare's yellow eyes reminding Twilight of the stallion that had come so close to putting an ax in her chest.

Still, the words of the light-bathed creature rang in Twilight's mind. Focusing her vision and mind, Twilight bent the light from her horn into a single cone. The more intense light made the shadowed mare falter, and Twilight could see wisps of embers forming on the shadows that clung to the pony. The shadows began to burn off, and then, with a final flash, the shadows completely evaporated.

*Burn off the darkness and then strike.*

Twilight's eyes glanced around, trying to find something to use as a weapon. Then her eyes caught sight of it, the ax the stallion had been wielding glimmered just below the surface of the river. Magic flaring, Twilight grabbed up the ax. The mare was coming at her again, the shadows gone but the murderous intent still present. There was a moment's hesitation, when Twilight found herself realizing she was about to hit another pony with an ax...

The hesitation ended as the mare jumped at Twilight, survival instincts kicking in. The magically levitated ax flung itself through the air at the unicorn's command, the sickening sound of metal sinking into flesh filling the air as Twilight held her eyes shut tightly. When she did venture a look, Twilight saw the mare was gone, as if she had vanished into thin air. All that was left was the knife the mare had been holding and the ax Twilight had used to defend herself.

The unicorn trembled, mind shaken not only by the things that had come from the darkness to attack her but what she had been willing to do to defend herself. Had she killed that mare? No, there was no body... was the mare even really there?

Splashing water... Twilight looked up to see more shadowed ponies were crossing the river, creeping slowly towards her. Despite her anxiety, the unicorn levitated the ax again. Still, instead of facing her attackers, she turned and galloped down the path. The words of the creature echoed in her mind. You are safe in the light.

The strongest light she could see was the pillar of light that rose from the castle ruins.

• • •

More of the shadow-wrapped came at Twilight as she charged through the forest. Most she avoided, but a few she was forced to face. She used the lessons gained from her

encounter at the river, burning off the shadows of the opponents she couldn't run past before she swung her ax. She never kept her eyes open for the final moments of the blow. The sound alone would haunt the unicorn's memories; she didn't need to see the gruesome moment when the blade did its work.

Finally, after struggling through the forest, the unicorn reached the aged rope bridge. She charged across it, hooves clattering against the planks. The Ancient Castle of the Royal Pony Sisters loomed amongst the trees, its darkened walls standing like threatening forest giant sentinels in the moonless night. The light from her horn guided Twilight up the steps, through the ancient rooms, and eventually leading her to what had once been the grand hall of the castle.

There, in the center of it all, was an ancient statue that held six stone orbs aloft. The Elements of Harmony, which she and her friends had used to defeat Nightmare Moon. The pillar of light was emanating from the stones, and Twilight had never been happier or more relieved to see something producing light.

She moved beneath the stones, looking up the pillar of light as it cut into the nighttime sky. It was perfectly white, and in a way Twilight could feel it lifting up her spirits. It was like the light you turn on after having a nightmare, the light that lets you look about your bedroom and see that you were still safe, that everything had just been a dream.

Yet, as Twilight basked in the light the stones flickered... and then grew dark. The shadows and darkness enveloped the area like a wave crashing against the shore, and as Twilight looked about in a panic she heard a familiar voice cackling from everywhere before something lunged at her from the dark.

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"Twilight... Twilight!"

*GASP!*

The purple unicorn bolted up, soaked in a cold sweat and her heart racing. She looked around, brain shifting gears as she came to realize she had just been having a nightmare. She was in a train sleeper car, much like the one she had taken to Appleoosa when her friend Applejack was transporting a tree for transplanting.

The pony that had woken her was Rainbow Dash, the pegasus wearing a mixture of worry, concern, and fear on her face.

"You okay Twilight?"

"I... I think so..."

"That must have been one crazy nightmare. You were tossing and turning and you even screamed before I woke you up."

"Yea... it was quite the doozy."

"What's a doozy?" Pinkie Pie asked, poking her head down from the bunk above Twilight. "I didn't have a doozy twitch, so it must not have been a *real* doozy."

"She was talking about her nightmare, Pinkie," Dash said, using a hoof to push the pink ball of energy back up onto her bunk. "You sure you're okay?"

"Yes... I'm fine... I just need to get some air," the unicorn replied, getting out of the bed. She walked slowly to the end of the car, nosing open the door before stepping into the space between the train cars.

The train itself was charging along the tracks through the heavily forested Wintergreen Mountains. It was a northern region of Equestria. The air was rich and fresh, smelling like pine needles and sap. The scenery was beautiful, the sun just starting to rise over the eastern horizon and creating a breath-taking sunrise.

It was a scene that helped calm Twilight, deep breaths filling her lungs. It had just been a nightmare... though one of the most realistic feeling dreams she had ever had. She could remember every detail, like it had really happened, where all the other nightmares she had faded from memory within minutes of waking up.

She didn't know why this one lingered, but Twilight consciously tried to push it from her mind. It was just a dream.

"All passengers departing at Wintergreen Station, please prepare to disembark," the conductor called from behind Twilight, his voice carrying outside the sleeper car. "We'll be arriving in half an hour."

The unicorn turned, lifting a hoof to step back inside. Wintergreen Station was where she and her friends would be getting off. Celestia had invited the six to the royal vacation spot, a small but stately castle in the mountain range where Celestia would escape from her royal duties once in a while.

On this week Celestia was hoping her sister, Luna, would be able to come to know and even befriend the six ponies that had saved her. Twilight was more than happy to give a friendship with Luna her best effort, not only because she understood the power that friendship held but in respect for Celestia, her teacher.

Stepping back into the train car, Twilight joined her friends as they gathered their things so that when the train arrived at the station they could disembark. They would travel from the station to a small town in the mountains, Emblem, before heading up to Castle

Lakeside, named for the fact that the castle stood on the very edge of Moon Shadow Lake.

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Nightmare Moon stirred amongst the shadows, grinning as she sensed the six ponies drew closer.

She was not a creature born of the Dark Place, but unlike the writer she found huddled in the aged cabin she did not see it as a place to be feared. She embraced the darkness, and relished in its power.

Celestia of the Sun.

Luna of the Night.

And now, Nightmare Moon of The Darkness. She was her own princess, no... a *queen*. And as a queen she would take over all of Equestria, plunge it into darkness. This was the price they would all pay for casting her out.

It had been easy to trick the writer into weakening the veil; she just had to tempt him and he slowly broke down the barrier. Now she would be able to spread the darkness and take control. Equestria was a perfect place for the darkness. In other worlds, where the sun and moon did their celestial dance without aid, the darkness would always have to recede and hide for the dawn.

But Equestria was different; the sun rose not of its own will but by the prodding of Celestia. Take out Celestia, and the night lasts forever. And, in an eternal night, the darkness could spread without hindrance. All of Equestria would become swallowed up, all of its ponies her delightful minions.

They would all come to regret the day that she was defeated by the Elements of Harmony, for it was in that day she was thrown into the Dark Place... and it was on that day she found far greater power.

Nightmare Moon shut her eyes, feeling out the darkness. She would command it, but first she had to let it in... let it fill her. It was just a bit painful, a stabbing sensation in the alicorn's heart signaling when the darkness was hers to control. Still, a little pain was easy enough to endure for the power the darkness offered.

*Journal 57*

*In writing the last chapter I have come to realize that Equestria is a world inherently innocent. Perhaps it's the nature of the ponies who inhabit it or because of the magic that seems to linger everywhere, but the darkest sins of humanity don't seem to exist. Anger, joy, sorrow... those feelings are there, but they never boil over. The populace as a whole knows nothing of war... of murder. Even with their homes threatened, the ponies of Appleosa didn't fight back with guns or anything lethal. No, instead they threw apple pies at their short-lived enemies, the buffalo.*

*Apple pies... even now as I write it down I find it difficult to wrap my head around the thought of using pies to fight off buffalo. It's absurd... and yet it happened.*

*In my world, I fought the darkness like a soldier at war. The darkness was my enemy, an enemy I tried to kill on sight and fled in terror of when I ran out of bullets. I hardened myself to the fact I was shooting things that looked like people I knew, people who were my friends. I even shot at what looked like my own friend, Barry, without a moment's hesitation. The Taken are no more human than the shadows a person casts on a bright, sunny day... but they still looked like the people I had come to know in Bright Falls, still looked like my friends.*

*I gunned them down just the same.*

*"Creeping Darkness" could be written the same way. It would make things much easier. I could just have Twilight and her friends fight the darkness directly. Let them take up weapons, and fight as I did. Let them become soldiers in the war against the darkness.*

*It would be easier... but the moment I start to consider it guilt begins to writhe in my stomach like an angry snake. Twilight cannot be what I was, cannot be a soldier... I don't think any pony can. Their world is too pure, too innocent. Facing the darkness and having it hunt her in the night will mentally scar Twilight enough. What happens in the next chapter will be something she will not forget.*

*But I do not need to make the mental wounds worse by forcing her to gun down things that look like other ponies, especially if someone she knows becomes a Taken. I already regret what I wrote in the first chapter, forcing Twilight to use an ax to beat back the shadows. If I could take it back I would, but the story has begun. The Dark Place will not let me make changes now, the story must keep moving forward.*

*I must find another weakness of the darkness, find some other way for Twilight and her friends to fight back. If I don't, when the Taken come for them in the night they will only be able to run... and you can't run from the darkness forever.*

• • •

The town of Emblem was quaint and quiet, much like Ponyville. Twilight watched as the small shops and homes passed by through the carriage window. The population seemed to be primarily earth ponies, though Twilight did see the occasional pegasus or unicorn. Two in particular that caught her eye were talking in front of the town's sheriff station, wearing a pair of green jackets and wide-brimmed hats. Undoubtedly the sheriff and her deputy, though Twilight couldn't tell from a distance which was which.

The town was bordered on all sides by the Wintergreen Forest, the tall green pines acting as a backdrop in every direction.

The others were chatting about the village, and while Twilight wasn't paying much attention she did catch snips of their conversation. Fluttershy was, of course, thinking about the woodland creatures in the area and hoping she could make some new cuddly friends. Pinkie Pie was looking around for a party supply shop or a bakery. Rarity, on the other hoof, was just thankful they would be staying at Lakeshore Castle. It came as no surprise that she wasn't a pony who thought "camping" was a fun way to spend a week.

Normally, Twilight would have joined in their chatter, but she was still a bit too shaken by the dream. It was still fresh in her mind, and because of that she couldn't help but think about it as she gazed out the window.

"Um... Twilight?"

The unicorn blinked, her train of thought ending as she glanced to her side, the large concerned eyes of Fluttershy looking back.

"Are you okay? You're being awfully quiet."

Twilight put on a smile. "Yes, I'm fine. That nightmare I had on the train just really shook me up."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Twilight raised a hoof, waving. "No, it was just a silly nightmare. I'm fine, really. I just need to get my mind on something else."

"Well... if you change your mind, I'm ready to listen."

Twilight's smile widened a bit. Fluttershy... all her friends were such good ponies. She didn't know why the nightmare was bothering her so much; it was just a stupid dream, but the fact they were so concerned about her was reassuring. She had little doubt that once they got to the castle, got settled in, and started enjoying their vacation the lingering memories of the nightmare would disappear from her mind.

• • •



The day proved to be the distraction that Twilight was hoping for. As they had arrived at Lakeshore Castle, they were greeted by Celestia and Luna, and after getting things packed away the group spent the day relaxing on the shores of Shadow Moon Lake. The lake's name came from its two key features. The first, its crescent moon shape. The second, the dark color of the water that came from the natural, volcanic hot springs that billowed on the lake bed.

Dinner was eaten, and as the sun began to sink over the distant horizon Twilight found herself striding the halls of the castle restlessly. The others had gone into town to explore, but Twilight just hadn't felt up to it. As the sun drew closer to the horizon she found the memories of the night before pressing themselves back to the front of her mind. Twilight couldn't deny it... she was a little scared about what nightfall would bring.

Not really thinking where she was going, Twilight soon found herself on the highest balcony of the castle, looking over the dark, glistening water of the lake. The sun was just nearing the horizon, its edge starting to mingle with distant treetops.

"Twilight, I thought you would have gone out with your friends."

The unicorn turned, having been too lost in thought and the scenery to hear the hoofsteps coming up behind her. Bowing her head, Twilight was joined on the balcony by Celestia and Luna, the two princesses undoubtedly coming to orchestra the sunset and moonrise.

"I wanted to, but I'm just too tired. I didn't sleep well last night."

"Well then, the three of us will just have to have some nice quiet fun here in the castle, won't we?" Celestia offered, her horn already starting to glow as she reached the edge of the balcony. The white alicorn spread her wings, Twilight able to feel the magic in the air thickening. She had seen Celestia raise the sun before, the grand display at the Canterlot Summer Sun Celebration the moment that inspired the unicorn to study magic.

The magic used to bring the sun above the horizon was energetic, uplifting... like the first cup of coffee in the morning for those ponies who couldn't get the day started without the black, caffeinated beverage. The magic Celestia used to make the sun set, however, felt completely different. It was warm, soothing... the sensation you get when you're snuggled up in bed with a warm blanket on a cool evening. It was like a lullaby, a warm glass of milk, the magic so relaxing Twilight almost fell asleep on her hooves.

And the magic did its duty, the sun sinking below the far horizon as the world sunk into darkness and the stars in the sky began to twinkle into view. Celestia's horn stopped glowing, the task complete, and without a word Luna began to work her own arcane arts. Her horn glowed, the small alicorn struggling since her magical strength wasn't what it used to be.

Still, her magic began to extend out, calling the moon from the far horizon. The magic had its own unique sensation to it, one that washed over Twilight as she got to enjoy the

rare privilege of watching the sister princesses change the sky. The magic to raise the moon was like a cool night breeze that carried the gentle music of the night. Almost a lullaby-like sensation, a soft melody that somehow managed to actually make you feel more awake. A contradiction... but a glorious and beautiful one.

"There we are," Celestia said, giving an approving nod to Luna who just smiled in return as the moon began its journey across the sky. The princesses turned to head back inside, Twilight falling in line on the right side of Celestia while Luna walked on the left.

"Now, what do you two think about heading to the grand hall to play a game? I know we've got a couple old board games tucked away someplace in this castle, and I think I have a deck of cards in my personal quarters."

"As long as we don't play poker."

"What's wrong with poker?" Twilight asked, glancing at Luna.

"Celestia's poker face," the moon princess replied. "You can't tell if she's bluffing or not. The last time I played with her I lost 50 bits."

"You were gambling?"

"Why, of course Twilight. The game just isn't that interesting unless you're betting something," Celestia offered matter-of-factly. Celestia opened her mouth to say something further when a gust of wind blew along the corridor. The torches that lined the walls were extinguished in a single wave, the hall plunging into an inky blackness. Twilight couldn't even see the nose in front of her face... and in an instant the memories of her nightmare surfaced.

"Sister, did you leave the door to the balcony open?" Luna asked, her horn starting to glow with a faint, pale light that mimicked the glow of the moon. Still, as she and Twilight looked to where the white mare had once stood there was only air. Celestia, in the moment of pure darkness, had vanished.

"Celestia..." Twilight ventured a call into the darkness, her voice echoing across the hall. Luna seemed far less worried, a disgruntled expression on her face as she looked about the hall.

"Very funny, Sister. Don't think a thousand years on the moon made me forget that you're a prankster. Come on out." Yet, despite Luna's call and accusation, Celestia didn't appear. The castle was as still and silent as a graveyard, and Twilight could feel her heart starting to race.

The tension was set off by a flash of light behind the unicorn and alicorn, making Twilight jump while Luna spun her head quickly. The light had come from the lake shore

beneath the castle's balcony, and the pair galloped back out into the night air to try and see its source.

The source turned out to be Celestia, the sun princess's horn glowing brightly as she shot beams of pure light at shadowed figures that were attempting to surround her. The figure made Twilight's blood turn to ice... they were the same kind of ponies she had seen in her dream. Mares and stallions, wielding garish weapons while their bodies were wrapped in lingering shadows.

"We... we have to help her," Twilight forced out, looking over at Luna. The moon princess read the fear on Twilight's face, coming to realize that this wasn't one of her sister's elaborate pranks. Eyes furrowing, the moon princess flapped her wings and got airborne. She soared down to the lake shore to help Celestia fight while Twilight turned and broke into a gallop, racing off the balcony and down the castle halls to join the fight.

Bursts of light radiated through the castle windows, signs of the ongoing fight on the lake shore outside. Twilight could only hope that Celestia and Luna would be able to defeat the strange, shadow-wrapped ponies. She didn't honestly know how much she could do to help, but she couldn't just sit on the sidelines either.

She reached the staircase, galloping down as quickly as she dared. Memories of the nightmare flitted across Twilight's mind and more than once she stopped to examine some of the old swords and shields that decorated the castle walls. She needed an ax in her dream to defeat the darkness... and one of the swords would surely serve as an ideal replacement if not an upgrade. Still... each time Twilight began to reach for a sword the horrible sounds from her dream made her draw her levitation magic back. The sound of a metal blade hitting pony flesh... she didn't want to hear that sound ever again.

She would continue on with only magic to defend herself.

After what seemed like an endless run through the castle corridors, Twilight reached the entrance, casting out her magic and forcing the old wooden doors to slam open and almost off their hinges. Her lungs were burning and legs were aching, but she continued to run. Every moment mattered, every second could be the difference. Maybe it was her nightmare-fueled fear, but Twilight couldn't shake the thought from her mind. The single thought that if she did not hurry something horrible would happen.

The flashes of light were continuing as Twilight hugged close to the sides of the castle, following the earthen trail that led around to the lake shore on the castle's western side. A flash of light, another flash of light... and then the brightest flash Twilight had yet to see... and then nothing. The night grew still, and for a moment Twilight let a smile spread onto her face. Celestia and Luna must have defeated the attackers, that was the only explanation after the huge surge of light that had preceded the quiet.

And yet, as Twilight rounded the corner, she was greeted with an empty scene. The black water of the lake lapped against the shore. The sand showed signs of action, of many

hooves treading across its surface in a confusing and panicked dance... but the water was already washing those hoof prints away. There was no Luna, no Celestia, no shadow-wrapped ponies. Twilight was the only one there.

Racing down to the shore, Twilight searched for any sign of the princesses. She followed the hoofprints, trying her best to read what happened. The deepest and largest hoof prints had to belong to Celestia, so Twilight traced them as best she could. The sun princess had stood in the center of the beach for much of the fight, turning in place as she shot bursts of light.

But then the hoof prints retreated towards the lake shore, backwards. Like Celestia was starting to get overwhelmed and was putting her back to the water to try and improve her odds. The hoof prints then just stopped, the last few partially erased by the lapping waves of the lake. It was like Celestia just vanished right there.

Twilight's panic only grew, her mind spinning as she tried to think. Celestia and Luna were gone... they had just vanished when fighting the shadowed ponies. The attackers were gone as well, and the lake water was slowly erasing the only evidence that something happened.

First instinct was to call for the guards, but as Twilight raced into the castle she was unable to find a single armor-clad pegasus. The castle was just empty. Had they been taken as well? Twilight couldn't be sure. The castle was utterly dark, the few lights and torches that had been lit when Twilight left were extinguished upon her return. The words of the creature from her dream echoed in her mind, warnings of how something was strongest in the dark.

And even with the light from her unicorn horn guiding her, the darkness grew ever more threatening to Twilight. Soon, she couldn't bear to stay in the castle any longer, galloping back outside where at least the moon provided some additional illumination. She panted, dropping to her haunches as her body tried to recover and seize control of the panic filling every fiber of her being.

The guards were gone, the castle was empty and dark... there was darkness all around. There was danger all around. She needed to find help, she needed to find someplace safe. Looking about, the answer to all these needs presented itself in the distance, a glowing beacon in the night.

The town of Emblem, where her friends were currently exploring. If she could get down to Emblem then maybe they could help. They were the Elements of Harmony after all, maybe they could use that power to save Celestia and Luna from whatever had taken them... Twilight assuming that the princesses were taken against their will.

Forcing herself back to her hooves, Twilight began to jog in the direction of town, letting the light from the village guide her while the light from her horn illuminated the path ahead.

*You are only safe in the light.*

Twilight offered a small silent prayer that the creature from her dream was right, and that the lit streets of Emblem would be a safe haven. A place where she could rest, collect herself, and try to understand what was going on.

*Journal 63*

*Any good horror story requires that the protagonist be out-gunned, over-powered. The reader has to believe there is an honest chance the story will end poorly, as some horror stories do. The situation needs to be almost hopeless. If the protagonist could fight back and have a good chance of victory, then it wouldn't be a horror story. It would be a fantasy story or adventure novel.*

*No, in horror stories you have to take a common character and put them in the bleakest situation possible. It's there that the character will start to fear every dark shadow, check cautiously behind every corner... where the character's panic and anxiety will infect the reader and have them holding their breath as they wait to see if the ax murderer is waiting around the next bend in the path.*

*Thus, to make "Creeping Darkness" work as even a light horror story I had to ensure that those who could stand a fighting chance against Nightmare Moon were taken out early. I allowed Celestia and Luna to be taken.*

*It may seem counter-intuitive, to allow those in the story with the greatest likelihood of victory fall so early on... but the Dark Place demands it. I can only write a horror story, because it's in a horror story that an evil like the darkness has the greatest chance of being victorious.*

*Nightmare Moon also continues to whisper in my ear, trying to drive the story the way she wants it to happen. Thankfully, while Nightmare Moon whispers she doesn't have control like Barbara Jagger did... which leads me to believe she is not in fact just another face for the Dark Presence. Still, that means her desires to plunge Equestria into the darkness are her own... and I can only imagine what could have driven her to those desires.*

*Still, I am not her puppet. I'm her opponent, and while the story I write must be a form of horror story, I can, at the end, insure that she is defeated.*

*To do this, I must figure out a way to let Twilight fight against the Taken, Nightmare Moon's soldiers. Not with guns or weapons... no, I won't make her fight the darkness like I did. Still, I must think of a way for her to fight.*

*As I write this, I begin to think about the flare gun and flash bangs that often proved my saving grace when facing the darkness. Maybe there is an answer in that.*

• • •

The road down from the castle was long, and it only felt longer considering the situation. Twilight had been jogging constantly, looking at every shadow like it could leap out and

make her disappear. The stress was too much, the unicorn just barely making it halfway to Emblem when she had to stop and rest. Somehow, she knew it was dangerous to stop, that the darkness of the trees neighboring the road could easily be hiding more of the shadowed ponies... the Taken... that's what the creature in her dream had called them.

Taken... just like Celestia and Luna had been. Before she could stop her brain it had already composed ghastly images of the two princesses, lunging out from the dark at her as the other Taken did. Twilight had to shut her eyes and shake her head to make those thoughts dissipate, her mind latching onto the first thing she could think of as a distraction. She choose to remember Pinkie Pie's song. She just had to Giggle at the Ghosties. Twilight doubted that giggling or any sort of laughter was going to work against the Taken... but the message and cheerfulness of the song did its job... it helped to distract Twilight from her current situation long enough for the pony catch her breath.

Legs starting to regain some of their strength, Twilight got back to her hooves and continued towards the town, though now walking. She knew she needed to get there quickly, but at the same time thoughts of the Taken made Twilight realize that if she was attacked she'd need to be able to run away... and she couldn't do that if she didn't go a bit slower and save her strength.

It was a decision Twilight would soon appreciate, for as she drew closer to Emblem the night grew more threatening. A heavy mist began to linger amongst the trees and hang over the road, obscuring the unicorn's vision. A breeze kicked put, making the trees of the forest creek and groan, the noises growing louder as the wind gained strength. The night itself also began to darken, the stars and moon becoming obscured.

The tension in the air just kept building, Twilight sensing that something wasn't right. Something didn't want her getting to the town, getting to her friends. Twilight formed the light from her horn into a single cone, continuing down the road but watching the treeline that boarded the path on either side.

She saw glimpses of movement amongst the trees, and at first she tried to convince herself it was just branches and leaves turning in the wind. It was the logical explanation, but one of the first things to go when panic takes hold is logic. Yes, the movement could be just twisting leaves... or it could also be more Taken ponies, waiting for the right moment to leap out at Twilight with axes, chainsaws, and whatever weapons the shadow-wrapped ponies could wield.

A bend in the road greeted Twilight with a sight that made a smile pass onto her face for the first time since she left the castle. There was a house, a warmly lit cabin, just off the side of the road. Honestly, Twilight would have been happy with a hovel with a lantern... but the cabin would give her a chance to rest. She was safe in the light, and every window of the home glowed with the warm invitation of safety.

The second she was in the light of the porch the harsh wind and mist that had been threatening her seemed to fade, the night once again becoming calm and still. Twilight

went to the door, venturing a knock. She waited for several moments, but when nopony came to the door she decided to try sticking her nose inside.

It was a quaint little cabin, just large enough for a single pony or maybe a new couple to be living in. The furnishings were rustic and homey, and the light came from a fire that roared in the fireplace along with a few electric lights. The Lakeshore Castle was one of the few places around that didn't have electric lights, mostly because trying to wire a solid stone castle with electricity wasn't the easiest task and Celestia wasn't in the castle often enough to bother getting it upgraded.

"Hello..." Twilight ventured a call. "Is anypony home?"

Only silence answered the unicorn. After standing in the doorway for a few more minutes the unicorn decided to start nosing around, seeing if maybe the cabin's residents were just asleep. It was a single-story cabin, with all the basic rooms right on the bottom floor. Twilight searched each, finding evidence that someone had been in the home recently... especially since something was cooking in the oven.

The last door Twilight checked lead down to the basement, the one part of the house not lit. Twilight used her magic to play with the light switch, and after a few clicks a single, weak light bulb clicked to life at the bottom of the stairs.

Part of Twilight knew it was stupid to go down into the darkness, but at the same time part of her was worried about the owners of the cabin. If they were down in the basement, they were in danger... they could have already been attacked and need help. In the end, Twilight's conscience won out against her common sense as she began to descend the steps into the basement.

The single hanging bulb at the bottom of the stairwell didn't provide much light, but it was a safe haven Twilight was thankful for as she used the light from her horn to scan the room. The basement was filled with old boxes and canned and dried foods. Either leftovers from the previous winter or the first boxes of fresh supplies for the coming cold season.

Across the room the light from her horn swept, until it caught sight of a figure crumpled against the staircase. She jumped a bit, Twilight fearing it was a Taken... but unlike the Taken, when Twilight's light fell on the figure it didn't elicit a grunt and the sound of burning darkness. Instead, it caused the figure to moan, as if the pony had just been woken up and was in a lot of pain.

Twilight moved over beside the pony, letting the light from her horn spread evenly around like a lantern instead of a flashlight. The pony had a trickle of blood running down from his mane, and there was a large bump as well. He had been hit in the head... hard... and was probably lying there unconscious until the light in his eyes stirred him back into the waking world.



"Are you okay?" Twilight asked, using her magic to try and help the pony to his hooves.

"Ya... but my head is killin' me."

"You've got a nasty bump. What happened?"

"I rightly don't know," the stallion replied, carrying an accent similar but not exactly like Applejack's. "I was just down here rummaging for a jar of grape jam when something went and beaned me on the head. It wasn't you was it... and what are you doing in my cabin?"

"No, it wasn't me, and I'm in your cabin because... um... it started to rain and I was hoping I could wait here until the storm passed," Twilight lied as she went up beside the pony, letting him lean against her as they moved towards the stairs. They began climbing, but halfway up all the lights in the house blinked out, causing the stallion to curse.

"Oh hayseed, the fuse box is acting up again. You'll have to go check it."

"Where is it?"

"In the kitchen, just to the left of the fridge," the stallion replied as he sat down on the stairs. "I'll just wait here... don't think I can navigate these stairs in the dark... not with this headache."

"Okay, just stay here and I'll get the lights back on," Twilight replied, trotting up the stairs and making a beeline for the kitchen. She found the fuse box easily, but that's only because it was spitting sparks and a giant ax was lodged deep into the metal. Twilight turned, trying to see where the ax had come from. She took notice of a window that stood on the wall opposite the fuse box, a window that had been left open. Outside, she thought she saw a figure disappearing around the corner of a tree.

"Hey... you're back. Did you get the ligh... hey, what are you doing... Get your hooves off of me! No... AHHH!"

Twilight's eyes widened as she looked back at the stairwell, the screams emanating up from the basement. The stallion was dragged back into the basement, roughly, and the final scream sent a shiver down Twilight's spine. After that there was only silence, the house as still as a graveyard.

Moving as quickly as she dared, Twilight crept to the edge of the staircase, shining her light down into the basement. She couldn't see the stallion, even tried to call out to him a few times. Still, there was only silence. Again, common sense was telling Twilight to just get out of the cabin and get to Emblem, but she couldn't just leave the stallion alone in the dark. If he was injured the Taken could get him... if they hadn't already.

She took each step of the staircase one at a time, cringing whenever one of the aged boards creaked under her weight. Still, nothing leapt out from the darkness... and Twilight was able to reach the bottom of the stairs. The stallion, however, was nowhere to be found. It was like he had vanished... like Celestia and Luna did.

A resounding boom made Twilight jump, her head turning to focus on its source. The door to the basement had slammed itself shut. The break in the silence was followed by more noises, things shifting and walking in the darkness around Twilight.

Panic gripped the pony, Twilight calling on her magic as she made the light from her horn burn as brightly as she could muster and in all directions. Like a flare, the magic lit up the room. Three Taken ponies retreated from the light, covering their eyes. One of the ponies was the stallion Twilight had just tried to save. He was wielding a hammer his teeth, and glow from his eyes assured Twilight that he had been turned into a Taken.

Twilight kept her magic burning, satisfied that it was at the very least keeping the monsters at bay. Still, as she tried to figure out her escape one Taken worked its way around behind her, and without warning Twilight felt something hard hit the back of her head before breaking apart, the force of the blow knocking her to the ground and extinguishing her light.

For a moment the unicorn was in pure panic, feeling something oozing down the back of her neck. Her mind quickly jumped to it being blood or even her brains, but she couldn't focus on that as she heard the ponies around her starting to rush in. They were on the attack, taking the moment of pure darkness to strike.

Twilight focused on her horn, begging it to bring back the light.

And it did, with an explosion of light that even blinded the unicorn for the moment. It was as bright as the light that had exploded in front of her in the dream, which saved her from the ax-wielding stallion. She heard the Taken around her howling in pain, a burning smell reaching the unicorn's nose.

When Twilight dared to open her eyes, when the light of her horn had dwindled back down to normal, she saw that she was once again alone in the cabin and the threatening presence she had felt moments before had lifted.

Not only did the light seem to hurt the creatures, but enough of it at one time was able to make them disappear. It was a fact that Twilight seized with her mind, the idea igniting a small fire of hope. She could fight back against the Taken, but it wasn't all good news. The flash of light had left her feeling drained. She wouldn't be able to do that very many times in a row. The magical burst of light would be a good last resort if she got surrounded, but maybe she could figure out other ways to use her light that wasn't as physically taxing.

With the Taken gone, Twilight next focused on the gooey ooze running down the back of her neck. She felt it with a hoof, noticing it was cold. She brought it in front of her face, and after sniffing at it and venturing a lick she breathed a sigh of relief. It wasn't brains or blood... it was grape jam... one of the Taken had thrown a jar of preserves at her and the contents had spilled out when the jar broke.

The spot on her head where the jar had hit was sore, and it was going to swell into a solid lump. Still, Twilight couldn't help but laugh, a laughter driven by the sweet relief of knowing her brains weren't oozing out the back of her skull. The jam would get sticky and uncomfortable soon enough, but Twilight could wash up when she got to Emblem.

The house hadn't proved the rest-stop Twilight was hoping for, and guilt clung to her about being unable to save the stallion... she didn't even know his name. Still, she was thankful for the one good thing that had come out of the moment. She had a way to fight back, something that would maybe let her reach the town and her friends.

As Twilight left the cabin she couldn't help but look back. Part of her wondered what would have happened to the stallion if she hadn't stopped to seek shelter. Would he still be there, would he still be safe... or would he have still been a victim of the Taken?

Still, Twilight couldn't focus on the what-ifs. She needed to get to Emblem, find her friends... it was as simple as that. The town was close now, and looked closer than it had a few minutes ago now that she had a means of defending herself.

Turning back to the road, Twilight stepped out in a quick trot, distracting herself from the darkness around her by trying to think of other ways to use the light from her horn to fight back against the Taken.

*Journal 65*

*Things are progressing well. I was able to give Twilight Sparkle a means of fighting back the darkness. She is now close to Emblem, close to her friends and the safety of the light. Once they reunite I can maybe make use of the Elements of Harmony. The Elements are an ultimate power, and I have little doubt that they will be able to end this story quickly. Send Nightmare Moon back to the darkness.*

*Still, despite this Nightmare Moon seems unconcerned. I still hear her whispering, saying things in the darkness of the cabin, but she isn't at all worried. What does she know that I don't? What is she planning? Being the author of the story I should know this, but I don't.*

*For the time I can only continue writing.*

• • •

Never... never in her whole life had Twilight been so happy to see a street lamp... a happiness only compounded as she looked down the cleanly lit main street of Emblem. By some miracle she had made it down the road, even when the Taken had started to attack in force. The spell she had discovered, to produce the bright flash of light, had helped drive them back... even though the exertion of using the spell even a few times left Twilight mystically and mentally exhausted.

Still, the city light was soothing. The nervous tension that had coiled around Twilight's brain like a tightly tied rope was starting to loosen. The sense of safety brought forth a fresh supply of energy for Twilight, driving away some but not all the soreness in her legs. It was the energy Twilight needed to keep herself on her hooves, walking down the street as she checked the few stores that were still open for her friends.

Twilight had just begun to fear she had missed her friends, that they had left and were on their way back to the castle, when she heard a Pinkie Pie giggle dancing in the night air. Following the sound, Twilight eventually found herself standing outside a small corner restaurant. The sign outside read "Sundae's Sundaes", the sign of the restaurant showing an ice cream sundae being served by a pony with an ice cream sundae as a cutie mark.

Twilight nosed her way inside, the room filled with chatter and laughter. Amongst the more somber colored ponies that inhabited the town Twilight caught sight of her friends, their vivid coats making them stand out clearly from the rest of the crowd.

"Oh... HEY TWILIGHT!" Pinkie Pie half shouted, completely oblivious to the fact that she was disrupting other ponies who were eating at the ice cream parlor. "Over here!"

Twilight walked over quickly, not wanting to draw more attention to herself than necessary. All her friends offered a warm smile as she approached.

"Heysugarcube, glad to see you decide you came down to join us."

"Though you're a bit late. We were just about to head back up to the castle. Most of the stuff around town is already closing down. It's so lame."

"Twilight... Dear, don't take this the wrong way but you look positively frazzled... and you have something gunky and purple in your hair," Rarity offered. "Is something wrong?"

Twilight nodded her head. "Yes, but I can't talk about it here. We need to go someplace private... and well-lit."

"Aw man, we've already ordered," Dash whined.

"Just cause Twilight has somethin' important to say don't mean we got to skip out on our food. I'd bet my right hoof this fancy place has a private dinning room or two. We'll just ask to move back there. Besides, Twilight, I'd reckon an ice cream cone would do you a world of good."

Twilight opened her mouth to protest, but was betrayed by her stomach. Ice cream did sound amazing at the moment... something to calm her nerves and give her a little bit of a sugar high, something Twilight needed after wearing herself out on the run down the mountain. She'd see if the ice cream parlor had the private rooms as Applejack suggested. If it did, she'd order herself something and then tell her friends what had happened over their dairy desserts.

That and she'd wash the dried purple jam out of her mane in the bathroom.

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Twilight slurped down the last of her vanilla shake, soothing her tired vocal cords. The cool dairy concoction slipped down her throat and continued to relax the tight muscles in her body and to ease her mind. The private dinning room was brightly lit, with hardly a shadow anyplace... Twilight felt safe for the first time all night.

She had told her friends everything. The nightmare she had on the train, what happened to Celestia and Luna, her harrowing run down the mountain. Their faces portrayed varying and mixed expressions of disbelief, fear, and skepticism... Applejack, Rarity, and Dash looking the most skeptical. Twilight couldn't blame them though. Hearing herself talk about everything that happened... she'd be questioning her own sanity if she didn't have to wash out a gob of grape jam from her mane. The physical proof that something had happened.

"So, you're saying something took Celestia, Luna, and everypony at the castle and didn't leave a single trace?"

Twilight nodded. "Yes, I know what it sounds like but its what happened. Please, you have to believe me."

"Don't you fret none about that, we believe you," Applejack reassured.

"Yea, believe you're off your rocker," Dash mumbled, only to get a hoof to the back of the head from Applejack. The pair glared each other down a moment before Dash crossed her front legs and pouted, Applejack continuing to speak.

"Still,sugarcube, maybe we should go tell somepony about this."

"Who? All the royal guards are gone."

"Oh, we should tell the sheriff," Pinkie Pie chirped. "She seemed like a super nice pony; she even told us about when the street lights will go out."

Twilight's eyes narrowed. "The street lights will... go out?"

"Yes, she told us to be careful not to stay out too late," Rarity answered. "The mayor is trying to save some bits on the town's electric bill so most of the street lamps turn off around midnight. Only a few stay on for safety reasons."

Twilight's eyes moved to clock on the wall, the second hoof clicking into line with the minute and hour hooves. It was midnight, right on the nose. Twilight felt a cold sweat start to build on the back of her neck. She bolted up from the table, pushing open the door that separated the private room from the rest of the ice cream parlor. She looked out, across the ponies who were enjoying their dairy desserts in the main dining area and out the parlor's front windows.

Outside, the street lights were glowing with their safe, darkness fighting radiance. Then, one across the street clicked off, its light bulb growing dark with only a lingering afterglow of heat. That streetlight was followed by another... and then another. Soon, all the street lights right outside the parlor were dark.

Twilight jogged for the door, slamming it open despite the strange looks she was getting from the other customers and the parlor's staff. The safe, calm sensation that Twilight had experienced when first entering the town was now gone, and the prickling sensation on the back of her neck told her the darkness was coming.

"Miss..." one of the waiters ventured, "are you all right?"

Twilight glanced back, realizing that all eyes on the restaurant were focused on her. Should she warn them about the coming darkness? Would it even be worth the trouble? Her friends barely believed her, and the last thing she needed was the good folk of Emblem trying to toss her into a cell at the sheriff's office for being mentally unstable.

Twilight forced a smile, coming back inside the shop, "Of course... just needed some fresh night air." She kept up that smile for a few moments before darting back to the private room. Her friends had been watching her actions through the doorway, but quickly retreated back inside as the unicorn came galloping in, magic snapping the door shut behind her.

"Are you sure you're all right Twilight? You're acting really weird."

"I'm fine... I think we should... stay here, in the light. Yeah, just stay here 'til morning."

"Twi, this place closes at 1:00. I reckon the management wouldn't take to kindly to us trying to stay here overnight. Besides, why again is it so dang important we stay in the light?"

"Because -" Twilight began, only for her voice to be stolen as the lights in the room clicked off.

"OOOOH, that was spooky. We should tell *scary stories*."

"No, Pinkie!" Twilight snapped, lighting her horn so that its illuminations fell across the entire room like a lantern. Rarity lit her horn as well, the two points of light enough to let the six friends see each other fairly clearly.

"Listen, we have to find some place where there's light. We won't be safe until then."

"Geez, Twilight, didn't know you were afraid of the dark," Dash half-chuckled, only to find Applejack's hoof smacking the back of her head again.

"Hey, quit that!"

"I'll get to quittin' when you learn to button your lip."

"What I'd say?"

"Whatever the hay is going on obviously has Twilight spooked, and she don't need you makin' fun of her."

"Oh come on. Shadow-wrapped ponies that come at you with axes. This is so a prank, and not a very good one either. If she really wanted to scare us, she'd make some loud noises and screams."

It was then several screams began to come from outside the small, private dining room... ponies yelling both in terror and fear. All six friends watched the door to the room with narrow eyes; except for Fluttershy who, in a panic, had ducked beneath the table and was shivering, hooves over her eyes.

The screams went on for a time before falling silent. No pony dared moved, ears tuned and listening for something... anything... but all they could hear was their own hushed breathing.

"You were sayin'?" Applejack finally muttered, turning her gaze on Rainbow Dash, who just offered a sheepish smile.

"Okay... we're still okay," Twilight said, obviously trying to reassure herself more than her friends. "We just need to find some flashlights, lanterns, anything that produces light. Then we'll find someplace well-lit and then wait there until morning. When the sun's up we'll have plenty of time to figure out what's going on and what we can do to fix it."

"Can't... can't we just stay here?" Fluttershy asked, poking her head out from beneath the table. "I mean... all those screams... there has to be something bad out there... wouldn't be safer here?"

"It's too dark in here."

"Well, maybe we should go check the fuse box," Rarity offered. "It can't be too hard to get the lights back on in this wonderful little ice cream parlor."

Twilight nodded. "That's not a bad idea. I'll go see about getting the lights on while the rest of you stay here."

"Now hold on, darlin'; if even half of what you told us is true it don't sit right with me letting you go out into the darkness by yourself."

"Yes, at least let me come with you, Twilight. We unicorn girls have to stick together, after all."

"No, if we both leave then the others will be left alone in the dark and they'll be in danger. One of us has to stay here, to keep this room at least partially lit."

"Fine, then we'll split up. Pinkie Pie, you and me will go with Twilight to see if we can't get the lights back on in this place. Rarity, you go with Dash and Fluttershy and see if you can't rustle us up some flashlights, lanterns, and the such. I saw a general store 'cross the street that's bound to have somethin'.

"And Twilight," Applejack continued, "don't you go sayin' a word about it being too dangerous. We stuck by you in the Everfree Forest, and we ain't about to abandon you now."

Twilight couldn't hide her anxiousness, eyes flicking back at the door that separated them from the rest of the parlor. To the unicorn, the Everfree forest wasn't nearly as dangerous as the situation they found themselves in now. Still, upon looking back at her friends, Twilight couldn't help but smile. It would be dangerous, but they were the ponies that had



defeated Nightmare Moon. They were her friends, and when friends stick together anything is possible.

"Okay, we'll do it together then. But Rarity, once you, Dash, and Fluttershy have the stuff from the general store I want you to stay there until you see the lights come on in this place. If we can't get the lights back we'll come meet you in the general store and we'll hole up there for the night."

"But wasn't that general store closed?" Rarity pointed out. "How are we supposed to get anything if they're closed?"

"Break in and take whatever."

"Break in... you want us to just steal everything? That's so barbaric!"

"I agree with Twilight here; I don't think we have the luxury of bein' civil no more. Just take whatever you can find that's useful. If it ends up botherin' ya too much just make a list and we'll pay the store owner for everything after the sun's up."

"Very well... I guess desperate times do call for desperate measures."

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Twilight nosed open the door slowly, looking out into the main dining room of the ice cream restaurant. There wasn't a pony to be seen... which was both a comfort and a worry. It meant there weren't any Taken waiting for them just outside the door, but it also raised the question of where all the customers and employees had gone.

Still, they couldn't focus on that. Rarity, Dash, and Fluttershy headed out the front door of the restaurant, bolting across the street to the general store. As they did that, Twilight lead Applejack and Pinkie Pie towards the back of the restaurant, doing her best to illuminate the rooms so that all three of them could search for the restaurant's fuse box.

They passed through the kitchen, where half-made sundaes were starting to melt into soup. Pinkie Pie, not one to waste any sugary dessert, quickly went about gobbling up any unattended ice cream while Applejack and Twilight made their way around the room.

"I got to say Twilight, I ain't a pony that's ever been 'fraid of the dark, but... *\*shiver\**... I won't lie, somethin' just don't feel right."

Twilight nodded her head, looking on one of the kitchen walls. "I know, it was like this almost the entire time I was trying to get here from the castle. It gets like this whenever..."

"Whenever what?"

"Whenever there is a Taken nearby." At that Twilight flashed her light about the room, searching for one of the shadowed ponies. They could come out of almost anyplace, out of the shadows. The room was pitch black minus the light from her horn, they could surround them... and had.

At the far end of the room Pinkie Pie was fiddling with the latch on a large bed freezer, undoubtedly trying to get to the ice cream inside, and behind her Twilight saw a figure lumbering into view. It looked like one of the restaurant's waiters, the stallion moving towards Pinkie with half a broken soda bottle in his teeth.

"Pinkie Pie!" Twilight shouted. "Look out!"

The pink pony turned her head, giving Twilight a curious look before looking in the other direction. Her eyes then met with the eyes of the Taken waiter, but instead of freaking out Pinkie Pie turned to face the waiter... and then started making silly faces.

"Pinkie... WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!"

"Why, giggling at the ghostie," Pinkie Pie replied. "Do I need to sing the song to you again?"

"Sugarcube, this ain't that kind of ghostie."

"Sure it is. He's big, scary... has glowing eyes. He's the perfect kind of ghostie! All you have to do is turn, look them right in the eye and then go Ha... Ha... Ha..."

The Taken waiter seemed to freeze at this, and Twilight's brain did a flip. Did that actually work!?

Still, the moment of hope was lost as the waiter swung his head back, winding up to strike Pinkie Pie with the broken bottle. The pink pony was just barely able to duck under the swing, sprinting past and jumping behind Twilight, her eyes the size of dinner plates and hair completely deflated and flat.

"Giggling didn't work. Giggling didn't work! GIGGLING DIDN'T WORK!" Pinkie Pie chanted to herself, fear and panic gripping the energetic pony.

"Well, then maybe it's time we got just a little more physical," Applejack said, grabbing up a pan from a nearby stove. She then charged the Taken, swinging the pan. The blow connected home, the pan ringing like a bell for a moment. The Taken's head had been snapped to one side, Applejack striking the shadowed waiter pony right across the muzzle. Still, after a few moments of stillness the waiter continued to move, lashing out at Applejack.

"What in tarnation!?! What kind of thing can take getting smacked in the head with a frying pan like it weren't nothin'?"

"We've got to burn off the shadows first," Twilight called, racing up by Applejack. She focused the light from her horn into a single intense beam, the waiter cringing from the brightness and starting to back up. The shadows that encased him began to burn off, the smoldering cinders floating into the air. After burning away a significant amount of shadows a flash came from the Taken stallion, the rest of the protective darkness combusting and burning away.

"NOW!" Twilight shouted, Applejack rallying to the call. The farm pony sprinted forward one more time, swinging the frying pan with all her strength. The blow connected with the side of the Taken's head, the frying pan hitting against then falling through the stallion. The Taken had become a cloud of lingering smoke which faded away until there was no trace of him left except the broken bottle, which clattered to the floor.

"And... and you said these here boogie ponies were doggin' you all the way down the mountain?" Applejack said after spitting out the frying pan.

"Pretty much..." Twilight replied, panting and dropping to her haunches as she put a hoof to her chest, trying to calm her racing heart.

"Well... I think I'd better just hang onto this here fryin' pan then. Once you burn off the shadows with your light I can finish the job."

Twilight nodded, happy to know her friend was willing to handle the physical violence necessary to fight off the Taken. Yes, that was a plan that could work. She could use her light to weaken the Taken and then Applejack could finish them off. That, and a blow from the frying pan wasn't as gruesome as the ax Twilight had used in her dream.

"Still, we'd best be gettin' a move on. I don't want to be just waitin' here in the dark like sittin' ducks."

"Yes... we need to find the fuse box... but what about Pinkie Pie?" Twilight asked, casting her light onto the usually energetic pony. Pinkie was curled up in a tight ball in the corner of the room, shivering as her eyes focused on her own hooves. She was chanting to herself, vocalizing the mental struggle she was enduring.

"But giggling didn't work... But giggling always works... But giggling didn't work..."

• • •

*CRASH*

"Really, Rainbow Dash, did you have to break a window?" Rarity asked, giving her hair a gentle toss as a sign of her distaste.

"How else were we supposed to get in?" the blue pegasus asked, putting her hoof through the hole in the glass she had just made with a well-placed rock throw. After fiddling with the lock for a moment it clicked open, Dash grinning as she pushed open the general store's door. Rarity and Fluttershy followed her in, the trio spreading out as they began to search the store.

"I still say we are being incredibly rude," Rarity whispered, her voice carrying across the store.

"Yes, we heard you the first dozen times," Dash snapped, hovering between the aisles. "Now, how about you quit whining and look for those lights?"

"Oh, trust me Rainbow Dash, when I'm whining... you'll know it," Rarity said, giving a small "humph" as she disappeared down another aisle, casting her unicorn light on the different items. The general store had food, cleaning supplies, a whole lot of a bunch of different things... but nothing that stood out as a flashlight or lantern.

"Have you found anything yet?" Dash asked as she landed beside Rarity several minutes later.

"No, this general store utterly lacks anything that produces light. They don't even have spare light bulbs."

"Fluttershy, you find anything? ...Fluttershy?"

Dash and Rarity looked around a bit, checking the different store aisles. Still, Fluttershy was nowhere to be seen.

"Where did she go?"

"You don't think one of those dreadful things Twilight was talking about got to her?"

"We would have heard something... wouldn't we?" Dash asked, landing beside Rarity. Still, the pair flinched as they heard the sound of a door creaking. It came from the back of the shop, behind the counter where the register was position.

"What was that?"

"It... it was probably just the wind... Still, maybe we should go check it out."

"Yes... yes of course. You first."

"What?! Why me?"

"Don't tell me you're scared."

Dash puffed up. "I'm not scared."

"Then you should have no trouble going first."

The blue pegasus chanced a look at the far end of the store, Rarity's light revealing the door that had creaked open. She forced down a tense swallow, lowering her head down as she crept towards the back of the store. Rarity followed, keeping her unicorn light trained on the door, both expecting something horrible to leap out at any moment.

When they finally reached the door, Rainbow Dash nosed it just a little wider, the creaking hinges making both ponies cringe. If something was in the back of the store it now knew they were coming. Still, the pair tip-hoofed onward, Rarity's light piercing the darkness and showing the many storage shelves in the store's backroom.

It was then another light clicked on beside the two, the sudden brightness making both Dash and Rarity jump and grab a hold of each other as they looked at the source of light, expecting to see some horrible creature that was ready to attack.

"Oh... sorry... um, I found the flashlights," Fluttershy offered, the yellow pegasus lowering her head so the beam of light wasn't right in her friends' eyes. She had found a small collection of headlamps, one of the more popular kinds of flashlights used by ponies. There were several, enough that every pony in the group would have a battery-powered source of light, even Twilight and Rarity.

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There was no hope of getting the lights back on in the ice cream parlor, even after Twilight, Applejack, and Pinkie had found the fuse box. All the fuses were blown and there weren't any replacements to be found. With the lights out permanently at the restaurant, the trio turned to go back through the restaurant, intending to head out the front door and cross the street to the general store.

The group found their way back into the kitchen. Applejack was in the lead, checking each corner as she held the frying pan in her mouth, thankful the cooking utensil had a soft wooden handle that was easy on her teeth.

Twilight followed behind, letting her unicorn light shine out in all directions like a lantern. Pinkie Pie stayed closed to Twilight's side, wanting to stay in the light. The usually energetic pony was jumping at almost every shadow and was as quiet as Fluttershy. It was a little unnerving for Twilight to see her friend like that... the usually bubbly Pinkie actually quiet and frightened. That and her hair had deflated, falling down across Pinkie's face much like it had been the day of the pink pony's surprise birthday party.

Twilight was snapped out of her thoughts when Applejack mumbled a curse around the frying pan handle in her mouth.

"What's wrong?"

Applejack set down her frying pan weapon so she could speak clearly. "The door back to the front room's blocked."

"It's blocked? But we just came through there."

"I know, but try tellin' that to this stubborn door," Applejack said, turning as she bucked. The door, however, held fast. Either the door had been locked or something very heavy had been moved up against it on the other side.

"What now?" Pinkie asked.

"Well, I reckon that this place has a back door. We'll go out that way, circle 'round, and loop on back to the general store," Applejack replied before taking the frying pan back into her mouth as she marched back to the other side of the kitchen. Twilight followed, Pinkie staying close to her side. Twilight was never so grateful to have the steadfast and reliable Applejack taking the lead.

The back door to the restaurant opened up into an alleyway that ran between the different shops of Emblem. Normally, the trio would have been able to just turn and get back on to the street quickly since the restaurant was a corner shop, but their way was blocked by a high fence. Since Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash were with Rarity, the three earth-bound ponies were forced to find another way around.

The only other way out of the alley was at the far end of the block, the place illuminated by one of the few streetlights in town that stayed on past midnight. The light was a warm, welcoming beacon in the distance, like a lighthouse on the edge of a savage sea.

Applejack kept in the lead while Twilight and Pinkie followed closely behind. They stepped around bags of garbage, overturned dumpsters, and old wooden pallets that had been knocked over in the alley.

"Twilight..." Pinkie half-whispered.

"What is it?"

"Do... do you feel that?"

Twilight nodded. It was that sensation, that strange prickling she was coming to hate. The wind was starting to blow, the stars were growing dark as was the moon, and a mist was starting to hang in the air. It all combined into the single, solid sensation that Twilight knew. The darkness was getting close, its mere presence making the normally welcoming world threatening.

The first one came out from behind a dumpster, a construction worker mare wielding a large shovel. She swung wildly, just barely missing Applejack. The Taken mare was about to make another swing when Twilight focused her horn light. The shadows burned away painfully slowly, but the mare was blinded long enough that, when the encompassing shadows did disappear, Applejack was able to leap in and clobber the mare. A single solid blow from the frying pan was enough to make the Taken fade away like a shadow.

Still, unlike in the kitchen where the prickling sensation lifted with the defeat of the Taken waiter, the atmosphere remained the same. From behind other items further down the alley two more Taken ponies appeared, stepping into view before breaking in a run towards Applejack.

"Don't worry, I got them," Twilight called, focusing her light on the charging ponies while Applejack prepared to strike the moment the shadows were gone. Still, as Twilight focused she suddenly felt something tackle her, knocking her off her hooves and down onto the hard ground of the alley.

"Pinkie... what are you -" Twilight began, seeing it was the energetic pony that had knock her over. Still, the words caught in her throat as she saw a large Taken stallion was standing very close to where they had once been, lifting a large sledge hammer. She hadn't even heard that Taken coming up from behind. If Pinkie hadn't noticed... Twilight could just barely imagine how much pain she'd be in... if she would have even survived a blow from that hammer on her spine.

"TWILIGHT!"

Applejack's call snapped the unicorn's attention back forward. Applejack was jumping and dodging the attacks from the other two Taken that had appeared in front of them. Twilight scrambled back to her hooves, running past the third, hammer-wielding Taken stallion. She focused her light, giving it as much power as she could muster. The shadows around the ponies attacking Applejack burnt away quickly, the farm pony delivering the finishing frying pan blows as soon as she was able to.

Pinkie Pie tried to do her part as well, distracting the third and largest of the Taken ponies so that Twilight and Applejack could deal with the other two. She leapt clear as the stallion brought the sledgehammer down hard on the ground, a blow that could easily shatter bones if it had connected.

"Guys... a little help!" Pinkie called.

"Hold on sugarcube, we're a-comin'," Applejack muttered around the frying pan, rearing back before breaking into a gallop. She rammed herself right into the stallion, knocking him off his hooves while she yelped out in pain.

"Applejack!"

"It's... it's all right," the farm pony answered, setting down the frying pan for a moment, "just don't let them touch you. Burns like a frying pan on a hot stove. Still, can't do no more harm once we get rid of it."

Twilight nodded, focusing her unicorn light. The shadows around the stallion, however, didn't burn away as quickly... and while he still hid his eyes the sledgehammer-wielding Stallion continued to march towards them.

"Why isn't it working?!?" Pinkie asked in a panic.

"This one is a mite stronger than the others. Still, it is working Twilight, just keep that light on him."

"You got it Ap-AHH!"

Twilight winced, faltering to one side. Another Taken had appeared, this one launching herself at the unicorn wielding a large wooden bat... a bat that had just been smashed into Twilight's haunches.

"TWILIGHT!" Pinkie Pie and Applejack yelled in unison, racing to their friend's side. They held the unicorn to her feet, but Twilight winced whenever she tried to put weight on her back leg. It wasn't broken, but the pain from getting hit with a bat meant she wouldn't be able to walk on it for at least a few minutes.

"We... we have to get to the street lamp," Twilight forced out through gritted teeth and pain. "We're safe in the light."

"Pinkie Pie, you carry Twilight," Applejack said, dodging the sledge hammer wielding stallion as she grabbed up her frying pan and jump back to her friends. "I'll run ahead and clear the way."

Pinkie Pie gave a firm nod. Before Twilight knew it the pink pony had gotten underneath her, springing up so that Twilight was laying across her friend's back like big, purple set of saddle bags. Once she was sure her friend wasn't going to fall off, Pinkie broke into a gallop. Applejack did the same, using her greater speed to charge ahead of her friends.

Despite being jostled around like a saddle bag, Twilight kept her light up and focused on the path ahead. Taken were coming out from behind every dumpster, every stack of boxes, anything in the alley that had deep enough shadows for them to appear from.

Still, Applejack led the charge. She dodged around most of the Taken, and those that she couldn't avoid she countered with the frying pan. She couldn't get rid of them since the Taken were still wrapped in shadows, but the blow from the frying pan was enough to make the threatening mares and stallions falter, clearing a path for Pinkie Pie and Twilight.



The Taken, however, just kept coming, but they were getting close to the street lamp. They had already galloped halfway down the alley, they were halfway there. Just a little farther, and they'd be safe.

"Twilight!" Pinkie called, snapping the unicorn out of her hopeful thoughts. The pink pony was looking skyward, Twilight chancing a glance up where she saw a swirling flock of what looked like ravens. They were circling, but at the same time something wasn't right.

They weren't normal ravens, a fact proven when the flock suddenly turned and began to dive at Twilight and Pinkie Pie with a horrible, monstrous cawing. Instinctively, Twilight brought up her light, and the crows cried out in pain as some of them began to burn away entirely. They were ravens made entirely of shadows, something Twilight could fight with just the light from her horn.

Applejack continued to clear a path, Pinkie Pie following right on the farm pony's hooves while Twilight used her light to keep the ravens at bay. They were being assaulted on all sides but they were holding the darkness back. They were so close now, the street lamp was literally just a few yards away.

One final Taken stepped into view, blocking the way to the light. A mountainous stallion the same size as Big Macintosh. He was armored, carrying a sword. It was one of Celestia's Royal Guards, one of the soldiers that had been tending the castle just hours before. The Taken soldier was so imposing that Twilight would have honestly preferred to try and get another dragon not to nap near Ponyville over trying to get by the soldier.

Applejack, however, barreled down the stallion like any other, jumping up and swinging the frying pan so it connected with the Taken soldier's head. The blow had little effect, the sound of metal striking metal making Applejack take notice of the fact the soldier was still wearing his helmet. Yet the farm pony didn't falter, jumping back from a slow sword slash before striking out at the stallion again. As Applejack fought, Pinkie Pie caught up and then bolted past the distracted Taken soldier. That was what Applejack was waiting for, throwing the frying pan at the soldier to distract him for a few more moments as she raced after her friends.

Twilight smiled, looking back at Applejack who was also grinning. They were going to make it, just a little farther, but the darkness wasn't going to give up. A deafening cawing drew Twilight's attention skyward. Another flock of crows were now circling the streetlamp, and with a monstrous caw began to barrel down at the ponies.

Twilight focused her light on them, the crows veering off. Twilight smiled as she kept her light trained on the birds, following their black shadowed bodies as they flew just above her and Pinkie Pie's head. She had chased them away, ensuring the ponies would reach the light

But, instead of going back into the sky the flock veered down again... and the smile fell from Twilight's face.

In saving herself and Pinkie Pie from the crows, the flock had found a new target. They now slammed into Applejack, flying directly into her face as they clawed. The farm pony panicked, tripping over her own hooves. She hit the ground hard.

"Applejack!" Twilight called just as she and Pinkie Pie reached the street lamp. The unicorn's sudden shout had startled Pinkie Pie, making her lose control. They toppled over onto the ground beneath the streetlamp's light. The hard impact left Twilight disoriented for a time, her side aching. She could have laid there for quite a while, just trying to recover, but a single sound made the injured unicorn bolt back to her hooves.

A single, earsplitting scream... one that echoed for blocks and was even audible by Dash, Rarity, and Fluttershy at the general store. A scream that made the blood in Twilight's veins turn to ice as she forced herself back up onto her hooves. She limped out from beneath the streetlamp, her unicorn horn glowing brightly as she cast the light down the alley.

"Applejack... Applejack!" Twilight called, but there was nothing. The only reply came from Twilight's own voice echoing off the stone buildings. The Taken had vanished, and Applejack along with them.

Twilight felt her knees give way beneath her, the unicorn dropping to her haunches right there in the middle of the street. Tears began to pool at the back of her eyes, the unicorn unable to rip her gaze away from the blackened alley. There, just within range of her unicorn light, was Applejack's hat, sitting alone and unattended on the dirty ground.

They... they had lost Applejack, she had been taken... just like Celestia and Luna.

"APPLEJACK!" Twilight half-screamed, half-wailed as tears streamed down her face, as if calling her friend's name one final time would bring her back.

Again, only echoes replied.

Applejack was gone.

*Journal 66*

*God forgive me for what I've done.*

*It's not like in my novels, when I'd let some character die to drive the plot. It's not even like "Departure". When I wrote that, the Dark Presence that wore Barbara Jagger's face was controlling me, influencing me... I wasn't myself and I let people in Bright Falls die to try and bring Alice back... but I wasn't myself at the time.*

*But this time... this time it's different. I'm fully aware, I tried to stop it, but the story demanded it. The moment was there, the suspense was there, it was a scene where the reader would be wanting, maybe even expecting for all the ponies to reach the safety of the street light. Then, the rug is pulled out, and one of them falls. The horror story demanded it, the Dark Place demanded it.*

*I heard Applejack's scream.*

*I heard Twilight calling out into the night.*

*I heard both as if they were right here with me in this room. As the words flowed from me to the typewriter, the action played out in front of my mind's eye, and no matter how badly I wanted to I couldn't look away.*

*I wanted to stop myself, I wanted to take the page out of the typewriter, rip it into shreds, and start again... but I couldn't. The story has begun to take on a life of its own, much like "Departure", and in those moments where I lose control I can only sit back and watch as the events unfold, read the story as it is written by whatever force guides my hands.*

*Shaking... I'm still shaking just thinking about it. All this is happening because of my damn curiosity... it's my fault... it's all my fault. If I hadn't tried to learn more about Equestria in my own selfish desire to get back to Alice then maybe this wouldn't have happened.*

*The guilt is making me physically ill. I'd throw up, but anything that was in my stomach is already in the toilet. I'm just thankful that somehow the cabin's plumbing still works despite being in the Dark Place.*

*It's hard to even make myself look at the typewriter... but I know I have to return sooner or later. The story has to be finished; if I left it now Nightmare Moon would be able to take over Equestria without opposition. She would flood that world with Darkness, it's only my writing that holds her back.*

*The last chapter was a victory for Nightmare Moon. Applejack was one of the strongest of Twilight's friends, one of the ponies that would have found facing the darkness easier.*

*She was a tough, rural spirit. Losing her will demoralize the ponies, and will make it more difficult for them to face the darkness.*

*I will write a happy ending to this story, I'll make up for my mistake. I'll somehow save Applejack, but that can't happen until the end of the story. No, for now Applejack must remain in the darkness... the horror story must continue.*

*I must give Twilight and her friends hope, something to work for... something to get them out of the general store and back outside... back into the darkness outside. Once outside, then the story can truly continue.*

*And it must continue, the situation must become bleaker... because at the end, when all hope is lost, in climax of the horror story I'll have my chance. I have the chance to save them all. But I must get to the climax first... and to get there I must make things worse.*

*I must let darkness spread and deepen for Twilight and her friends... for it's only when the night is at its darkest that the sun can bring the dawn.*

*It's always the darkest before the dawn.*

• • •

Twilight was dull to the world, her body numb and her mind just gone. She and all of her friends... no, most of her friends, were sitting in the back room of the general store. The head lamps Rarity and the others had found sat unused on the floor, the five ponies gathered in the protective glow of several dozen lanterns set about the general store's backroom.

In the center of the group, lying on the floor alone and unclaimed, was Applejack's hat. A silent reminder to the fact their dear friend was gone. Twilight would have kept looking for hours, would have kept calling out for Applejack in the dark, but the Taken were coming back. The darkness was returning and they couldn't stay outside; they had go someplace where they could be safe in the light.

Unable to do anything else, Twilight and Pinkie retreated to the general store with Applejack's hat, where they were forced to break the news to the others. That had been an hour ago, and since then hardly a word had been spoken.

Everypony was taking it differently. Rarity was shell-shocked, unwilling or unable to comprehend that Applejack was gone. Dash was angry, seething. She glared at the hat, as if demanding it explain how Applejack could be taken.

Pinkie Pie... she just stared at the lanterns blankly. Her hair had deflated, falling straight across her face. She wasn't Pinkie Pie at the moment. Instead, she was just plain old Pinkamena... the somber and straightforward pony from a family of rock farmers.

Fluttershy had taken it the worst. The yellow pegasus bawled her eyes out for several minutes after hearing the news. She was currently lying with her back to everypony else, trying to fall asleep or having already drifted off. In either case, she still whimpered from time to time... all she could muster after crying herself dry.

That left only Twilight, the unicorn staring at Applejack's hat as she played the scene over and over in her head. She wanted to analyze it, break it down, study it... understand why she hadn't been able to help Applejack. Why didn't she try to make her horn flash with light like she had done before? Why hadn't that crossed her mind? She might have been able to save Applejack if she had just remembered to do that.

Finally, the silence in the room was broken as Rainbow Dash snapped to her hooves, heading for the door.

"Where are you going?"

"To find Applejack," the pegasus retorted, looking back accusingly at Twilight. "Maybe she's still out there, maybe you and Pinkie Pie just didn't look hard enough."

"The Taken are still out there. If you go outside you'll end up just like Applejack. We don't know enough about what's out there to fight back."

"So, what, are we just supposed to sit here?"

"Until morning, yes. When the sun comes up we'll have time to figure out a plan."

"I can't wait that long," Dash snapped, lifting a hoof to open the door only to find somepony grabbing at one of her back hooves. It was Fluttershy, the yellow pegasus holding onto Dash's back leg for dear life as she held her eyes shut tight.

"Let go! I got to go look for Applejack."

Fluttershy just shook her head furiously, her grip only tightening.

"Rainbow, I know you want to find Applejack... we all do, but we don't want to lose you either" Twilight offered. "Please, we've all been up all night and it's not doing us any good. I say we try to get some sleep and take turns keeping watch."

Dash stomped a hoof, obviously wanting to argue. Sitting around had never been her strong suit, but Fluttershy's tight grasp of Dash's leg told the blue pegasus she couldn't hope to leave without distressing her friend further. With a defeated, begrudged sigh Dash turned away from the door.

"Okay... whatever."

"Good. I'm sure when we've all got some sleep we'll be able to think of something."

"How about I take the first watch Twilight? After what you and Pinkie Pie went through you need the sleep more than any of us," Rarity offered.

Twilight nodded, immensely grateful for Rarity's generous offer. Sleep would not come easily to anypony that night, but it was important to try. Twilight herself knew that she desperately needed the rest, especially after she had jogged down from the castle while being hunted by the darkness.

Everypony, minus Rarity, laid their head down. The floor was hard, there were no blankets or pillows, but still their eyes began to slide shut. Twilight took in a deep breath, shifting a little to try and get more comfortable as she began to drift off. Exhaustion took over, the stress and strain of the past several hours washing over her and lulling Twilight into her dreams.

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Twilight opened her eyes, stirred away by the sound of music. She wasn't in the general store anymore; instead, she was lying in soft grass outside, a moonless sky looking down at her. The unicorn was up on her hooves in a moment, looking around in a panic. She expected to be jumped at any moment, for the Taken to encircle her as they had Applejack. Yet, the night was calm and the sky clear. It was dark, but she didn't feel threatened.

The music that had awoken Twilight continued to linger on the wind, and it drew the unicorn's eyes. She had been lying on a hill, and down below her was a farm. On the far side of that farm, past the fields and aged, untended buildings was what looked like a stage, with a single bright spotlight shining in the very center.

In that spotlight she saw a figure, sitting perfectly still as if listening to the song. The figure looked unfamiliar, like nothing Twilight had ever seen before. No... she had seen this creature once before, in her nightmare aboard the train. He was the one that told her about the Taken, told her how the light was safe.

He knew answers, knew about the Taken and the darkness. Maybe he knew a way to save Applejack. Twilight knew she had to reach that stage, had to talk with the creature there in the light.

Galloping down the hillside, Twilight made her way to the edge of the farm. She clambered over a fence, running through a high, uncut field of grain. The light from the distant stage shone through the stalks, keeping the unicorn from losing her bearings. It would be a short run, the unicorn only needing to hop a few other fences before she reached the stage.

Yet, as Twilight crossed the first field she felt a cold sensation on the back of her neck. A breeze was kicking up, causing the grain to shift and sway. Twilight stopped, glancing

skyward. The stars didn't seem as clear or bright as they had been. The night was growing darker, and chilling wind was brewing.

These were all signs that Twilight knew, she had experienced when trying to get down from the castle or when she, Pinkie Pie, and Applejack were fleeing down the alley. These were the signs that darkness was getting closer.

Amidst the gentle rustle of the grain stalks in the wind Twilight heard another, more distinct rustle. This one focused, in a single point... a point that was moving. Something else was in the grain field with her. The unicorn spun on the spot, lighting up her unicorn horn and focusing the beam forward. She swept the light around her, trying to listen to the rustling.

It kept drawing closer, and Twilight knew what was causing the noise. It had to be a Taken; there was nothing else that made sense. Still, she couldn't keep track of where it was. The Taken was moving too quickly, zipping around and circling. If it attacked Twilight doubted she'd be able to protect herself; she just didn't know where it was.

She needed to get out of the grain field, to someplace where she could better defend herself. The nearest option was an aged barn, but it was in the wrong direction. Still, with the rustling sound continuing to get closer Twilight knew she'd have to detour herself to the barn and deal with the Taken stalking her. Then she'd could continue to the stage.

• • •

The aged barn was more foreboding than the field outside, but at the very least Twilight's vision wasn't blocked by tall stalks of grain. The barn didn't play home to farm equipment, bales of hay, or anything sensible like that. Instead, the barn was filled with viking shields, swords, and horned hats. There was even a large viking ship. It hung from the rafters on aged ropes. Even a breath from Twilight seemed to cause the boat to shift, the ropes groaning as they struggled to keep the heavy wooden vessel suspended.

After making sure the barn itself was empty Twilight turned to the door she had just come through, focusing her light on the entry way. Sure enough, a few moments after she came inside Twilight saw something come out of the grain field. It was a farm pony, holding a large curved blade in her teeth. The blade was normally used for harvesting grain by hoof, but it could probably hurt a pony just as easily.

Twilight brought her unicorn light to greater focus, the farming mare forced to stop and hide her eyes from the light while the shadows around her burned away quickly. Soon, they were gone, but yet the Taken pony still remained. Memories of her first nightmare came hurtling back to Twilight. Without Applejack there, she'd have to figure out another way to make the mare disappear.

There were plenty of weapons around, but Twilight avoided them all. She instead choose to keep her distance from the Taken mare, running around the barn in a game of cat and mouse she couldn't afford to lose.

Twilight chanced a glance back her pursuer as she continued to run about the barn. The Taken mare was keeping perfect pace. Twilight couldn't risk slowing down even slightly, but she was starting to tire. She needed to get rid of her somehow, but she just couldn't bring herself to grab one of the weapons that were readily available. The memory of using the ax in her last nightmare still haunted Twilight.

She could use the light flash like she did once before, but that was overkill. She couldn't do that many times without wearing herself out and this was only one Taken. No, she needed something else. Maybe a smaller version, like a focused flash from a camera.

It would have to work, and Twilight was staking life and limb on it. She called for on the magic of her horn before jumping into the air. She spun half way around, landing on her hooves as she skidded a few inches and brought herself to face the Taken. The light from her horn blinded the Taken mare, forcing her to stumble back a moment. That gave Twilight the moment of time she needed, focusing the light from her horn as tightly as she could.

The cone of light slimmed, eventually becoming nothing but a thin, intense trail. The Taken hissed under the light, it was causing pain but it still wasn't enough. The Taken remained, and was now inching closer to Twilight on three legs, using the fourth to keep the light out of its eyes.

It wasn't working, the light was easily as intense as the flash of light had been, but it wasn't working. The Taken kept getting closer, and Twilight felt she was wearing herself out with the intensity of the magic. If she tried to keep this up it would be no better than if she had just used the flash of light. What was she missing?

Before Twilight could find an answer to that question the Taken mare was within striking distance, keeping her eyes blocked but taking a swing with the harvesting knife. The blade connected, but with only a few strands of Twilight's hair as the unicorn ducked. Failing to defeat the Taken, Twilight turned and bolted, galloping up a set of rickety stairs and into the loft of the barn.

She rounded the corner, jumping a bit as the dragon-shaped masthead of the viking ship came into view. Twilight quickly realized it was not another monstrous Taken, breathing a short sigh of relief. Now, however, was no time to rest. The Taken mare was still in pursuit, already climbing the stairs after the purple unicorn.

Twilight ducked behind a stack of boxes, dousing the light from her horn as she hoped to hide from the Taken. She could see its yellow eyes in the darkness as it crept forward; it was getting closer, and the unicorn had the sinking suspicion that even though the barn was pitch black the Taken could see just fine.



It would find her, there was no way it couldn't, so Twilight did her best to prepare herself. She focused on her horn, on her magic, and tried to form a new spell. She'd light her horn, but she'd trap the light with magic. She'd let the light build, let it collect... maybe then if she released it all at once that would be enough to finally take down the Taken.

The monster drew closer, just starting to round the corner of the boxes where Twilight was hiding. It took a single step, looking forward before snapping its head in Twilight's direction. It knew exactly where she was, already swinging its head so it could strike at the unicorn. Twilight, however, was ready. She had built up the light on her horn into a single, packed ball that continued to build with energy. She released all that built up energy, focusing it into a single coned burst of light, a single bright flash comparable to powerful camera flash.

The Taken was not destroyed, but it was hurt. Its attack was halted as it stumbled back, grunting in pain. Twilight smiled, releasing another pulse of light. It took four pulses, but the Taken was defeated, disappearing into thin air.

Twilight finally released the breath she had been holding, panting as she dropped into a sitting position. Now that was a spell she could use. She'd just have to let the light from her horn build up, keeping it contained with a simple mirror spell. Then, she'd just have to let it out in small bursts. A few small bursts were enough to defeat the Taken, or at least the small one she had just faced. Most importantly, it was a spell Twilight could perform without wearing herself out... at least not very quickly.

• • •

After leaving the barn Twilight followed a dirt road that wound around the edge of the farm and eventually reached the stage. Some Taken leapt from the fields, but now that she had a way to fight them for herself Twilight found her courage. She dodged and fought the Taken that appeared, defeating them with her new light pulse spell.

She was close to the stage now, and she could clearly make out the music. It had been looping endlessly, the mournful melody that was telling the story featuring two characters. A poet and his muse. The song was starting over just as Twilight was drawing close, the unicorn able to clearly hear all the lyrics for the first time.

The song did not repeat again, as if it had been playing only to the point where Twilight was able to hear the lyrics to their full extent. With that the speakers on the stage fell silent, but a small bit of the melody continued. It was the creature on the stage, he continued to hum the song's melody. Now that Twilight was closer, she was sure this was the same that had appeared in her last nightmare. Did that mean this was a dream? Twilight wasn't sure, and at the moment pushed the thought from her mind.

Dream or not, this creature had answers and Twilight wanted them. Still, Twilight knew she had to be careful. This creature may be standing in light, but because of that light he

appeared to be nothing more than a silhouette. He could easily be just some strange form of Taken that was able to stand in direct light.

Moving just a bit closer to the stage, Twilight swallowed to try and clear the knot in her throat before speaking. Her voice was weak, but she forced the words out. "Who... who are you? What are you?"

The figure stopped humming, lifting his head... or at least what Twilight thought was his head, and while Twilight couldn't see his eyes she knew the creature was looking right at her.

"I'm a friend."

"Kind of a creepy friend."

The creature chuckled. "Yes... but I am a friend."

"And do you know what's going on?"

"I do. Your world is being threatened by something called the Darkness. It's being led by someone named Nightmare Moon."

"Nightmare Moon! But... we defeated her."

"Yes, you did, but you didn't destroy her. She was banished from this world entirely, but when you cast something out it must always land somewhere. Nightmare Moon landed in the Dark Place, trapped in there just like me."

"Trapped?"

"Yes, but you can't worry about me." The creature grunted, a hand grasping at his chest. He paused for a moment, as if struggling through a stab of pain, but it passed and the figure continued. "Nightmare Moon has embraced the power of the Dark Place. She is the one leading the Taken, and she is the one that kidnapped Celestia, Luna, and Applejack."

"How do you know about that?"

"I... I can see what's happening... and I promise I am doing all I can to help. The Dark Place... it will demand a heavy cost for the information I'm giving you... but with it you can defeat Nightmare Moon."

"How? How do we beat her?"

"I cannot tell you here, the story won't allow it... the price would be too high. It's too soon. You'll need to seek the wisdom of the Old Gods from mu... GRAH... ah... from the black

records... only a needle can read. They helped me defeat the darkness. Now they'll do the same for you."

"The Old Gods... but who are the Old Gods?"

"They are the ones who told the tale of The Poet and The Muse." At that the creature grunted again, dropping to one knee. Twilight galloped up onto the stage to help the creature, but when she reached the stage's spotlight he was gone, at least physically. His voice still lingered in the air.

"Now, we must both bear the price of the knowledge... for that is the nature of the Dark Place. Everything has a price. The Taken are coming... defend yourself."

The stage light snapped off at this point, and as her eyes readjusted to the darkness Twilight could see several Taken had appeared in the area around the stage, slowly moving towards her. There were easily half a dozen of them, and she could see more coming in the distance.

The unicorn lit up her horn, focusing the light on the closest taken as she backed up. The unicorn sure wasn't why she was trying to stand and fight, against such huge odds she couldn't hope to win. Still, there was nowhere to run, and when you can't run you have to stand and fight.

Twilight took another step back, trying to keep herself distanced from the approaching Taken. Her right back hoof then stepped down on something that clicked, and the unicorn jumped as the speakers on the stage blared to life with a new song. Above the stage, sparks began pouring out the mouth of a dragon sculpture as fireworks erupted all around. Some of the Taken were blown away just by the explosion of light, the others were forced back.

Twilight chanced a glance back, seeing the hoof pedal she had stepped on accidentally. She then took notice that there were about a dozen other pedals around the stage, each undoubtedly set to trigger some of the stage's pyrotechnic effects.

The first effects began to run their course, the sparks from the dragon statue's mouth coming to a halt. The Taken resumed their approach, but this time Twilight prepared to face them with a small flicker of hope. She had to wait 'til they were close, until several of them were *very* close, but she could wipe out multiple Taken at once if she triggered the stage effects at the right time.

The intense rock song continued to blare, offering background music to Twilight's struggle. It was another song by the same band, though this tune was far louder and more intense than the one that had first drawn Twilight to the stage. Still, as Twilight caught some of the lyrics... she found they had some significance. It spoke of fighting the darkness with light, a subject Twilight was becoming very familiar with.

*Journal 68*

*As with the short stories I've written in the Dark Place, when I wrote myself into "Creeping Darkness" I was pulled away from my typewriter, to play my part in the scene. Maybe that's why I decided to make the scene play out on the Anderson Brothers' farm. It was less for Twilight's benefit and more my own. A chance to see even part of my own world again, to hear something besides the ticking of my typewriter. To remember the aged, senile rockers that helped me defeat the darkness and who found inspiration in Norse mythology.*

*Still, everything I do either creates cost or affords credit. That was what Thomas Zane didn't understand about the Dark Place when he first tried to harness its power. He tried to bring Barbara Jagger back to life, but he didn't give up anything in return. So, she came back wrong... possessed by the Dark Presence that later kidnapped my Alice.*

*That's why I became trapped in the darkness in the first place. To undo the damage done by the Darkness in Bright Falls and to save Alice I had to pay a high price, and that price was keeping myself trapped in the darkness.*

*I believed... or rather hoped... that because Applejack had been taken the scales in the story had become unbalanced. That there was enough wiggle room, enough credit, for me to help Twilight. The cost of speaking to her, however, was steeper than I imagined. To tell Twilight what I did, more had to be paid to the Darkness. She had to face the army of Taken alone, and me...*

*The cost I had to pay was revealed when I came back to the cabin. The stabbing pain I felt while speaking to Twilight was only an after-effect. Upon inspecting myself in a mirror, I've found a thin layer of darkness over the top right quarter of my chest. Lingering shadows.*

*When that realization hit me I felt a wave of nausea over take my stomach and I bolted for the bathroom. There was nothing for me to throw up, but that didn't stop me from dry heaving into the toilet bowl. Shadows that clung to my skin, that were warm to the touch.*

*I am becoming a Taken... the Dark Place was taking bits of me. I can't say exactly what. It could just be parts of my body, but it could just as easy bit pieces of my soul or even my humanity.*

*The worst part... Nightmare Moon knows what has happened.*

*She has been whispering to me almost constantly since I discovered the beginning of my transformation. She only fell silent once I began to write this journal, but I can feel her presence. I can feel eyes looking over my shoulder, reading as I write... I think I can even feel her smiling.*

*She argued that if I keep trying to save Equestria I'll be dooming myself. That I'll never see Alice again. That I should be doing the exact opposite, that I should be letting her take over Equestria so that I can write myself free of the Dark Place. Use a single, true horror story to earn enough credit with the darkness to write myself free with just a few words.*

*She promises that it would work, and even if Equestria wasn't enough I could just doom other worlds, write others into the darkness until my way out is paid. The worst part of it is I know she's right; that by continuing to struggle I am risking my own life in a fight that I may not even be able to win. Are these ponies really worth it?*

*Alice... I wish you were here... even for a moment. I don't know what to do...*

*What do I do, Alice? What do I do?*

• • •

While she had slept for several hours straight, Twilight didn't feel at all rested. Her eyes slid open, her gaze greeted by lantern light and Applejack's hat. All her friends were asleep, which meant somepony had fallen asleep during their watch. Still, nothing bad had happened... so it was probably better they had all gotten some rest.

Getting to her hooves, Twilight's eyes turned to the clock on the wall. It was almost nine in the morning, meaning the sun was up. Honestly, the store owner should have probably come in by now and found them asleep. Maybe he did, and was just out finding the sheriff so she could lock up the trespassers.

It was something Twilight would worry about if or when it became an issue. Until that point, all she wanted to do was go outside and enjoy the sunlight, to bask in the safe glow of day. She nosed open the door that separated the general store's back room from the front, walking around the counter and between the aisles before heading outside.

Twilight made the walk still half asleep, eyes focused on the floor and her own hooves. Her dream had left her mentally exhausted. She didn't look up once until she had stepped outside, turning her eye skyward to see the blue sky and any clouds. Twilight opened her eyes... and yet the only sight that greeted the unicorn was black sky speckled with stars.

The sun wasn't up... oh by Celestia the sun wasn't up!

Twilight bolted back inside the general store in a flash, using her magic to push a shelf up against the door. The moment of panic snapped Twilight's mind awake faster than any cup of coffee could have managed, and she realized how big of an idiot she had been.

Of course the sun wouldn't be up; Celestia had been taken! The sun couldn't rise without the princess.

Why hadn't she realized that earlier? She could have walked outside and right into a whole pack of Taken and been a sitting duck. And their plans relied on the sun coming up. They were going to try and find help in the morning, try to figure out a way to save Celestia, Luna, and Applejack. They were all going to do that during the nice, safe daytime... but without Celestia the sun wouldn't come. They would be at the mercy of the shadows constantly.

And Twilight could only imagine that panic that was stretching across Equestria. How many ponies would blame this on Luna? The moon princess was *already* having enough trouble with her public image; she didn't need to be blamed for this. And how quickly was the darkness spreading over Equestria without the daylight stemming its advance?

The violet unicorn was so lost in thought that she didn't take notice of the figure looming behind her. It drew closer, eventually reaching out a hoof and nudging her flank. Twilight jumped, letting out a small "Yeep!" as she spun about. Her horn lit up with light, the unicorn remembering what she had learned in her dream and preparing a flash of light.

"Hey, take it easy..." Dash said, putting a hoof up to shield her eyes. "It's just me."

"Dash... oh Rainbow Dash... don't... DO that!" Twilight strained, letting the light on her horn dissipate. There was plenty of light for the moment since Dash was wearing one of the headband flashlights, also known as a headlamp.

"Heh heh... yea, I'm kind of realizing that now," the pegasus admitted. "Still, you're not usually this jumpy."

"Well, being chased by Taken will do that to a pony," Twilight half-grumbled, dropping down on her haunches. "Especially now that I just realized the sun's not going to come up since Celestia was kidnapped, which means we'll have to try and fix all this in the dark."

"How do you know the sun's not coming up?"

"Dash, its almost nine in the morning. If the sun was going to rise, it would be up by now."

The pegasus looked back, the light from her headlamp focusing on the clock on the wall.

"Whoa... I didn't realize it was that late."

"Dash, your powers of observation are astounding."

The pegasus' eyes furrowed as she turned back to Twilight. "Hey, I just didn't check the clock, okay?!"

Twilight winced, realizing she had been a little harsher than she intended with her words. "Sorry Dash... I didn't mean... I'm just tired."

"And grumpy."

"Yes, and grumpy," the unicorn admitted. "I had another nightmare... and even though I've been asleep for hours I don't feel rested at all."

"Another nightmare? Like the one you told us about last night at the ice cream parlor?"

Twilight nodded. "Yes."

"What was it about?"

"Let's go wake the others up first. That way I only have to say it all one time."

• • •

And the others listened, appreciating the fact that Twilight was learning more about what was going on from the strange creature in her dreams. She explained how the darkness was trying to engulf all of Equestria, how it was being lead by Nightmare Moon. She even showed her friends the spell she had discovered in her dream, the flash of light that somehow managed to harm the Taken.

They took it all in, listening to Twilight like a congregation might listen to a preacher. They didn't understand the logic behind some of what she said. Parts sounded a bit crazy. Still, they listened and believed. Twilight was the one that had kept them safe in the light and they didn't have a reason to doubt her.

"Well, that's all well and good, but you said this creature told you how to fix all this?"

"He didn't tell me, but he said we could find out for ourselves," Twilight answered, meeting Rarity's questioning gaze.

"How?"

"The creature said we'd need to seek the wisdom of the Old Gods from the black records only a needle can read."

"Old Gods? There are no old gods. There are just Celestia and Luna," Dash pointed out.

"Yes, but don't you find the turn of phrase interesting?" Rarity noted. "It sounds almost like a riddle. Black records only a needle can play... did the creature say anything else?"

"That the Old Gods were the ones that told the tale of The Poet and The Muse," Twilight replied before tilting her head, the words ringing in her head strangely. "Wait... The Poet and The Muse. That sounds familiar... of course, the song!"

"Song?" Dash echoed.

"There was a song in my dream that was about a poet and a muse. Now, if we assume the Old Gods were the one singing that song, then maybe the Old Gods aren't really gods. Maybe it's a band."

"Of course!" Rarity said with a smile, eyes flashing with realization. "Black records that only a needle can read. It's talking about vinyl music records."

"Didn't we visit a record shop last night?" Fluttershy asked.

"Oh, don't remind me. Dash *insisted* we go inside. That dark little place had rock music blaring over its speakers. My poor ears were traumatized and I couldn't stay inside for even a minute. I waited outside."

"Hey, you have something against rock music?" Dash asked.

Rarity glanced over, nodding her head once. "Yes, as a matter of fact I *do*. It's brutish, loud, and obnoxious music that is like sandpaper on the ears."

"Are you kidding? Rock music is awesome! Come on Twilight, back me up here."

"Well, I haven't listened to that much rock music... and the last time I did all I really remember thinking was that it was awfully loud."

"Ha! See? Loud and obnoxious."

"She didn't say that," Dash argued.

"Putting tastes in music aside," Rarity continued, not pursuing the argument further, "It would seem we need to find a record from this band, the Old Gods. And while the venue is offensive, the record shop from last night would probably be an ideal place to start looking."

"Where is the record shop?" Twilight asked.

"I don't remember. Dash, you went inside. Surely you recall where it is."

"We went to a lot of shops last night. I think it was by that big park, but other than that..."

The hope that was fluttering in Twilight's heart flickered and dwindled.

"Well, it can't be too hard to find," Rarity pointed out. "We'll just head outside and start looking."

"But... what about the Taken?" Fluttershy asked. "Twilight said the sun hasn't come up. Isn't it dangerous outside?"



"We've got all these lights and Twilight has the spell she learned from her dream. I bet we can take those Taken," Dash argued, getting to her hooves and taking a few swings with her front hooves, as if she was boxing.

"But what if something happens?" Pinkie Pie asked, the usually energetic mare still shell shocked and somber from the previous day's events. "What if they get one of us... like they got Applejack?"

"The only way we'll get Applejack back is if we beat this darkness," Twilight pointed out, getting to her hooves, "and that means we've got to get to that record shop. Still, we can't just go wandering around in the dark either. The longer we're outside, the more danger we're in.

"So, here's what we'll do. Everypony gets a headlamp and we'll grab as many of the lanterns as we can carry. Then, we'll start at the ice cream parlor and backtrack. The parlor was the last place you guys visited before I showed up, so if we just follow your path through the town backwards we'll be sure to find the record shop."

"Now that's a plan I can get behind," Dash said, hooking her wings through the handles on two lanterns.

Rarity nodded. "Yes, it's better than just sitting here waiting for those *horrible* things to come and find us. Still, just promise me you won't play that dreadful music too loud. My sensitive ears just can't stand it."

"Pinkie Pie... Fluttershy, if you want to stay here..." Twilight began, only to see her two other friends putting on headlamps and grabbing up lanterns.

"We'll show those meanie, beanie, mean pants not to take our friends!" Pinkie said, her mane starting to curl as her usual energy returned. "Isn't that right Fluttershy?"

"Oh... um... yes..." Fluttershy offered in response, trying to hide her shaking knees.

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The group stepped out of the general store, armed to the teeth with lights. Each pony had a headlamp; Fluttershy and Dash had lanterns hooked around the base of each wing; Pinkie Pie carried a lantern in her teeth. The final addition was the light from Twilight and Rarity's horns, completing an all-around defense of light.

The final feature was Applejack's hat, Fluttershy wearing it so that when the group found her they could give it back. The farm pony would be devastated if she lost it. Seeing the pink-maned pegasus wearing the dusty, brown hat was a bit odd. Still, Twilight felt it was best to trust Fluttershy. No other pony would take better care of the hat until it could be returned to its true owner.

At the moment the night was normal; there was no prickling sense of danger and no Taken to be seen. The streets were utterly empty however, which was unnerving. Considering how late in the morning it was, Twilight would have expected to see somepony outside wondering why the sun wasn't up. Still, the town was quiet and silent... as if in one night it had been utterly abandoned by the ponies that call it home.

As if they had all just vanished into the dark.

Rarity and Dash took the lead, backtracking the route the group took the previous evening before Twilight showed up. There were times the pair argued, but with Pinkie Pie acting more like her old self she broke up the confrontations before they could get out of hoof, adding her own opinion and ending the stalemate.

With the others leading, Twilight was able to keep her eyes peeled as she looked around for the darkness. Why hadn't it come for them yet? What was it waiting for? They had been out in the open for a while now and still nothing had attacked. The only explanation was that maybe all the lights they had were actually keeping the Taken away... but for some reason Twilight couldn't believe it was that easy.

It took roughly an hour of backtracking through the town, but the five ponies found themselves at a small park in the center of Emblem. The park was boarded on every side by shops, Rarity and Dash agreeing that one of the stores had to be the record shop they had found the night before.

"Okay," Twilight offered, the lack of Taken emboldening her. "Let's split up. Half of us will check the shops on one side of the park, the others will check the other side. If you find the record shop, give a shout."

"Is isn't it a bad idea to split up?" Fluttershy asked.

"We haven't been attacked yet, so I'm guessing all these lights are keeping the darkness away. That, and the longer we're outside, the longer we're in danger. The faster we find the record shop, the better."

"Oh... okay..."

"So, how should we split up?" Pinkie asked. "OOO! Can I be a team captain?"

"Sure, Pinkie, who's your first pick?"

"Oh... oh, I pick Rarity."

"What! Why did you pick her?" Dash asked.

"Because she's a unicorn, silly, and Twilight taught her that light flash spell. That and I couldn't pick Twilight because she's the other team captain."

"Well... I guess that makes sense," Dash said, crossing her hooves as she hovered mid air pouting.

"Okay Twilight, your turn," Pinkie chirped.

"Fluttershy."

"WHAT?!" Dash shouted in disbelief.

"She's obviously scared, Dash, and I'm the one that has the most practice fighting the Taken, even if it was just a dream. I'd feel better if she was with me."

"But... but that means I'm going to be picked last... I've never been picked last."

"Oh, well... we were just saving the best for last," Twilight offered.

"Oh... oh yea, that's right. Yea, got to save the most awesome pony for last. I get ya. So, I guess that means I'm with Rarity and Pinkie Pie."

Twilight nodded. "Yes, which is probably a good thing. The three will be able to check the shops fairly quickly, and I don't mind taking it a bit slower for Fluttershy."

"Thanks Twilight..."

"All righty, ponies, let's move out," Pinkie Pie chirped, spinning about in her hooves before breaking into a silly marching step, Rarity and Dash following behind her. Fluttershy and Twilight shared a smile at this; the sight of Pinkie Pie being... well, Pinkie Pie was a sign that things were okay... at least for the moment.

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Fluttershy and Twilight reached the first shop, pressing their eyes against the glass as they tried to see into the darkness inside. Still, the blinds on the shop windows had been pulled down... and not just on the first shop; every shop on the street had windows that were blocked. Any hanging signs were also missing as well, vacant chains left dangling in the cool night air. It was like something was trying to hide the record shop from them.

"How are we supposed to figure out which shop is which if we can't see inside?" Twilight wondered aloud, Fluttershy only able to offer a shrug before they heard the crash of breaking glass behind them. The pair spun, expecting to see a Taken. Instead, the sound originated from the far side of the park, where Rainbow Dash and the others were standing by the broken glass of a window.

"Oh, I *do* hope she doesn't keep doing that," Fluttershy said. "The shop owners around here won't be happy when they find all their windows broken."

"Yea, but it is a quick way to get into the shops," Twilight admitted, her horn starting to glow. "But, let's see if I can't be a little more subtle."

The purple unicorn stuck out her tongue in concentration, stretching out her magic to the lock on the shop's front door. It took a couple moments, but a gentle clicking noise reached Twilight's ears and soon after the door to the shop swung open.

The two ponies poked their heads inside, looking about the shop as their eyes were greeted with bouquets of flowers. A flower shop, not a record shop. Still, Twilight would have probably felt like the luckiest pony in the world if they had managed to find the record shop on the first try. Closing the door, she and Fluttershy moved back out to the sidewalk and down to the next shop as another crash of glass reached their ears, Rainbow Dash once again using a rock as a more forceful way of getting into the locked businesses.

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A hardware store, a restaurant, and then a bookstore. Twilight and Fluttershy checked four of the eight shops on their side of the street. On the opposite side of the park, their friends were already working on the sixth and seventh shop, Dash going off on her own to search while Pinkie Pie and Rarity stuck together.

With another resounding click, the fifth shop on their side of the street opened, Twilight and Fluttershy moving inside. Again, it was not the record shop they were looking for. It was, instead a pet shop, and for the first time all evening Fluttershy charged ahead of Twilight.

"Oh, you poor things! Left all alone in the dark with all those scary things outside," Fluttershy cooed, moving to the animals. "Don't you worry, there's nothing to be worried about."

Twilight was once again impressed by Fluttershy's ability to connect with small furry animals. The many dogs, cats, fishes, birds, lizards and other animals around the room all seemed to gravitate to her, looking utterly relieved that the yellow pegasus was there.

"Fluttershy, don't you think we should go check the next shop?" Twilight asked, moving forward a bit as she happened to glance in one of the cages... taking a few quick steps away from it when she realized there was a snake inside.

"Oh no! These poor animals look like they haven't been fed since yesterday. We need to at least make sure they have enough food and water," Fluttershy replied before she turned her head to the back of the room, where one animal was continuing to panic. It was a bird in a cage, the avian in such a panic the cage itself was rocking in the air.

"Listen; that poor birdie is totally terrified. She's probably been under that cage smock since yesterday."

At that the yellow pegasus trotted to the back of the store, Twilight following slowly. Normally, the pegasus would have taken flight to take the fabric cover off the cage, but since her wings were currently holding lanterns Fluttershy resorted to jumping up onto the counter.

Reaching out to the swinging cage, Fluttershy used a hoof to stead it. "Don't worry little birdie, it's all right. Just let me get the smock off that cage." With that she took the fabric cover of the cage in her teeth, giving it a pull.

With the cage cover gone the bird inside was revealed to be a raven. The blackbird continued to flap its wings in a panic before letting out a single, deep... unworldly caw. A caw that startled Fluttershy so much she tumbled off the counter, crashing to the floor. The pegasus herself was uninjured, but the lanterns she had been carrying broke against the hard floor, falling dark.

Twilight turned her horn on the raven, the cone of light striking the bird and with a final deep caw it burned away, like it had only been a shadow.

"Where... where did it go?" Fluttershy asked, using a hoof to push up Applejack's hat. There was a moment's pause, both ponies staring at the now empty case before a loud crash made them both jump. Twilight spun, her eyes focusing on the source of the noise. The front door of the pet shop had slammed shut.

"No... no no no nonononono!" Twilight said to herself in a panic, rushing to the door. She tried to use her magic to open it, but cringed as she felt something lash back at her. Putting her light on the door, the unicorn saw the door frame itself was wrapped in darkness, trembling and shaking as if possessed by a demon.

"Twilight!" Fluttershy called, the yellow pegasus running to the unicorn as she turned. The back door of the shop had just burst open, a tall shadow-wrapped stallion easily as large as Big Mac running in. He was carrying a broom handle that had been snapped at both ends, leaving only sharp wooden spikes as he continued to barrel at the two mares.

Twilight used her magic to shove Fluttershy out of the way before jumping clear herself, the stallion crashing into the front door. The force of the impact startled a number of the animals in the pet shop but the door itself holding strong.

"Oh, ssshhh, it's okay."

"It is not okay Fluttershy!" Twilight called, focusing her light on the stallion as he lumbered towards her. "You need to leave the animals alone and get that door open."

"But... but..."

"Fluttershy!"

The yellow pegasus jumped, glancing first at the door and then at the scared animals. "I'll be right back," she promised, galloping toward the door, the light from her head lamp starting to burn away the shadows. It was slow, but Fluttershy kept her head turned towards the door so the light could continue to work.

"Come on... hurry... oh, please hurry," Fluttershy said, the sounds of the fight between Twilight and the stallion reaching her ears. In the back of the shop, the unicorn kept jumping clear of the Taken stallion's attacks, the lumbering behemoth taking large swing at her with the broken broom handle. The shadows on the stallion were burning away way too slowly; Twilight doubted she'd be able to keep dodging him long enough for it all burn away.

The broom handle clipped Twilight's left shoulder, leaving a scratch deep enough to draw blood. The unicorn winced, backing into a corner of the shop as the Taken stallion loomed over her like death itself. The situation was desperate, and while she knew it would strain her magic she began to build up as much light as she could. The stallion was lifting the broom handle to strike, lingering just a bit as if wishing to savor the final moment.

Twilight unleashed the burst of light she was building when the stallion began to swing the broom handle. The shadows around him burnt away almost instantly, but the stallion himself remained. He stumbled back, but was still there... and let out a guttural roar before charging at Twilight again.

Had the unicorn been a moment slower she would have been trampled beneath those massive hooves. Still, she managed to roll clear, the stallion crashing into the animal cages. Scrambling, Twilight galloped back to the front of the store. Fluttershy was still keeping her headlamp focused on the door. The shadows were almost gone, but it would still take a bit longer to burn them all away.

The stallion had recovered, already heading towards the pair of mares. Twilight began to build another burst of light in her horn, gritting her teeth as she felt herself starting to strain her magic. She wouldn't be able to pull off another large flash for a while, it was just too much effort, but at the moment it was their only chance.

The spell was ready when the stallion was within inches of the two, drawing back his broken broom handle to strike. Twilight unleashed the light magic, and in that single flash the stallion hollered in pain and faded away and the front door of the shop disappeared completely.

"Oh, Twilight... that was amazing," Fluttershy offered, only for Twilight to collapse on the floor a moment later. Fluttershy bent down beside her friend, helping the unicorn back to her hooves.

"Are you all right?"

"Yea... I just can't cast that spell very often. It takes a lot of magic to build up an explosion of light like that."

"Well, at least we're safe now. Yep... we're all safe."

"AAAAAAHHHHHHH!"

Twilight and Fluttershy turned, looking through the now open door frame of the shop. Outside, the night was dark and a hard wind was tearing at the park. A flock of ravens circled and swooped, their dreadful caws joining the harsh rhapsody of the wailing wind.

"That... that was Rarity..." Fluttershy said.

"YYYYAAAAHHHHHH!"

"Pinkie Pie!" Twilight uttered, her voice filling with panic.

"HHHEELLPP!"

"RAINBOW DASH!" the pair said in unison, charging out the front door of the pet shop.

They saw lights flashing in two different shops, the windows from one illuminated with two different sources of light while in the other shop the light seemed to come from a single source. The lights in the two shops were moving and darting around frantically, as if the ponies carrying them were running for their lives.

Fluttershy and Twilight each took a shop, Fluttershy flying to the farther of the two shops while Twilight charged up to the nearest. Her horn glowed, the unicorn reaching out her magic to rip the door right off its hinges. Still, her magic was cast back. Like the door of the pet shop, the door was encased in shadows.

Twilight tried to focus the light from her horn as best she could, her own headlamp helping to burn the shadows away from the door more quickly. Still, it was taking time, and the unicorn could hear the panicked hoof movements and crashes from inside.

"No... stay away!" Rarity barked from inside.

"Hey, you leave my friend alone!" Pinkie Pie retorted, only to yelp in pain.

"Pinkie Pie!" Rarity called, a few flashes of light emanating from inside the shop.

"Don't worry girls, I'm coming!" Twilight called, focusing all the strength she could muster into her light spell. The shadows on the door, however, continued to burn away painfully slow. Twilight was forced to listen as the struggle inside the shop continued. Still, it sounded like things weren't going well for Rarity and Pinkie Pie.

"Rarity, look out behind you!"

"Wha-AH!"

Twilight's concentration broke, the light from her horn burning out. One of the sources of light in shop had gone out, and she heard Rarity scream one final time. It was followed by a cry from Pinkie, hers more one of rage. Twilight could almost picture the party pony charging at the Taken inside the shop, trying to save Rarity... but within moments of that cry her light too went out... the shop totally dark.

The unicorn's headlamp finished off the last few traces of shadow on the door, and without a thought of her own safety Twilight barreled in. She built up all the light magic she could in her horn, crying out through tears and rage as she released it all. The shop was completely blanketed in light, all the Taken inside being burnt away in an instant. Still, it was too little too late.

Twilight casted her eyes about the room, using her own headlamp to search, but there was no sign of Pinkie Pie or Rarity. They were gone... just like Applejack. They had been taken into the darkness.

Hopelessness began to build in Twilight, the unicorn struggling to stay on her hooves, knees shaking. Three of her friends gone... gone forever. It hadn't even been a full day since the horrors had started and she had already lost three of her best friends. How long would it be before Fluttershy and Dash were gone? How long would it be before she was Taken as well?

Twilight's heart skipped a beat, her eyes turning back outside. Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash; they were still fighting. Before she even realized it, Twilight was on her hooves, galloping out back outside and down the street. Fluttershy was bucking at one of the windows of the shop, calling out to Rainbow Dash.

"Hold on Dash, I'm coming," Fluttershy shouted, again trying to buck at the window but lacking the strength to make it break.

"Fluttershy!"

"Twilight!" the pegasus called, wincing a bit as the wind outside gusted. The pegasus didn't even notice as Applejack's hat flew off of her head, getting tossed into the darkened skies.

"Dash is trapped inside; I can't touch the door and something is attacking her."

"I know, stand back," the unicorn answered, turning her attention across the street. Her magic was mostly spent after three of the light flashes, but she had enough to levitate. Twilight picked up a wooden cart, and with a twist of her head made it barrel at the shop



window. The cart burst through in a shower of glass, knocking down a number of Taken inside along with some shelves.

Dash flew out a moment later, having ditched her lanterns so that she could use her wings.

"Thanks for the save!"

"We're not out of the woods yet! We need to get someplace safe, NOW!"

"But what about Pinkie Pie and Rarity? Were you able..."

Fluttershy didn't need to finish, Twilight hanging her head. Still, the trio couldn't mourn their fallen comrades for long as Taken began to clamour through the broken window towards them. The trio made a run for the park, but saw that the Taken were all around them. The shadow clad stallions and mares were coming out from behind every bush, every tree; it was an army of Taken.

Twilight, Fluttershy, and Rainbow Dash stood back to back in the center of the enclosing horde, their head lamps causing a few of the Taken to fall back but unable to keep them all at bay.

"Dash... Fluttershy... you need to leave. Fly out of here, go to Canterlot and get help."

"We can't leave you!"

"You can't carry me either. You need to get to Canterlot fast. Maybe the royal guards can do something."

"But what about you?"

"You can't worry about me."

"Yes, we can. We aren't going to leave you Twilight," Dash said, putting a hoof down. "We're staying right here. Isn't that right Fluttershy?"

"Y... Ye... Yes," Fluttershy added, even though she was shaking like a leaf.

Twilight grunted; she appreciated what her friends were doing but they needed to leave, they needed to escape. If they didn't, then all the ponies who knew how to fight the darkness and the Taken would be gone. One of them needed to survive, if only to warn the rest of Equestria... that's if it wasn't already too late.

The Taken were close now, just a few more steps and they'd be ready to strike. The sky above was thick with ravens, so even if the pegasi had chosen to depart Twilight doubted they would have gotten very far. They were surrounded on all sides.

Twilight struggled, trying to summon one more flash of light from her horn, but it was too much. She had expended too much magic, pushed herself too far. She could hardly have lifted a book at the moment, let alone conjure enough light to hold back this many Taken. They were defenseless, their headlamps practically useless against so many of the shadow-wrapped ponies.

"Hay, I just want to say... it's been awesome."

"Don't talk like that, Rainbow Dash. We'll get out of this," Twilight tried to argue, but her voice quivered and failed. She wanted to believe they had a chance, but... the hope was withering in her chest. They were surrounded, her magic was spent, and all they had for light were some cheap general store headlamps.

The Taken crept forward, inching in on their trapped pray. The three mares pressed back against each other, trying to keep what distance remained between them and the shadowed ponies. The eyes that fell on them were filled with murderous intent, they would attack within moments.

It was at this point, as Twilight's eyes danced about the scene, that the unicorn felt the last strand of hope in her heart snap. This... this really was it... despite how much she'd deny it. They had failed... it had proven to be too much. They'd never be able to save Celestia or Luna... save any of their friends. They would be taken... and Equestria would be swallowed up in darkness.

Journal 69

*I... I can't do it... I just can't do it.*

*I brought myself to the point, to the razor's edge. It would only take a few more words to plunge Equestria into darkness. To give Nightmare Moon what she wants. Even now she's whispering in my ear, her words dripping with anticipation. She knows it would only take maybe one more sentence. One final line where Twilight and her friends fall and Equestria's fate is sealed.*

*But... I can't do it... I just can't bring myself to do it. I... I realize now that Alice would never want this. She wasn't that kind of person, she could never be happy if she knew what I did to bring us back together. She's not that kind of person... I'm not that kind of person. I wouldn't be able to live with myself knowing what I had done.*

*But does this realization come too late? The situation I've written is literally hopeless, there is no way for me to save Twilight and her friends without re-writing the story and I can't do that. The Dark Place doesn't allow it. Once part of the story has been accepted by the Dark Place it becomes history, unchangeable.*

*No... that's not right. The Dark Place isn't linear, there is no sense of time here, so I can change the past, just not what I've already written. My story depicts only the events it depicts, nothing more. Anything outside what is exactly written on the page can be changed. There is a brief moment left, from where I left the story off and when the Taken will attack. There is enough time for something to happen... for one thing to happen.*

*That still doesn't change the fact I've written myself into a corner. There is no way for Twilight, Dash, or Fluttershy to escape the darkness without outside help... but the Dark Place won't just let me bring in help like an angel from the sky. The aid has to come from a source that makes sense, is reasonable. Something that's already been in the story before.*

*And any help I am able to bring will be at a cost. That's the nature of the Dark Place. There's light and there's darkness, cause and effect. There's guilt and there's atonement. But the scales always need to balance, everything has a price. That's where Zane had gone wrong. That's why I let myself remain trapped in the darkness, so that I could save Bright Falls and Alice.*

*I've already paid a price once for this story. The darkness that clings to my chest is a sign of that. Telling Twilight about the record shop and the Old Gods had a cost, and it was part of my humanity... or at least I'm calling it my humanity.*

*In any case, part of me has become lost in the darkness... part of my body is wrapped in the shadows of the Taken. It was the price I bore, and I have a sinking suspicion that*

*anything I try to do to help Twilight and her friends now would result in me giving up the rest of my humanity. Saving them now would take a very drastic shift in the story, and the cost might be too high.*

*Unless... what if I gave up my humanity willingly... but do it in a way so I don't become a Taken? I've already been in the story twice before, I am a character. I am the creature from Twilight's dreams, the writer... I already exist in the story.*

*I think I know what to do... but it's a gamble. Once I write this part of the story I will lose all control. The story and Equestria will be left completely to their own designs. I won't be able to guarantee the happy ending... I may not even survive... but it's the one thing I can think of that might actually work. A path for the story to take that the Dark Place will accept.*

*A final hope... one final chance to set things right and to make up for the fact that it's because of me all this is happening. Alice... I'm sorry... but I may not make it back to you. Still... I have a feeling that if you were here... you'd understand.*

*There's guilt and there's atonement... and it's time I atone for the darkness I unleashed.*

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The writer, Alan Wake, stepped back from the typewriter after hammering out one and a half pages of text. The first eleven paragraphs to the seventh chapter of "Creeping Darkness". He stood in the center of the cabin's study, waiting for the moment. Nightmare Moon's voice filled his ears, crying out in her rage. She knew what he had done, what he was going to try to do. She had already read what he had written.

"You're only dooming yourself!" she yelled. "You can't save them. All you've done is guaranteed you'll share the same fate."

Alan just closed his eyes, blocking out Nightmare Moon. He thought of the page he had just written, the events that were transpiring at that very moment. The story was already beginning to take effect. It spoke of him, the writer, getting up from his typewriter. It spoke of Nightmare Moon's rage... and Alan knew and held his breath for what was about to come.

Closing his eyes, Alan suddenly felt himself being thrust upward yet never hitting the cabin's roof. His body burned like it was on fire, and he would have yelled out in pain but he knew better. He had to hold his breath; he'd need it.

The burning sensation continued until a few moments later when the writer felt himself submerged. He opened his eyes, taking a moment to orient himself. He was deep underwater, but above he could see the pale light of the moon guiding him to the surface. Alan began to stroke, the air in his lungs starting to burn as his body demanded he take a breath.

Stroke after stroke Alan clawed his way to the surface, his body feeling unfamiliar to him. Still, it wasn't something he couldn't focus on. He had to get to the surface, to get to the air his body desperately desired.

His vision began to blur, oxygen deprivation starting to set in. His mouth was trying to open, his lungs trying to breath, but Alan kept his lips sealed tight. Finally, he broke the surface of the water, coughing and sputtering before breathing deeply on the cool, fresh night air.

He had made it, but then again Alan knew he would make it. That was what he had managed to write on that single page of the story, and as the writer made his way to the edge of the last few paragraphs he managed to hammer out in the cabin it started to come true as well. He swam to the shore of Shadow Moon Lake, stepping up onto the sand as he looked up at the towering form of Lakeshore Castle. It was still night out, the moon hanging over the western horizon. Twilight and her friends were still asleep in the general store, though Twilight would awaken within the next few minutes.

The writer also took note of his body, which was now alien to him. He had paid the price the darkness demanded. He had given it up his humanity and his control over the story, all of it in one fell swoop, to write himself into the story for a third and final time. But he had not become a Taken, wrapped in shadows and just another minion to dance at Nightmare Moon's beckon call.

No, instead the writer had given up his humanity and his position at the typewriter, pulling the strings of fate, to make one final stand against the darkness. He stood on the lake shore not as the story's author, not even as a human. No, he was now just a side character in the plot, a pony that could maybe... just maybe, save Twilight, Dash, and Fluttershy.

Yes, Alan had himself become one of the brightly colored ponies that inhabited Equestria. A plain earth stallion, with iron gray coat and a brown unkempt mane. He still had his favorite jacket, which had morphed to fit his new equine shape. The pockets of the jacket had also moved to the sleeves, a more accessible location for ponies that tended to do so much with their mouths. In one pocket of his jacket Alan could feel the secure weight of his flare gun. The other, a standard revolver. He also had a headlamp on his head, the electric light already on and illuminating the ground in front of him.

The final detail was his cutie mark, a typewriter with a flashlight.

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With his first step Alan knew he was now outside the story he had authored. Back in the cabin, he had only written to the point where he just standing on the lake shore. He had noted a description of his new pony body and that was it. Now the story was under its own power. What would happen would happen... he wouldn't be able to do or change

anything unless he got back to the cabin, back to his typewriter, and somehow got his fingers back.

And none of that would happen until after he had saved Twilight and her friends.

Alan began with a few tentative steps, finding his new hooves strange and unfamiliar. Still, even newborn foals can walk soon after being born. It was instinct, instinct Alan had. With each step his hooves seemed less alien, and soon the writer was able to at least walk at a decent pace. The writer wasn't feeling brave enough to try running or anything much faster than a trot... but he knew he'd get practice with those particular skills soon enough.

Taking a moment to orient himself, Alan saw the few street lights of Emblem shining in the distance. He only had a short time to get down there, to reach the park where Twilight and her friends would be searching for the record store. Alan knew that because of how he had written the last chapter of "Creeping Darkness" he would not be able to interfere or save Rarity and Pinkie Pie.

The only hope he had was to get there at that moment, the last instant of the preceding chapter when Twilight and her friends were almost assuredly lost to the darkness. That would be the moment when what he had written in the cabin would end, when the events occurring wouldn't be controlled by the words he put down on a page. That would be the moment when he could intervene and save Twilight, Rainbow Dash, and Fluttershy from the darkness.

It took a moment of looking, but Alan found the road down the mountain Twilight had traversed back at the beginning of the story. It would lead him straight into town, and he knew how to get to the park from there. Still... as Alan walked along the dirt road he felt the night air shifting around him, the stars growing dimmer.

"I won't let you interfere."

Nightmare Moon's words hung on the wind, nipping like frost bite at Alan's ears. He turned to one side, teeth wrapping around the modified handle of his revolver, finding he could pull the trigger with his tongue and that the gun itself settled perfectly into his mouth, as if it had been designed to be used by a pony.

He turned, seeing Taken starting to appear from the shadows around him. Alan turned his headlamp on the Taken, the shadow-wrapped ponies baking off from the light as it burned at their shadows. Alan shifted a little, listening and feeling. He had bullets in the pocket where the gun had been, but reloading his revolver wouldn't be easy without fingers... if at all possible.

Six shots in the gun and a flashlight... that's all he had to get him safely down the mountain. A trek he had to make quickly otherwise he'd arrive too late to help Twilight.

Alan couldn't help but laugh to himself a bit, his tongue playing with the trigger of his gun.

"Well, at least I have a 'Flaming Eye of Mordor'." Alan mumbled to himself, glancing up at his headlamp and thinking of his friend Barry. His literary agent who, upon finding a similar headlamp in Bright Falls, proceeded to proclaim the simple head mounted flashlight was equal in strength to the mythical eye of Sauron from the classic Tolkien tales.

The Taken, however, would not wait patiently as Alan reminisced. They charged in, bidden by their mistress to kill Alan before he could intervene. The writer glanced up, snapped out of his memories as one of the Taken lunged at him. The writer managed to dodge, rolling across the ground once before jumping back up to his hooves. He then broke into a gallop, charging down the mountain. He could outrun them for a time, but it was always better to deal with the Taken than to just run from them. If he could only figure out how to reload the gun.

• • •

Alan dove through the open doorway, spinning once he was inside and throwing his body against door to slam it shut. He lifted a hoof, flipping the light switch of the house he had just entered and cursing as nothing happened. The Taken stallion outside with the ax was now swinging at the door, resounding thunks reaching Alan's ears as the ax began to work its way through the wood.

Alan flipped the lock on the door, knowing it wouldn't hold for long but would buy him some time. He was in the kitchen of somepony's house, not far from the park where Twilight and her friends would be but he knew he was running out of time. He had even caught glimpse of the ponies from the far side of a fence, passing a shop that had ads for fireworks in the windows.

Fireworks... Alan wish he had the time and the fingers to make use of those. Still, with hooves in place of hands and his time already running short, the author continued to make his way to the park. He had his gun, far more lethal and accurate than any firework.

That had been just about half an hour ago, which meant Twilight and her friends had probably already arrived at the park and were now starting to search the shops. He didn't have long, maybe ten minutes tops. Still... he was close, he could make it... if he didn't have to worry about the Taken.

Alan shook his front right leg as he leaned to one side, managing to toss out the last of his ammunition. He then swung his head, the chamber for his revolver clicking open. By some small miracle the gun was enchanted. The gun glowed as the empty casings from the spent rounds popped out and the fresh bullets began to levitate into the air. His last six bullets... Alan was honestly amazed he had managed to get down the mountain without using them all. Still, he only had six left... he'd have to make them count.

A loud thunk accompanied by the splintering sound of wood announced the ax breaking through the door, Alan's headlamp glinting off the metal as it was yanked back. The Taken stallion on the far side made another swing, further weakening the door before throwing itself at the door.

Wooden splinters cascaded across the room as the door buckled and failed under the weight of the stallion. The shadows that had encased the Taken were already gone, Alan having burnt them off when the attack first began. He had just needed a few more bullets to finally bring the stallion down, bullets he now had loaded into the revolver.

Alan pointed the gun as his tongue found the trigger. The kick back from the revolver felt strange on his mouth, the force leaving a temporary tingling sensation. The writer could only imagine that bearing the kickback from a gun on his teeth wasn't something a dentist would approve of.

Two shots, in addition to the three Alan had put in the stallion earlier, finally made the Taken go down, body disappearing as the ax he had been wielding clattered to the ground. Alan slipped away his revolver, stepping forward and picking up the ax in his teeth, grimacing at the flavor. With only four shots left he'd want to save the revolver for an emergency. The ax would be a good substitute, though Alan didn't understand how these ponies were able to stand putting so many different things in their mouths.

Moving through the house, Alan came to the front door. He undid the lock and nosed it open, stepping out into the streets. While the night had been calm when he first leapt into the house, a dark wind was now starting to stir. Alan thought back to the last chapter, remembering the events. The darkness was gathering; it was about to spring its trap on Twilight and her friends. He was still a few blocks away; he'd need to move quickly to make it.

Nightmare Moon seemed to know this, because the moment Alan put a hoof out in the direction of the park he felt a chill run down his spine. Turning back, he saw a small, fast, shadow-wrapped mare was now sprinting at him from behind a hedgerow. Alan cursed, breaking into a gallop again as he raced towards the park. He did NOT have time for this.

• • •

*BANG...*

With that last shot Alan had spent all the ammo he had for his revolver, the writer dropping the weapon as he bolted down a back alley. The Taken had been dogging him every step of the way, and while they hadn't managed to kill him yet they were still accomplishing their goal. The sky was dark, the wind was whipping, and the prickling on the back of Alan's neck told him that he was running out of time.

Reaching an intersection in the alley, Alan turned right, cursing as he quickly found himself face to face with a fence. The wooden fence was missing one of its vertical



planks; Alan able to see the park through the gap. Twilight and her friends weren't outside yet but it wouldn't be much longer. Still, maybe this would be close enough. Alan glanced back at the flare gun and its one, unspent shot.

He had been saving it for that moment, that final moment that was left unwritten in the last chapter. If he could fire the flare off at the right moment that burst of light could save Twilight and her friends. It would be the saving grace, the entire reason he had written himself into the story... and he had only one shot.

Alan suddenly found himself wishing he could get a lot closer, but he had been trying to near the park for the past few minutes and several large Taken had always stood in his way. The writer could only imagine that it was Nightmare Moon. From the way the Taken were throwing themselves at him, Alan had convinced himself Nightmare Moon had figured out exactly what he was planning.

A hoof step behind Alan made the writer cringe, looking over his shoulder as a Taken crept up behind him. It was a big brute, the shadowed pony one of Celestia's royal guards. It may have even been the same stallion that Applejack had fought with a frying pan. Alan didn't know if the Taken could be re-used like that, but at the moment he let himself believe it was the same Taken.

It gave him even more reason to kick its hindquarters.

The Taken stallion shifted, the sword in its teeth glinting in the light from Alan's headlamp. The shadows from the stallion were already burning off slowly, from just being in the light of the headband flashlight, but it would take several minutes for the shadows to burn off at such a slow rate... minutes Alan didn't have.

For a time the Taken just stood there, sharing a staring match with Alan as the gray pony lowered himself to the ground, getting ready to dodge from the coming blow.

"Well... come on!" Alan taunted, the tension building inside him. "I doubt that witch sent you just to stand there and stare at me."

This seemed to click the Taken stallion into action, the mountain of a pony galloping forward as he drew up the sword. Alan dodged to the right, rolling in the dirt as the sword struck the ground where he had been just moments before. Thus began the dance, Alan ducking and weaving to stay just a few steps ahead of the Taken soldier while his headlamp was kept focused. He had to burn away the shadows, then he could maybe do something to get rid of the stallion.

"AAAAAAHHHHHHHH!"

The voice on the wind caught Alan so off guard he almost tripped, just barely managing to keep his hoofing and avoid another swing from the sword. That had been Rarity; Alan knew the sound of her voice despite never hearing it before... an author's intuition coming

into play. It had started. This was when Twilight and Fluttershy would race out of the pet shot to try and help their friends. He was running out of time.

"YYYYAAAAAHHHHHH!"

"HHHEELLPP!"

The cries from Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash only confirmed Alan's fears: it was getting close. He only had a couple minutes at best before the moment he'd need to fire the flare gun, and he was still trying to deal with the Taken soldier.

He needed to run, needed to put some distance between him and the attacking stallion, but the only direction he could run was away from the park. The fence kept him blocked in the alley behind the shops. He had to stay there, the gap in the fence his one means of firing the flare gun into the park itself.

A roar from the Taken soldier brought Alan out of his thought, realizing too late he had lost track of the fight. The soldier was upon him, slamming into Alan like a linebacker. He fell back, bouncing against the ground once before slamming into a hard brick wall on the far side of the alley.

His vision was swimming and Alan was fairly sure he could feel the first few drops of blood starting to trickle down the back of his neck. Slumping over, he struggled to his hooves and cursed under his breath. If the writer didn't have brain damage he at least had a concussion or a very painful bump.

Not offering Alan any respite, the soldier loomed over him. It raised the sword and Alan struggled to get back on his hooves. He couldn't die... not now. He was too close... he had to at the very least save Twilight and her friends. He hadn't come this far, raced down the mountain and fought through the town, just to get tripped at the finish line.

Still, the blow to the head was keeping Alan from coordinating his hooves. He couldn't get back up, couldn't get away, and the soldier's muscles began to tense. This was it, the sword began to swing down. It was going to connect right with Alan's neck. The writer tried not to think of how gruesome his death was going to be, but his imagination refused to obey as images of the gore presented themselves to Alan.

The blow, however, was interrupted as something smacked into the soldier's face. The sudden loss of vision made the Taken soldier swing wide, nicking Alan in the shoulder. It was a wound that hurt but wouldn't kill him. That and the pain seemed to help Alan's brain snap back into gear, the author getting back to his hooves.

He looked as the Taken soldier tossed off the thing that had smacked him in the head, Alan watching the item drop to the dirty ground of the alley. It was Applejack's hat. He hadn't ever seen it before, but somehow Alan just knew that the dusty old hat belonged to the orange farm pony. His mind clicked back to the last chapter he had written. Fluttershy

lost the hat while trying to save Rainbow Dash, just before Twilight Sparkle used a cart on the street to break the shop's window.

It was a minor detail... a single minor detail from the last chapter that had become his saving grace. Despite being away from the typewriter, the events happening still held some of the writer's style and nature of story telling. Maybe there could be a happy ending to this after all.

Still, Alan could not muse for long. HE was running out of time. He had only a few seconds, a minute at best before he'd need to fire the flare gun. Still, Alan realized that he had no hope of firing the flare while this soldier was taking swing at him. He needed to get away, put some distance between him and the soldier so he could fire the flare, but at the same time he couldn't run away from this spot in the alley. This was the only place he had a clear shot of the park.

Only one idea came to Alan's mind, one thought that might work. Still, he frowned at the idea. It was going to hurt... a lot.

The soldier, recovered from being temporarily blinded by the hat, began to move towards Alan again. The writer lowered himself down, legs spread as he got ready to put his haphazard and crazy plan into action. He waited, letting the soldier start to swing his sword before jumping to one side.

Alan broke into a full run, circling around the Taken. He snatched up Applejack's hat, skidding to a stop near the wooden fence before tossing the hat up onto his head, giving it a tap with his hoof to make sure it was in place. If this worked, he'd be able to give the hat back to Fluttershy... and the author knew the pegasus would appreciate it.

The Taken soldier turned, charging down Alan. Again, the author dodged, but this time leaping ahead. He leaped between the legs of the stallion, rolling and praying he didn't get stepped on. Thankfully, while one of the hooves clipped him there was no major damage. The soldier crashed into the fence, his head getting wedged in the opening as Alan got back to his hooves.

It had worked, but the plan wasn't over. The writer backed up a few steps, grimacing a bit. This was the part that was going to hurt. The author charged, leaping into the air and landing on the back of the mountainous soldier. The burning pain from touching the shadows almost made the author stumble, but he kept his balance as he then leapt from the back of the soldier, jumping over the fence.

He landed hard, stumbling and flopping onto the ground. The impact dazed Alan for a moment, another blow to the head ensuring that the author at the very least *did* have a concussion. Still, Alan forced himself up, eyes moving to the park. The Taken were circling, drawing in. This was the end, the moment was just a few seconds away. Alan wasn't sure if it was his imagination or not, but he was sure he could hear Rainbow Dash saying her final line from the last chapter.

Alan grunted, body wishing to fail and just lay there on the street but his mind forcing it to comply. He reached his head back, not even bothering to get up off the street as his teeth found the handle of the flare gun. He extracted the tool, bringing his head forward. He nudged his head against the ground, using the hard street surface to push Applejack's hat loose so it wasn't blocking his aim.

Alan lined up the shot, tongue finding the trigger of the flare gun. Behind him, the writer could hear the Taken soldier was now hacking through the fence. Still, it would be too late. Alan let a smile pull at the edges of his lips, his tongue pulling on the trigger.

The flare gun roared, the bright red sprite of the flare hurtling through the air, leaving a thick trail of smoke behind it. The arch was perfect, the flare clearing the Taken and reaching the airspace right above Twilight and her friends before bursting, a loud bang ripping through the night as the park was bathed in the light.

The light cascaded, the Taken and ravens all burning away in pain from the blinding light.

• • •

Twilight's ears were ringing and her eyes were burning. Was this what it felt like to be Taken? To be engulfed in such a bright light? No; not only did that not make sense, this wasn't nearly as painful as she would have imagined. No, this was something else. As the light faded, Twilight's eyes were greeted with the empty expanse of the park. The Taken were gone... they had been saved.

"What... what was that?" Dash asked, looking around as she rubbed her eyes.

"Are... are we dead?" Fluttershy asked.

"No... I think we're okay."

"But... how... was that you, Twilight?"

"No," the unicorn replied, looking over at the pegasus. "But whatever it was it got rid of the Taken."

"Not all of them," Fluttershy said, a tremor in her voice. Twilight and Dash turned, following the pegasus' pointed hoof as a soldier Taken burst through a fence a fair distance away from the trio. Still, while the sight of the remaining Taken was frightening, Twilight's eyes were instead drawn to the line of smoke in the air, which lead from them to a figure lying motionless on the ground.

"Hurry! We have to help that pony!" Twilight called, breaking into a gallop. Fluttershy and Dash took flight, following Twilight in the air.

The soldier stood over the motionless stallion on the ground, lifting the sword to deliver the final strike. His last attack, however, was interrupted as Dash flew right into his face, putting the light from her headlamp in the soldier's eyes.

The Taken stallion cringed, backing up as he raised a hoof. Dash continued the assault, dive bombing the soldier and being a perfect distraction while Fluttershy and Twilight worked to pull the injured stallion to safety. They moved into the absolute nearest shop, pulling the stallion in through the door before trying the light switch. Thankfully, the electric lights clicked on. They had a safe haven.

"DASH!" Twilight called out the open door. The blue pegasus looped once in the air, dodging a swing from the soldier's sword before chancing a glance at Twilight. The pegasus gave a nod, and, after dive bombing the Taken soldier one final time, the rainbow-maned pegasus soared towards the shop, zipping in the door before Twilight slammed it shut and flipped the lock.

The Taken soldier never came to the door, the lights inside the shop holding him at bay. By some miracle, it was the shop they had been searching for. The Record Store, the racks filled with vinyl records from all different kinds of bands and genres.

Still, it did little to console the ponies. Again, as the panic and the fear of the moment subsided... sorrow and pain rose up in its place. Rarity and Pinkie Pie... they were gone. Three friends, lost in a short few hours. It was spirit breaking. Only Fluttershy found motivation to do anything, using a first-aid kit from behind the counter to tend to cut on Twilight's shoulder before going to tend the stallion, who was unconscious.

Dash and Twilight, however, could do little more than lay on the floor. They just couldn't bring themselves to do much else. As before, Dash did her best to keep herself from crying, face bent in a half scowl as she tried to keep the tears at bay. For Twilight, while she didn't cry vocally the tears flowed openly. Memories of her three friends keep spreading across the canvas of the unicorn's mind, fond memories torturing her with the knowledge that she may never see those three ponies ever again.

There was no clock to be seen in the record shop, so there was no way for the ponies to know how long they just lay there. Fluttershy finished tending to the stallion's wounds, many of the bandages stained with the tears she hadn't been able to stop. The only thing not marred with tears or blood was Applejack's hat. Fluttershy wasn't sure how the stallion had gotten a hold of it, but the pegasus had been careful to keep the hat as pristine as possible, hanging it on a corner of one of the sales racks.

When the final bandage for the stallion was in place, Fluttershy's distraction was over and the pain of the moment welled up in her. The yellow pegasus then moved over by Twilight, the unicorn and pegasus crying together but trying to stay quiet so the stallion could rest.

It was a moment of mourning, where the three that remained cried for the three who had been stolen.

Silence... tears and silence for those who fell to the darkness.

• • •

Alan groaned, the pounding headache forcing the writer awake. He half expected to wake up and find himself dead, or even in the Dark Place as just another victim that was stolen in the night. But instead, upon opening his eyes, Alan was greeted with the interior of the record shop, three brightly colored mares lying several feet away from him.

While Dash had her back to the rest of the group, Alan was able to clearly see Twilight and Fluttershy's faces. Their eyes were red and puffy... the pair had undoubtedly been crying for a long time. The room itself was silent, minus the occasional whimpers of

tears. It was the atmosphere Alan would have expected to find in a funeral home or graveyard, the pain of lost friends choking any possibility of happiness from the room.

Several surges of pain shot through Alan as he tried to sit up, his pounding headache only getting worse. God, he hadn't felt this bad since the hangover he had from the Anderson Brothers' moonshine. He didn't know how those old rockers brewed that stuff, but it didn't take much of that stuff to knock a man off his feet.

Probably even less to knock a stallion off his hooves.

Fluttershy took notice of Alan's movements, getting up and trying to dry her eyes as she moved over to him. "Hey... you're awake," she said, her voice muted and quiet... more so than usual. "How are you feeling?"

"Like I got run over by a train." Alan replied, lifting a hoof and gingerly touching the large lump on the back of his head. "How did I get here?"

"Oh, we brought you here. If Twilight's right, it's the least we could do after you saved us."

Alan turned his gaze to the unicorn. "What makes you think I saved you?"

"Whatever you did to save us left a trail of smoke in the air, and it lead straight to you."

Alan smiled a little, the unicorn was smart... but he already knew that. Still, hadn't she noticed his voice sounded familiar? Was she just that out of it or did his voice change after becoming a pony? Alan didn't think he sounded different... still, his ears were different now to so there was no telling what he really sounded like.

"So, I'm Fluttershy. That's Twilight Sparkle and Rainbow Dash is over there. What's your name?"

"Alan Wake," the author replied, realizing that his name probably sounded strange compared to the normal names in Equestria. The short flash of confusion on Fluttershy's face confirmed that. Still, the pegasus didn't let the expression linger, putting another smile on.

"Well, that's a very... nice name... oh, wait... you shouldn't."

Alan, however, didn't listen as he forced himself to his hooves. "We can't just stay here. The darkness will figure a way into the shop sooner or later. The longer we stay here, the longer we give Nightmare Moon a chance to figure out how to shut off the lights."

Twilight was up on her hooves quickly, moving over beside Alan. "Wait, you know about what's going on? How? Did the creature visit your dreams too?"

"No," Alan replied, starting to walk along the store racks filled with records. "Though, I did visit *your* dreams."

"My dreams?"

"Doesn't my voice sound familiar?"

"Now... now that you mention it..." Twilight muttered, before her eyes narrowed. "Wait, are you saying *you're* the creature from my dreams? The one that told me about the darkness and Nightmare Moon?"

Alan nodded, not taking his eyes off the store racks as he continued to move around the store.

"But... but... you weren't a pony in my dreams. How did you even get in my dreams... or how did you get out of them?"

"I wasn't a pony in your dreams because until a few hours ago I *wasn't* a pony. I was something else... but the only way I could save you three was to let myself become a pony so that I could write myself into the story."

"Story... what story?"

Alan stopped, turning his eyes away from the store shelves and focusing on Fluttershy and Twilight. He knew he had to tell them the truth... they needed to know the full extent of what was going on. Still, that didn't mean it was going to go over well.

It took some time, but the writer told the ponies almost everything. He told them of about his own world, how he had been a writer and how the darkness had kidnapped his wife Alice. He told them about how he wrote "Departure", a story where he became the protagonist fighting against the darkness. He told them how, to save his wife and Bright Falls, he had let himself become trapped in the darkness.

That was the easy part. Next came the part that Alan struggled with. He told them how he was first contacted by Nightmare Moon, how the mare had whispered in his ear and tempted him with information about Equestria. He told them how it was his fault the darkness had escaped, and how he had been fighting to try and fix his mistake.

"But how were you helping us fight back? How were you getting into my dreams?" Twilight asked.

"The Dark Place gives powers to words. Nightmare Moon couldn't escape on her own; she would need someone to write a story or poem where she takes over Equestria. I feared that if I let Nightmare Moon find some pony to write for her, that pony wouldn't realize what was happening before it was too late.



"So... I began a story of my own. I began typing out a story called "Creeping Darkness", in hopes that I could write a story where Nightmare Moon was defeated. I began the story with a nightmare. Twilight, it was the dream you had on the train, running through the Everfree Forest towards a pillar of light. That was my first attempt to warn you. From that point until the moment before I saved you three, I've been mostly in control of what's happened."

"You've been in control? So everything that's happened to me and my friends, to Celestia and Luna... that all happened because you wrote it into a story?"

"...Yes."

"YOU MONSTER!"

Dash tackled Alan without warning, knocking the stallion down. The writer cringed in pain from his place on the floor, a number of his injuries flaring up as Dash stood over him. The blue pegasus had tears streaming down her face from eyes filled with rage. She put her hoof on Alan's neck, starting to apply pressure. Not enough to choke Alan but enough to communicate the fact she pegasus wanted to strangle the life out of him.

"Dash! What are you doing?" Fluttershy asked, darting over to try and get Dash off of Alan only to be pushed away.

"Didn't you hear him? Everything that's happened is because of *him*! It's because of him that Applejack, Rarity, and Pinkie Pie are gone!"

"Alan... is that true?" Twilight asked.

"...Yes..." Alan replied. He would have said more, but the words were interrupted as Dash put more pressure on his throat.

"Why? Why did you do it?" Dash snapped, her voice harsh with anger but also starting to tremble with the sorrow she had been trying to bottle up inside. "They never did anything to you. You didn't even know them. They didn't deserve it."

"I had to... the story... the story demanded it," Alan choked out.

"Demanded it... is that all we are to you?!" Dash half-screamed, putting more weight down on Alan's throat. "Are we just characters in your story, to be killed off when it's entertaining?!"

"Rainbow Dash, stop it! You're killing him!"

"He deserves it!"

Alan was now starting to have trouble breathing, his hooves grasping at Dash's as he tried to get the pegasus off his throat. Still, the struggle only made Dash put more pressure down. Alan could feel himself getting light-headed, his movements getting more sluggish as his lungs desperately tried to draw in a fresh breath of air.

"Dash, that's enough!" Twilight barked, her horn lighting up. She levitated the pegasus off of Alan, the stallion coughing as his ability to breathe freely was restored. The pegasus thrashed in the air, trying to free herself but the magic kept her in place.

"Twilight, put me down! He deserves it! It's because of him that Applejack, Rarity, and Pinkie Pie are gone! HE DESERVES IT!"

"Dash, he's been trying to help us. If it weren't for him -"

"If it weren't for him none of this would be happening! He admitted it! It's his fault all this is happening. How can you be defending him? Rarity, Pinkie Pie... Applejack... they're gone... not only that, but they could be dead for all we know! Twilight, THEY COULD BE DEAD!"

Twilight's magic faltered, the unicorn losing her grip on the pegasus. Dash dropped back down, landing on her hooves. She moved towards Alan again, wishing nothing more than to put her hoof back on his throat. Yet her path of vengeance was blocked again... by Fluttershy.

"Get out of the way," Dash ordered.

"No," Fluttershy quietly muttered.

"Fluttershy, he hurt our friends. He may have killed him. He deserves this!"

"No!"

"Why... why are you two defending him!?! He's a MONSTER! He killed our friends! He may have doomed us all to be swallowed up by the dark!"

"Because I don't want to see any other pony get hurt!" Fluttershy shouted, one of the rare moments the yellow pegasus managed to find strong volume in her voice. She then dropped to her haunches, eyes watering up again as she stared at the floor.

"Hasn't there been enough... haven't we seen enough ponies get hurt? I just want it to stop... I want it all to stop."

The rage died from Dash's eyes as she just stared at her pink-maned friend. Without a word, the blue pegasus moved forward, leaning in and hugging Fluttershy with a single hoof. Twilight also joined in, the three friends doing their best to console each other in what was easily the bleakest situation they had ever been in.

Alan watched all this and it felt like someone was digging his heart from his chest with a rusty, dull knife. The guilt was overwhelming, drowning... it was the worst feeling Alan had ever experienced. The only thing that had ever hurt more was the terrible realization that he lost Alice to the darkness.

What had he done?

• • •

Comforted by the embrace of her friends, Fluttershy calmed down fairly quickly. Dash and Twilight had also taken the time to cry, to let anything they had left out. It had felt good, just getting it all out.

Alan had slipped away, limping slowly around the room as he searched the record racks. He came back just as the three mares were stepping back from each other, their embrace ending.

"Uh... I found it," Alan offered, slightly worried that saying anything might re-ignite Dash's anger.

"Found what?" Dash asked, using a hoof to dry her tears. There was still pain and hatred in the eyes, but for the moment the pegasus was content to just glare the writer down.

"The record from the 'Old Gods of Asgard'."

"But, you're not in control of the story anymore," Twilight pointed out. "How is that song supposed to help?"

"It's how the magic of the Dark Place works. What's written becomes reality. In the story, I told you that this record could tell you how to defeat the darkness. The Old Gods of Asgard is a band from my world. This record shouldn't exist, but because I wrote about it in the story it *does* exist. It does exist... which makes me believe it may be able to tell us something. Though... honestly, I don't know if it can tell us something I don't already know."

Twilight levitated the record away from Alan, carefully removing the vinyl disk from its paper sleeve. The unicorn then trotted over to the counter. A record player, hooked into the shop's speakers, was tucked just below the cash register. Twilight set the record into place, starting the turntable and setting the needle down.

There were just pops and cracks from the record for a moment, and then the song began to ring out from the speakers set about the shop. Someone was picking at some guitar strings, the melody of the song resembling *The Poet and the Muse*. Still, it wasn't the same song. Twilight levitated the record sleeve, reading the words printed out on the cover.

Old Gods of Asgard  
Writer's Folly (Single)

The guitar player picked at his strings for a bit longer, and then a voice came over the record. The lead singer's voice carried the tune with soft, stretched tones. It was a mournful song... a song of warning and sorrow.

• • •

*Once we told a tale of mystery, of Tom the Poet and his muse  
And the darkness that bent and twisted the words the poet used*

*But the tale didn't end just there, no more still remains  
Others in time would be bound the nightmare's garish chains*

*Even we old gods once faced the darkness and its might  
And the next to be ensnared was a writer and his wife*

*And now to see the sun set free  
To see the moon regain its majesty  
Find the strength for the fight where the sun rests at night  
That's how you reshape destiny*

*The nightmare twisted and corrupted both the writer and his tale  
Hoping to escape from the lake, both its home and its jail*

*But the writer, aided by the poet and we the elder gods  
Managed to beat the darkness back, defying all the odds*

*But to do all this, to save us all, to set the story right  
The writer had to give himself to the darkness of the night*

*And now to see the sun set free  
To see the moon regain its majesty  
Into the lake you must dive, the darkness you must survive.  
That's how you reshape destiny*

*Never again was the writer seen, his vanished from this place  
Torn away from his home and his wife's warm embrace*

*He struggles on, even now, to return from the gloom  
To see his wife again, to leave the darkened tomb*

*And yet we gods offer this one word to our fallen friend  
Those who face the dark alone... are doomed... in the... end*

*(Guitar Solo)*

*And now to see the sun set free  
To see the moon regain its majesty  
Seek out your friends, with their power it can end  
That's how you reshape destiny*

*And now to see the sun set free  
To see the moon regain its majesty  
Offer a warm heart to those lost... in the dark  
That's how you reshape... destiny...*

• • •

The needle reached the center of the record at this point, the speakers filling with the mild static until Twilight lifted the needle and shut off the turntable. The room was silent for a time, the three mares looking at Alan. The song had been about him, about his own fall to the darkness. It had dredged up several painful memories for the writer, including the single fact that he may never see Alice again... especially after he sacrificed his human body to try and save these ponies.

Still, like Dash, Alan chose to bottle these emotions up, putting on a stern face as he looked up at the mares. "We need to go back to the castle."

"That castle? What about that song makes you think we need to go back to the castle?"

"The first line of the chorus says to see the sun set free. The sun, however, isn't what's being held captive. It's Princess Celestia. Then, in the first chorus, the song said something about finding the strength for the fight where the sun rests at night."

"Oh," Twilight mouthed, comprehension striking the pony. "If Celestia is called the sun in the song, then it's telling us to go where Celestia rests at night. And, assuming the song isn't talking about Canterlot, then we need to get to Celestia's private quarters in Lakeshore Castle."

Alan nodded. "That would be my guess."

"Wait, wait wait wait," Dash said, pointing a hoof at the door. "Did you two forget about the fact we were surrounded by Taken the last time we were outside? And you two want to try and get all the way to the *castle* and you're just guessing?!"

"Do you have a better idea?" Twilight asked.

The pegasus opened her mouth, ready to snap out some better plan. Still, for several moments no words came out and then Dash dropped her head in defeat. "I got nothing..."

"Then it looks like we're going to the castle," Twilight argued. "Still, Dash is right. How are we supposed to get there? I doubt Nightmare Moon will let just walk up the road."

"No, she won't, but we won't be defenseless either," Alan said, a small smile pulling at his lips.

"What makes you say that?" Fluttershy asked.

"I couldn't make use of it on the way into town, but I remember seeing a place selling fireworks."

The cabin stood dark, silent, and empty... untouched since its owner had been taken several hours earlier. Outside, the night was originally still, but it slowly grew more violent. Through the whipping of the wind, the screeches and booms of fireworks began to echo inside the cabin, the bright lights from outside casting harsh flashes of light through the windows.

The light and sound of fireworks grew closer and closer until the pyrotechnic display was just outside the cabin's front door. The sound of heavy hooves on the steps outside prelude a stallion throwing his weight against the cabin's door, breaking it open with a thud.

The stallion stumbled and fell to the floor after breaking down the door, struggling to his hooves as a pair of pegasi zipped in. The last pony outside was a unicorn, Twilight Sparkle, who levitated in the air above her head a small swarm of fireworks. With sparks of fire she lit the fuses, launching the fireworks out into the night and into the swarming horde of Taken. When she had cleared enough of a gap Twilight retreated into the cabin.

From her own saddle bag the unicorn levitated three fountain fireworks, lighting the fuses as she set them out in front of the cabin. The firework fountains began to erupt, putting up constant streams of sparks that forced the Taken back as Twilight slammed the door of the cabin shut, levitating a nearby bookcase in front of it.

"There... there are so many," Fluttershy whispered, looking out one of the cabin windows as the army of Taken that lingered just beyond the light of the spark fountain fireworks.

"The darkness took everyone in town," Alan pointed out, moving over to the window as well. "Honestly, I wouldn't be surprised if it's spread farther."

"You... you don't think its reached Ponyville yet?"

"I... I don't know."

"Listen to you; you actually sound like you're sorry you made all this happen," Dash grumbled.

"Dash, stop it!" Twilight snapped, knowing her friend was just trying to pick a fight. While the pegasus wasn't openly trying to attack Alan anymore, she still hated the writer for what he had done. It was a feeling Twilight shared... but one that only lingered at the back of her mind. They had other things to worry about right now. They could be mad at Alan later... if they survived.

"How many fireworks do we have left? The spark fountains outside won't last much longer and we need to be ready to keep going the moment they start to run out."

"I've got most of mine left," Alan said, the saddle bags across his back still laden with fireworks.

"That's because you've been running so far behind she hasn't been able to use any of your fireworks," Dash cut, tossing her saddle bag to the floor. "All I got left are a few bottle rockets and a spark fountain."

"Fluttershy, what about you?" Twilight asked.

"You used the last of mine just before we got to the cabin."

"And all I've got are a few large rockets... we burnt through over half the fireworks and we're barely halfway to the castle."

"That's because you've been attacking every Taken you've seen," Alan lectured. "The Taken are only going to keep coming, and wasting our ammunition on the ones that don't get close is pointless. You need to focus just on the Taken that are starting to get close."

"She can't *wait* for them to get close," Dash argued. "If she does, the fireworks will start exploding near us, and I'd rather not get my tail caught on fire."

"She can't keep using fireworks like she has been either," Alan snapped back, glaring at Dash. "Otherwise we'll run out before we reach the castle and then what will happen? We'll be sitting ducks."

"Stop it, both of you!" Twilight scolded, putting herself between the stallion and blue pegasus. "I've had enough of this fighting. Dash, I promise, you can chew out Alan all you want and I won't stop you... AFTER we beat the darkness."

"Fine... but the second this is over I'm going to make you pay for what you did to our friends. You're going to get what you deserve, you monster."

Alan's gritted his teeth, trying to hold back his anger but failing. He burst out, his voice filling the cabin. "I KNOW!"

Dash shrunk back, a little surprised by the stallion's rage... a rage that continued as Alan ranted.

"I realized I screwed up, made a mistake... and I know nothing I can do can make up for what's happened to you and your friends. But I don't need you reminding me every ten seconds that I was an idiot!"

"And you're not the only one that's lost something. I don't think you realize what I gave up to save you, Twilight, and Fluttershy. I'm not a pony, I'm a human... I gave up my humanity to write myself into the story. Do you realize what that means? It means that once I get back to the Dark Place, back to my typewriter, not only do I have to figure out



a way to write myself back into my own world but now I have to figure out how to turn myself back into a human.

"I mean, I can't go back to my wife, Alice. She can't be married to a pony, even if can talk. I can't even go back to my world like this. Not only would my writing career be over because of the simple fact I don't have fingers anymore but I'd probably be locked up in some government testing facility. That or paraded around the country as a sideshow freak.

"I know I messed up, I know this is my fault... and I'm doing my best to help you three fix it. So **BACK OFF!**"

Alan breathed heavily at this, trembling a bit from his anger. Twilight glanced over at Dash, the pegasus a bit wide-eyed. It had been a scary moment, seeing the stallion so enraged, but Twilight had a feeling that this was for the better. Maybe now Dash wouldn't keep trying to pick fights with Alan, and the writer undoubtedly felt better getting all that pent up anger out of his system.

"Uh... Twilight... I don't... I don't mean to interrupt but the fireworks are starting to run out," Fluttershy quietly noted.

The unicorn gave a nod in the pegasus' direction before glancing at Alan. "You going to be okay?"

The stallion nodded, starting to calm his breathing.

"Good," Twilight replied, her horn starting to glow. She gathered all the remaining fireworks and stuffed them in Alan's saddle packs. "I want you to take the lead as we head up the mountain. Now that you have all the fireworks you set the pace. Dash, Fluttershy, and I will follow. Hopefully, between the headlamps and the last fireworks we have we'll make it."

The light from the firework fountains outside dimmed, one of the three spitting out the last of its cascading sparks. The moment of rest was over. Alan shifted, making sure the fireworks that had just been placed in his bag had settled into place before he moved to the door. The three mares followed.

"Start running on my signal," Twilight said, already levitating a few bottle rockets out of the saddlebag and moving the bookcase away from the door. The others nodded, lowering themselves down like track stars waiting for the starting gun. The second of the three firework fountains outside pattered into darkness, the third remaining the one that was just in front of the cabin's front steps.

Its outpouring of sparks began to dim, a few final surges popping out as unspent gunpowder inside ignited. Then, the last of the firework fountains fell dark and silent.

The only light that remained came from the headlamps each pony wore, the cones of light spreading out into the darkness.

For a time there was nothing, but slowly the Taken began to move in on the cabin's steps. Twilight waited, eyes focused as she waited for shadowed ponies to get just a little closer. Then, she lit the bottle rockets, the fuses burning quickly before the rockets shot free of Twilight's levitation spell. The explosion of cascading color destroyed a number of Taken and illuminated the rest, allowing Twilight to aim a few more fireworks into the horde, clearing a path.

"RUN!"

• • •

"KEEP RUNNING!" Twilight bellowed out between pants, all four of the ponies breathing heavily. They had been running at a full gallop for the past several minutes, but for good reason. The darkness was pulling no punches, offered no quarter. A platoon of Taken soldiers charged along the path just behind the ponies. Shadowed ravens filled the sky, ready to strike the moment Dash or Fluttershy tried to take flight.

And finally, Nightmare Moon had unleashed the greatest force of destruction available to her. A towering tornado of pure darkness ripped at the ground and the forest just behind Twilight and her friends, threatening to engulf them if they slowed down at all.

The iron taste of blood was filling Twilight's mouth, a result of the sheer amount of running she had done. She had never run this hard, even back during the Running of the Leaves. The unicorn was impressed she had managed to last so long, suspecting that the adrenaline in her system was somehow keeping her on her hooves.

The end, however, was looming close. The castle was close, maybe a few hundred yards away. The length of a couple football fields, give or take. Twilight's legs burned as did her chest, but they were so close. They could make it.

At least, Twilight thought they could make it. Still, not all in the group were as physically fit. Twilight and Fluttershy were tired but would make it, Dash was fine, but Alan... Alan was obviously struggling. His panting was the loudest between the four and he was starting to have trouble just coordinating his hooves. More than once he almost fell, but he managed to regain his balance and continue.

"You will not save them!" a voice called from the tornado, echoing across the trees and distant castle. It was Nightmare Moon's voice, though it didn't sound the same as Twilight' remembered it. It sounded more hollow... and a lot more evil... and it sounded like there was another voice behind it. The unicorn, however, couldn't linger on those thoughts as the tornado began to rip trees from the forest, the giant trunks swirling in the wind for a time before being hurled at the fleeing ponies.

The trees crashed to the ground with heavy booms, bouncing not an inch as if they were being forced down by a dark force, which was probably a very accurate summation of what was happening. The trees blocked the path ahead at first, forcing Twilight and her friends to make detours as they ran around or leapt over the trunks to continue their sprint towards the castle.

Then the trees started falling closer, landing within feet of the group. They had to skid to a stop a number of times just to avoid crashing into the thick trunks and heavy, needle covered branches. The vortex's aim was improving, each tree becoming a murderous projectile thrown with the sole purpose of crushing them.

But they were so close, the castle steps were just a few dozen yards away. Dash began to run ahead, a smile spreading on the pegasus' face. "We're almost there, come on!"

"Dash, stay with the group," Twilight scolded, but her voice was lost in the wind. She would have shouted again, but the sound of another tree being flung through the air made Twilight, Fluttershy, and Alan turn their faces to the sky. This tree was aimed at the very base of the stairs, and would reach its destination just as Dash did.

"DASH!" Twilight called, trying to warn her friend. The pegasus, however, just glanced back, offering a smile as she powered on. The tree continued to tumble from the sky, and in her panic Twilight stride to stretch out her magic. She couldn't stop the tree from falling, it was too big, but maybe she could slow it down.

Still, Twilight winced in pain as her magic was cast back. The tree was being controlled by the darkness, and like the shop doors back in the town Twilight's magic couldn't touch the darkness, just as no pony could physically touch it with their hooves.

Twilight feared the worse, taking her eyes off the looming tree and looking back at Dash. The pegasus was still charging at the steps, keeping pace with the tree. They were going to get to the same place at the same time, and Twilight couldn't keep herself from imagining the tree dropping down squarely on Rainbow Dash.

Her mind spun, trying to think of what to do next, but fatigue and the long gallop up the mountain was making it difficult to think. So difficult, in fact, that it was only as the tree was within feet of the ground that Twilight took notice of something: Alan had almost caught up with Dash.

The stallion, tapping into some last reserve of strength and energy, had managed to actually catch up with Dash, despite being the one having the most difficulty running. He was right on Dash's flank as the tree's shadow loomed over them. With a few final strides Alan put all his weight into a single leap, crashing into Dash's back.

Twilight didn't see what happened next, the tree slamming down hard. She couldn't see Dash or Alan, and the unicorn feared the worse. She and Fluttershy leapt over the tree, being first greeted with the sight of Rainbow Dash lying on the stairs, in a crumpled heap.

"Dash, are you okay?"

The blue pegasus got to her hooves, giving her head a shake before putting lifting a hoof. "Yea... but who pushed me?"

"It was... ALAN!" Twilight realized, spinning around. The gray stallion was lying on his back, tears running down his face as he tried to bite back the screams of pain that wanted to escape his lips. Just behind the stallion's head, his two back legs were extended, crushed and pinned beneath the heavy trunk of the tree.

The three mares quickly circled around the stallion, already trying to help, but he pushed them away. "You don't have time!"

"But..."

"GET INSIDE THE CASTLE NOW!" Alan barked. Fluttershy and Dash nodded, the looming vortex of darkness urging them into the safety of the castle just as much as Alan was. The writer, however, caught Twilight's tail in his mouth, holding the unicorn back for just a few more moments.

"Twilight, remember the song... don't forget a single word of it. It told you how to defeat the darkness. Take my saddlebag. We don't have many fireworks left, but enough to help. Leave me the last firework fountain though, and the moment before the vortex is about to engulf me I want you to light the fuse.

"Remember, trust nothing in the dark; you are only safe in the light. Don't forget that."

The unicorn nodded, her horn glowing as she took the saddle bags off of Alan's back. She mouthed him a silent thank you, and then raced up the stairs after Fluttershy and Dash.

• • •

Alan groaned, the pain in his legs was making it difficult to think. Still, in his front hooves he cradled the last firework fountain, keeping the fuse exposed and in the light of his headlamp. He waited, waited for the Taken soldiers to catch up... waited for the vortex of darkness to reach him. He waited... and his mind began to spin.

F. Scott Fitzgerald once said, "Show me a hero and I'll write you a tragedy." Well, that suited him, didn't it? He had tried to be the hero, writing himself into the story to save Twilight and her friends. He had tried to be the hero to save Dash from the falling tree... and now his story was going to end in tragedy. Still, that's what happens to side characters in a horror story. They die, hopefully helping the story's true protagonist reach the end safely. At the very least, he had ensured Twilight would be with her true friends for a little longer.

Alan was able to smile, even as the darkness loomed. Alice... Alice would be proud of what he did, of how he died. She's be sad, but happy to know he died fighting the darkness. He wanted... *had* to believe that.

The fuse of the fountain firework in Alan's hooves lit, drawing the stallion's attention to the castle doors which swung shut a moment later. He then looked back, seeing the towering vortex of darkness was just about to roll over him. The stallion grunted through the pain, smile being replaced with a serious look as he twisted his back, pinching the firework fountain between his hooves and aiming it into the heart of the darkness.

• • •

Twilight flicked her horn, the large locks on the castle doors snapping shut just as the windows lit up with the cascading light from the fountain. A horrible roaring sound shook the castle, along with the sound of several more trees crashing to the ground. It could only mean that Alan had been able to stop the vortex of darkness using the firework fountain, but Twilight had little doubt that the writer had already been taken into the darkness by the shadowed solidier stallions that had been pursuing them.

She should have felt pain, but she was becoming numb to it. So many ponies had already been lost... and not just ponies she knew. All of Emblem had been taken, all of the staff and guards at the castle... all of Equestria could have fallen to darkness for all the unicorn knew. They may be the last three still able to fight back.

Twilight turned from the door, seeing Dash and Fluttershy staring back at her. She didn't offer a single word, no pep talk or anything. She didn't have the words nor the strength to lift anypony's spirits. They were in a bad situation, there was no sugarcoating it... a bad situation that had stretched on for too long.

All they could do was what they had been doing. They had to keep pushing on.

"Come on, we need to get up to the top floor," was all Twilight said, replacing her own saddle bags with the firework-laden ones Alan had been carrying as she walked past her two pegasi friends. Dash and Fluttershy took flight, hovering in the air just behind Twilight as the trio began to work their way up the castle.

The latch clicked, the well-oiled hinges offering not a single sound as the door swung open. Twilight, Dash, and Fluttershy stepped forward, the lights from their headlamps moving about the room as they took in the scene. Celestia's private quarters, a regal bedroom just as beautiful as one could imagine. The huge, four-post bed was a siren calling out to the three exhausted ponies, but they couldn't rest. It wasn't safe to rest right now.

Twilight felt a pang of guilt as she and her friends began to search the room. They opened drawers, searched Celestia's desk, dumping everything and anything out onto the floor unceremoniously. Though, Celestia would probably find the ransacking of her room a fair price to pay when Twilight and her friends finally managed to turn back the darkness.

The desk had offered nothing but quills, bottles of ink, some government papers and blank pages. The small bookshelf had held just that, books, and the dresser drawer in the room had played home to a number of different regal garments, horseshoes, and necklaces... some Twilight had seen the princess wear on certain occasions while others that looked like they hadn't been used in years.

Still, they found nothing that stood out as the answer. No spell book that gave the miracle spell to turn back the darkness. No great and powerful weapon or tool. Nothing.

"So, is this it... we came all this way and there's nothing here," Dash growled. Twilight could tell; the pegasus' patience with the situation was running thin, just like her own.

"Maybe there was another clue in the song," Fluttershy offered.

"There was only one line. Find the strength for the fight where the sun rests at night. The next line starts talking about the lake. No, the answer has to be in this room," Twilight said, setting down a firm hoof.

"Well, where haven't we looked? I mean, we checked the desk, the dresser, the bookcase..."

"What about the bed?"

Twilight and Dash blinked, glancing first at Fluttershy and then the bed. In truth, they had ignored the bed, but it made a bit of sense. The bedroom was where Celestia rested at night, but more specifically she rested on the bed.

The trio began to work at the bed. They tossed the pillows off first, wondering if Celestia had maybe tucked something beneath them. Then they went after the blanket, the sheets, tossing it all to the far corner of the room until they were down to the mattress. Twilight even levitated that away too, leaving only the wooden frame.

That's when they saw it, hidden in the headboard of the bed. A small wooden door, a hidden compartment. Twilight felt her heart starting to race, wondering what could be contained within. She swallowed nervously, lighting her horn. It took a bit of fiddling, but the lock on the small door finally clicked opened. The door swung open under the gentle guidance of Twilight's magic, that arcane energy spreading to the contents of the secret compartment.

A trio of items floated in front of the three mares, cradled gently by the Twilight's levitation spell. One was a book, a hoof-written diary. The last two items were a pair of necklaces. One silver with a moon pendant, the other gold with a sun pendant.

"So... what... are those like some super, magical... things that can kick the darkness to the curb?" Dash asked, obviously expecting the sun's strength to be something... more.

Twilight didn't answer immediately, skimming through the pages of the journal. The dates on the pages were from back before Celestia and Luna became the princesses of Equestria, back when there was a single queen. Few ponies realized that the sun and moon weren't created by Celestia and Luna, that they were in fact made by Equestria's one and only queen, who left the land over a thousand years ago. Luna had been the one to fill the night with stars, to create the beauty of the night, but the heavily bodies of the sun and moon were themselves gifts the princesses had inherited.

The unicorn shut her eyes, her horn flashing a bit brighter for just a moment. The flash came from a locator spell, something she had found in the library one day and quickly grew to love. It was a spell that could search a book for certain words. The words the spell was to find were strength and pendant, and those two words only occurred together on a single page. Twilight, Dash, and Fluttershy all leaned in, reading the diary entry.

*Dear Diary*

*Celestia and I were out playing in the forest last night it when it got late. Big sister tried to get me to come back but I was having so much fun I didn't want to. Then the sun set, and it got dark. There wasn't any moon last night, so it was really, really dark.*

*Celestia and I tried to find our way back to the castle, but we got lost. The forest is so scary when it's dark. Celestia won't admit it, but she hates the dark. I don't mind the dark as long as I can kind of see, but it was really, really dark last night. We both started to get really scared.*

*I felt so bad. It was because of me we didn't back to the castle before sunset. Celestia started to cry, but I guess that was a good thing. Mom found us quickly when she heard Celestia crying. She had been so worried about us she didn't yell at us or anything.*

*Until this morning. She was mad at us this morning. Celestia and I are grounded for a month.*

*Dear Diary*

*Celestia and I been having nightmares since Mom had to come rescue us from the forest. Mom just told us they were just nightmares, but a few nights ago she started to look worried.*

*But tonight Mom brought us some presents, two necklaces. They're so beautiful. She told us that they're special, magical necklaces. She said when we're both asleep at night, and if we start to have a nightmare, we can use the necklaces to find each other in our dreams. That way, we can face the scary dreams together. That we'd have the strength to be brave together.*

*Celestia says it's silly, but I saw her put the necklace on once Mom left. I put mine on too. Hopefully, if I have a nightmare, big sister will be able to protect me.*

*Dear Diary*

*The necklaces worked. I started having a nightmare last night, but before it got too scary my necklace in the dream stated to glow. The light from it pointed into the darkness, and when I followed it I found Celestia. The darkness just seemed to go away when we were together.*

*Mom was really happy when we told her too. She said that we never had to fear the darkness again as long as sister and I stuck together.*

Twilight's eyes moved from the page to the pendants hanging in front of her. This was what was supposed to help them face the darkness? These little necklaces that had belonged to the princesses in their youth?

Yet, the necklaces had been a gift from the Queen; they likely held some power greater than portrayed by their small size. That, however, wasn't what worried Twilight. What worried Twilight was the journal offered no information on how the necklaces could be used against the darkness that currently threatened them an all of Equestria. They were made so the princesses could find each other during a nightmare, but how could two little necklaces stand up against the full force of an actual darkness? How could the little trinkets possibly help them face the darkness Nightmare Moon commanded?

Dash seemed to share at Twilight's disbelief, and was venting it in anger. She stormed away, jumping and kicking at the books and other things that lay scattered about the room. "What are we supposed to do with those?!" Dash grunted, sending a book flying against the far wall. "I bet I could break them just by stepping on them! How are they supposed to do anything?"

"I don't know," Twilight replied, turning the necklaces over in the air. "But, this has to be what the song was talking about... even if they do seem a little flimsy."



"I think they're pretty," Fluttershy offered.

"Oh, well, isn't that something? Maybe we can bribe the darkness to free Equestria by giving it the pretty necklaces," Dash chirped with sarcastic enthusiasm before kicking at another book.

"Oh... um... well... I didn't mean..."

"Dash!" Twilight scolded, glaring at the pegasus before turning to Fluttershy with a much softer gaze. "She didn't mean it."

"No, it's... it's okay. I know that... well, them being pretty doesn't really help."

"Here, why don't you wear one of them? Keep it safe," Twilight offered. Her magic undid the clasp on the sun pendant's chain, looping it around Fluttershy's neck before re-securing it. The necklace was a good fit, gently hanging right at the crest of Fluttershy's neck.

"Oh, Twilight... really, maybe you should let Dash -"

"What are you talking about? You've done such a good job taking care of AJ's hat. I'm sure you can take care of a necklace."

"What about the moon necklace?"

"I'll wear it," Twilight replied, using her magic to bring the chain about her neck. "We'll keep them safe together."

This brought a smile to Fluttershy's face, the first smile in several hours. Dash opened her mouth to provide another snarky comment, but both Dash's mouth and Fluttershy's smile were abruptly interrupted. A tremor shook the castle, a voice calling out from every dark corner of the room.

"You can't save them. You'll never be able to save them. I won't let you near them."

At that a loud crash came from the bedroom door, a Taken soldier knocking the door off its hinges. The thick wooden barricade crashed to the floor, making all three mares jump from the sudden entrance.

Twilight, however, reacted quickly, drawing out one of the last fireworks. Her horn lit the fuse as she used her levitation magic, grabbing hold the unhinged door and using it to push the Taken soldier out of the room. She then threw the door clear and unleashed the firework. It screeched into the hall, striking and bursting against the soldier, who was burnt away by the particularly powerful explosion.

Still, despite the sudden scare, Twilight was smiling... smiling wide. A smile that had both Dash and Fluttershy scared.

"Twilight, please tell me you didn't just crack?"

"No, Dash, I'm fine... better than fine."

"Why?"

"It's Nightmare Moon; she's scared. She's scared because we have these necklaces. I don't know how, but something about these necklaces can let us stop her."

Dash began to smile herself. "Yea... she *did* sound pretty scared there, didn't she?"

Twilight nodded. "She did, and if she's scared of these then that means the song from the Old Gods was telling the truth. We have the strength to beat Nightmare Moon and the darkness, now all we need to do is get to the lake."

"But Nightmare Moon won't let us just go back down the way we came. She's probably got the castle entrance blocked by now."

"There's more than one way out of the castle," Twilight said, sprinting out into the hallway. Fluttershy and Dash followed, flying after the unicorn as she galloped down the hall. A few careful turns and a few minutes of running, and the trio were once again outside in the night air.

Twilight found herself standing where the horrors had begun: the balcony where Celestia had made the sun set and Luna made the moon rise. It was hard to believe that hadn't even been a full day since that happened. Twilight felt like she had lived through a week or longer.

Yet they had made it, they were there... and for the first time Twilight felt they really had a chance of defeating the darkness.

Yet, the darkness was not ready to submit. The weather outside turned violent quickly, the wind whipping at the ponies' ears. The lake below tossed and turned, a funnel of water starting to rise up. It was another shadow tornado, this one as large as Lakeshore Castle and three times as violent as the last.

"Are you sure we have to dive into that lake?" Dash asked.

"Yep."

"And we don't know what we're going to find down there, are we?"

"No."

"Twilight, if we save Alan, remind me again how hard I need to kick his flank for putting us through all this."

Twilight smiled a little. "Don't worry, I will."

"YOU'LL NEVER SEE ANY OF THEM AGAIN!" the darkness wailed, sounding less and less like Nightmare Moon and more and more like something else... the deep rumbling mixed into the voice sending a chill down Twilight's spine.

The tornado of shadows shifted, bending and twisting. As it did, a massive column of ravens took flight, beginning to circle the lake. Their shadowed, feathered bodies began to form a barrier, a wall of flapping wings and sharp claws to keep Twilight and her friends from the lake.

"How... how are we supposed to get through that?" Fluttershy asked.

"I don't know. I don't have enough fireworks left for all those birds."

"You two just worry about getting into the lake. I'll keep the birds off your back," Dash said, the pegasus hopping into the air.

"Dash..."

"Hey, I'll be right behind you. Not even a million birds can out-fly the best young flier in Equestria. Fluttershy, think you can carry Twilight to the water?"

"Uh... maybe... I won't be able to go very fast."

"Just worry about getting there. Twilight, use the fireworks to try and clear a path. I'll keep the birds off you as best I can. Just keep yourselves safe. You two have those necklaces, and that's what can beat the darkness."

"Rainbow Dash, no! You don't realize -"

"Yes, I do, Twilight, and don't tell me there is another way. Even if I carried you Fluttershy couldn't keep the birds away. This is our only option."

Twilight bit back one final plea, brushing away some tears from her eyes. She knew Dash was right... her mind clicking back to what Alan said. He wasn't writing a story any more, but the events he started in motion with his writing had been shaped as a horror story. Twilight had read horror stories... and she knew Dash was right. There was only one way she and Fluttershy would reach the lake. Only one hope of stopping the darkness... because there is only ever one hope in a horror story.

"Okay Dash, but as soon as Fluttershy and I hit the water I want you to get someplace safe. The lights are probably still on at the record store. If you can, try to get back there."

"Got it," the pegasus said with a firm nod. With that Twilight glanced over at Fluttershy, the yellow pegasus also nodding. She fluttered into the air, pinching Twilight between her hooves so that she could carry the unicorn. It took some struggling, but Fluttershy managed to get Twilight off the ground, the unicorn trying to help her friend by reducing her weight with a levitation spell.

At the same time Twilight took out all the fireworks she had left, a set of approximately a dozen fireworks... but they were big fireworks, the kind of show stoppers that were saved for the climax of a pyrotechnic display. One of them was about the size of Twilight's head even, the label on the side reading, "Celestia's Fury".

Dash took the lead, the pegasus swooping down off the balcony as Fluttershy followed. The swarm of ravens, which had to number in the thousands if not tens of thousands, shifted. Streams of the black, shadowed birds began to fly at the three mares, but Twilight had already lit the first few fuses.

The fireworks screeched out, flying within inches of Rainbow Dash before hitting and exploding inside the ravens. The screeching of the birds joined the echos of the explosion, their bodies turning to shadows and quickly burning away. Still, it was only a small number of the huge army of ravens, which were already continuing the assault.

What few birds survived the bombardment of fireworks met up with Dash, the pegasus spinning and kicking in the air. Hitting the birds hurt, burned a bit, but Dash ignored the pain as she made sure Fluttershy and Twilight stayed safe.

They were reaching the barrier of birds, Twilight lighting the largest firework. Still, one raven made it past Dash, the bird crashing into Twilight's face. Thanks to the unicorn's headlamp the bird was burned away quickly, but it had been enough. The last firework slipped free of Twilight's levitation, falling towards the beach below.

"NO!"

Twilight's sudden cry made Dash glance back, the pegasus seeing the falling firework. Performing a maneuver that would have made the Wonderbolts proud, Dash turned hard, going into a dive as she chased the firework.

The air at Dash's hooves began to condense and build, the pegasus' eyes watering as she pushed herself to catch the firework. It was within feet of hitting the ground when Dash nabbed it, pulling an abrupt turn.

The rescue was punctuated with a single, cascading boom as Dash shot back up towards the swarm of birds, her tail and mane forming a rainbow behind her. Below, just above the lake, a cascading ripple of rainbow color spread out, glowing in the night. For the third time in her life, Dash had performed a sonic rainboom.

Dash took as best aim as she could as the rocket began to ignite in her grip. It burned her a bit, but with Dash's aim the "Celestia's Fury" firework shot straight for the cloud of ravens. It struck home, bursting into the largest firework explosion Twilight had ever seen. The radiant golden colors spread out, waving spikes taking shape as the firework's light cut a huge hole in the wall of ravens. The end result, a sparkling reproduction of Celestia's cutie mark, a regal sun, shown brightly in the night, shining like the true sun for a few brief moments before the burning powders that fueled the fireworks were used up.

"YEAH!" Dash called as she continued to fly skyward, blasting past Fluttershy and Twilight as she arced in the air, the brightly-colored rainbow she was forming standing out like a beacon of hope in the night. Twilight and Fluttershy couldn't help but cheer, their eyes fixed on the rainbow.

It was a bad place to have their attention focused, because while a huge hole had been punched in the flock of ravens others still remained and they dive-bombed at the pair. Using their bodies like missiles the ravens through themselves at Fluttershy, and after a few hit the pegasus her wings faltered.

Fluttershy lost her grip on Twilight, the pair separating as they fell to the lake. A pair of splashes punctuated their landing. Dash, hearing the splashes, chanced a look back, expecting to see her friends come up for air. Twilight and Fluttershy, however, didn't come back to the surface even after several long seconds.

"They will never find each other in the dark," the twisted voice of Nightmare Moon called out from the still-raging shadow tornado in triumph. "Equestria is mine!"

All the remaining ravens turned their attention on Rainbow Dash as the twister itself began to move in on her. The pegasus was still riding the speed boost of breaking the sound barrier, but as she bobbed and turned to avoid the ravens they began to box her in.

Dash kept her eyes on the lake below, hoping... wishing that her friend would surface. But she didn't see anything. She circled and swooped, even as the ravens began throwing themselves in the pegasus' path. Still, Twilight and Fluttershy never surfaced.

"How could you hope to save Equestria or your friends when you can't even save yourself?" Nightmare Moon taunted. "You shall all be consumed by my darkness."

Dash looked about, the ravens surrounding her on all sides and the shadowed tornado drawing closer. She didn't know what happened to Twilight and Fluttershy; the worst fear Dash had was that they had drowned. Still... at the moment Dash knew that no matter what had happened to her friends she wasn't going to get back to the record store. The darkness had her surrounded; she wouldn't be able to keep herself safe the entire flight back to Emblem.

So Dash made a decision. The next best thing she could if she wasn't able to escape. To go down fighting. To kick Nightmare Moon in the flank, which at the moment meant directly attacking the huge, shadow tornado.

Spreading her wings, Dash slowed herself down to just below the speed of sound, making a hard turn as she flew straight at the shadowed tornado. Dash smiled, feeling the friction of the air as she once again came close to breaking the sound barrier.

"This is for my friends," the pegasus whispered to herself as she flapped her wings with the last bit of strength she could muster. The pegasus dove into the black tornado, and just as she was enveloped by the darkness the sound barrier snapped, another cascading rainboom cutting through the night air.

The brightly glowing colors tore at the tornado, making it break apart and disappear as Nightmare Moon wailed in pain. Dash heard the scream, and in her last moments smiled at the blow she had managed to land against the darkness.

The ripple of the rainboom spread out further and further, slowly dissipating into the night, but there was no rainbow shooting out from the rainboom itself. No trail of colors that would have trailed behind Dash as she flew. The light from the rainboom had been strong, but the darkness Dash had dove into was deep. Deep enough that it was able to envelop her before the light burnt it all away.

The shadowed ravens began to spread out into the air, their enemies now gone from the night wrapped world of Equestria. The scene grew peaceful again as well as dark. The stars themselves seemed to be blinking out, the moon losing its luminescence. One would have expected to hear Nightmare Moon's laugh on the wind, her victory assured. Yet, the darkness deepened in silence, as if the one guiding had become stone cold and heartless.

As the world grew darker and darker, a single shape floated gently on the water, getting carried towards the shore. It brushed up onto the sand, getting drawn back out into the water by the next wave before being thrown far enough up onto the lake shore that it would remain still.

Applejack's cowpony hat, wet and alone, sat in the sand of the lake shore, the only thing left behind by the six friends who had first come to the peaceful Wintergreen Forest. It sat, the lake water splashing at it gently as the world faded, and was consumed by solid darkness.

Twilight's eyes snapped open, the unicorn breathing deep as she got to her hooves. She looked around, expecting to be surrounded by water, but instead there was nothing. There was literally nothing. All she could see was black. She could hear nothing. She was numb to the world, unable to feel the ground beneath her hooves or even the air moving in and out of her lungs. There was nothing... nothing but darkness.

The unicorn opened her mouth, calling out... if only to end the silence... but the silence continued. The unicorn lifted a hoof to her throat, trying to speak again. Her vocal cords were vibrating, she was breathing out, her lips were forming the words, and yet there was nothing.

Well... almost nothing. Despite being unable to see, hear, feel, or smell anything, Twilight did feel something... a sixth sense causing her body to tense. Something felt threatening, dangerous... a terror welling up in Twilight she couldn't understand. She wasn't afraid of the dark, at least not before all the crazy things that had happened. There was nothing there... nothing to be afraid of.

Yet there was something, and it was starting to affect the unicorn. Her breathing became rushed; she turned her head and tried to look around for anything, but she might as well have not turned her head at all. There was nothing... nothing... nothing but the dark.

The unicorn began to walk, then jog... then and soon she was sprinting as fast as her hooves would allow her. She just wanted to escape, escape whatever was causing the terror and panic inside her. But she couldn't, she couldn't even tell if she was really even moving at all. Her legs struck against something, she was pushing herself forward, but there was no way to tell if she was moving at all.

She needed to find something, anything. She'd been happy with a paper clip, a bug... literally anything to give her a frame of reference, to give her something to focus on besides the darkness. Twilight tried to light her horn, hoping to shine the light on her own body and at least see herself... but either the magic wasn't working or the darkness was eating up the light.

Twilight's panic rose, the unicorn starting to tear up as the terror squeezed the heart in her chest. She was scared... scared out of her mind, and she didn't understand why... which only scared the unicorn more. Was this what it was like to be Taken? To be so wrapped in constant fear but unable to escape? What kind of horrible creature would want to make ponies suffer like that?

She needed to get out, she needed to escape. She needed it more than she had needed anything else in her life. The panic was at its boiling point, Twilight stumbling a few times before tripping over her own hooves. She fell, feeling the pain of hitting whatever ground she had been running on but not feeling the ground itself.

The unicorn didn't try to get up, bringing her legs in as tightly against her body as possible as she shut her eyes. She wanted to escape, she wanted to get away. She... she was starting to wish it would just end. Anything... anything would be better than the darkness... even death.

"No, you must not sink any deeper. *Koooh...kssssh.*"

Twilight bolted up, eyes flying open as she looked into the darkness. There, something had appeared. It was a figure, floating above her as if suspended in water. The figure was built like Twilight had seen Alan in her dreams, standing on two legs with two arms, but this figure was wearing a bulky, solid metal suit. The figure also wore a helmet with a few glass windows, but despite this Twilight couldn't see the figure's face. The only thing that came out from behind the glass was a solid, constant white light.

"Who... who are you?"

"I am Thomas Zane. *Koooh...kssssh,*" the figure replied before bubbles jetted out from the heavy metal suit. Twilight now realized the figure, Thomas, was in a diving suit, the sound of his breathing and the bubbles verifying this fact.

"Where am I?"

"You are in the Dark Place. *Koooh...kssssh.*"

"The Dark Place... you mean the place where Alan was trapped?"

"Until he wrote himself into Equestria, yes. *Koooh...kssssh.* This is the place where the darkness lives, a world infinitely deep... *koooh...kssssh...* where, if you're not careful, you can sink into oblivion. *Koooh...kssssh.* I was able to catch you before you sank too deep, but you must hurry if you wish to save your friends."

"My friends; they're all right?"

"For the moment, yes," Thomas replied. "Their light keeps them on the surface. *Koooh...kssssh.* But soon they shall begin to sink. *Koooh...kssssh.* Soon, they will be beyond rescue."

"Can't you save them, like you saved me?" Twilight asked, getting to her hooves so she could stand and talk with Zane.

"No. *Koooh...kssssh.* I cannot move freely through this place, not as freely as you do. *Koooh...kssssh.* It was by luck I was close enough to you to stop your descent. *Koooh...kssssh.*"

"But... I don't understand... the necklaces... they were supposed to..."



"*Koooh...kssssh*. The necklaces served their purpose, at least the one told in the song by the Old Gods of Asgard. *Koooh...kssssh*. They gave you the strength, the courage, to plunge into the darkness. *Koooh...kssssh*. They may yet serve a purpose, but they are no weapon against the dark. *Koooh...kssssh*."

"But..." Twilight struggled, looking down at the necklace. This... this trinket was supposed to be the the thing to save them. The necklaces were the sun's strength... but Zane was right. The way the song was worded... the necklaces didn't have to be the strength. They had found their courage in Celestia's bedroom as well.

"What now?"

"*Koooh...kssssh*. Hope still burns, there is still light in the dark. *Koooh...kssssh*. Find your friends, find your strength and courage. *Koooh...kssssh*. With them the darkness can still be turned back."

"How?"

"I will guide you, as I guided Alan through his own story. *Koooh...kssssh*. But first you must know more about the darkness. *Koooh...kssssh*. You must simply be willing to fight, to continue the struggle... and the story can continue."

Twilight turned her head, following Zane as he floated around her. It was a bit bewildering, seeing him floating like he was a mile underwater while she stood there and breathed like she was on dry land. Still, those thoughts were secondary in the unicorn's mind. If what Zane said was true... while the necklaces weren't the answer there was still a chance to save her friends, the princesses, Equestria.

"What do I need to know?" Twilight asked, a spark of determination in her eyes.

"The Dark Place and the Dark Presence are one and the same, just as every Taken is also the Dark Presence. *Koooh...kssssh*. It is a thing not bound or held to a single physical form. *Koooh...kssssh*. The Dark Presence exists where the darkness does and vice versa.

"To Alan, Nightmare Moon was another Dark Presence. While that was not true originally, it is now. Nightmare Moon is the new face of the Dark Presence. *Hoooh...kssssh*. Alan hoped he could outwit the darkness, write a story that ended happily. *Koooh...kssssh*. A foolish hope... the darkness is far older and more cunning than any of us. It cannot be so easily defeated. This is evident in the fact that the darkness was able to force Alan to put himself into the story. *Koooh...kssssh*."

"You make it sound like the Dark Presence wanted that."

"It did. *Koooh...kssssh*," Zane replied. "Besides myself, Alan is the only other person that's been able to fight back the darkness. It feared him... feared he'd be able to stop it from taking over Equestria after it had waited so long for a physical form."

"A physical form?"

"It is one of the few weakness the darkness holds. *Koooh...kssssh*. The Dark Presence must have a face. *Koooh...kssssh*. In my and Alan's world, it wore the face of my love Barbara Jagger... *Koooh...kssssh*. A face it had to steal. A face it lost when Alan defeated the Dark Presence. *Koooh...kssssh*. Equestria, however, gave the dark presence a new mask to wear... *koooh...kssssh... in Nightmare Moon.*"

"So, that isn't really Nightmare Moon?"

"It was, at first. *Koooh...kssssh*. But everything in the Dark Place comes at a cost. Nightmare Moon gave herself to the darkness so that she could use it to take over Equestria, so she could rule. *Koooh...kssssh*. But, to do this, Nightmare Moon had to give up parts of herself to the Dark Presence so she could use its power.

"Every time she acted against you, Nightmare Moon gave up more. *Koooh...kssssh*. Now, in her final attempt to keep you from reaching this place, Nightmare Moon has become hallow... *koooh...kssssh... filled with Darkness. Koooh...kssssh*. She is nothing more than a mask for the Dark Presence to wear. *Koooh...kssssh*. That is what you now face. *Koooh...kssssh*. Not the Mare In The Moon as you knew her but a far older evil."

"But... then how can we stop her?"

"Stop her with the light, with purity. *Koooh...kssssh*," Thomas Zane replied. "The darkness lives and exists in chaos. In the unknown and in corruption. *Koooh...kssssh*. Anything pure can harm it. *Koooh...kssssh*. Light in this place is merely the metaphor for purity. *Koooh...kssssh*. It is why Alan was able to defeat the darkness using an old broken light switch. The switch represented the pure, innocent memories of Alan's childhood. *Koooh...kssssh*. Of a gift from his mother to scare away the monsters in his dreams.

"Even my light is not light. *Koooh...kssssh*. My light is the purity of clarity, a light gained once I came to understand the Dark Place as it truly is. *Koooh...kssssh*.

"And you contain such purity yourself, Twilight Sparkle. *Koooh...kssssh*. It is a purity that you have already used once before defeat the true Nightmare Moon. *Koooh...kssssh*. A purity that you and your five friends hold together. *Koooh...kssssh*. A purity that forms the greatest power of your world."

"The Elements of Harmony!"

"Six pure virtues. *Koooh...kssssh*. Honesty, laughter, generosity, compassion, loyalty, and the magic of friendship. *Koooh...kssssh*. They will be your weapon and your light in this world. This is why you must save your friends quickly. *Koooh...kssssh*. It is not only for their own sakes. It's only with them you can hope to set things right, to reshape destiny. *Koooh...kssssh*."

"But how do I find them?"

"You are the lynch pin of the Elements of Harmony, the sixth element that binds the other five together. *Koooh...kssssh*. Trust in the purity of that, of your own light against the darkness, and it will show you to your friends. *Koooh...kssssh*."

"What about the necklaces?" Twilight asked, looking down at the moon pendant.

"Those carry the purity of childhood memories, much like the clicker. *Koooh...kssssh*. They hold the power to guide you to the ponies who treasure them. *Koooh...kssssh*. The princesses must be found... *Koooh...kssssh*... for if they are left in the darkness your world will wither under an endless night. *Koooh...kssssh*. Still, the princesses are not sinking as quickly as your friends. *Koooh...kssssh*. The other elements of harmony must be found first. *Koooh...kssssh*."

"What then? When we find the princesses will we be able to escape?"

"Yes, but Equestria would still be doomed. *Koooh...kssssh*. The only one that can fix Equestria is the one that wrote the story that doomed it. You will need to find Alan, but the darkness is guarding him closely. *Koooh...kssssh*. It fears the writer, and is trying to drive him to insanity once again. *Koooh...kssssh*. To save Equestria, you will need to fight the Dark Presence head on to free Alan.

"The Dark Presence will not be easy to defeat. *Koooh...kssssh*. Since Alan defeated it, the Dark Presence has been guarding itself closely. Still, you have the strength to do it. *Koooh...kssssh*. Now, I must leave you to your task. There is another I must save, who is sinking into the dark... whose light will be necessary for the final battle. *Koooh...kssssh*."

"Remember, the light is inside you. Keep it on, and you can defeated the darkness. *Koooh...kssssh*."

With that the mysterious Thomas Zane floated away, and when Twilight blinked her eyes as she found herself in a different place. The all-encompassing darkness that had once surrounded her was replaced with a sort of half-darkness. The light from her horn was now illuminating the unicorn as well as the rough, cracked dirt beneath her. Twilight could hear, smell, feel, and see again, and while she hadn't realized it the terror that had been gripping her had been dissipated. She was just simply calm, as if speaking with Thomas had driven away whatever was imposing the panic on Twilight.

The unicorn got to her hooves, looking about. Beyond the solid bit of ground she was standing on, the darkness seemed to come in two tones. There was a pure blackness that seemed to rise up from the ground just beyond the reach of her light, hanging in the air like ink in water. The rest of the world was black as well, but a duller gray. Just enough that she could make out the swirling masses of black around her.

It was ethereal... almost in a way tragically beautiful... and generally kind of creepy.

Twilight ventured a few steps, seeing that the darkness rising from the ground dissipated under the light of her horn. It was a comforting thought, that the unicorn wouldn't have to trudge through the soupy-looking dark. Still, she didn't know where to go.

Still, the words Zane had offered the unicorn still rung fresh in the unicorn's mind. She needed to trust in her own purity, her own virtue of magic and friendship. Twilight shut her eyes, thinking about her friends... she wanted to save them, find them... rescue them from the dark. Twilight grabbed onto this feeling mentally, like it was a butterfly in her hooves.

When Twilight opened her eyes next she saw that trails of light had formed from her horn. Five trails, colored orange, white, blue, pink, and yellow respectively. The thin, wispy beams of light stretched out into the darkness, and Twilight knew where the lines lead. She began to trot, choosing to follow the orange light first.

"Don't worry girls, I'm coming."

## Offer a Warm Heart to Those Lost in the Dark

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It took some time, but Twilight eventually reached the end of the orange trail of light that was coming from her horn. And there, at the end, she found what she assumed was Applejack.

The farm pony was lying on the ground, body completely covered in shadows, but she wasn't a Taken. No, a Taken would have jumped to its hooves and attacked Twilight as soon as she had gotten close. No, this was really Applejack, just encased in shadows. The unicorn could only imagine that she was wrapped in darkness as well until being freed by Zane.

Now, Twilight had the perplexing problem of trying to do the same for Applejack. Zane hadn't given her the details of how to free someone, but spoke like the unicorn would know or be able to figure out what to do.

Stepping closer, Twilight lowered herself down so she was lying near Applejack. The farm pony was curled up, legs tight against her chest, and Twilight could make out a discernible tremble. She was really, really scared. For a moment, Twilight's anger flared as she was unable to understand how anything sentient, even the Dark Presence, could do this kind of thing to a pony. Still, it was a rage Twilight pushed to the back of her mind as she leaned in close.

Zane had had spoken to her at first, it was his words that let her realize he was there. Maybe she just needed to talk to Applejack.

"It's okay, I'm here."

"What... Twilight... oh, heavens girl, it's good to hear your voice. Where are you?" Applejack replied, the orange pony still wrapped in shadows but getting to her hooves.

"I'm right beside you."

"Where? I can't see you."

"Relax, I'm front of you," Twilight reassured. "What's the last thing you remember?"

"Before ending up in this nasty darkness... I was in that alley, and all those birds flew into my face. Then... then there was pain. Worst darn pain I've ever felt, even worse than the time I cracked some ribs at the rodeo. Then... I woke up in this blackness. Couldn't see, feel, or hear nothin'... and I don't know why but I've never been so scared in all my life... until I heard your voice. Now... I reckon I don't even remember what I was scared of."

Twilight smiled. "That's good, but you're not out of the darkness yet. We need to, well... basically we need to turn on your light."

"Twilight, I hate to break it to ya but I ain't got no light on me. No flashlight, lantern, not even a match."

"Your inner light."

"My inner light? Twilight, are you going all philosophical on me?"

"Yea... it's kind of how this place works."

"Shoot... was never that good at philosophical stuff. Still, I trust ya. I'll do whatever you want."

"I want you to think of a memory, one time where you were perfectly honest with somepony and it felt good. Like the time you saved me from falling off the cliff, and you convinced me to let go because you promised me that I'd be safe, that it was the honest truth."

"Yea... I remember that. I could tell how scared you was, but I knew I couldn't hold onto you long enough to explain that Dash and Fluttershy were going to be able to save you. Not without both of us getting pulled over the side. Still, even when you hardly knew me... you trusted what I said, and it felt good to know that you were willing to trust in my honesty."

Twilight smiled, seeing the darkness around Applejack start to waver. "Good, I want you to hold onto that memory, just close your eyes and hold onto it."

It took a few moments, but the darkness began to unravel, fading until only the orange cowpony was left. Applejack still had her eyes shut, straining herself to think about that night. Twilight couldn't keep herself from chuckling a little before putting a hoof to her friend's shoulder.

"You can open your eyes now, Applejack."

"Wha... well shoot, not exactly Equestria but a country mile better than where I was," Applejack said as she looked around. She then turned to Twilight, a big smile on her face. "Still, it's awful good to see you Twilight. By my reckonin' I had to be in that dark for weeks..."

"Well, it wasn't weeks... but right around twenty-four hours."

"Just a day... shoot, felt longer than that," Applejack said, scratching her head, only to quickly glance up. "What the... where in tarnation is my hat?"

"You lost it when you were taken. Still, we tried to keep a hold of it."

"Tried..."

"The last time I saw it Fluttershy had it, but that was before we came to this place."

"Well, puts my mind a bit more at ease known she's the one been taking care of it. So, where is Fluttershy... and for that matter, where are we and what are we doing here? ...and why are all those funny lights coming out of your horn?"

"I'll explain, but on the way. We've got to go find the others too."

• • •

It didn't take long and soon the six friends were reunited, Dash being the last since she was the last to be taken. Never had the ponies been happier to see their friends. For some, it was like having their friends being brought back from the dead, since none of the ponies had ever been exactly sure that being Taken wasn't just another way to say a friend was killed.

"So," Dash began, having been filled in on roughly what had happened. "What now?"

"Now we need to save the princesses," Twilight said. "From what Zane told me, the necklaces we found in the castle can point us to them, since the necklaces represent a fond childhood memory for both Celestia and Luna. A pure memory."

"Yes, that is correct. *Koooh...kssssh.*"

Twilight and all her friends turned, seeing the floating figure of Zane just above them.

"Who is that?"

"And what garish thing is it wearing?"

"This is Zane. Don't worry, he's a friend."

"Yes, and you are right Twilight. *Koooh...kssssh.* It is time for your friends to free the princesses from the darkness. You, however, have another task."

"I do?"

"Yes *Koooh...kssssh.* My attempts to save another from the darkness have failed. The darkness is holding me back, keeping me from her. *Koooh...kssssh.* Her light is necessary; without it there is no hope of defeating the Dark Presence, which currently wears the face of Nightmare Moon. *Koooh...kssssh.*"

"It's wearing her face... oh, that sounds positively ghastly!" Rarity commented

"Yes, it is. *Koooh...kssssh.*"

"But, won't my friends need my help to waken the princesses?" Twilight asked.

"The light from their five traits... *koooh...kssssh...* their five virtues are enough to hold back the darkness. They must only find the princesses and then help them escape the dark. *Koooh...kssssh.* There is no hope, however, unless we save this other. *Koooh...kssssh.* I can guide you to her, but then I will have to act as a decoy for the Dark Presence. *Koooh...kssssh.* Buying you the time you need to offer a warm heart to one who is lost in some the deepest parts of the Dark Place."

Twilight looked back over her shoulder. "What do you think guys?"

"Don't worry about it Twi, we'll go get the princesses," Applejack reassured. "I just want to make sure you trust this here Zane person."

"Yes, he is a tad creepy, dear."

"Zane is the one that saved me; he could have just left me in the dark if he wanted," Twilight answered, taking off the moon pendant and using her magic to secure it around Rarity's neck. "Don't worry girls, I'll catch up with you later."

"You got it, sugarcube... but, uh... how do we make these here things work?"

"They are a manifestation of childhood beliefs. *Koooh...kssssh.* To give them power, simply remember a pure childhood memory where you believed in something... *koooh...kssssh...* even though it may seem childish."

"OOOH... Oooh, like Santa Hooves? No, the Tooth Fairy. Oh, wait, even better, the Cupcake Pixie."

"Who or *what* is the Cupcake Pixie?"

"Silly, she's the little cupcake-sized fairy that makes all cupcakes and other baked goods so scumdiddlyumptious... well, except the time Applejack helped me in the kitchen when she was all tired. Those were definitely *not*scumdiddlyumptious."

"Yes... *koooh...kssssh...* something like that," Zane replied before landing on the ground in front of Twilight, the heavy metal of his suit sending a small shock wave through the ground. "Now, we will have to dive very deep very quickly to reach the pony we seek. While we dive... *koooh...kssssh...* the darkness will try to overpower you. *Koooh...kssssh.* You must keep the light on inside... if you don't then I may not be able to bring you back out of the depths. *Koooh...kssssh.*"

Twilight nodded. "I understand."

"Then we shall begin to dive."



"Okay, so, how does this work do you hold my hoof or -" Before Twilight could finish the world faded into black around her, Twilight once again feeling numb to the world. She began to get a sense of sinking, and the terror that once filled the pony began to spring for anew. Twilight's breathing began to accelerate to a panicked state.

"Remember," Zane offered, even though he too had faded into darkness. "Keep the light on inside. *Koooh...kssssh*. It's what will keep the darkness at bay."

Twilight squeezed her eyes shut, even though it really had no effect on what the unicorn was seeing. She then focused, or at least tried to focus, on the fond memories she had with her friends. It was, however, more difficult than before. When she thought of the memory the first time, when Zane freed her, she wasn't contending with the fear at the same moment. Zane had stopped the terror in Twilight, allowing her to think clearly.

Now, however, the terror was pressing and demanding to be at the forefront of Twilight's mind. It was a struggle, like a mental pushing contest. Twilight tried to focus on her memories, of meeting her friends, of the good times and laughs they had together. About the many lessons of friendship she had learned from her stay in Ponyville.

The terror, however, pushed back with equal force, and it began to infect Twilight's memories. Mutating, the fear went from just something general to a fear of losing her friends. Twilight's imagination began to betray the unicorn. She was able to see her friends walking away, turning their back on her. She began to feel hopeless, like she'd never have another friend as long as she lived.

"Keep the light on... you're letting the darkness win. *Koooh...kssssh*."

Twilight gritted her teeth, her mind literally at war with itself. Her friends wouldn't just leave like that. It was a fear, but an unfounded one. The terror then started to offer reasons why her friend would leave. Because they thought she was too nerdy, because she was such a shut-in. Because they were afraid of her and her magic after the Ursa Minor incident.

Good memories were turned against Twilight, forcing the unicorn to find fresh ones... and she was starting to run out of ammunition.

"Just a little farther... only a little deeper. *Koooh...kssssh*. Hold onto the light, use the strongest memory you can."

Strongest... Twilight's mind froze up a bit. What was her strongest memory... what was the moment she was happiest to have friends, when her friends have proven that they wouldn't abandon her? Then... a spark. A spark much like the one Twilight remembered from the faithful day. The memory of the fight with Nightmare Moon, when Twilight saw the Elements of Harmony be shattered. She had feared the worst, lost hope... but then she heard her friends... and she felt the spark inside. The spark of magic, of friendship.

This memory seemed to do the trick, the terror welling up finally getting pushed back. Twilight thought she heard Zane laugh a little, almost a chuckle to himself as the terror subsided fully and the unicorn realized it didn't feel like they were going any deeper.

"We're here. *Koooh...kssssh.*"

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Twilight opened her eyes and found herself someplace she didn't expect. She was in a stone hallway, completely barren of furniture but, then again, Twilight could only see the part of the walls directly around her, which were illuminated by her unicorn light. Anything beyond a certain distance was just pitch black, as if the world didn't exist beyond the light.

"This is the prison the Dark Presence made for the pony you seek. *Koooh...kssssh.* You must find her in this place, but move quickly. *Koooh...kssssh.* I will not be able to keep the Dark Presence distracted for long. *Koooh...kssssh.*"

With that Zane's presence and heavy, scuba diver breathing was gone... but instead of a pressing silence Twilight did hear something. It was quiet, very quiet... something so quiet you're not sure you're really hearing it or if it's just your ears playing a trick on you.

It was coming from down the hall, and after straining her ears Twilight allowed herself to move in the direction of the sound, if only to make it out more clearly. She kept casting her eyes about the darkness in front of her, glancing back from time to time as well. The darkness felt threatening, dangerous... unfriendly. The hallway as a whole giving Twilight the sensation she just didn't belong.

It took some time, Twilight walking slowly due to the ominous feeling she was getting, but the noise finally grew loud enough for Twilight to discern what it was. It was quiet, distant... but discernible.

It was crying... the crying of a very small pony... a filly, or maybe even a foal.

A new haste entered Twilight's hooves when she realized the nature of the sound. She trotted, her feet clipping and clopping against the hard stone of the mysterious hallway, which just seemed to stretch on forever without any doors or furniture. It was just a ceiling, two walls, and a floor that just kept going and going.

At least until Twilight drew close to the crying, and suddenly found herself face to face with a heavy wooden door. The crying was emanating from behind the barrier, and Twilight only lingered a moment before stretching out her magic, opening the latch and pushing the heavy door open. Whoever had been crying gasped at the creaking of the door hinges, falling silent as Twilight moved into the room.

It was a bedroom, a fairly comfortable looking one, but completely dark. The furniture and decor was toned in purples and blacks, something that might have looked very pretty and welcoming room when the lights were on. In the dark, however, many things in the room seemed to take on very harsh shapes, Twilight unable to deny that some of the shadows were looking a little too much like evil things staring back from the dark.

Guiding her light about the room, Twilight eventually took notice of something moving. It was in the bed, a very small bulge beneath the covers... a foal. She was small, or at least appeared small in comparison to the huge, princess-sized bed she was in. The foal had the covers pulled up over her head, her hooves just barely poking out as she trembled visibly.

Twilight moved over to the bed as quietly as possible, but with hooves and a hard stone floor it's impossible to make a silent approach. At the sound of the hoof steps the foal in the bed ducked under the covers further, as if utterly terrified of Twilight.

"Hey, it's okay, you don't have to be scared," Twilight offered, making her voice as quiet and soft as she could, trying to emulate the tender caring tone Fluttershy used with her animals. "I'm not going to hurt you."

"Who... who are you?" The foal under the blankets asked.

"My name is Twilight Sparkle."

"Are you a monster?"

"No, I'm just a normal pony."

"She told me that anything that comes out of the dark is a monster, and that they would be mean to me."

"Well, I promise I'm not going to be mean to you. That and I'm not in the dark. In fact, there is a little bit of light coming from my horn. I bet you can see it, even from beneath the covers."

"It... it is brighter under here."

"See? Now why don't you come out?"

"You promise you're not a monster?"

"I promise. I'll even Pinkie Pie promise. Cross my heart, hope to fly, stick a cupcake in my OW!" Twilight flinched, biting back her voice. Darn it, she had to remember to be careful of that last part.

"Okay... I'm coming out... but just to look and make sure you're not a monster."

The foal began to crawl back towards the top of the bed. Twilight saw a pair of dark-toned hooves peak out from under the covers, followed by a unicorn horn and a deep, regal purple mane. A color several shades darker than Rarity's glamorous hair. Those were followed by a dark color coat and a pair of turquoise eyes.

"See, I'm just a regular old pony," Twilight offered, though she was squinting in the right eye from managing to hurt herself doing a Pinkie Pie promise again.

"I... I guess you look pretty normal," the small foal offered, inching herself a little further out from the covers. It was slow, but soon the little foal pulled herself all the way out and stood on the bed, staying as far away from Twilight from possible and refusing to meet the unicorn's gaze.

This was probably a good thing, because Twilight's eyes had narrowed in disbelief. The foal in front of her had a solid black coat and her regal purple mane flowed across her back and face like a sad waterfall, hiding part of her face much like Fluttershy's hairstyle... actually it was more akin to Pinkie Pie's hair the few times it fell straight.

Even with hair across half her face there was no hiding the foal's big, rich, turquoise eyes, which at the moment reflected how scared the little foal was. The eyes themselves, however, weren't shaped like normal pony's eyes. No, they were more diamond shaped, the pupils with dagger-shaped slits. They were eyes that bore more of a resemblance to a dragon's eye than a normal round pony eye.

The final features of the small foal were her unicorn horn and pegasus wings. She was an alicorn, an alicorn that was very, very familiar looking. Twilight had to rub her eyes, making sure she wasn't just seeing things, but when she looked back there was no denying what she saw. The resemblance was uncanny, perfect.

The little foal in front of Twilight looked exactly like Nightmare Moon. Well... at least what Nightmare Moon *would* have looked like if she was a foal.

"Um... so what's your name?" Twilight asked, trying to end the silence that had fallen on the room, if only to keep the foal Nightmare Moon from ducking back under the covers.

"I... I don't know."

"You don't know your name?"

"She didn't tell me what my name was. She just told me to stay in here, otherwise the monsters would get me."

"Who told you that?"

"I... I don't know," the foal whimpered. "I... I was all alone in the dark and then she found me and put me in here, and told me that if I didn't want to get lost in the dark I had to stay here. But it's dark in here too and I don't like the dark and she left me alone and... and..."

Twilight felt her heart breaking as she saw the foal starting to tear up. Even if she looked like Nightmare Moon, she was nothing like the evil mare who had plotted to plunge Equestria into an eternal night. Before Twilight realized what she was doing she was up on the bed, moving over to the foal as she hooked her hooves around her. The foal Nightmare Moon seemed to find comfort in this, burying her head in Twilight's shoulder as she cried.

"Shhhh... shhhh... it's all right."

"I don't like the dark..." the foal blubbered. "I don't like being alone... I don't like the cold either... but it's cold and dark and lonely in here and I don't *want* to be here anymore... but she said that if I leave the monsters would get me."

"Who told you all this?"

"She... she kind of looks like me, but... but she's all grown up and her mane is all black. She's scary, but she saved me from the dark and brought me to here so I could hide... but then she left me alone and I don't like being alone."

"Shhhh... it's okay," Twilight reassured, holding the foal a little more tightly. She could only imagine that the foal was describing Nightmare Moon, the real Nightmare Moon, the one that had embraced and then been taken over by the darkness. What kind of sick, twisted thing could scare such a sweet little foal?

"Listen, I know it was scary, but you don't have to be scared anymore. I mean, it's not dark in here anymore is it?"

The foal pulled her head away from Twilight's shoulder, looking about a bit. "Well... it isn't as dark."

"And are you still cold?"

"No..." the foal replied, snuggling a little bit more into Twilight.

"And you can't be alone anymore because I'm here."

"I'm not... but you're just going to go away like she did. You're going to leave me alone here in the dark and cold."

"Well... I do have to go back to help my friends, but that doesn't mean you can't come with me."

"No!" the foal wailed, shaking her head furiously at the thought. "She said the monsters would get me. She said they'd come out of the dark. That they'd come and get me. That they're waiting, just outside the door. "

"Shhhh... shhhh... I know, but the monsters won't be able to get you."

"They... they won't?"

"No, and you know why?"

"Why?"

"Because I'm going to be there, with my super special light spell," the unicorn replied, pointing a hoof at her horn.

"What... what makes it special?"

"It makes all the monsters go away," Twilight said with a confident smile.

"It does?!" the foal asked, perking up a bit as she rubbing the tears away from her eyes.

"Yep, that's how I was able to get here. It protected me, and I didn't see a single monster. It's really easy spell too. Would you like to learn it?"

The foal nodded, Twilight's smile widening a bit as she began to explain the spell. It really was a simple spell, one of the first Twilight had learned. It had gotten the unicorn in trouble a couple times when she had stayed up past her bedtime reading thanks to her own built-in night-light. Twilight was a little worried how long it would take the foal to get the spell. She was young and it had taken Twilight a little time to get it herself.

Still, the foal Nightmare Moon was as adept at magic as the royal sisters. While she struggled with her first few attempts, on the fifth try her horn snapped to light, a single point of light shining out from the very tip.

"I... I did it!" the foal said, a smile on her face.

"See? Now you don't ever have to be scared of the monsters ag-" The last words died in Twilight's mouth as the foal hugged her neck tightly.

"Thank you!"

"You're... you're welcome," Twilight offered, unable to keep the smile off her face. This foal was just so sweet, and she had been so scared. Twilight couldn't contain the happiness welling up inside her from the simple fact she had been able to make the foal Nightmare Moon feel better.

The pair just sat in the moment for a time, Twilight letting the foal be the one to end the embrace. "There, are you feeling better?"

The foal nodded her head.

"Good, but my friends are probably wondering where I am. I should be getting back, but I'd like it if you could come with me."

The little foal craned her neck, looking at the distant door and the darkness of the hallway beyond it.

"And you promise the monsters won't be able to get me?"

"Not if you keep using that super special light spell."

"But, what if the light goes out?"

"How about this?" Twilight began, climbing off the bed. "I'll let you ride on my back. That way, if one of our super special lights go out then the other can keep the monsters away."

"Okay!" the foal chirped, moving quickly across the bed before stepping onto Twilight's back. Despite her age the foal Nightmare Moon proved she had an amazing sense of balance. Perhaps it was part of being an alicorn, or maybe even just part of being part pegasus. Standing on clouds, after all, was probably more difficult than standing on a pony's back.

"So, are you ready?"

The foal nodded, and with a gentle smile Twilight began to walk slowly towards the door. They stepped into the hallway, and the foreboding feeling began to wash over Twilight again. Still, the unicorn took her time and walked slowly, looking over her shoulder several times to check on the foal.

Foal Nightmare Moon was scared; Twilight could tell by how tightly she was holding the unicorn's neck. Still, while she was scared, the foal didn't run back to the bed to hide under the covers. She stayed with Twilight, clinging to the unicorn's back and finding some sense of safety from the mare who had found her in the dark.

Eventually, Zane's presence returned... and while Twilight was thankful he had come back she was afraid foal Nightmare Moon would bolt at the sound of his breathing. Still, she instead just clung closer to Twilight, looking around for the source of the sound.

"It's okay, it's just one of my friends. I know he sounds scary, but he's really very nice."

"You promise?" the foal asked.

"Yes," Twilight replied before looking towards the ceiling. "Zane, are you there?"

"Yes. *Koooh...kssssh*. And you have done well, Twilight. You have found the light we need."

"Yes, but... who is she?"

"She is Nightmare Moon... *koooh...kssssh*... or at least part of the mare you once knew by that name. *Koooh...kssssh*."

"She's only part of her?"

"Yes, she is the embodiment of the last pure virtue that existed in Nightmare Moon. *Koooh...kssssh*. The one virtue that remains buried within anyone... *koooh...kssssh*... even those born from the malice, hatred, and jealousy of another pony's heart."

"What virtue is that?"

"Innocence... *Koooh...kssssh*... pure childhood innocence. *Koooh...kssssh*. The innocence we have before we come to really comprehend the unfair realities of the world. *Koooh...kssssh*. For some, the light gets covered up early; they are unable to enjoy the innocence of youth. Still, all are born with it... *koooh...kssssh*... and all still have it inside, preserved by their memories and brought back to the surface by interacting with children still young enough to enjoy it. *Koooh...kssssh*."

"But how could Nightmare Moon have any innocence? She was just the witch Luna became when she grew jealous of Celestia," Twilight asked as the tunnel faded around her, Zane pulling Twilight and the foal Nightmare Moon back up from the depths of the Dark Place.

"She was born of Luna, yes, but Nightmare Moon shares Luna's history. *Koooh...kssssh*. This is where the innocence originated. When the two were split apart by the Elements of Harmony, the innocence was split as well. *Koooh...kssssh*. No soul can exist without some light... and for Nightmare Moon the spark of innocence was the last shard of light in her black heart.

"And this is how Nightmare Moon fell to the darkness. *Koooh...kssssh*. To gain the power she desired she gave herself to the darkness, let it take and rip away pieces of her soul. *Koooh...kssssh*. This little foal here was one of those pieces, and without this small spark of pure virtue inside... *koooh...kssssh*... Nightmare Moon was consumed and became nothing but a puppet to the Dark Presence. *Koooh...kssssh*."

"In the Dark Place any part of a person can gain sentience and a physical form. *Koooh...kssssh*. When Alan went insane, the part of his mind that was still logical



and willing to fight gained a physical body of its own in his dreams... *koooh...kssssh...* and that part was able to fight back and regain control."

"I hope you don't expect her to fight," Twilight snapped, surprising herself a little at how protective she was of the foal.

"It is the only way. *Koooh...kssssh.* To defeat Nightmare Moon, to weaken the Dark Presence enough to free Alan so he can end the story and save Equestria... *koooh...kssssh...* the darkness that currently fills what remains of Nightmare Moon's heart must be replaced. *Koooh...kssssh.* Her heart is filled with darkness, and it can only be purged by the strongest of lights. *Koooh...kssssh.* The purist of virtues.

"That is the role this one has to play. *Koooh...kssssh.* A role that she may not survive. *Koooh...kssssh.* Now, the Dark Presence is near, it has sensed something going on in these depths. I must concentrate on getting you two back to the shallows."

With that Zane fell silent, even the breathing from his suit became muted and distant, even though Twilight still had the sense she and the foal were being pulled back out of the darkness.

"Twilight?"

The unicorn glanced back, seeing the foal Nightmare Moon slowly coming out from her hiding place beneath the unicorn.

"What is it?"

"Is... is my name Nightmare Moon?"

"Pardon?"

"Your friend kept talking about me and calling me Nightmare Moon... is that my name?"

"Well... kind of," Twilight admitted.

"I don't like that name... that's a scary name. I don't want to have a scary name."

Twilight settled herself down, lying on the black ground. The foal quickly curled up beside the unicorn, and it was obvious from her face that she was really troubled by the fact she had such a scary name.

"You know, you can change your name if you don't like it."

"But I don't know any other good names... besides Twilight... Can I have your name?"

"You could, but then what would my name be?"

"I don't know," the foal replied, leaning her head against Twilight's side as she used the unicorn as a pillow.

The unicorn couldn't keep a frown from moving onto her face. This foal, while once part of Nightmare Moon, was not the same pony. She was just a scared, innocent little filly that had been left alone in the dark. She was Nightmare Moon without the nightmare or even the moon. She was... like the night. When you take away the stars and moon, night still remains in its simplest form. Night, in pure simplicity.

Night... Twilight's literature-filled brain hung on this word as she thought back to many of the stories she had read. Both stories, plays, and poems that portrayed the night with different names, sometimes letting it play a character. One in particular stood out in Twilight's mind, a poem from an author she couldn't remember from some random collection of poems she had half read one night before going to bed.

*She walks in beauty throughout the night  
Upon her darkened flanks, the stars shine bright  
Upon her brow rests the blessed moon, full glory in the night  
Against her ebony mane, does the evening delight  
She is Nyx, she is the blank canvas of night*

The author's intent in the poem was to describe the beauty of a mortal mare, to try and woo her. It was a love poem, but at the moment it was inspiration.

"Hey, I've got a name for you," Twilight said, smiling as she leaned her head into the foal.

"You do?"

"Yes. How about we call you Nyx?"

"Nyx?"

"It's an old name for night. It comes from a distant part of Equestria."

"But isn't the night scary?"

"No, the night isn't scary. The night is beautiful, especially when the moon and all the stars are out. It's wonderful and amazing... just like you."

The foal giggled, cozying up beside Twilight as her eyes slipped shut. "I like that name..." Nyx said with a yawn. "Can I really have it?"

"Yep, it's all yours," Twilight replied quietly, watching as the foal began to drift off to sleep beside the unicorn. After being trapped and scared in the darkness for so long, it was no wonder somepony so young would be tired.

Without even realizing it, Twilight brought her head down, curling her neck around as she rested her head on the ground near Nyx. Maybe she was just as tired, or maybe it was because she was watching Nyx sleep... but Twilight was finding it hard to keep her eyes open. It was strange, to think she felt safe enough to sleep in the Dark Place... but between Zane and Nyx, the unicorn just couldn't resist.

Yet, as sleep overtook Twilight, a single thought rolled across her mind. An echo of something Zane had just said.

*"That is the role this one has to play. Koooh...kssssh. A role that she may not survive."*

Zane didn't really mean that, did he?

"I won't let you interfere again, Poet."

Twilight had not realized she had fallen asleep until she was jarred awake by the voice shouting out loud. It snapped both Twilight and Nyx awake, the young foal jumping up and grabbing hold of Twilight's neck while the unicorn herself looked around. She expected to see some monstrosity looming over them, but she could only see darkness.

"They shall both sink, sink into the depths and be swallowed up," the voice called again, and this time Twilight was able to hear it properly. It rung not as a single voice, but two voices speaking together. One voice was recognizable: it was the voice of Nightmare Moon. Still, she spoke only as an echo to the stronger thing speaking. A dark, rumbling voice that shook Twilight down to her very core.

And something else began to grab at her... fear, panic, terror from a source Twilight couldn't explain. It was something she had felt before, her memory fresh from the experience. When Zane had been pulling the unicorn into the deeper parts of the Dark Place she had felt this kind of creeping terror trying to overtake her. Nyx must have been feeling the terror too, the alicorn foal's grip on Twilight's neck was growing tighter and tighter.

Twilight could only think of one explanation: they were sinking... sinking back into the depths where Twilight had found Nyx. Zane only confirmed this, his breathing and voice sounding panicked as it reached Twilight's ears.

"The Dark Presence... *koooh...kssssh...* it's trying to stop us, stop you. *Koooh...kssssh.* It knows you have the light to defeat it. *Koooh...kssssh.* I can't save us all. *Koooh...kssssh.* You cannot defeat her like normal Taken. The darkness of this place protects her, and it is infinite. *Koooh...kssssh.* Taken are only destroyed when they are filled with light. *Koooh...kssssh.* Her heart is filled with darkness. You must turn on the light. *Koooh...kssssh.*"

A light clicked on below Twilight and Nyx, blinding the unicorn for a moment. When her eyes adjusted she looked down, and saw the form of Zane floating just beneath them. The light from the glass window in his diving helmet was growing brighter and brighter, and as it did Twilight gained a sense of being pushed upward. Zane was using his light to push them back up to the shallows of the Dark Place. Yet, as Twilight and Nyx ascended, the unicorn took notice that Zane looked like he was sinking... and sinking quickly.

"You are a fool, Poet," the voice from the dark taunted as Zane began to fade into darkness, only the light from his helmet still visible. "Your sacrifice will be for nothing. They will not be able to bring light back to Equestria. All you have done is let yourself succumb to the darkness."

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The darkness around Twilight faded, revealing the familiar landscape of the Dark Place. Twilight, now armed with a bit more understanding of the Dark Place, couldn't help but wonder if where she was now was the surface of the Dark Place. A thin, aged, stone crust that surrounded an endless sea of darkness below. That would explain why trails of blackness floated into the air from almost every crack in the earth.

Nyx was still clinging to Twilight's neck, eyes shut tight as if afraid of what she'd find when she opened them. Twilight lifted a hoof, trying to comfort the foal, both for Nyx's sake and also because Twilight had come to realize she was being choked by Nyx's frightened embrace.

As Nyx calmed down, Twilight let herself look around. Most of the terrain was what the unicorn expected, just more darkness and an endless horizon, but upon turning to look to her left Twilight was surprised to see something standing there. An aged archway, made of old tree limbs nailed crudely together. From the arch a sign hung that read "Diver's Isle", the lettering made out with small pieces of wood.

Twilight got to her hooves, using a bit of telekinesis to shift Nyx so the foal could still hold onto her neck but was also sitting on the unicorn's shoulders. She walked beneath the sign, stepping onto an aged wooden bridge that appeared to rise from the darkness as the light from Twilight's horn spread upon it.

The bridge was suspended over a swirling sea of darkness, and Twilight had to struggle to keep herself from looking down. Was that what she had just been in? What Zane was now sinking in? Twilight couldn't let herself wonder or even think about. She just focused on the bridge, finding a minor distraction in making sure each hoof step landed squarely in the center of a board.

It didn't take long to reach the end of the bridge, Twilight's hooves once again on solid ground. This ground, however, was different from the ground of the rest of the Dark Place. It was softer, and there were patches of grass and gray stone. The island in the sea of darkness also featured a cabin, and Twilight could hear the sound of something metallic ticking away from one of the windows.

"You are a strong one, little pony."

Twilight jumped a little, the ground shifting beneath her hooves. The island began to twist and mutate, shadows stripping across it as trees were knocked over and rocks were crushed. The island was stretched and pulled, like a giant piece of taffy, until Twilight suddenly found herself on the edge of large open field, easily a few hundred feet across.

The cabin rested on the opposite side of the open field, and was now covered in a black ooze that looked as thick as tar. It dripped and hung from the aged logs, covering every window and enveloping the cabin's front deck.

The voice, or rather voices, that had announced the sudden change to the terrain had been the same Twilight had heard minutes before. A deep rumbling voice echoed and mixed with Nightmare Moon's. The voice began to fill the air again as Twilight saw a figure rise out of the black ooze that engulfed the cabin.

At first there was no solid form to the figure. It was large and it had four legs, but beyond that the shape was undetermined. Yet, as the creature stepped completely out of the ooze and away from the cabin, its shape began to solidify. A pair of huge black wings, a long alicorn horn, and a waving black mane of inky darkness. A pony, equal in stature to Celestia with dragon shaped black eyes.

It was Nightmare Moon, or, as Zane put it, the Dark Presence that wore Nightmare Moon's face. Twilight couldn't deny that this vision of Nightmare Moon was far more frightening than the one she and her friends had faced down. The true, original Nightmare Moon had looked threatening, but at the same time regal. This creature, however, was just terrifying. There was nothing pleasing about her or its appearance.

"There are only a few that have ever been able to defy me. The poet and the writer. With their help you've survived my darkness... you've kept your light on. Now that both of them are gone, I wonder how long you can keep yourself from sinking.

"But I am merciful. I'll let you free yourself. You can just write a little story, and the words will carry you from this place. You can go anywhere you want, be anything you want on the other side. I'll let you write yourself free... if you hand over the foal."

"NO!" Twilight snapped without a second thought.

"Are you truly willing to give up your own chance at freedom for a foal you just met?"

Twilight stamped, lowering her head as she glared down Nightmare Moon. "If you want Nyx, you'll have to go through me."

"Strong... but ignorant. Very well... succumb to darkness."

With that the corrupted Nightmare Moon's mane flared out, the black tendrils spreading out into the air before lunging at Twilight. The unicorn lit up her horn, making the light shine as brightly as she could. The dark tendrils started to burn away, retreating from the light. Twilight smiled at this, meeting Nightmare Moon's black gaze... but the corrupted mare was only smiling.

"I am an old spirit... older than your princesses, older than your world... older than most worlds. I have spent eons in the darkness, waiting for my chance. I am, if nothing else, patient. Your light is strong, your pure virtue of friendship has shielded you from my minor efforts.

"But now, unicorn, you have my full attention, the full weight of the darkness bears against you. It saps your strength, your virtue weakens and will soon break like thin glass. Even now you struggle to keep up the light."

Nightmare Moon's black tendrils inched closer, testing the strength and power of Twilight's light and proving that it was diminishing. The unicorn, seeing this, grunted as she forced her light out again, sweat starting to build on her brow.

"You can struggle, you can fight... but your strength is fleeting, as are all mortal lives. Your precious purity, your virtues, crumble in time. Corruption is only inevitable and the only thing eternal. I am eternal, I am patient... I can watch you be born and die like you would watch a grain of sand falling in an hourglass. I am patient... and my patience has allowed me to seize your world. With it I can spread to others, once I have broken the writer. I shall plunge all into darkness, all shall come to fear my new face."

The tendrils began to encroach again, Twilight's light weakening as Nightmare Moon continued to muse, the strange two-tone voice rumbling from her mouth carrying undertones of victory.

"How long can you last? Not for very long, I'd say. Yes, it won't be long until you will be sinking into the depths, just as the poet now sinks."

Twilight grunted, pushing her light out again but finding it harder and harder to keep the light from her horn up. She didn't know why it was so hard, why it was such a strain. Maybe it was because Nightmare Moon was pushing the tendrils of her mane against the light... Twilight wasn't sure but the unicorn was forced to drop to her front knees.

The unicorn chanced a glance over her shoulder, seeing Nyx trembling there. The foal happened to open her eyes, and her gaze locked with Twilight's. Zane had said it was Nyx's light that could defeat Nightmare Moon, defeat the Dark Presence. Yet... in the very next breath, Zane said that defeating Nightmare Moon would be something Nyx might not survive.

Twilight's light continued to fade, the black tendrils inching closer and closer, eager to strike. She couldn't keep them away, she needed help... but her friends were nowhere nearby and Zane was sinking into the darkness. Nyx was the only one.

"Nyx." Twilight grunted out, trying to keep her voice strong even as the strain of keeping the light up was starting to exhaust her. "I need your help."

"My help?"

"I need you to try and light your horn; use that super special light spell I taught you. It will help make this monster go away."

Nyx's eyes drifted, turning to Nightmare Moon who stared black with her cold, solid black orbs. The foal's grip on Twilight's neck tightened, but the alicorn nodded her head. She closed her eyes, screwing up her face as she tried to concentrate. A few sparks danced from her horn, a light trying to take shape but failing.

Again and again Nyx tried to light her horn, but she couldn't. She looked back at Twilight, tears in her eyes. "I... I can't. I'm too scared."

Twilight grunted, her strength starting to fail. The light from her horn barely encompassed her and Nyx at this point, the dark tendrils of Nightmare Moon's mane within inches of being able to strike at some part of the unicorn. She tried to find some hidden reserve of strength, tried to make her light shine brighter.

Light was only a metaphor for purity in the Dark Place. Twilight tried thinking of fond memories, of her friends, of anything that had once given her strength against the darkness. Each thought, however, was burnt up like paper in a roaring fireplace. It helped fuel Twilight's light, but only for a few brief moments before it was spent. The corrupted Nightmare Moon was truly the master of the darkness. Times before Twilight's light had been enough to keep the darkness at bay, but now it was like trying to use a single candle to light the entire royal palace.

Her light was just too weak.

"Twilight!" Nyx wailed as a few of the dark tendrils started to lash out, leaping into the burning of the light as they tried to reach the foal. She wanted to fight back, she wanted to protect Nyx, but Twilight didn't have the strength.

She sank to the ground, sweat pouring off her brow as her light dimmed further. She just couldn't keep it lit, not against the Dark Presence's direct assault. It was just too much. She needed help. She needed Zane or Alan, somepony who could help face the darkness. She needed...

"TWILIGHT!"

Her friends! The unicorn spun her head around, to the rickety bridge that had carried her and Nyx onto the island. Celestia, Luna, Applejack, Rarity, Dash, Fluttershy, and Pinkie Pie were all racing towards her. Those who could fly were in the air. Celestia's horn glowed like a miniature sun, her light blanketing half of the island while Luna, Fluttershy, and Dash followed in a tight V formation. Applejack, Rarity, and Pinkie Pie all galloped across the bridge and up to the unicorn's side, putting themselves between Twilight and the corrupted dark moon.

"How did you find me?" Twilight asked as she watched Celestia and Luna land near the center of the island, ready to face off against the corrupted Nightmare Moon while Dash and Fluttershy landed nearby.



"Well, it was hard not to notice ya, sugarcube. We were able to see that light of yours from a mile away in this dark place."

"Though you can imagine how worried we were when we saw it was starting to get dimmer. We raced over just as fast as we could."

"Yep, because I knew you were fighting the meanie-mean pants that controls this place!"

"How did you know that?"

"*Duh*, my Pinkie Sense told me."

Twilight laughed a little, smiling at all her friends. "Of course, I know -"

"Do you think you will fare any better?" the corrupted Nightmare Moon called, interrupting Twilight. The six mares of the Elements of Harmony turned, looking as Nightmare Moon stared down Luna and Celestia. "Do you truly believe you can defy me in this place where my darkness is bottomless, in this realm that is my home and prison?"

"Considering how scared you look, I think we can," Celestia replied, scraping at the ground with one hoof, proving the princess was ready for a fight. Luna had also lowered her head, the moon princess' horn starting to glow with white, pale moonlight. The corrupted Nightmare Moon seemed to take this challenge, pawing at the ground once herself. With that final exchange, the three alicorns charged at each other, Celestia focusing her light into a strong, straight-forward beam while the darkness that was Nightmare Moon's mane began to launch itself in an attack. Luna kept her light glowing all around, the moon princess acting as a shield for Celestia as the sun princess focused her light for the attack.

"Come on, sugarcube," Applejack said, the farm pony turning her eyes away from the ensuing fight. "Let's get you back on your hoo-" Applejack's voice died, the farm pony titling her head as she took notice of the black trembling mass clinging to Twilight's neck.

"Uh, darlin', you got something on your neck."

"Oh, don't worry, it's just Nyx."

"Nyx? What's a Nyx?"

"Not a what, Dash, a who," Twilight said, turning her head back. "It's okay, Nyx, these are my friends. They're here to help us. Nothing bad is going to happen while they're here."

Nyx didn't move for a few moments, but then slowly pulled her head out of Twilight's mane, her big turquoise eyes looking around at the five ponies that now encircled her.

The expressions around the group were mixed. Fluttershy and Pinkie Pie were leaning in and smiling, as if Nyx was the cutest little thing they had ever seen. Rarity, Applejack, and Dash were not as drawn in, exchanging confused looks.

"Hi Nyx, my name is Fluttershy."

"Hi..." the foal replied weakly, starting to gain courage despite being in front of so many strange faces. "Are you really friends of Twilight?"

"Oh yes, we're her best friends."

"And you're not monsters?"

"No, we're just regular ponies. Now, sweetie, would you mind getting off Twilight's back?" Fluttershy asked. "We need to help her back to her hooves and it will be easier if you stand over here by me."

Nyx glanced at Twilight, the unicorn offering a smile and nod. With that the foal released her grip on Twilight's neck, jumping down off the unicorn's back and stepping slowly over to Fluttershy. With Nyx out of the way, Applejack and Dash moved to help Twilight up, the unicorn thankful for the assistance.

"Thanks girls."

"No problem, sugarcube, but... uh, you feel like tellin' us just where you picked up that little one?"

"Or just who the heck she's supposed to be? I mean, you call her Nyx but she looks an awful lot like -"

"I know who she looks like, Dash, and she kind of is that mare. She's the last good piece of Nightmare Moon, a piece that the Nightmare Moon we knew gave up so she could use the power of the Dark Place. But, in giving up that piece, Nightmare Moon let herself become just a puppet to the darkness... a mask for something called the Dark Presence to wear."

Applejack huffed. "This place is as confusing as an apple that tastes like an orange."

"I know Applejack, but... it's okay. Even if it is confusing I know what we have to do. If we can beat Nightmare Moon, then we can free Alan. He's the one that started the story, and he's the one that can write a happy ending."

"Well, is that all? I would have imagined it being far more difficult than just beating Nightmare Moon again. After all, we've done that before, haven't we?" Rarity offered.

"Yep, it will be easy-peasy," Pinkie Pie chirped.

"Do not underestimate the darkness."

The six mares and one foal jumped, spinning around. The corrupted Nightmare Moon was standing in the center of the field, the black tendrils from her mane holding onto the limp, beaten forms of Luna and Celestia. The mare gave her head a toss, throwing the princesses at the hooves of the friends. Fluttershy quickly moved forward, hovering over the princess before putting an ear to each of their chests.

"They're still breathing," Fluttershy announced, letting everyone breath a sigh of relief.

"Yes; after all, they're no use to me dead," Nightmare Moon called, beginning to walk towards the six mares. "After all, I cannot make Taken out of the dead. No, they shall live, and become filled with my darkness. They shall be my Taken, my soldiers, just like all of you.

"Except you, unicorn. You and that foal are threats to me, threats that can serve no purpose. I let the writer and poet live after their rebellion because they are of use; they can dream me free with their words. You, however, serve no such purpose.

"No, I intend to kill you two," Nightmare Moon said in her two-toned voice. "So that nothing can stand to threaten my darkness."

"I'd like to see you try," Dash snapped, putting herself right between Twilight and Nightmare Moon.

"Yea, you want to get to Twilight, you gotta go through us."

"All of us," Rarity added as she, Pinkie Pie, and Fluttershy joined the wall of ponies.

"And you think you can stand against the darkness?"

"Twilight helped us escape your icky, mean darkness before. She just had to remind me of my laughter."

"And me of my compassion."

"My generosity."

"My honesty."

"And my loyalty," Dash finished.

"Here's the thing," Twilight said, her friends stepping aside so the unicorn could join the line. "Zane told me how this place works. Light here represents purity, and me and my friends each represent six of the purest virtues a pony can have. And together... we are the Elements of Harmony."

As if answering Twilight's call, six points of light snapped to life around the ponies. They turned and spun as, from the light, things began to take shape. The necklaces and tiara that Twilight and her friends had once used before manifested themselves in the darkness, moving to their respective owners. Each trinket glowed brightly, casting out a light that forced the corrupted Nightmare Moon back.

The six ponies began to float, eyes closed as the ancient magic they summoned began to build. The power of their virtues began to infuse in the magic, the light becoming bright. Twilight opened her eyes, pupils encased in pure light as the six ponies were caught up in a spiraling rainbow. The rainbow shot into the air, spiraling before it shot down at the corrupted Nightmare Moon.

"YOU KNOW NOT THE DEPTHS OF DARKNESS YOU FACE!"

At the shout of its master the Dark Place itself seemed to rise up. The inky shadows that surrounded the island and hung in the air surged, gathering around the corrupted Nightmare Moon before surging up at the rainbow. The two clashed, a shock wave and boom cutting in the air as the two forces collided.

For a time the strength was stalemated, but then the darkness began to inch its way up the rainbow. At the source of the beam, bathed in light, the six mares began to grunt and focus, trying to urge the rainbow further. The Dark Presence that wore Nightmare Moon's face had to do the same, struggling against the immensely powerful Elements of Harmony.

Yet, the darkness continued to overtake, inching its way up the rainbow until it reached the sphere of light. Then, Nightmare Moon reared back, spreading her wings and slamming her hooves down on the ground. This caused the darkness to swell, to surge, tendrils shooting out and engulfing the light. There was a crushing sound, a crackling sound, and then the darkness broke through the magic to reach the six mares inside.

When the darkness receded, Twilight and her friends dropped from the sky, crashing to the ground below. Each was covered in scratches and sore spots that would turn to bruises in time. They weren't unconscious, but none of them were able to summon the strength to stand. They all just laid on the ground, trying to recover.

Nightmare Moon stepped towards them, folding her wings as she wore a gentle smile, her black eyes glancing at the defeated six while moving towards Twilight.

"How... how didn't we..." Twilight asked, once again trying to stand but flopping to the ground.

"Surely you would have learned by now. Remember all the Taken you've fought? What the poet and writer have told you? The darkness cannot be defeated from the outside."

*Her heart is filled with darkness. You must turn on the light.*

Twilight's eyes narrowed as Zane's last words echoed in her mind. The Darkness lives inside the Taken, the darkness lived inside of Nightmare Moon. The Dark Presence could only be destroyed where it lived, and that was on the inside.

"Now you understand... but far too late," the corrupted Nightmare Moon mused, smiling devilishly before rearing back, lifting her front hooves high above the unicorn.

"Now, slip into the darkness of death." The Dark Presence, at this point, then brought her hooves down, bringing all her strength and weight down on Twilight in what would turn into a series of brutal, lethal blows.

"And together... we are the Elements of Harmony."

Nyx could only watch, eyes wide in awe as lights appeared around Twilight and her friends. The foal, upon seeing Nightmare Moon approaching, had run away from Fluttershy and hidden behind a rock. She had been content to just hide there, but upon hearing all of Twilight's friends standing up to the nasty monster of a mare, Nyx couldn't keep herself from peeking out from her hiding place.

Twilight and her friends were now floating as Nightmare Moon retreated back towards the center of the island, the light that was encompassing the mares driving her back. Nyx could feel herself smiling, watching anxiously as the mares were surrounded by a swirling rainbow. It was the first time Nyx had ever seen such beautiful colors, their light and beauty reflecting in her eyes.

The rainbow then lunged out, diving at Nightmare Moon, and Nyx was about to cheer. This had to be what got rid of the darkness, made that monster of a mare go away. It was so beautiful, bright, and the power it radiated sent a shiver down the foal's spine. There was no way it could fail.

But then the shadows began to gather, swirling before leaping out to meet the rainbow. The sound made by the darkness and rainbow crashing together made Nyx duck back behind her rock, but it wasn't long before the alicorn foal was once again watching the events transpire. The anxious tension in her chest was overwhelming; she couldn't take her eyes off the rainbow as it fought to push back the darkness.

But then the darkness began to win, it began to overwhelm the rainbow. There were a few times the rainbow was able to regain ground, but in the end the darkness continued to push back the mystical spectrum of colors. The darkness enveloped the rainbow as well as the light that was producing it. There were a few moments of lingering, where the darkness just held the rainbow and light in its grip... and then a resounding cracking noise began to fill the air. The cracking grew louder and louder until there was a final crack, the darkness crushing the light.

Nyx watched in horror as the shadows withdrew and six ponies began to fall. She saw Twilight, unable to look away as the mare hit the ground, bounced, and then landed. Twilight and all her friends were still, perfectly still. Nyx was terrified, wanting to know why they weren't getting up. Still, some small relief came when she saw all the ponies trying to shift. They were still moving, but they were badly hurt and unable to stand.

And Nightmare Moon was moving towards them. The monstrous mare had a victorious grin on her face as she stepped among the ponies, eventually finding her way to Twilight. She began to say something, leaning in close to Twilight as she spoke. Nyx couldn't hear what was being said, but whatever it was Twilight didn't seem to like hearing it. The unicorn's eyes narrowed, as if she had just had a terrible realization.

Nightmare Moon lifted her head, offering a few final words... and then she began to rear up. Her hooves waved in the air, her wings spread, and Nyx knew what was about to come. The foal burst out from her hiding spot, galloping as fast as her hooves would carry her. She was too young to really fly yet, and so Nyx could only run.

Once... Nightmare Moon brought her hooves down on Twilight once, putting her full weight into the blow. She then began to rise up again, preparing for another strike. Nyx's eyes began to stream with tears, the foal alicorn begging her hooves to run faster. She was still so far away.

Twice... this time there was a sound, the sound of something snapping. The tears in Nyx's eyes began to blur the alicorn's vision, but she didn't stop to clear them. She just kept running, galloping to try and save twilight.

Thrice... another cracking sound. While Nyx's mouth and lungs were too busy breathing to utter anything, the foal's mind was screaming. She was mentally begging Nightmare Moon to leave Twilight alone. She was willing to give herself up. The foal had heard what Nightmare Moon asked. She was willing to let Twilight go for her, and Nyx was willing to give herself up.

And again... Nightmare Moon's hooves fell on Twilight, the unicorn lying limply. Her friends were all struggling, trying to get to their hooves, trying to stop the brutality the corrupted Nightmare Moon was engaging in. They were trying to save her, but were unable to do anything. Nyx was the only one able to move, able to help.

She had to make the monster go away, had to save the one pony that had been nice to her. Twilight had carried her out of the darkness. She had made the dark, the cold, and loneliness go away. Twilight had even given the foal a name, a beautiful name... a name she loved.

Without even realizing it Nyx began to gather magic in her horn, her eyebrows furrowing as tears streamed openly down her face. She'd make the monster go away, she'd use the special light spell Twilight taught her. She's put all of her magic into it and it would make the monster go away, just like Twilight said. It was a special spell, it was a spell that would save Twilight.

The corrupted Nightmare Moon was lifting her hooves, ready to bring them down a fifth time on Twilight, only to be stopped as a young voice screamed at her.

"GO AWAY!"

Nyx was mere feet away from Nightmare Moon when she jumped into the air and screamed. Her horn was just starting to come to life, the first beams of light shining out into the darkness. The corrupted mare tried to jump back, trying to avoid the little foal like she was a plague, but it was too late. Nyx was on a collision course.

And the second they made contact Nyx disappeared, her body fading away like it was a puff of smoke. At the same moment, Nightmare Moon began to wail in pain, stumbling back. Beams of light began to shoot from her mouth and eyes, as if her once dark interior was now completely filled with light. There was a final cry of pain, then an explosion of light that blinded and knocked out all the ponies. It burnt away much of the darkness that clung to the island, including the black ooze that encased the cabin.

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"Alan... Alan... *koooh...kssssh*. Wake up."

"Zane?" The author groaned, his head swimming.

"Yes Alan, it's me. *Koooh...kssssh*."

In short order Alan realized a number of things as he got to his feet. First off, he had feet again... he was human again, though he didn't remember how he had been changed back. He was back in the cabin, but not in the study with the typewriter. No, he was in the living room, the front door standing open in front of him.

"What happened?"

"You were Taken by the darkness... *koooh...kssssh*... but Twilight and her friends were able to beat the Dark Presence. It's over. *Koooh...kssssh*."

"But how did I become human again?"

"The Dark Presence wanted you to write for it, but knew you couldn't work a typewriter with hooves. *Koooh...kssssh*. It gave you back your humanity hoping it could drive you to insanity and use your writing to spread to other worlds."

"Well, I guess I can't complain too much," Alan said, twiddling his fingers before looking ahead. The writer's gaze fell on the cabin's open front door, beyond which he could see the twisted landscape that had once been Diver's Isle as well as the horizon of the Dark Place. The writer then felt his heart skip a beat as he saw a number of brightly-colored bodies lying around on the ground.

"Oh no..." was all Alan could say before breaking into a run. He jumped down the steps of the cabin, sprinting as hard as he could. He ran for the nearest pony, which happened to be Rainbow Dash. He dropped to his knees by the pegasus, carefully picking up and cradling her in his arms.

"Come on, come on, wake up. Rainbow Dash, come on... don't be dead. Please don't be dead."

"Uhhh..."



"Oh thank God," Alan said, smiling as the pegasus in his arms began to move.

"Man, feels like I crashed into a tree... make that a dozen trees," Dash grumbled, opening her eyes and realizing she was being held by a strange creature.

"Who the hay are you?"

"Easy Dash, it's me."

"Alan? Yeesh; and I thought you were ugly as a *pony*."

Alan held back a laugh. Yeah, humans probably weren't that visually appealing to ponies. "What happened?"

"We were fighting Nightmare Moon... or whatever that thing was that looked like Nightmare Moon. We were using the Elements of Harmony, but something went wrong. It stopped the elements, and then we all fell. Then Nightmare Moon..."

At that Dash's eyes narrowed, the pegasus flailing as she tried to get out of Alan's arms. A hoof to the face made the writer drop the pegasus. It didn't draw blood, but it was close, and while Alan held his nose, Dash raced over to where Twilight was lying.

"Yikes, warn a guy," Alan groaned, rubbing his sore nose as he followed Dash. Still, before he was even halfway to Twilight, the pegasus was up in the air, flying in front of his face.

"Alan, she's not breathing!"

It took the writer a moment to process what the pegasus had said, the processes slowed by the fact Dash's nose and his were barely an inch away. Still, the moment the seriousness of the statement clicked into place, Alan pushed past Dash and dropped to his knees by Twilight. He held his hands over her, mind panicking as he tried to think of what to do. CPR... no, you couldn't give a pony CPR... could you?

With nothing better to do, Alan first put his ear next to Twilight's mouth and nose, listening. He couldn't hear the sound of air moving, confirming what Dash had noticed. The unicorn was not breathing. Next Alan moved his head, putting it to Twilight's chest. He listened, straining his ears... but the chest was silent. No heart beat.

The writer went to scoop Twilight up in his arms, but upon touching the unicorn the coldness in her body made him draw back. She was cold... dead cold... like she hadn't had a heart beat in several minutes...

Twilight was dead.

"Alan?" Dash asked as she saw the writer stand up. He looked back at the pegasus, and didn't have to say a word. The truth was written across his face. Dash almost dropped out of the air, shocked to the point she forgotten to keep her wings flapping. Alan did his best to try and catch Dash, when he saw the pegasus start to drop out of the air. The writer managed to catch Dash, but only enough to slow her fall and ensure he crashed down onto the ground with her.

After seeing Dash hadn't hurt herself dropping out of the air, Alan pushed himself back off the ground, offering the pegasus an apologetic look before turning away as the pegasus moved forward slowly, until she was sitting right beside Twilight's body.

"I'm... I'm going to go check on the others."

The writer began doing as he said, moving to each pony to make sure the others were still alive. Applejack, Rarity, Fluttershy, Pinkie Pie, and Fluttershy all woke up with just a little shake from Alan... all of them doing much the same thing Dash did. Freaking out a bit at seeing what the writer really looked like, and then running over to check on Twilight while Alan continued his work.

After waking Fluttershy, Alan was drawn to a large black mare who was lying in the very center of the island. He didn't recognize her, though the mare was the size of Celestia. All black, with a moon cutie mark and a purple, constantly flowing mane that was dotted with stars. Of all the ponies, the black mare was the only one that didn't look injured.

She awoke quickly at Alan's touch, her dragon shaped turquoise eyes locking on him for a moment. Something in those eyes made Alan back up, giving the mare room as she got to her hooves herself. She didn't say a word, hardly even looked at Alan. Her gaze instead shifted to Twilight, and then five colorful ponies that now surrounded her. The mare then turned, walking off to a corner of the island where she choose to stand, staring into the darkness that surrounded the island.

Unsure what to do about the black mare, Alan went to wake up Luna and Celestia. They had taken the worst beating of the ponies. Luna was able to get up on her own but Celestia was just a bit too weak, Alan needing to help the alicorn to her hooves. Something that wasn't exactly easy considering the princess was just as tall as Alan.

With the princesses up now everyone gathered around the still, cold body of Twilight. Alan chose to stand a few feet back, knowing it wasn't his place to be right at Twilight's side considering he had hardly known the unicorn... that and it was his fault all this happened. No, that area was to be reserved for her closest friends and the princesses, the seven ponies gathered around with solemn faces and eyes brimming with tears.

Alan, however, was not alone as the black mare move up beside him. He took a glance at her, her turquoise eyes hard and cold as they had been when she had first awoken. But... now they seemed a little redder, and Alan could just barely make out the trails of fallen tears across the black mare's cheeks.

The moment lingered for a time until Zane came floating over from the cabin, the poet diver still hanging in the air like the entire Dark Place was underwater, even as everyone else stood on dry land.

"Alan, the Dark Presence has been defeated... *koooh...kssssh...* but you know just as well as I do that it will return soon. *Koooh...kssssh.* You only have so long to finish the story, to undo the damage done."

"I... I know Zane," Alan said, "Just... just a little longer."

"Undo the damage?" Rarity asked, perking up her ears to the conversation.

"Yes, with the Dark Presence defeated, the story Alan began can now be finished, and by defeating the darkness credit has been earned. Credit Alan can use that to pay the price for writing Equestria out of the darkness, to set everything right."

"Everything? So, does that mean -"

"No. *Koooh...kssssh,*" Zane replied flatly. "Twilight gave her life fighting the darkness; she died in the Dark Place. Everything done in the Dark Place has cost, and to write her back to life would cost too much."

"How much?"

Alan and Zane turned, this question coming from the black mare that stood beside them.

"What do you mean? *Koooh...kssssh.*"

"How much would it take to write Twilight back to life? How much would have to be given?"

"Why do *you* care?" Dash snapped, turning a cold, tear-marred glare at the black alicorn. "*You* were the one that killed her. It was *your* hooves that... that did *this.*"

"No."

"NO?!" Dash yelled, jumping up into the air. "What do you mean 'no'?! You were the one that did it! We watched you! Nightmare Moon, you killed Twilight."

"I AM NOT NIGHTMARE MOON!" the black mare snapped, spreading her wings. Dash jumped back in fear, ducking behind her friends. Still, the black mare's rage quickly died, her eyes once again becoming cold as she looked upon the lifeless purple unicorn.

"I'm not Nightmare Moon anymore..." she said, her voice much softer. "I'm... I'm just Nyx... just Nyx..."

"And that's why I ask, how much would it take?"

"More than you're willing to give. *Koooh...kssssh*," Zane replied.

"Don't assume what I am and am not willing to give!" Nightmare Moon snapped. "My wings, my horn, my royal blood, my immortality, even if my life if it must be given... I will relinquish it without pause... just write her back to life."

"I still don't think -"

"Zane," Alan interrupted, "You and I both know how the Dark Place works. There's light and there's darkness, cause and effect, guilt and atonement. But the scales must always balance. Everything has a price... and usually that's something that works against us.

"But, this time, it's a truth that has a silver lining. When everything has a cost... then everything has a price. It *is* possible to write Twilight back to life, there *is* some price that can be paid.

"I don't know what the price would be to bring Twilight back," Alan admitted, turning to meet Nyx's gaze, "...but, considering an immortal princess is willing to give herself up I say it's at least worth a try."

"*Koooh...kssssh. Koooh...kssssh. Koooh...kssssh.* Very well," Zane finally offered, turning as he began to float back to the cabin. "But if you are going to attempt this, I am going to help. We will write the ending to this together... and ensure that the scales come out balanced."

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Twilight opened her eyes, cringing at the bright light. She lifted a hoof, shielding her eyes as they adjusted. When the light was no longer painful, the unicorn began to look around, taking in her surroundings.

She was lying in a bed, and the bright light that had awoken her was coming from the window. It was the sun, the great golden orb hanging just below the edge of the window as it ascended up into the sky.

Twilight grumbled, trying to pull the covers over her head and go back to sleep. The lingering desire for sleep, however, was abruptly blown away. A voice shouted out, filling the room and making Twilight bolt up from bed in a panic.

"TWILIGHT'S AWAKE!"

Pinkie Pie, who Twilight now noticed was standing next to her bed, had been the one to shout out loud. That shout quickly brought all of her friends running, galloping into the

room with huge smiles on her face. Twilight was soon surrounded, everypony asking about a million questions, most of them simply different variations of "Are you all right?"

"My little ponies!" Celestia chuckled as she and Luna strode into the room. "Please give Twilight room to breathe."

The others managed to corral their excitement as the princesses approached the bed, both smiling widely.

"It is good to see you, Twilight."

"It's good to see you too. I guess this means we won."

"Yes; thanks to you and your friends, the darkness was beaten back."

"And Alan?"

"He is still trapped in the Dark Place, but at the moment that is where he needs to be. It is only from that place that Alan has a hope of returning to his own world."

"What happened anyway? The last thing I remember was us trying to use the Elements of Harmony."

There was a tense moment, the ponies looking about the room. Still, Applejack continued the story, the farm pony telling the full and honest truth, including the explanation they had been given by Zane for what exactly happened when Nyx touched the corrupted Nightmare Moon. It was a long story, but Twilight hung on every word... how could she not when she had literally been dead for most of what had happened?

In the end, Nyx had been the light that was able to defeat the Dark Presence. She was a piece of Nightmare Moon, so, when the foal touched her corrupted other self, the two pieces were reconnected. Nyx became part of Nightmare Moon once again... and that little foal became the light inside Nightmare Moon's heart. A light strong enough, burning bright enough, that it filled her dark heart with light and defeated the Dark Presence.

"So, if I died... how am I sitting here?" Twilight asked.

"It was Nightmare Moon, the real Nightmare Moon... or rather, Nyx," Celestia answered. "In an act I would have never expected from my sister's dark other form, Nightmare Moon offered herself up as payment so that Alan could write you back to life with the end of his story."

"She... she did that?"

"Yes, she did, Twilight."

"But why?"

"That I don't know. None of us dared to ask Nightmare Moon why she was doing it, partially in fear that she'd change her mind."

"What about everything else? Did Alan fix everything?"

"He did; Equestria has been perfectly restored. We didn't even miss a day. After we were freed from the Dark Place we all surfaced in Shadow Moon Lake only an hour after I had set the sun. No days have been missed and no pony is missing. It as if Equestria was never touched by the darkness. The only part that remains is our memories of it."

"Which I reckon is goin' to give the lot of us plenty of nightmares. Still, it's awful good to have you back Twi."

"Yes, don't know what I would have done without you, darling. Being the only unicorn in this rag-tag group isn't something I'd look forward to."

"And your awesome spells have helped us out more than once."

"And parties just wouldn't be as fun without you, right Fluttershy?"

"Yes."

Twilight smiled, looking across all her friends. It was over... it was really over... the darkness had been beaten back... and still, as Twilight shared a group hug with the ponies near and dear to her... something gently nipped at the back of her mind.

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Pinkie Pie turned the palace into an all-day party central to celebrate Twilight waking up. All of Emblem was invited, even though most ponies didn't understand why there was a celebration being held. Still, they didn't ask and no pony told. The darkness was to be just a bad nightmare to those six ponies and two princesses that had to endure it. It would be nothing to anypony else.

Still, when the party began to die down, Twilight excused herself from the castle, stepping out the front gates and following the path down to the lake shore. She was exhausted from all the partying, and the late afternoon breeze felt good in her mane.

As Twilight strolled the shore, she looked over the dark lake, its water's tinted black by the hot springs in its depths. The lake had been the gateway for the darkness, but now it was once again just a body of water. There was no foreboding feeling, not a thing wrong with it... Equestria was as it should have been.

Twilight dropped to her haunches, looking out across the gently rippling surface of the lake. She should have been happy, relieved, and grinning ear to ear like Pinkie Pie. Still, while Twilight was all those things, she was also just a little sad. Throughout the day, from one time to another, Twilight couldn't help but think of Nyx. The little foal... the innocence of Nightmare Moon.

That and Twilight was also trying to understand why the real Nightmare Moon would have literally given up her life to save the unicorn. It baffled Princess Celestia and Luna, and they were the ones that knew the Mare in the Moon the best. Celestia by dealing with her, Luna by once being Nightmare Moon.

Twilight was so lost in thought she didn't notice something wash up on the shore beside her until it brushed against her flank. Looking down, Twilight saw it was a small basket, soaking wet like it had just been underwater. The bottom of the basket had a number of balloons tied to it, undoubtedly what kept it afloat on the water.

Tilting her head, Twilight craned her neck and looked inside the basket. There were two things, a blanket and a scroll. Both had a shimmer to them, a shimmer Twilight recognized as a waterproofing spell. Despite the fact the basket itself looked half-drowned, the magic of the spell kept the scroll and the blanket presciently dry.

Glancing around, Twilight wondered where the basket came from... but there was no other pony to be seen. Curiosity getting the better of her, the unicorn's horn lit up as she picked up and undid the seal of the scroll. It unfurled in front of her, the unicorn's eyes moving to the top of the page.

*Dear Twilight Sparkle,*

*Thank you for being a warm light in a life filled with only seething hatred, vengeful desires, and cold loneliness. I can't atone for all the wicked I've done, but at the very least I hope that what I'm about to sacrifice will be enough to ensure you a long happy life. To at least release me of the guilt and pain caused by knowing that you died at my hooves.*

*Until you found me in that bedroom I had only known darkness, only known the cold of night... had only known the pain of loneliness. From the moment I was born of Luna's jealousy to the moment you found me in the darkness... that is all I've known. An entire existence in the dark. You were the one that drove that all away. Brought light to the dark, brought warmth to the cold... the one that drove away the loneliness.*

*And in doing all that you saved me from myself, from the dark, vengeful thoughts that caused me to trust and accept the power of the darkness.*

*So, again, thank you... and I just pray that you will live... that I can at least atone for my greatest sin... the sin of hurting the one pony that cared about me... and who I cared about in return.*

*Sincerely,*  
*Nyx*

Twilight's eyes lingered on the last word of the page, the carefully drawn cursive letters that formed Nyx's name. Pain welled in the unicorn's heart, but at the same time she was happy. It was a strange mixture. She was sad that Nightmare Moon... no... that Nyx gave her own life to save Twilight... but Twilight was happy for her still. Nyx had found peace in the end... she had found herself. She had become a mare far greater and better than Nightmare Moon could have ever hoped to be.

Twilight lowered the scroll, was about to set it down when she noticed something written on the back. The unicorn turned the scroll over, eyes moving across the words written on the opposite side. The handwriting was different, and just barely legible. Still, Twilight was able to make out what was said.

*Dear Twilight,*

*Sometimes, it doesn't cost as much as you would think to atone for a sin. Nyx was willing to give up everything, including her life, to bring you back, but Zane and I found that was more than was needed.*

*We took only what was necessary to balance the scales. Roughly one thousand years of experience, one thousand years of power gained through study and practice. One thousand years of wisdom. One thousand years of painful memories, and one thousand years of maturity.*

*Taking back everything she gained over a thousand years spent plotting revenge on the moon. We took it all back, a life lived but not the spark of life itself.*

*Now, we leave the rest to you. Take good care of her, Twilight.*

*Sincerely,*  
*Alan Wake*

*P.S. Open the blanket.*

Twilight felt the air catch in her lungs, eyes moving over to the basket. Was it really possible? She swallowed once, setting the scroll down as her magic shifted to the blanket. The unicorn lifted the folds, and a huge smile spread to her face at what was lying in the basket.

Nestled, sleeping soundly in the basket, was a foal alicorn... solid black with regal purple mane. It was Nyx, looking exactly the way Twilight first found her. Though, not exactly the same. Nyx had been terrified in the dark place, but now she was sleeping soundly... a smile on her little face.



Being exposed to the late afternoon sun made Nyx stir, the foal grumbling before yawning and opening her eyes. She sat up in the basket, mane a mess from her bed head. She stifled another yawn, still half asleep as she looked around at her new surroundings. She looked to her right first and then swiveling her head around to the left, at which point the the foal met Twilight's eyes.

Nyx then laid back down in the basket, obviously intending to go back to sleep. There was a few moments when the foal's eyes slid and remained shut, only for them to snap open. Her dragon shaped eyes locked on the purple unicorn smiling down on her, a grin exploding onto her face.

"TWILIGHT!"

The alicorn leapt from the basket and tackled Twilight, hugging the unicorn's neck. The pair began to roll in the sand, laughing at the top of their lungs. They rolled a good several feet away from the basket before Twilight managed to stop the action, both of them completely covered in sand but never happier.

Twilight bent her neck around Nyx, embracing the foal as she held tightly to the unicorn's neck. It was then Twilight opened her eyes, looking out across the lake. She smiled, a gentle knowing smile. She knew Alan couldn't hear what she was saying, but still Twilight whispered, casting her words out to the lake.

"Thank you, Alan... thank you for the happy ending. I hope someday you'll be able to write one for yourself."

*Journal Entry 70*

*Somehow... I managed to do it. I wrote a happy ending to Creeping Darkness... though it wouldn't have been nearly as happy if Nyx hadn't been willing to sacrifice what she had. I'm just thankful that taking most of her memories and experiences, changing her back into the innocent foal Twilight met in the darkness, was payment enough to balance the scales.*

*And, if anything, this strange experience has given me hope and inspiration.*

*The hope comes from the fact that I was able to write a story with a happy ending, something I didn't entirely believe was possible when you're trapped in the Dark Place. It took a great cost, a fallen princess giving up a thousand years' worth of knowledge, experience, power, and memories... but it was possible to write a happy ending. It gives me hope that my own story, "Return", can also end happily as well... with Alice in my arms.*

*Twilight and her friends also reminded me of the power of friendship. As I write this it sounds silly or childish, and friendship doesn't have the same mystical power in my world as it does in Equestria. Still... friends are the ones that can help you through the tough times. Can help you find your way back, guide you through the dark.*

*I think this is why I've had trouble writing "Return". I've been focusing on writing myself out of the darkness, of finding my own way back to Alice... but I don't have to go it alone... I don't have to bring myself completely out of the dark. I just need to get myself halfway. Then, I can have Alice and Barry meet me there. They can help pull me back, bring me back, save me from the Dark Place.*

*As I sit here and write this, I can't help but think of Twilight Sparkle. I know I was the one that wrote those last lines into the story, her final words to me but... at the same time I can't deny it felt it was more like she was really the one saying it... and I was just the one writing it down.*

*I wish I could see them just one more time... to tell them thank you. Those ponies... they may have shown me the way home... shown me the way out of the dark.*

*My name is Alan Wake; I'm a writer. And I may just owe my own happy ending to six colorful ponies from a magical land called Equestria.*