

Past Sins

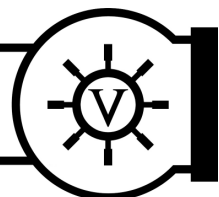
Pen Stroke

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PONY FICTION VAULT



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

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

For a long while, the unicorn had sat in utter silence on the edge of the pond with only a few nearby candles for company. The light from the tiny, flickering flames fell upon his coat and mane, which had been dyed from its natural color to a pitch black. Even his cutie mark had been covered by the dyes, his flank appearing utterly blank.

Only the quiet sounds of the forest were audible. There was the creaking of the trees, the shifting of the pond water, and the occasional buzz and chirp of insects. In all, it was a scene of tranquility, and it was just what the unicorn needed to prepare for the task of the evening. Yet, as he took in another deep breath, hoofsteps began to echo across the trees.

“Nexus, we're ready when you are.”

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

The pony who had interrupted gave a nod before disappearing back into the forest. Nexus waited for the hoofsteps to fade into silence before lighting his horn. His magic flowed freely, and he used the mystic energy to reach to his side and levitate a number of items into the air. He then looked skyward, fixing his gaze on the moon.

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

Nexus spoke the words slowly with a voice that carried the tone of a pony well practiced in preaching, whose words could inspire loyalty and devotion. It was a voice that had drawn great minds and strong bodies to the cause, though at the moment Nexus spoke only to himself as he lowered his head and touched a hoof to his chest.

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

The levitating items drew close to him and began to circle slowly. There was a cape, midnight blue in color, with white stars all across its surface that billowed as it moved through the air. Along with the cape were pieces of armor, all comprised of a grayish-purple metal. There were horseshoes, a neck brace, and lastly a chest plate which had a turquoise crescent moon set into its center.

“Let me bear your mane,” Nexus spoke as he drew the cape over his back, “both powerful and beautiful, a depiction of the endless sky. Let me stand in your uniform,” he continued as the armor began to secure itself to his body, “in the armor that pays tribute to your image and greatness. Let me be your agent this night, for it is you I serve above all others.”

The final piece of armor levitated towards Nexus: a helmet made of the same metal as the chest piece. The unicorn guided the helm carefully, bringing it down his horn until it fit snugly onto his head. “May your power be with me, for, tonight, you shall breathe and taste the cool night air for yourself. You shall look upon the world with eyes of your own, and no longer will you be forced to share a body with a weak foal as you have in the past. Tonight, you shall be your own mare, never again to be threatened by the Elements of Harmony.”

Nexus rose to his hooves and looked at his reflection in the pond. He now appeared the ultimate doppelganger of his mistress, and, like any eager acolyte, he was ready to bear witness to her power and knowledge. Through the efforts of him and his group, they would see their queen rise again. Yet it was only he that was allowed to look so much like the queen, to lead the spell that was about to be cast. It was his place of honor, one nopony would steal from him.

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

Mentally prepared, Nexus turned from the pond and began to walk into the forest. He followed a trail that connected to a nearby clearing, which came into view quickly. The clearing was occupied by several unicorns, pegasi, and earth ponies who were moving back and forth across the space as they constantly checked their work.

The ground had been cleared of snow, though a few piles were left dotted about the space. On both the exposed ground and on the piles of snow, there were wooden bowls filled with oil soaked powders. Paint had been employed to draw arcane lines of power,

and cloaked pegasi worked in the air above to push clouds together to hide the clearing from prying, skybound eyes.

All the ponies Nexus saw wore the black cloak of the order, except for three who stood giving orders: a pair of pegasi and an earth pony. They, like Nexus, wore the honored armor, though he alone wore the flowing, starfield cape and the helmet. Only he had the honor of wearing those vestments.

“How close are we, Night Wind?” Nexus asked as he approached the trio.

“Cloud cover is almost complete, and the pegasi only need a few minutes to get their bowls,” the dark purple pegasus answered, staring back at Nexus with her turquoise eyes. Such eyes were a sign of the order, a blessing that granted not just their majesty’s regal turquoise eye color, but also enlightenment.

“Good,” Nexus said before turning to the earth pony. “Stonewall, do you have the items?”

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

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

“Oh yeah, she just woke up,” the gray pegasus answered, “And boy is she scared!”

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

Gray Gale shrugged her shoulders nonchalantly. “Hey, it kept her from trying anything.”

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

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

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

Treading carefully, Nexus moved between the wooden bowls and approached the hogtied pony. Her violet coat was dirty from lying on the ground, and her dark purple mane was a rough mess. The sight of her like that made Nexus smile, and, once he was close enough, he used his magic to remove the bag on her head and reveal her terrified eyes.

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

“Who are you? What are you going to do to me?” Twilight Sparkle asked in a panicked squeak, just barely managing to find her voice. She struggled at the ropes around her legs and tried to use her magic to escape. However, not only had she been physically bound, but the metal brace secured around her neck kept her from making use of her magic.

Nexus laughed a little to himself and used his magic to pick Twilight off the ground. “Inquisitive, though I should expect no less from Celestia’s *star* pupil,” he said with a smug superiority. He then turned and began walking towards the center of the clearing as Twilight floated behind him. Ahead of him, the earth pony Stonewall had set up a metal pedestal, upon which he had placed the wooden bowl from his back.

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

“Are you *crazy!*?” Twilight asked while she twisted around in Nexus’s magic, continuing to try and free herself. “Nightmare Moon is *gone*. How can you serve somepony who is gone?”

“It is much easier than you think, Miss Sparkle. I will not, however, spoil the surprise. For the moment, all you need to know is that your... contribution is appreciated.” At that, Nexus replaced the bag on Twilight’s head. He secured it tightly before placing a sound dampening spell across the fabric which muffled Twilight’s continued protests

Leaving Twilight floating and thrashing in the air, Nexus walked over to the metal pedestal. He examined the contents of the wooden bowl set upon the tall, narrow metal table, and his eyes gleamed in anticipation. Inside the bowl were curled shreds of what looked like paper. They were black in color with a big, turquoise crescent moon adorning the largest of the pieces.

Nexus then turned his attention to a dagger resting beside the bowl, picking it up with his magic. The blade was fine, sharp, and clean. It had never been used, although Nexus intended to change that. He turned back towards Twilight, who was still twisting, flailing,

and shouting out muffled protests. He drew close, and, after lowering Twilight a little closer to the ground, Nexus proceeded to give the mare a swift kick in the stomach.

The kick quickly made Twilight stop flailing. She hung limply, trying to catch the breath that had been knocked from her lungs as Nexus moved in with the dagger. He drew the blade across part of Twilight's leg, leaving a very shallow wound. It was no worse than a paper cut, but Twilight still screamed. She screamed both from the pain and also in fear for her own life.

Nexus, however, showed no interest in harming Twilight further. He instead focused on the wound he had created. It had begun to weep blood, and Nexus set the dagger against it. He gathered several drops of blood on the blade and then placed it into the bowl with Nightmare Moon's remains.

"Yes, steal the life from the blood of the bearer of the Element of Magic. Let it give you strength, so that you may shed the rest of her blood with your own hooves," Nexus whispered to the shreds, as if in prayer. He then levitated Twilight back to the edge of the clearing and dropped her unceremoniously at the base of a tree before he approached the metal pedestal. At the same time, the other cloaked ponies, as well as Stonewall, Night Wind, and Gray Gale, turned their attention to Nexus. They watched him, and they fell silent as he began to speak to them as a preacher would speak to his congregation.

"Brothers and Sisters, for nearly two years we have toiled in secrecy. We worked behind the backs of the guards and tyrant princesses, and we put our own safety at risk. Personal fortunes and countless hours have been spent to bring us to this point. But now we are ready; the spell is prepared. Tonight we, the Children of Nightmare, shall see our queen given life, blood, and form of her own!"

The rest of the cult ponies cheered and stamped their hooves against the ground in applause. Spell Nexus smiled, and he took in their joy for just a moment before he continued to speak. "Once, our queen and Luna were one and the same, but the Elements of Harmony could not destroy what our queen was. No, that power could only peel her away from the weak foal Luna; it could only trap her essence in these precious shreds. It was a horrible fate, but it is because of the Elements of Harmony's inability to destroy our queen that we can stand here tonight.

"For it is tonight we give this essence of our queen life of its own. It is tonight our queen's shackles to the meek Princess Luna shall be broken forever. And it is tonight that our campaign to retake Equestria begins!"

Nexus reared back and raised his voice to a triumphant shout. “Now lend your magic to the spell my brothers and sisters, for tonight, our victory is at hoof! For tonight, Nightmare Moon will be born anew!”

The cult cheered, sharing in Spell Nexus’s jubilation before quickly going about their work. The unicorns formed a circle around the clearing, and their horns glowed as the lines of paint they had drawn on the forest floor came to life with a blue incandescence. At the same time, Stonewall, one of the few earth ponies at the ritual, walked around the circle. With a torch in his mouth, he lit the bowls filled with oil soaked powders, causing them to flare with an eerie blue flame.

A similar scene was occurring in the air above the ritual. There, the pegasi cult members held more bowls of powder, keeping them aloft while Gray Gale and Night Wind flew amongst them. The two armored pegasi lit each bowl with practiced efficiency before joining Stonewall on the edge of the spell, where the trio would watch as it unfolded.

Spell Nexus himself watched all this, and, once all the bowls were lit, he waited until the air became sufficiently saturated with magic. He then used a spell of his own to take the fire from one of the bowls. He held the fire gingerly and carried it over to the ritual’s center slowly so that it wouldn’t die. Then, with a final pleased smile, he tossed the fire into the bowl containing the shreds of Nightmare Moon and the bloodied dagger.

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

And, after a few anxious moments, Nexus saw what he had hoped for. The blood soaked dagger started to float above the fire, cradled by the energies of the spell. The blood was drawn up from the blade and formed into a single crimson sphere. The dagger itself was then launched clear of the spell with such force that its polished blade dug deep into one of the trees surrounding the ritual.

Then, with the dagger gone and the blood remaining, black smoke began to billow from the central bowl. The shreds of Nightmare Moon were starting to burn, and the smoke they released formed around the large drop of blood. The fires, smoke, and magic from the wooden bowls set around the spell were drawn in as well. Everything was swirling and orbiting the spell’s focal point, being drawn in like water in a whirlpool.

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

“Yes... it is working my brothers and sisters,” Nexus called out. “She is beginning to take shape. Our queen shall soon be—”

KRAC-CROOO-OOOM!

Many of the cult ponies jumped a foot in the air when a single bolt of lightning raced down from the sky and struck the very center of the spell, sundering the metal podium and wrapping the drop of blood, the shreds of Nightmare Moon, and the wooden bowl in crimson flames. At the same time, the cult’s carefully constructed cloud cover was blown back, and a full battalion of royal guards flew down from the sky.

“FREEZE! YOU ARE ALL UNDER ARREST!” several of the guards shouted as dozens of other gold armored pegasi landed in the center of the clearing. However, not a single pony froze, the cultists instead charged the guards, turning the once carefully tended clearing into a battlefield.

Yet, as the battle began, Spell Nexus stood flabbergasted. He watched as the center of the spell and the precious shreds of Nightmare Moon were destroyed. All their plans had been decimated by a single surge of magical lightning: lightning that could only have come from one source.

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

“Celestia,” Nexus forced out through gritted teeth as he locked his turquoise eyes on the sun princess. She floated down amidst the fighting, casting back anypony that dared attack her with barely any effort, and it enraged Nexus. Every fiber of his being wanted him to attack, to smite down Celestia for daring to interrupt the ritual, but he knew better.

“Don’t think you’ve won today, Celestia. You have merely delayed me at best,” Nexus hissed. He then barked at any cultists nearby, calling them to him as his horn began to glow. Together with Gray Gale, Night Wind, Stonewall, and a few dozen of the other cultists, Nexus cast his spell, and the group as a whole seemed to vanish into thin air.

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“Have you apprehended all involved?” Celestia asked. After rescuing Twilight, she had taken her student home and sent her straight to bed. Twilight resisted a bit, but, after what she’d been through, it didn’t take much to get her to fall asleep. Celestia had then turned Ponyville’s Golden Oaks Library into a base of operations, keeping guard of her student personally while having her guards bring their reports to her.

“We have captured a great number, but we believe some were able to escape by using magic to disguise themselves,” the guard reported, head bowed respectfully to Princess Celestia. “We believe it was an invisibility spell, and we followed their tracks into the forest. Unfortunately, the tracks eventually ended. We are currently working under the belief that the missing cultists realized their mistake and corrected the spell so it hid their tracks as well. We are continuing to search the forest with the aid of the zebra that reported your student’s ponynapping.”

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

“Of course, Princess,” the guard answered as he raised his head. “Though, if I may ask, what do you believe these ponies were trying to do?”

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

“What about the spell?”

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

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

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

“Of course, Your Majesty.”

• • •

The unicorn guards searched the area, sweeping it with their magic to try and detect anything left behind. What remained of the wooden bowls were gathered, and any unburnt powder was collected together into a single bag. Everything and anything that was not natural to the Everfree Forest was taken from the clearing, though the guards did not extend their search into bordering trees and bushes once it became clear the ritual's radius ended at the tree line.

All that was gathered was loaded into a waiting chariot, and, once the unicorns were finished, the pegasi hitched to the chariot took flight. They rose quickly into the sky before banking towards Canterlot. At the same time, the unicorns below began forming into a line while the lieutenant of the squad began to relay orders.

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

“Sir, shouldn't some of us remain here, to guard the crime scene?” one of the soldiers spoke up, a newer recruit to the royal guard.

“No, these cultists are too careful for that,” the lieutenant answered his recruit. “If the zebra Zecora hadn't witnessed Twilight Sparkle's ponynapping, we wouldn't have even known any of this was happening. That means these ponies planned all this without Princess Celestia or anyone in the guard finding out about it, and that means they're not going to backtrack when they've got a battalion of guards hot on their tails.

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

“But, if you want to stay here and guard the scene of the crime, be my guest. Just watch out for the hydras,” the veteran guard concluded. He then motioned to the rest of the squad, guiding them out into the forest to join the ongoing search.

Only the guard who had spoken up remained in the clearing as the others disappeared amongst the trees. He remained there, for a minute, but then the lieutenant's words got

to him. He broke into a gallop, sprinted to catch up with his comrades, and left the clearing to once more succumb to the calm quiet of the Everfree Forest.

Yet, the magic that lingered in the air like a heavy mist began to shift, sparkling in the cool night air as it was drawn to one side of the clearing. There, hidden away by a bush a few feet into the forest, a black sphere lay amongst the dirt. It was the same sphere which was cast away from the center of the spell by Celestia's bolt of lightning.

The tiny black ball was nestled into a crook of the cold ground, and from there it drew in the lingering magic like a magnet attracting metal. It pulled in the energy, and, with each ounce it absorbed, it grew larger.

Then, when the sphere had doubled its size, it pulsed. That pulse caused tiny drops of blood to weep from pores in the sphere's surface. It was the blood that had been harvested at the edge of a dagger only moments before, but now it was black and gooey. The life had been drained from it, and it was now being discarded like trash.

With each pulse, the sphere excreted more of the dead blood, forming a smear on the ground. Then, when none of the used blood remained, the sphere's pulsing shifted. It became the weak, but distinct, pitter-patter that lived in the chest of almost every living creature: a heartbeat. All the while, the sphere continued to grow larger, continued to draw in the magic of the clearing, and continued the process begun by the spell Celestia had interrupted.

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

“Rarity!” Twilight half-shouted. She was sitting at the library’s main table and looked as if she had been reading when Rarity chose to barrel in. Spike was in the main room of the library as well, working to organize and clean the shelves. He hung back from the ladder he was standing on and wore a smitten look as he waved a claw. “Hi Rarity.”

“Good day, Spike,” she said before she turned her attention back to Twilight. “Now, what is it you wanted to say, dear?”

“I wanted to tell you to relax,” Twilight assured her. “I’m fine.”

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

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

“Are you sure?”

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

“Everypony!? Even Fluttershy?”

“She was actually the first.”

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

“Rarity, it’s okay.”

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

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

“A favor. Pinkie Pie has her promises; I have my favors. You just come to me if you need anything, and, if I can help, I will do my very best to assist.” Rarity paused, glancing anxiously away from Twilight while batting at a few strands of her hair. “Just as long as it doesn’t involve excessive amounts of dirt.”

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

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

“I got it,” Twilight replied as she watched Rarity leave, using her magic to shut the door after her. Fluttershy, Pinkie Pie, Applejack, Rainbow Dash, and now Rarity... she had been visited by all her closest friends, and she had told all of them she was okay. She had also received letters from her parents and Shining Armor, and she had assured them of the same.

That was everypony she could think of that would be panicked by the news of what happened, so maybe now she would be able to read her book.

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

Spike, who had been feeding his pet baby phoenix Peewee, paused from his work and glanced in Twilight’s direction. “Didn’t you have it with you yesterday?”

Twilight looked up from her book and stared at the ceiling as she tried to think back. “Well... I didn’t think... but maybe... No, wait... I *did* have it, didn’t I? Yeah, I put it in my

saddlebags so that I could have it when I read this book at the park, but then I realized I had left this book here.”

Twilight began to point her hoof at different spots in the air, mentally retracing her steps. “So I came back, but then Pinkie Pie grabbed me to help decorate for her party. That took all afternoon. So, the book was still in my saddlebags when I went to the party, and then I left the party to come back here... and then I got ponynapped—”

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

The sight made Spike sigh and shake his head. He gave Peewee the last of the birdseed he had in his claws before he began jogging after Twilight. He waited, and, when he had the opportunity, he leapt in front of Twilight just as she was turning to gallop in another direction.

“Whoa, easy, Twilight. What’s wrong?”

Twilight craned her neck around Spike, trying to look at the part of the library he was stopping her from reaching. “My saddlebags! Where are they?”

“How should I know?” he asked with a shrug.

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

Spike grabbed the sides of Twilight’s head and brought her eyes to his. “Twilight, *breathe*... and think. Can’t you just use your locator spell?”

Twilight paused for a moment before a smile of relief burst onto her face. She closed her eyes and focused as her horn started to shimmer and blink. The locator spell was a charm Twilight put on her saddlebags after losing them one too many times. The charm would allow her to find her bags based on similar magical principles to the spell Rarity used to find gems.

After the spell had been cast, Twilight waved her head around while crossing her eyes so that she could gauge how fast her horn was flashing. She set off in the direction the flashing was the most frequent and soon found herself drawn to a window. Beyond that window she could see the Everfree Forest.

Twilight groaned and put her hooves up on the windowsill. “Great, that’s *just* great. My bags are in the forest.”

“Then you should probably just forget about them, Twilight,” Spike said. “They’re just books after all.”

“But that’s just it, Spike,” Twilight argued. “They *aren’t* ‘just books.’ Some of the books in those bags were on loan from the Royal Canterlot Library, and Princess Celestia loaned them to me herself. Do you realize how disappointed she’ll be if I tell her I lost those books? No, I can’t just leave them there. I’m going to get those books.”

With that Twilight began to trot towards the door, only for Spike to quickly cut her off. “Nuh-uh! No way, Twi. Princess Celestia would have my scales if she found out I let you go back into the Everfree Forest the day after you were ponynapped!”

“Well then, she won’t find out,” Twilight replied before she levitated Spike out of the way. He, however, ran right back into her path.

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

“Princess Celestia’s guards scoured the forest last night with Zecora’s help. I doubt that any of those ponies are still there,” Twilight rationalized. “Besides, I need to get those books back! They’re irreplaceable.”

“Then I’m coming with you.”

Twilight shook her head firmly. “No, Spike, I need you to stay here in case somepony comes by. The last thing we need is everypony thinking I got ponynapped again. And what if somepony comes by to check out a book? This is a library. We can’t just close it whenever we want.”

Spike was not convinced. He crossed his arms and eyed Twilight. “I still don’t like it. Can’t you find somepony to go with you?”

“Everypony else is busy, especially after taking time to come and see me. Besides, I’ve been to the Everfree Forest before, Spike; I know how to keep myself out of trouble.”

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

Twilight smiled weakly. “I’ll admit, that wasn’t one of my better moments. Still, if I’m not back in three hours, you can tell the princess that I left. You can even say that I put you to sleep with a sedation spell so you couldn’t stop me.”

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

“Spike, I promise everything will be fine,” Twilight reassured Spike as she walked around him and continued towards the door. “Now, just keep doing your chores, and I’ll be back before you know it.” She glanced at the clock. “It’s just after three, so if I’m not back by a little after six *then* you can tell Princess Celestia, but I promise I’ll be back before then.”

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Twilight swallowed nervously, stepping slowly through the forest as she kept her head down, following the light of her blinking horn. The threatening trees of the Everfree Forest surrounded her, their mangled and twisted branches reaching down from the canopy like deadly claws. The silence of the forest was also strangely unnerving. Twilight’s ears swiveled constantly to pick up any trace of sound as shivers ran up her spine from both the tension and the chill in the air.

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

The situation was only made worse by the dark, gray, threatening clouds that were rolling in over the forest; it was the Everfree Forest’s first spring thunderstorm. Twilight could only imagine how horrible it would be to be caught in one of the forest’s infamous wild storms. They were rumored to have winds strong enough to pick a pony off her hooves and throw her halfway across Equestria. They were also supposed to have lightning that could—

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

“Just hold it together, Twilight. Just hold it together a little longer,” she whispered to herself in a half-hearted pep talk. However, as she rounded a bend in the path, her pep-talk died in her mouth, her pupils shrank, and her breathing quickened. Her locator spell had led her back to where she had been the night before, the place where she had been held captive by the cult ponies.

For a moment, Twilight had to fight the overpowering urge to teleport back to the library and leave her saddlebags and the rare books they contained to their fate. That urge, however, subsided when Twilight noticed her horn was blinking faster. She was close, so very close, and, with a nervous swallow, she mustered the courage to continue. She trotted along the edge of the clearing until she found the spot where her horn was flashing with the greatest frequency. She then rummaged through the bushes, and, with a triumphant smile, found her saddlebags.

Needing to be sure the books were okay, Twilight carried the bags to the center of the clearing and opened the flaps. A wave of relief swept across her body. None of the rare books were missing. In fact, nothing was missing, not even the more common texts she had been carrying. It was a discovery that brought a smile to Twilight’s face as she levitated the bags over her head and settled them down on her back.

“Perfect! Now to just teleport myself back to the library, and—”

RUSTLE

Twilight froze, her eyes narrowed, and her ears stood erect.

RUSTLE RUSTLE

She turned her head and focused on the source of the noise. It was a single bush located on the edge of the clearing. Something was moving around inside the foliage just out of sight, causing the leaves to rustle. Almost instantly, Twilight’s mind jumped to the worst case scenario. She could imagine a cultist leaping out of the bush to hogtie her again, and this time, when they cut her, they would do far worse. They’d use something bigger than a dagger, like a sword, and they wouldn’t just make a little paper cut either. They’d—

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

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

Inching closer to the bush, Twilight made each hoofstep as silent as possible. She strained her eyes to see into the darkness and kept her ears pointed forward to pick up any sound that might clue her in on what was hiding there. The branches rustled again, but whatever animal was inside had yet to jump free.

FLASH... KRAC-CROOO-OOOM!

Twilight leapt, screamed, and galloped in the exact opposite direction of the bush before she dove behind a tree on the far side of the clearing. Her heart was pounding so hard it felt like it would burst out of her chest, and Twilight put a hoof over her ribcage in a panicked attempt to make sure that didn't happen.

She began breathing deeply, trying to calm down while she looked up at the sky. "It was just the storm... It was just thunder... it was just thunder... thunder that scared me *half to death*... but it was just thunder."

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

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

The crying quickly fell silent, as if the voice's owner was trying to hide. However, Twilight had been able to figure out the general direction it was coming from. She moved back into the forest clearing and continued to listen. "It's okay, I'm not going to hurt you."

Twilight heard no voice call back to her, and she could only sigh and shake her head. "I must have just imagined it," she told herself quietly. She closed her eyes and began to prepare her teleportation spell.

FLASH... KRAC-CROOO-OOOM!

Again, the storm caught Twilight by surprise. It wasn't as bad as the first time. She was able to keep herself standing in the center of the clearing instead of galloping off to hide. She did, however, throw an annoyed glare up at the clouds for startling her twice.

The thunder had also brought with it another sound, the crying Twilight had heard earlier, and it was close. Her first instinct was to call out again, but she decided against it in fear of the pony falling silent again. Instead, Twilight swiveled her ears forward and listened. The crying was now accompanied by some rustling, and it took Twilight only a few moments to pinpoint its source. It was the bush from earlier, the one Twilight had feared hid some horrible danger.

More concerned about the other pony than the possibility of being attacked, Twilight crept over to the bush as quietly as possible. As she drew close, she reached out with her magic and began to carefully grasp at the branches. If whatever was inside the bush decided to run away, Twilight wanted to at least get a good look at it before it escaped.

Once she was standing beside the bush, Twilight swallowed nervously and braced herself. She shoved the branches away and shut her eyes tight, a small part of her still expecting some pony in a cloak to jump out. When that didn't happen, Twilight cracked open her eyes and looked into the interior of the bush.

What Twilight found, however, was nothing like she had expected. A filly as young as Apple Bloom was tangled up in the branches. It looked like she had been there for a few hours, if not longer. She also had nicks and scratches all over, which Twilight could only guess had been caused by the bush's long, sharp thorns.

Normally, Twilight would have reached out to help the filly, but instead she found herself frozen in place. Her mind locked up, unable to process the filly's appearance. Her coat was a regal black. She possessed a long, rich purple mane that was currently tangled in the bush's thorny branches. And lastly, the filly had not only a pair of pegasus wings but a unicorn horn, making her an alicorn.

Yet, it was the filly's eyes that held Twilight's attention and filled her with fear. Those eyes were not shaped like a normal pony's. The turquoise orbs, which should have had round pupils, instead had dagger-shaped pupils. The whites of her eyes were also off. Instead of white, they were a lighter color that closely resembled the color of the irises.

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

Twilight felt her breathing quicken as her memories slipped back to the night before. The cult said they were the servants of Nightmare Moon, and they were obviously trying to cast some kind of spell. She'd admit, she hadn't gotten a great look at the clearing, but she had seen spell lines, bowls with powders, and—

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

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

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

It was insane; it was something that shouldn't work. Yet, how else could she have felt such a strong aura of magic in the air? Why else would a filly she had never seen before, an *alicorn* with such a strong resemblance to the infamous Mare in the Moon, be in the same clearing?

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

It had to be. There wasn't any other explanation for the intensity of the spell nor the appearance of the filly. That crazy cult had actually brought back Nightmare Moon, and Twilight had to warn somepony, anypony. She had to write to Princess Celestia immediately.

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

Twilight bristled, furrowed her eyebrows, and glared at the filly. "I know—" Twilight began harshly, only to stop abruptly. With just those two words, the filly shrank away whimpering, shutting her eyes as the bush's thorns left fresh cuts and scrapes on her

body. When the filly dared to open her eyes again, she was looking up at Twilight like she was some hungry, pony-eating monster.

Twilight had never had anypony look at her like that, and it caused her indignation to cool. She lifted her hoof and reached out as slowly as possible. The result was the same. The filly shied away, whimpered, trembled, and succeeded in injuring herself further on the bush's thorns.

It was a reaction of pure fear.

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

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

"I-it's okay," Twilight soothed shakily, "I won't hurt you." She wasn't at all sure of what she was doing, but she had to, at the very least, get the little filly out of the bush before she injured herself further.

Taking hold of the bush magically, Twilight began carefully snapping away branches piece by piece. The filly winced a couple times during the process. Any small movement led to a thorn pricking her, but she kept her eyes locked on Twilight. The filly's eyes were still filled with fear, but behind that fear was a flicker of hope, hope that the unicorn who had appeared was not a monster.

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

Twilight's mind was spinning at a million miles an hour, cycling through the same thoughts over and over again. Was this really Nightmare Moon? Was that the purpose of the spell last night? Did it work? How did it work? How could there be a Nightmare Moon without Luna? Weren't they one and the same? Why was Nightmare Moon so

small? Did the spell not work? Was Nightmare Moon just trying to trick her into taking her back to Ponyville? Was she only pretending to be so small and helpless? Was she dangerous? Was this really Nightmare Moon?

Round and round the thoughts circled. Twilight was unable to stop herself. It was the storm that finally managed to break the endless loop. Another wave of thunder cut through the air, snapping Twilight back to reality. Just as quickly, she noticed that the filly had rushed up to her. Trembling like a leaf, the filly clung to Twilight's leg, eyes shut tight.

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

At the same time, if the filly was Nightmare Moon, Twilight couldn't just leave her in the forest. If she did, then there was a chance that the filly would disappear. No, if the filly was a danger to Equestria, Twilight had to keep track of her, if only to be sure she couldn't hurt anypony. That, and Twilight couldn't deny it didn't feel right to leave anypony alone in the dangerous forest, even a pony that was arguably an enemy.

"Um... would you like to come back to Ponyville with me?" Twilight asked, unable to think of a better way to try and ask the filly to come along willingly. The little pony remained silent, but her eyes spoke her reply even before her head did. She nodded shakily and clung even closer to Twilight, looking upon her like she was the grand savior from a storybook. Twilight might have smiled at this if it weren't for the raindrops that were starting to fall on her head.

"Oh, *great...*" Twilight muttered, flinching a bit as the rain started to worsen. With the storm coming quickly, Twilight did the only thing she could think of. She picked up the filly and nestled her between her saddlebags. Twilight then turned her magic above her head, projecting a transparent barrier just in time to shield them from the rain.

Twilight then took in a deep breath and tried to cast her teleportation spell, but she couldn't get it to work. To teleport herself and others, Twilight used not only her magic, but also the magic that occurred naturally in Equestria. Yet, no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't draw in enough magic from around her and the filly. The air had been leached dry of all magic, even though the evening before it had been over-saturated with mystical energy.

Finally, Twilight was forced to give up. If she strained herself any further she wouldn't have enough magic to power the barrier spell separating her and the filly from the rainstorm nor enough energy to walk all the way back to the library. With a sigh, Twilight began to walk. She could only pray to herself that she'd get back before Spike panicked and sent a letter to the princess.

• • •

Spike anxiously finished writing the letter to the princess and glanced at the clock to see it tick to the next minute. Twilight had been gone for two hours and fifty-nine minutes. That left her with one minute, just one minute, to get back to the library before he sent his letter to Princess Celestia. Spike watched the clock anxiously before he dared to glance out the window at the raging thunderstorm.

Dash had come by the library earlier to warn that the weather team was letting a storm from the Everfree Forest roll over Ponyville. The storm wasn't scheduled, but the weather team had decided to let it pass over to save themselves the trouble of preparing another just two days later. It made sense, but the storm was still pretty nasty. Thunder, lightning, wind, and pounding rain all came together at once, and Twilight was out in that weather, possibly hurt or even ponynapped.

Spike glanced at the clock again and watched as the minute changed. It was official; it had been three hours and Twilight hadn't returned. Spike began to breathe in, the message to Celestia mere moments from being magically sent to Canterlot when the library door suddenly swung open.

"Spike! Don't you *dare* breathe out!" Twilight yelled, pointing a commanding hoof at him. She was covered in mud and grime up to her neck, little leaves and sticks were caught in her mane, and a tired expression was on her face. Still, Spike couldn't help but smile. He tossed the letter aside and ran up to Twilight.

"Where were you?" Spike asked in a combination of worry and relief. He would have hugged her leg, but he'd noticed how muddy she was.

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

"Why couldn't you teleport back? Did something happen? Are you okay?"

“Yes, I’m fine,” Twilight reassured him. “There was just something wrong in the forest, I couldn’t get a strong enough magical charge to teleport. It was like almost all the magic had been sucked out of the air. I’ll be fine. All I need is a bath and some dinner.”

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

“Can you make it celery soup and daffodil sandwiches?” Twilight asked as she levitated the books from her saddlebags and placed them in Spike’s waiting arms.

“Of course! One order of celery soup and daffodil sandwiches coming right up... after I get these books put away,” Spike said. He then turned and began the quick task of putting the tomes Twilight had just retrieved back in their places. While he did that, Twilight headed to the second floor of the library. She crossed her bedroom and entered the bathroom. It was small and cozy with a bathtub that doubled as a shower and all the basic amenities. Nothing fancy, but it got the job done.

Twilight shut and locked the door before breathing a sigh of relief and looking over her shoulder. Still lying on her back, nestled between her saddlebags, was the filly Nightmare Moon. She had curled up and fallen asleep halfway to the library. Thankfully, Spike hadn’t noticed the breathing black mass that was partially hidden by Twilight’s mane and saddlebags.

For the moment, Twilight just let the filly sleep while she turned on the bathtub faucets. The tub began to fill, and, as it did, Twilight opened the medicine cabinet to gather some first aid supplies. While most of the injuries the filly had from the thorny bush were tiny, there were a couple Twilight wanted to bandage.

Twilight waited until the tub was almost full before shutting off the faucets. The perfectly warm water gently steamed in the cool bathroom air, and a shiver of relief crawled down her body just from sinking her hoof into the water. Still, Twilight couldn’t go jumping in until the filly was off her back and she had taken off her saddlebags.

Looking back at the filly, Twilight bent her head close and gave her a nudge. It took a few tries, but the little pony finally began to wake up. She lifted her head off Twilight’s back and took in her surroundings before looking at Twilight, who offered a gentle smile.

“Don’t worry; you’re safe here. This is where I live, and you won’t have to worry about the storm or anything else here,” Twilight assured her. “Still, I need to get cleaned up. Would you mind getting off my back while I take a quick bath?”

The filly shook her head once before very carefully and cautiously getting to her hooves and jumping off Twilight's back. Her little wings slowed her descent to the floor, allowing her to land gently. She, however, didn't stay on her hooves for long. She lay down and curled up into a small ball on the soft bathroom mat below the sink.

With the filly off her back, Twilight was able to remove her mud-splattered saddlebags and climb into the bathtub. She winced a little as hot water came into contact with colder parts of her body, but she eventually sank in with a relieved sigh. After tromping around in the storm, Twilight wanted nothing more than to soak in the warm water. She, however, needed to make it a quick bath.

She picked up a brush and worked to remove the mud, twigs, and leaves that clung to her. Once they were all gone, she climbed out of the tub and let the now dirty water drain away as she toweled herself off. Then, once the tub was drained, Twilight opened the faucets and began to fill the tub again, this time only a quarter of the way full.

It was a very shallow bath, but it was perfect for the small filly. Twilight levitated the miniature Nightmare Moon lookalike into the water. She winced a few times as the water came in contact with her cuts and scratches, but otherwise the filly didn't protest. She just stood there, being as complacent as possible as Twilight carefully used a brush to clean her.

Once the filly was clean, Twilight lifted her out of the tub, toweled her off, and began using the first aid kit to bandage the worst of her cuts and scrapes. All the while, she was amazed with how cooperative the filly was, despite acting sad and tired. Would Nightmare Moon really allow herself to be bathed and bandaged without protest? Yes, such a regal and royal pony might expect to be waited on by servants, but that wasn't what Twilight was doing. She was treating her like a foal, and the real Nightmare Moon wouldn't accept being treated like a foal, no matter how small or young she actually was.

Again, the question of whether this filly really was Nightmare Moon rose up in Twilight's head. She was becoming less and less sure. The resemblance was undeniable. If the little pony had a flowing, magical, star-dotted mane and tail, then she'd look exactly like the Mare in the Moon.

Yet this filly just wasn't acting like Nightmare Moon, at least in Twilight's opinion. She didn't talk down, nor did she make threats. She hadn't even said anything yet, and the silence was even stranger. Twilight would expect Nightmare Moon to be vocal, and the filly's odd behavior only raised another question: If she wasn't Nightmare Moon, then who was she?

Twilight was drawn from her thoughts by a knock at the bathroom door. She finished placing one last bandage on the filly and then turned in the direction of the door. “Yes?”

“Hey, Twilight, I’ve got your dinner.”

Twilight glanced over her shoulder, both to speak in Spike’s direction and to make sure he wasn’t coming into the bathroom. “Thank you, but... you know, I’m *really* hungry after hiking through the Everfree Forest and the storm. Would you mind making me another sandwich and bowl of soup?”

“No problem,” Spike proudly assured from the other side of the door. “I made a big batch of the celery soup, and we have plenty of stuff for sandwiches.”

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

“You got it, Twi,” Spike replied before departing.

Twilight waited for her assistant’s footsteps to reach the bottom of the stairs before she opened the door. She checked the bedroom, making sure Spike, Owloysius, and Peewee were all downstairs before she stepped out. The filly followed close behind, not getting more than a few inches from Twilight as she crossed the room and moved towards the bed.

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

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

It was the first real sign of life Twilight had seen from the Nightmare Moon lookalike, and it was encouraging, to say the least. For now, however, she had to leave the filly to her meal. She needed to go downstairs and tell Spike the truth before he discovered the filly for himself, assumed the worst, and sent a letter to Princess Celestia.

• • •

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

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

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

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

Taking a moment to steady herself, Twilight approached the filly and again she found herself torn on just how she was supposed to act. Nightmare Moon had tried twice to plunge Equestria into eternal night, but filly didn't seem like a danger. She should have consulted Princess Celestia already, but she just wasn't sure enough. It was a stalemate between her fear of what the filly could do and her fear of what the princess would do if she found out. She wasn't convinced enough to tell the princess, but she couldn't let her guard down either. If she did, there was a chance the filly would show her true colors, transform into Nightmare Moon, and attack.

It was better to be safe than sorry, and Twilight chose to keep her guard up. She'd watch and be ready to bolt out of the room should things become dangerous. At the moment, however, she needed to find out more about the filly. She needed to see if she remembered being Nightmare Moon or maybe had other memories, something to prove who she was.

"Are you feeling better?"

The filly nodded only once, barely meeting Twilight's eyes.

"That's good," Twilight replied before taking a seat beside the bed. "So, uh... do you know where you are? Do you remember where you were before I found you?"

The filly shook her head, the first of many such replies. Twilight asked the filly what she did remember, what she knew, and a whole slew of other questions. Yet, while there were a few nods here and there, most of Twilight's questions were met with a shake of the filly's head, and each shake seemed to cause the filly's eyes to tear up a little bit more.

The breaking point came when Twilight asked the filly if she remembered her name, which caused her to break down and cry. It wasn't wailing or outright sobbing, but a quiet cry where she sniffled as tears poured down her cheeks.

It was a sight that helped Twilight understand why the little pony had been so quiet and subdued; she was scared and confused. The only memories she seemed to have were the ones of the past several hours. She had no memories of her own, yet possessed some common knowledge, like an understanding of Equestrian language.

Twilight found it difficult to even imagine having so few memories. It did, however, support her theory that this little filly had been produced by the spell cast by the cult. It would make sense for her to only have a few hours of memory as the spell had only been cast the night before.

Again, the question of whether or not the filly was really Nightmare Moon reared its ugly head, but it was a question Twilight chose to shelve in her mind for later. The filly was still crying, and it was pitting Twilight against herself. She had every desire to keep her guard up in case the filly was truly dangerous, but, at the same time, she couldn't in good conscience ignore how scared the filly was.

So, despite her own anxieties, Twilight crawled up onto the bed and lay down beside the young alicorn, doing her best to comfort the crying filly.

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It took about half an hour for the filly to finally calm down and cry herself dry. The tears seemed to have a good effect on the filly, for she looked less scared than she had been. She lay right next to Twilight and was working to dry her eyes as she rested her head against Twilight's shoulder.

"Feeling better?" Twilight quietly asked.

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

“That’s good,” Twilight replied before falling silent. She struggled to find something to say. When nothing came to mind, Twilight glanced at the clock and noticed the late hour. “So, uh... it’s been a long day. How about we get some sleep?”

“Can... can I sleep here?” the filly asked as she looked up at Twilight, a question that brought fresh unease to Twilight’s mind. Letting the filly sleep in the same bed was asking for trouble. If she was Nightmare Moon and just playing some cruel trick, Twilight was just asking to be attacked in the middle of the night. At the same time, Twilight couldn’t bring herself to refuse. It was like her mouth had forgotten how to form the word ‘no’ in the face of the filly’s pleading eyes.

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

With that Twilight lit her horn and used her magic to shift a few blankets and pillows around. She first tucked herself beneath the covers, then she set the filly down on top of the bed’s blanket and gave her a spare blanket and pillow. The blanket and pillow were meant for Spike’s basket, but they were the perfect size for the filly.

Soon, both Twilight and the filly were stifling yawns as the long day caught up with them. It was still relatively early, barely close to ten o’clock, but Twilight was more than willing to call it a night. Another yawn gripped her, and her eyes were just starting to droop when she heard a small voice whisper to her.

“Miss unicorn?”

Twilight was drawn back from the edge of sleep. She lifted her head, and met the filly’s gaze with her own. “I’m sorry, I guess I never introduced myself. My name’s Twilight Sparkle.”

“Okay... Miss Sparkle, can I ask you something?”

“Yes?”

The filly snuggled into Twilight's side, as if fearing she'd be pulled away. "Do you want me to leave in the morning?"

"What makes you think I'd want you leave?"

The filly bit her lip for a second before continuing. "You... were mad when you first saw me. I just... didn't think you'd want me around."

"It's not your fault. I just thought you were somepony else for a while," Twilight assured her, "but... no, you don't have to leave in the morning."

Those words made the filly smile, the first honest smile she had given all evening. Then, with that concern put to rest, the filly yawned, closed her eyes, and drifted off to sleep with Twilight following soon after.

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

Still, with her empty belly acting as a powerful motivator, Twilight stepped into the kitchen. Almost immediately, the smells of breakfast filled her nose and whetted her appetite. Spike was working at the stove but turned and offered Twilight a pleasant "Morning" before turning his attention back to his cooking.

"Hey, Spike," Twilight responded before yawning again as she made her way to the table. This had been Twilight and Spike's usual morning ever since they had moved to Ponyville, and even for a time before that. One of them would get up early and make breakfast while the other would stumble into the kitchen sometime later. Who made breakfast was largely dependent on who went to bed first the night before, and the previous evening it had been Spike.

Yet, for the past few days, there had been an addition to the routine: a little black filly alicorn who was currently seated at the table, waiting patiently for breakfast.

Twilight had come to call the filly Nyx, an old name from a storybook Twilight remembered from her own fillyhood. Nyx, as the stories went, was a black coated mare that slept during the day and basked in Luna's night, back before the princess became Nightmare Moon. Her job was to guard her town during the night from the many creatures that hunted in the dark. The tale of Nyx of the Night was one of Twilight's favorite bedtime stories. Her parents had to have read it to her hundreds of times when she was growing up. It was the first decent name that came to mind when she was trying to find a name for the filly other than Nightmare Moon.

And, in truth, Nyx had become the focus of Twilight's efforts for the past few days. She had spent all of her free time studying, devoting herself to researching the possibilities of resurrection spells. Unfortunately, none of the library's books had any direct information, and what information she could find was in theoretical magic.

The Golden Oaks Library was insufficient, but Twilight knew that the princess had unicorns in Canterlot working on the spell. They had to have more information, and she had asked Celestia if she could possibly read some of the same books or be kept informed

on the progress of the research. Princess Celestia, however, refused the request, wishing Twilight to simply forget about the spell and what happened that night.

But Twilight couldn't stop herself. While she couldn't really believe that the scared little filly was Nightmare Moon reborn, the threat and danger of that truth lingered constantly on the fringes of her mind. She wanted, maybe needed, to be absolutely sure, and the only way to be absolutely sure was to understand the spell and figure out what could have happened if the spell was interrupted.

Progress was slow, however, and Twilight was forced to put her research on hold the previous evening to handle a more pressing concern, one that involved Nyx.

Over the past few days, Nyx had become a little more open, though she was still nervous and quiet. She had even started helping Spike with his chores, slowly winning over the skeptical baby dragon. She had also demonstrated an interest in reading. She had cracked open and read a number of books, even though she struggled with the words at times. Her focus wasn't purely on fictional stories either. She had read a few books that fillies her age would be exposed to in school: nonfiction books about a wide and almost random spectrum of subjects.

The reading was okay by Twilight's standards, but, if there was one thing that Nyx did that was annoying, it was that she asked questions... a *lot* of questions. Most of them were things that Twilight could easily answer off the top of her head, but it was still enough of a distraction to greatly reduce her normal study time. Nyx's curiosity, at times, just seemed insatiable.

What worried Twilight the most, however, was that her curiosity was beginning to shift to the outside world. Just the previous day, Nyx had spent hours looking out the window, watching ponies pass by. If anypony happened to look in her direction she would quickly duck out of sight, but she would only hide for a few minutes before returning to the window.

Twilight's concerns came to fruition when Nyx asked if she could go outside. She had to refuse the request, and, thankfully, Nyx didn't resist. She was willing to accept her confinement in the library. Yet, her request made Twilight realize something.

She couldn't keep Nyx hidden in the library forever. The library wasn't a jail, she wasn't a warden, and Nyx wasn't a prisoner. Nyx deserved to be able to go outside and enjoy the sunshine. Yet, at the same time, the sudden appearance of a filly alicorn in Ponyville would undoubtedly draw a disastrous amount of unwanted attention.

Thus, if Nyx did go outside, Twilight would be sure it was done with considerable preparation. That had been her focus of the previous evening. She had made a plan. She was going to pass off Nyx as a cousin who was going to stay with her indefinitely to study, much like how she had started living at Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns when she became the princess's private pupil.

It might not have been the greatest of plans, but she hadn't told her friends about Shining Armor until she got his wedding invitation. Rarity admitted later that she thought Twilight was an only child. Thus, it wasn't unreasonable to think they'd believe Nyx was a cousin she hadn't ever mentioned before, especially if she was a distant cousin.

Twilight groaned a little and sat down at the kitchen table to eat her breakfast. It wasn't a plan she was overly confident in, but the plan just had to work for a little while. She just needed more time to be sure whether or not Nyx was Nightmare Moon. Once she was sure, she'd be able to act appropriately.

Yes, all she needed was more time. Thus, once she had filled her empty, grumbling stomach, she would begin enacting her plan. Step one of said plan: she'd need to sneak Nyx across Ponyville to Carousel Boutique.

It was time to call in Rarity's favor.

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It took some precise movements and careful hiding, but Twilight was able to lead Nyx across Ponyville to Carousel Boutique without anypony getting a good glimpse of them. They were going to get there right when Rarity usually opened the shop for the day, hopefully ensuring there wouldn't be any customers in the boutique.

The little bell above the door chimed when Twilight opened it with a relieved smile. She quickly guided Nyx inside and then looked over her shoulder. When she was sure none of the passersby on the street had taken notice of Nyx, Twilight herself slipped into the shop and flipped the latch on the door. She didn't want anypony stumbling in on them by accident.

Twilight then trotted forward, glancing around the boutique's front showroom as she tried to see where Rarity was. At the same time, Nyx stayed close to Twilight. She had been excited to finally go outside, but the size and number of ponies in the outside world had driven her to cling to Twilight the entire trip over to the boutique. It was only now, when they were once more alone, that Nyx dared to venture away from Twilight. She

took a few anxious steps and turned her head slowly as she took in the shop's beautiful interior and looked at the elegant dresses that were on display.

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

"Yes, dear, just a moment!" Rarity called back as she came out from the boutique's back room with several spools of thread floating behind her. She had on her red glasses, a sign that she was in the middle of sewing something together. "Twilight, *darling*, I've seen neither hide nor hair of you in days. Where *have* you been hiding?"

Twilight chuckled a little under her breath and shrugged. "In the library, where else?"

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

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

Rarity took her glasses off and set them on one of her dressmaking forms. "A fact I am well aware of. Still, I guess hearing that you've been studying your little head off is a good thing. It means you've recovered from your *traumatic* ponynapping as well as anypony could hope.

"Now, just what brings you by the boutique?"

"Um," Twilight began. She nervously scratched at one of her legs as her once pleasant smile became anxious and forced. "I need some casual day-wear."

"Now *that* is a request I don't get too often," Rarity commented. She walked to the side of her room and began digging in a drawer. "Most ponies are just satisfied strolling about without a thread of fabric on, but, personally, I feel some ponies would look just *fabulous* with the right vest or day-dress."

With a triumphant smile, Rarity pulled a pencil and a sketch pad from the drawer. She then used a hoof to push the drawer shut before she turned and began walking back towards Twilight. "Personally, I think you're one of those ponies that doesn't need casual

wear. I, however, can't say for certain until I have a chance to sketch out some designs. So, Twilight, what were you looking for in particular?"

"Okay, so... here's the thing," Twilight said with a nervous laugh. "It really isn't for me."

Glancing up from the sketch she had already started, Rarity arched an eyebrow. "Well, whom is it for then?"

Twilight stepped to one side, revealing Nyx, who had ducked behind her when Rarity came into the room. "It's for her."

A small squeak escaped Nyx's throat when she realized Rarity could see her. She then hung her head and quickly stepped back behind Twilight in an effort to remain hidden. After Twilight whispered some reassuring words, Nyx found the courage to step out into plain view. Still, she kept her head lowered and avoided any direct eye contact with Rarity.

"Rarity, I'd like you to meet Nyx," Twilight said when she was sure Nyx wasn't going to try and hide behind her a second time. "Nyx, this is my good friend, Rarity. Say hello, Nyx."

"Um... H-Hello, Miss Rarity," Nyx mumbled very quietly.

It was a good thing Nyx was keeping her eyes turned down at the floor, for it kept her from noticing that Rarity was staring dumbfounded. Her gaze was focused on Nyx's eyes, which she found all too similar to a pair of eyes she had gotten a very close look at during the Summer Sun Celebration two years ago.

Before Nyx could notice her slack-jawed stare, Rarity regained some of her composure and put on an uneasy smile. She then looked at Twilight and spoke through her clenched teeth. "Well... of course. I... just need you to... come in back with me and... pick out a fabric. Uh... Nyx, was it? Would you mind staying here? I just need to speak with Twilight for a few moments in private."

Nyx turned to look at Twilight as if she would never see her again. "T-Twilight?"

"It will be all right, Nyx," she reassured. "Just go look at some of the dresses that Rarity has made. We'll be right back."

Nyx slowly nodded before she turned and headed towards the mannequins. She approached the one that was currently displaying the jumpsuit Fluttershy had worn

when Rarity was trying to impress Photo Finish and began to look at her reflection in some of the gemstones.

At the same time, while Nyx's back was turned, Twilight felt herself become wrapped in magic: Rarity's magic. She then found herself being dragged unceremoniously into the boutique's back room by Rarity.

The moment the pair was in the back, Rarity quickly but quietly shut the door behind them. She then flipped the latch on the door before locking her eyes on Twilight and speaking with a stressed voice. "Who. Is. *That*?"

Twilight flattened her ears and lowered her head, bracing herself for the worst. "I take it you noticed she looks kind of like—"

"Nightmare Moon!" Rarity loudly whispered, though her firm stance made it obvious she would have rather been shouting. "Yes, I *did* notice! Now, would you care to explain?!"

"Well, do you want the long or short version?" Twilight asked, anxiously scratching at her front right leg. "Or maybe the medium version? I suppose I could—"

"Twilight, just *tell me!*" Rarity pressed.

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

Rarity visibly shook as she struggled to keep herself from shouting. "And you brought her to Ponyville?!"

"Calm down before she hears you!" Twilight stressed, motioning with her hoof that Rarity needed to keep quiet. "Look, she doesn't remember anything that happened before I found her, and she acts nothing like Nightmare Moon. She's... just a sweet, nervous, little filly. To be honest... I'm having trouble believing she could be Nightmare Moon at all."

Despite Twilight's assurances, Rarity pointed an accusing hoof at Twilight while her brow furrowed with concern. "And did it ever cross your mind what would happen if she really *was* Nightmare Moon? That monster could have attacked you in your sleep!"

"Rarity, she isn't a monster, I promise. She's just—"

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

“But I’m afraid that if the princess finds out, she’ll banish Nyx to the moon!” Twilight said, struggling to keep her voice down as the argument grew more heated. “Look, you saw how she acted when she first met you. She’s more scared of you than you are of her. She really doesn’t know who Nightmare Moon is or anything that happened at the Summer Sun Celebration two years ago.”

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

“I’ve thought about it, yes... but—”

Rarity stomped a hoof. “Twilight, listen to yourself! If that filly was produced by a spell, and that spell was supposed to bring back Nightmare Moon, then—”

“Rarity, *please!* You’re the only other pony I’ve told, and I *need* you to keep this a secret,” Twilight pleaded, “If somepony finds out, then the princess will find out. Do you really think a filly that young deserves to be banished to the moon, even if she *was* created by a spell meant to bring back Nightmare Moon?”

“Right now, all I want to do is to try and pass her off as my cousin, just until I can figure out whether she is Nightmare Moon or just looks like her. But I can’t just keep her locked in the library all the time. If I’m going to pass her off as a normal unicorn, she needs to be able to go outside, and for that she needs a disguise. Consider this the favor you owe me.”

Rarity pushed her lips together. “And you want to use your favor like this?”

“Yes,” Twilight replied firmly.

“Are you absolutely sure?”

“*Yes.*”

“Are you absolutely, *positively*—”

“Rarity, I’m sure.”

Rarity let out a sigh, rubbing her forehead with a hoof before nodding. “Very well, Twilight. Your secret is safe with me, but that still leaves me wondering just why you’ve brought her to my boutique.”

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

“Her wings?” Rarity echoed, cocking an eyebrow.

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

“Well of course I noticed,” Rarity said, a bit insulted. “I also understand why you’re apprehensive about her going outside, but, Twilight, wings are *so* in style right now. *All* the best boutiques in Canterlot are using pegasus models this season. Makes me wish I could talk Fluttershy into stepping back onto the stage; that, or convince Rainbow Dash to give fashion modeling a try. She could have *such* a beautiful mane if she would just brush it out once in a while and—”

“Focus!” Twilight interrupted, bringing Rarity back to reality. “Even if wings are in style, it’s a whole lot easier to hide a pair of wings than it is to hide a horn, wouldn’t you agree?”

“True, wings are a more readily hidden feature, though, personally, I think I could have figured out a way to hide her horn. Still... I’ll admit she *does* have that wonderful black coat; it’s such a rare color that I don’t get to work with often enough. Her mane isn’t bad either, a little ragged maybe, but with some brushing and a little care... Hm...”

At that, Rarity shut her eyes and gently tapped her chin with her hoof as the gears in her mind turned. A smile then sprang onto her lips, and, with inspiration-driven enthusiasm, she opened the door to the back room. “Iiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii~!” Rarity sang out.

Rarity’s sudden return made Nyx jump a little, and she quickly tried to escape when she saw Rarity coming towards her with horn aglow. It was, however, too late. Nyx found herself being levitated into the air along with several spools of fabric. She was now at the mercy of Rarity’s fashion sense.

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“I’m almost done, just hold still for a few more seconds,” Rarity said an hour later. She had gotten lost in her work and had been treating Nyx more like a mannequin than a

filly. She had asked Nyx to stand still for almost the entire time and quickly hushed any complaints. It had allowed her to work quickly and efficiently.

It was, however, becoming apparent that Nyx was nearing the end of her endurance, growing both tired and bored of standing in the same place for so long. She kept shifting her weight between her legs and making very quiet whines. Still, for the most part Nyx had done as Rarity asked, and Twilight made a mental note to reward Nyx, if only to encourage the good behavior.

And that good behavior had allowed Rarity to work her usual magic, creating the casual wear Nyx needed. It was a simple purple vest, similar in design to the vests worn by everypony in town during Winter Wrap Up. Rarity, however, modified the design in a few places so that Nyx's wings could hide comfortably beneath the fabric. Rarity also worked to stylize the vest a little bit, putting some black here and there to blend with Nyx's natural coat color.

The final thing Rarity needed to work on was Nyx's hair. She had tried a number of different styles, from styling Nyx's mane up like her own, to giving it more body like Fluttershy's. Nothing, however, seemed to please Rarity.

"Oh, what to do? What to do?" Rarity pondered, letting Nyx's hair drop. "Most ponies have their mane styled to leave a little something in the front, but I think for your facial structure we need to pull your mane back. Yes, I definitely need to style it back, but it just *needs* something..."

Rarity's horn glowed, and she levitated a few ribbons and hairbands from a nearby drawer. Her eyes moved over each one, tossing some away while others lingered in the air, waiting to be judged by her meticulous eye. She even held some of the ribbons up to Nyx's hair, as if to test the color, but in the end they all got tossed aside.

That is until Rarity's eyes lit up. "Of course! Aloe and Lotus!"

"Who and what now?" Twilight asked. She had been watching from what she considered a safe distance for one of Rarity's inspiration driven design sessions.

Rarity used her magic to bring a brush to Nyx's mane and began brushing it back so nearly every strand would lie straight behind Nyx's head. "Aloe and Lotus, the ponies who manage the spa. They style their manes back like this, and I think that's just what we need." Rarity then levitated a headband close and settled it down on Nyx's head just

behind her horn. The headband was teal with some designs featuring darker greens on the side.

“Perfect,” Rarity said, approving of her handiwork a few minutes later. “Oh yes, this really is a mane that can pull this off, and the headband brings out the eyes.”

“Am I done now?” Nyx whined. She had attempted not to sound bored, but even the well-behaved Nyx was at her wits’ end.

Rarity nodded, slipping out of designer mode and regaining some cautious coldness in her voice as she remembered who she had been making the vest for. “Yes, you are done. Here, why don’t you go take a look in the mirror?”

Nyx nodded and jumped down from the table she had been standing on while Rarity had been working. It wasn’t hard to find a mirror; the front of Rarity’s shop was littered with mirrors of varying sizes. Nyx moved to the nearest one, examining her reflection while Twilight stepped over beside Rarity.

“It’s perfect,” Twilight beamed happily. “If I didn’t know better I’d say she was just a normal unicorn.”

“Oh, Twilight, must you *always* think of function over form?” Rarity chided as she began to put her supplies away. “Yes, it hides her wings, but the outfit looks fabulous, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Yes, she looks great, Rarity, and now all she needs are her glasses.”

Rarity arched an eyebrow and glanced at Nyx, who was still looking at her reflection in the mirror. “Are you sure she needs them, Twilight? Her eyesight seems fine, in my opinion.”

“These aren’t correctional glasses. It took a lot of research, but I’ve finally found an illusion spell that I can use to enchant the glasses to disguise Nyx’s eyes. It makes them look... well... more common. After all,” Twilight lowered her voice to a whisper and leaned in close to Rarity, “there are only a couple of things I know that have eyes like that. Dragons, the changeling queen, and... well, Nightmare Moon.”

Rarity nodded. “It would make sense to hide them as well, wouldn’t it? It was because of those eyes I recognized who she was. Still, at the very least I hope you selected some fashionable frames.”

Twilight turned her head, and, using her magic, she opened a flap of her saddlebags, which were resting by the front door. From inside the bags, Twilight extracted a pair of glasses. She then quickly levitated the glasses across the room and presented them to Rarity while saying, “Well, I *thought* they looked nice.”

“Twilight!” Rarity exclaimed before she shied away from the glasses, as if they were an angry snake that was ready to bite. “*Please* tell me this is some kind of cruel joke!”

“Why, what’s wrong?”

“Those glasses are in every *way* wrong,” Rarity stressed while she treated the glasses as if their ugliness was infectious. “Those thick frames, and that black color! Oh, they utterly clash with Nyx’s entire outfit!”

“But... she has a black coat. How can black frames clash with a black coat?”

“It’s about so much more than just the *color*, Twilight. I mean, look at these glasses!” Rarity took the frames up in her own magic and levitated them in the air while she pointed out their flaws. “They’re matte, with no shine whatsoever. Nyx’s coat, in contrast, has just the slightest natural sheen. And don’t get me *started* on the thickness.

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

“But—”

“No buts!” Rarity said. She then got behind Twilight and began pushing her towards the boutique’s front door. “I will *not* have you ruin this fashionable attire with some random frames you picked out just because you’d thought they’d *be fine*. As you surely remember, Twilight, I’ve seen your definition of fine, and it was embodied in that... *interesting* dress you were going to wear to the Gala before I made you your new dress.”

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

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

“But what about Nyx?”

Rarity shoved Twilight out the door with a small burst of magic. “She will be fine here with me until you come back with those new frames. Now, *off* with you.” At that the door to the boutique abruptly shut, leaving Twilight bewildered outside while Rarity shook her head in disbelief.

“Twilight, sometimes I think you’re actually trying to be unfashionable on *purpose*,” Rarity huffed before she turned and trotted away from the door. It was then she caught sight of Nyx, and forced a smile. “I do apologize for that outburst, Nyx, but I just couldn’t let Twilight ruin the new outfit I made with those awful glasses. They would have just been a travesty against fashion, a simple *travesty*.”

“Were the glasses really that bad?” Nyx asked.

“Oh yes,” Rarity said with a nod. “Between you and me, I wouldn’t make my worst enemy, somepony I truly hated, wear those glasses. They are, in all honesty, the very *definition* of a fashion *don’t*.”

At that Rarity turned and began busying herself with cleaning up the bits and pieces of fabric left behind from making the vest. For a time, she went about her work happily, humming a melody to herself as she reveled in the satisfaction of a job well done. Yet, as Rarity cleaned she began to hear something: a quiet sniffing. Caught a bit off guard by the sound, Rarity turned to look at its source.

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

It was an awkward moment, and Rarity tried to turn away and ignore Nyx. After all, she wasn’t in any way convinced that Nyx wasn’t Nightmare Moon, and she still strongly believed that Twilight needed to write a letter to the princess immediately. Even if Nyx had been well-behaved, it didn’t dispel Rarity’s fears.

So Rarity continued to clean. She put away her spools of black and purple fabric, her needles, and her thread. She did everything she could to just ignore Nyx. Yet, as Rarity tried to keep herself busy, Nyx’s sniffing matured and graduated to soft sobs.

Finally, it became too much. Rarity turned and approached Nyx, unable to hide the hint of annoyance in her voice as she asked, “What in the world is the matter?”

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

Rarity cocked her head to one side, arched an eyebrow, and took a cautious step closer as her annoyance was replaced with confusion. “Now just what makes you think that?”

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

Rarity sighed and chuckled a little to herself in relief before she reached out with a hoof and gently lifted Nyx’s chin. “No, Nyx, I promise Twilight doesn’t hate you.”

“But... you said—”

“Allow me to clarify,” Rarity began while she gently brushed away a few of Nyx’s tears. “I wouldn’t make anypony wear those glasses, but I also have a better sense of fashion than Twilight Sparkle. She just didn’t realize how ugly those glasses were; she’s *always* more concerned with function at the expense of aesthetics. Honestly, if she needed to, she’d probably wear those glasses herself, and I know Twilight doesn’t hate herself.”

“Are you sure?” Nyx asked.

“I am absolutely positive,” Rarity said, her voice ringing with authority. “Twilight Sparkle does not hate you in the least.”

“O... okay, Miss Rarity.”

“Please, you may just call me ‘Rarity,’” she corrected. True, she appreciated the fact Nyx had enough manners to address her like a lady, unlike those ruffians the Diamond Dogs. However, she never quite liked it when young fillies and colts addressed her as “Miss Rarity”. Coming from them, it made her sound older than she liked.

“Okay, Rarity,” Nyx said again, making the correction.

Rarity smiled, gave an approving nod, and began walking towards the boutique’s kitchen. “Good. Now, I’m done cleaning, so why don’t we go and have ourselves a late morning tea while we wait for Twilight? I also think I have some leftover pieces of cake from one of Pinkie Pie’s many parties. I’d say you deserve to have a slice after behaving so well this morning.”

Nyx perked up at the thought of getting a slice of cake and eagerly followed Rarity. The pair reached the kitchen quickly, and, with an elegant flick of her horn, Rarity set several

things in motion about the kitchen: a shining example of her skills as an efficient levitation multitasker.

“Go ahead and sit there,” Rarity said, motioning to the small kitchen table as a table cloth laid itself across the table and a tea kettle found its way to the stove. “The tea will be ready in a jiffy.”

Nyx complied and watched patiently as Rarity worked. Within a few minutes, the water had boiled, and the tea was ready. Rarity then cut two slices of cake and levitated it all over to the table where Nyx was waiting. It was going to be a pleasant late morning tea, but Rarity had another purpose for the impromptu sit down with Nyx. To say the least, she was curious about the Nightmare Moon look-a-like and now had an opportunity to satisfy her curiosity while Twilight was away.

“So, tell me a little about yourself, Nyx.”

Nyx looked up from the cake and tea that had been placed in front of her. “Well, I’ve been staying with Twilight. She’s a really nice unicorn, and Spike is nice too. She also has an owl named—”

“Nyx, you’re telling me about Twilight Sparkle, and I *know* Twilight,” Rarity interrupted with a polite chuckle before she batted at her mane. “She is, after all, one of my closest friends. That, and, if you recall, you and Twilight told me all about what you’ve been doing the past three days while I was working on your vest.”

Rarity levitated her cup of tea, preparing to take a sip. “No, I want to know more about *you*. Oh, and, if I were you, I’d drink your tea before it starts getting cold.”

Nyx nodded and looked down at the small cup she had been served. She first leaned in to take a sip but cringed and froze up when Rarity began to speak.

“Oh, please tell me Twilight has at *least* taught you how to drink tea correctly,” Rarity groaned.

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

“But of course,” Rarity assured her, “especially when you have a unicorn horn. The only proper way for a unicorn mare to have tea is to levitate the cup to her mouth and take a very delicate sip, and, above all, a proper mare shouldn’t spill a drop or slurp.”

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

“You mean... like this?” Nyx replied, her own horn starting to glow. Yet, to both her and Rarity’s surprise, Nyx’s cup shot up and smashed against the ceiling, causing several small pieces to rain down on top of them.

Rarity’s mouth hung open slightly while she gaped at where the tea cup had shattered against the ceiling. “My word...”

“Rarity, I’m sorry! I’m so sorry!” Nyx panicked before she put her hooves together on the table and literally began to beg Rarity for her forgiveness. “Please don’t be mad, I-I-I didn’t mean to do it! It was an accident! Please don’t be mad! I’m so sorry, please don’t hate me! I... I...”

“Nyx, Nyx, please relax! It was just an accident,” Rarity said. She lit her horn again, and, with the help of a few dish rags, she began to clean up the spilled tea and shattered tea cup. “Though, if I were to venture a guess, that was your first time trying to levitate something.”

Nyx replied with a nod.

“Well, I never liked that cup anyway, and no unicorn gets levitation right on the first try. Most colts and fillies your age have trouble lifting things, whereas your trouble seems to be that you have a natural ability for magic. You just put a little too much energy into it.

“Now,” Rarity continued as her magic cleaned up the last pieces of the mess and poured Nyx a fresh cup of tea. “I want you to try again, but be very gentle this time.”

“But... what if I break another cup?”

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

The vote of confidence, however, brought a smile to Nyx’s face, and she made another attempt. This time, Nyx very gently levitated the cup of tea off the saucer. It wobbled around in the air but stayed level enough that it didn’t spill. Nyx then began moving the cup closer to her head, and she opened her mouth wide to give herself as large of target as possible.

In the end, Nyx was able to wrap her lips around the rim of the cup and take a small, quiet sip. She then levitated the cup down with the intention of placing it back on the saucer. She, however, released her magic a little too early. The cup clattered down onto the waiting saucer, causing both Nyx and Rarity to wince. Yet, despite its rough landing, the cup neither broke nor spilt.

“There you go, just like that,” Rarity said, though her happiness came mostly from the fact that Nyx hadn’t smashed another tea cup. “Yes, you’ve taken a good first step towards being a proper mare.”

Nyx looked up at Rarity with wide, eager eyes. “So, if I can learn to sip tea right, I’ll be a proper mare!?”

“Oh heavens no,” Rarity replied. She stepped away from the table and began to slowly stroll across the room. “A proper mare has to be able to walk with the right posture, to keep up pleasant conversation, oh... and any proper mare must—”

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

Rarity glanced in Nyx’s direction, finding the request all too enticing. Yes, she was still unsure about Nyx, but she had been presented with an opportunity to spread her knowledge of proper manners and elegance. It was an offer too tempting to pass up.

“Well... I suppose we have time before Twilight gets back to go over a few things,” Rarity mused with a smile before she walked back over to the table. “First, sit up straight; a proper mare must never slouch at the table. Now, while maintaining your posture, I’ll demonstrate the proper way to eat cake.”

• • •

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

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

“Rarity?”

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

Following her friend’s voice, Twilight nosed open the door to the kitchen and was a bit surprised at what she found. Rarity was balancing a stack of three books on her head while Nyx had a single fairly thin book on hers. Nyx was watching the book, squirming a little as she tried to keep it balanced. Rarity, on the other hoof, was strolling around as if the three books she was carrying weren’t even there.

“What... are you two doing?” Twilight asked, her expression etched with confusion.

Rarity smiled, turned, and strolled towards Twilight while keeping the books on her head perfectly balanced. “Why, I’m just giving Nyx a few lessons in being a proper mare.”

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

“There’s a way to eat cake?” Twilight couldn’t help but ask with a raised eyebrow.

“But *of course*, Twilight. At least, there is a *proper* way to do it,” Rarity assured her. “Still, I assume you have the new glasses?”

“Yep, I’ve got them right here,” Twilight said. She levitated the frames off her forehead and held them out to Rarity, who took them in her own magic. Rarity then began turning them over several times. She scrutinized every detail, and, after a moment, she nodded her head weakly.

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

“Yes, I did it on my way over here.”

Rarity turned to Nyx, and levitated the glasses into her hooves. “Well then, try them on.”

Nyx glanced down at the frames in her hooves and then worked to place them on her nose. It took her a few tries to get them on correctly, but once they were in place the enchantment Twilight had placed on the frames worked almost instantly. Nyx’s eyes changed in appearance and looked like the eyes of any other pony. They had normal round pupils, and while the irises of her eyes were still turquoise, the whites of her eyes were now actually white.

“Yes, those frames definitely suit her better than the first pair,” Rarity said with a smile and a single, confident nod. “And the color goes just as well with her vest as I had hoped.”

“Twilight, why do I have to wear a vest and glasses anyway?” Nyx asked, her curiosity about the clothes reaching its limits.

Twilight bit her lip and rubbed the back of her neck anxiously as she tried to figure out what to say. Thankfully, however, Rarity stepped in to assist by saying, “Well, Twilight’s just trying to protect you.”

Nyx’s ears drooped and she shrank back a little. “Protect me? From what?”

“Why, from making other ponies jealous. Most ponies either have wings or a horn, if they even have either at all, but you have both. Not only that, but you have such unique eyes that you’d make other ponies jealous, and you wouldn’t want to make anypony jealous, would you?”

Rarity finished by gently tapping Nyx on the nose, making her giggle a little before she smiled up at Rarity and said, “No, I guess I don’t..”

“Well, you just keep those vest and glasses on then, and you won’t have to worry about it. Now, why don’t you go and finish your cake? I want to talk with Twilight for a moment.”

Nyx nodded eagerly and quickly scampered back over to the kitchen table while Rarity guided Twilight to the far corner of the room where they could talk quietly without being overheard.

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

Rarity glanced over her shoulder. “I’ll admit, Twilight, she’s... she’s very well behaved, and I can see why you believe she only *looks* like Nightmare Moon.”

Twilight breathed a sigh of relief. “I’m glad to hear that.”

Rarity lifted a hoof. “Don’t misunderstand me, Twilight. I still think you should tell Princess Celestia about this, but I can better appreciate your reasons for desiring secrecy. I don’t think I’d be able to sleep at night if Celestia punished such a young, sweet filly if she wasn’t in fact Nightmare Moon. Still, I noticed a couple things that you may want to be aware of.”

“Like what?”

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

“Well, she *is* an alicorn,” Twilight pointed out. “Princess Celestia and Luna are able to move the sun and moon. Magic is probably just something that comes naturally to her.”

“Secondly,” Rarity continued, not even registering Twilight’s interruption, “Be very, and I do mean *very*, careful what you say around her. I’ve found out the hard way that Nyx is a very sensitive pony. I accidentally said something in passing that made her think you hated her, and she was absolutely heartbroken. In fact, I dare say she is actually *worse* than our dear Fluttershy.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Twilight gave an affirming nod. “Exactly, though... I think for right now I’d like to just keep the truth between you and me.”

“It would be for the best, wouldn’t it?” Rarity agreed. “While Fluttershy and Pinkie Pie may take well to Nyx, I can only imagine that convincing Applejack and Rainbow Dash that she isn’t Nightmare Moon would be *much* more difficult. Those two are just so stubborn when they get their minds set.”

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

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

“Thank you, Rarity, and thanks again for helping with Nyx’s disguise.”

“It was my pleasure, Twilight. It was nice being able to extend my creativity to a casual wear vest,” Rarity replied before her tone once again turned serious. “Please promise me one thing, though.”

“What’s that?”

“Keep an eye on Nyx, Twilight. I know you don’t think she’s Nightmare Moon, but I would rather you err on the side of caution.”

Twilight nodded. “I’ll be careful, Rarity, I promise.”

“Good,” Rarity said with an approving nod before she and Twilight began moving back to the table. Nyx had finished the last of her cake, set her fork down like a proper mare, and was just jumping down from her seat at the table as the two mares walked up.

“All right Nyx, we need to get going,” Twilight said. She began to guide Nyx from the room, but she paused at the kitchen door to look back at Rarity. “And thanks again.”

“Yeah, thank you, Rarity,” Nyx added. “It was fun learning to be a proper mare.”

“Well, I’m glad you enjoyed it,” Rarity said with a smile.

“Do you think I could come back and learn some more?”

Rarity tensed, glancing anxiously at Twilight. It was a rare occasion when somepony was actually interested in learning about proper manners, at least in the simple-natured community of Ponyville. Rarity would walk down the street and see ponies slouching or eating with such horrible manners, and, the few times she tried to correct ponies, her efforts were usually met with annoyed glares. Even her own little sister, Sweetie Belle, didn’t seem interested in learning proper etiquette. She was more worried about playing with her friends, the Cutie Mark Crusaders.

It was such a tempting request, an opportunity to spread proper manners in a world that was often, in her opinion, lacking such things. That, and Rarity realized something else. Having Nyx over would give her the opportunity to make sure she wasn't Nightmare Moon. While Twilight seemed at least somewhat certain, Rarity felt it wouldn't hurt to have another pair of eyes watching Nyx, just in case she started to show signs of being evil.

"I suppose you could come back from time to time," Rarity finally answered, "though, if I'm busy with a client, I expect you to either come back later or wait patiently. A proper mare doesn't interrupt somepony that's working."

Nyx nodded her head eagerly, more than willing to accept Rarity's terms.

• • •

Twilight spent the next few hours showing Nyx to her other friends, and, just like her friends were different, their responses to Nyx were vastly different. The only constant was, thankfully, the one thing Twilight really needed to worry about. None of them had so far been able to see through Nyx's disguise.

Rainbow Dash was actually the very first to run into Twilight and Nyx... literally. Twilight was no stranger to being a living crash site for her pegasus friend, and was no worse for the wear after the pony-to-pony collision. Nyx, however, was bawling her eyes out in panic, worried that the first pony to show her any kindness was seriously injured.

It was easy enough to get Nyx to calm down once Twilight was able to assure her that she wasn't hurt. Rainbow Dash, on the other hoof, wasn't too impressed with Twilight's "cousin." In her own words, Dash pointed out that Nyx was kind of a crybaby and that she could stand a lot of toughening up. It was the kind of harsh honesty Dash was known for, though Twilight didn't appreciate it at the time. After those not so gentle words, Nyx hid behind Twilight until Rainbow finally left.

The next pony Twilight introduced Nyx to was Applejack. Still reeling from her encounter with Rainbow Dash, Nyx was frightened of Applejack and seeing her bucking trees didn't help. Nyx, however, warmed up to Applejack when she showed her some good old fashioned hospitality, offering a smile and apple juice. Soon, Applejack was answering Nyx's almost endless stream of apple-and-farm-related questions, impressing not only Nyx but Twilight with her extensive knowledge of her livelihood. If apple farming was a field of magical or scientific study, Applejack would have a PhD.

Nyx also got along with Fluttershy fairly well. Though, if Nyx couldn't get along with the bearer of the Element of Kindness, Twilight would've doubted that Nyx could ever get along with anypony. Fluttershy also proved to be just the mare to help Nyx completely forget about Rainbow Dash's callous comments. Fluttershy introduced Nyx to as many of her animal friends as she could and happily responded to Nyx's questions about the many cute and cuddly creatures.

That had all happened earlier that day, and now Twilight was leading Nyx through the streets of Ponyville to their final destination. The disguise had to undergo one final test before Twilight would feel confident that Nyx's resemblance to Nightmare Moon would remain hidden. One final opponent: an energetic pink earth pony that had a happy outlook on life, but more importantly, a strange sixth sense.

The disguise would have to stand up against Pinkie Pie.

Twilight winced when she heard the little bell above Sugarcube Corner's door ring, announcing her and Nyx's arrival. She knew she could make Pinkie Pie promise to keep the truth a secret if she saw through the disguise, but that didn't ease Twilight's nerves. If anypony was going to see through the disguise, it would be Pinkie Pie. Yet, if the disguise could fool her, then it meant that any regular pony would be fooled.

"Hey, welcome to Sugarcube Corner, where everything is super tasty, super sugary, and just super super. Oh, hey, Twilight!" Pinkie Pie said as she bounced out from the kitchen. "Here for an afternoon snack?"

Twilight shook her head. "No, I'm actually here to introduce you to my cousin. She's going to be staying here in Ponyville with me for a while, and—"

Twilight found herself quickly knocked out of the way as Pinkie Pie zipped up, bringing her face within inches of Nyx. Nyx responded to this invasion of her personal space by craning her neck back and taking a few nervous steps in the opposite direction of Pinkie Pie.

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

"I'm... I'm... I'm..." Nyx stammered as she stared into Pinkie Pie's expectant, almost manic blue eyes.

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

Pinkie Pie froze up at this, as did Twilight. On the morning of the Summer Sun Celebration two years ago, when Nightmare Moon first appeared, Pinkie had tried to guess Nightmare Moon's name. One of the names she guessed back then was Black Snooty, and Twilight's mind had already begun to whirl with worry. Was that a sign Pinkie Pie saw the resemblance? Was she able to see through Nyx's disguise?

"Oh, I'm sorry, that was mean of me," Pinkie then finally apologized, ending the uncomfortable silence that had fallen on the room. "I know your coat is black, but I don't know enough about you to call you snooty, and even if I did, I wouldn't say it to you like this. That would just make me a rude rudy rude pants." Pinkie Pie tilted her head to one side, staring at the ceiling as she scratched her head. "Why did I think that would be your name?"

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

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

"Just a few days," Twilight answered for Nyx, since Nyx was now hiding behind her.

"WHAT?!" Pinkie Pie shouted before she glared angrily at Twilight. "She's been here for *that* long and you didn't tell me?!"

"W-well," Twilight stuttered while forcing a smile, "I was just giving her a chance to settle in. See, she's very—"

"Twilight, nothing helps a pony settle in better than a welcome party," Pinkie Pie lectured, her tone dead serious, "and now I'm late! I'm going to have to make this party extra, super-duper special to make up for it being so late! Oh, I'm going to need streamers, balloons, and you know what else?"

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

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

With that, Pinkie Pie was off, leaving a very scared and confused Nyx in her wake. Twilight, however, was mostly relieved. Pinkie Pie was acting like Pinkie Pie, which meant she hadn't recognized Nyx. She did worry that Pinkie Pie might have subconsciously noticed Nyx's resemblance to Nightmare Moon, which could explain why she brought up the name Black Snooty. Still, as long as that recognition stayed in Pinkie's subconscious, they would be fine.

With Pinkie Pie off to pull together a welcome party, Twilight turned her attention to Nyx. She was still stunned, as some ponies were when they first met the very energetic Pinkie Pie. She, however, was beginning to recover and had shored up just enough courage to peak out from her hiding place behind Twilight.

"Twilight, i-is she always like that?"

"Only when she meets a new pony," Twilight assured.

Nyx turned her attention to the door Pinkie Pie had bounced out of a few moments earlier. "And... is she really going to throw me a party?"

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

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

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

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

Twilight chuckled anxiously; the welcome party had been on the night just before Nightmare Moon returned, which was treading dangerously close to information Twilight didn't want to share with Nyx. After all, the reason she hadn't attended her own welcome party was that she wanted time to look up more information about Nightmare Moon.

Then again, Nyx did just ask what the *party* was like. Twilight didn't have to mention what happened during that Summer Sun Celebration or why she was so eager to get away from everypony that day. It couldn't hurt to just tell her about the party.

“Well, it’s sort of like this,” Twilight began as the pair turned to leave Sugarcube Corner. “I had just arrived in Ponyville with Spike, and he told me to try to talk to some of the ponies in town. The first pony we ran into was Pinkie Pie, and...”

Nyx clung to Twilight's front leg as the pair looked at the building ahead of them. It was painted in rich, welcoming reds and surrounded by a lush green yard. The building was decorated with festive hearts; even the weather vane on the top of the bell tower featured a heart, looking almost like a Cupid's arrow. A playground was visible behind the building, while in front there was a flagpole and a hedge sculpture of a pony wearing a square, flat-topped hat with a tassel.

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

It was a place that utterly terrified Nyx.

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

"Yes," Twilight replied.

"For how long?" Nyx whined.

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

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

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

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

"Can't I just stay at the library with you?" Nyx pleaded.

“The whole point of school is to learn new things,” Twilight replied. “You’ve been learning everything you can from me and Rarity, and you’ve been having a lot of fun. Now you’re just going to be learning from Cheerilee with other fillies and colts instead.”

“But I know you and your friends, and I don’t know Cheerilee. What if she’s mean?”

Twilight chuckled a little at Nyx’s fear. “Don’t worry, Cheerilee is very nice. Just pay attention in class and remember to follow the rules. That means both Cheerilee’s rules and my rules, which are?”

“I can’t take off my vest, I can’t take off my glasses, I can’t tell anypony about my wings or that I’m an alicorn, and I should try not to use my magic unless I’m writing something down.”

“And try to make some friends,” Twilight added, rubbing a hoof against Nyx’s head.

With a yelp and a giggle, Nyx batted at Twilight’s hoof before she escaped from the playful noogie. She then looked up at Twilight, curiosity glinting in her eyes. “Are friends really that important?”

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

• • •

“Good morning, class,” Cheerilee greeted in a singsong voice as she stood at the front of the room.

“Good morning, Cheerilee,” the class echoed back, some honestly, others just to please the teacher.

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

“Yes, Cheerilee,” the class chimed back.

Cheerilee gave a pleased nod before turning to look at Nyx. “Good. Now, go ahead and find a seat. You can take any open desk you like.”

Nyx nodded gently as she looked out across the sixteen desks. The class was sitting to one side of the room, leaving a column of empty desks, which had been added the previous evening, on the left side. Nyx looked at each seat, trying to decide which of the desks to claim as her own. Twilight had told her to sit as close to the front as possible. However, Nyx didn't feel brave enough to sit in the very front, at least not on the first day.

Nyx eventually picked the desk second from the front, setting down her saddlebags before taking her seat. Directly to her right was an earth pony with a grayish-magenta coat and a mane that was a mixture of white and violet. Nyx couldn't help but notice she was wearing a tiara very similar to the one she had for a cutie mark.

It was only then that Nyx realized the pony she was staring at was staring back, and not in a good way. The tiara-wearing pony wore an expression of annoyance, as if Nyx's very presence offended her. Nyx shrank away from the other filly, not sure what to do... but then she remembered what Twilight had told her. She was supposed to try and make friends.

Gathering what courage she could, Nyx gave a very sheepish smile and gently waved her hoof, but the tiara-wearing pony just humphed and turned her head away, lifting her nose a little.

Nyx slumped in her seat at the dismissal and rested her head on the desk. She glanced at the other fillies and colts in class, but those who happened to be looking her way quickly turned their heads back to the front when she glanced in their direction.

Frowning and turning her head towards the front, Nyx watched Cheerilee write on the chalkboard as her mind came to a single, solid, and in her opinion, undeniable conclusion.

School was not going to be fun at all.

• • •

School was *amazing!*

Nyx could only smile, horn shimmering as she took notes feverishly. Cheerilee had started the day's lesson with some history, teaching about Ponyville's origins and traditions, such as Winter Wrap Up and the Running of the Leaves.

“Now, are there any questions before we go to recess?” Cheerilee asked, not expecting to see a hoof in the air. Her students were always more interested in taking their recess than they were in learning more. So, Cheerilee couldn’t help but smile when she saw a particular black hoof in the air, one she had seen raised several times over the course of the morning.

“Yes, Nyx, what’s your question?”

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

“That is a very good question, Nyx,” the teacher replied, pleased with her student’s inquisitiveness. “While it is a tradition that magic isn’t used to clean up winter, few ponies realize that back when the tradition started, there weren’t any pegasi around.”

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

“Well, if you don’t mind getting to recess a little later than usual, I can tell you that originally the earth ponies in town—”

And Cheerilee was off, going a little deeper into her lecture than she had intended. Nyx was happy and was already jotting down fresh notes. Her note-taking, however, was interrupted when something hit the side of her head. Looking down at the floor, she saw it was a piece of paper, and, upon looking up, she saw a number of her classmates were glaring at her coldly.

Under the unforgiving glares of her classmates, Nyx could only sink into her desk and whimper a little. She didn’t know what she had done wrong. She had just asked a question. She was just curious.

• • •

“Boy, am I glad to get outside,” Apple Bloom said about fifteen minutes later, when Cheerilee had finished talking about how earth ponies cleared the clouds. “I was worried we wouldn’t get recess ‘cause of that question the new filly asked.”

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

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

Twist pointed her hoof at the school's small sports field, where several of their classmates were starting to kick a ball around. "We could go play hoofball with Scootaloo and Sweetie Belle."

Apple Bloom scrunched her nose up for a few moments, but then shook her head. "Nah, we played that all last week."

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

"Now *that* sounds like a good idea," Apple Bloom replied as the pair began to trot towards the playground equipment. Twist arrived first and jumped onto the wooden swing set.

Apple Bloom stood back to wait her turn. She watched Twist swing higher and higher, her own smile growing as Twist reached impressive heights. It wasn't the highest Apple Bloom had seen somepony reach on the swing, but it was still respectable.

"Hey!" Twist called, just before she reached the top of one of her forward swings.

"What is it?" Apple Bloom shouted back.

"I think... Silver Spoon... and... Diamond... Tiara... are talking... to... the new... filly," Twist explained, saying a few bits of her sentence each time she swung by Apple Bloom.

Turning her head, Apple Bloom looked in the direction the swing was facing and saw that the two school bullies had caught the new filly just as she was coming outside for recess. The three of them were talking on the schoolhouse steps, and, by the looks of things, it wasn't a pleasant conversation.

"What do... you think... they're... talking... about?"

"Nothin' good if I know those two," Apple Bloom said before she took a step in that direction. "Twist, you stay here a sec. I'll be right back."

"O... kay!" Twist called out as she continued to swing, though she kept watch as her friend crossed the playground and drew closer to where Diamond Tiara, Silver Spoon, and the new filly were standing.

• • •

“So, like, we don’t appreciate *nerds* like you making us almost miss recess.”

“That class is already *soooo* boring without you asking a bunch of questions. We get enough of that from Twist, don’t we, Diamond Tiara?”

“Yes we do, Silver Spoon, but at least Twist is bearable. She also doesn’t have an ugly coat, like yours.”

Nyx cringed and lowered her head as her ears flattened against her skull. She had been the last to get out of the schoolhouse for recess, mostly because she had to stop and ask Cheerilee what recess was. Cheerilee had been more than happy to answer, though Nyx hadn’t been thrilled by the idea of having to go and play with the classmates she had just made angry.

Her fears had then only been confirmed when the filly she sat next to in class and another filly, one with a gray coat and a spoon cutie mark, caught her within a few seconds of her stepping outside. “U... ugly?” was all she was able to stammer out under the other fillies’ verbal assault.

“Yeah, ugly,” Diamond Tiara sneered. “It’s the absolute worst color. I would just *die* if I had a black coat.”

Silver Spoon nodded her head in agreement, scrunching up her nose in disgust. “Me too! Not only is black, like, so ugly, but it’s creepy too. Only things like spiders, bats, and ticks are supposed to be black.”

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

“Ewww!” Silver Spoon said while sticking out her tongue. She and Diamond Tiara then began to smile devilishly as they chanted in unison. “Nyx has ticks, Nyx has ticks, Nyx has ticks.”

“I... I do n-not...” Nyx whimpered in an attempt to defend herself, but Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon’s onslaught of chanting continued. Tears started to flow from her eyes, and the sight of her crying only fueled the sadistic mood of the two class bullies.

“Awww, look, she’s crying,” Diamond Tiara mocked with faked sympathy. “I didn’t realize they let little foals come to school, or maybe that’s your lame special talent: crying.”

“What special talent? She doesn’t even have a cutie mark,” Silver Spoon noted, pointing to Nyx’s blank flanks.

“Wow, I so didn’t notice that before!” laughed Diamond Tiara before looking back at Nyx. “So not only are you a nerd, a creep, and a crybaby, but you’re also a blank flank! You’re, like, the biggest loser in the whole school!”

“More like the biggest loser in Ponyville,” Silver Spoon corrected, which only made Nyx cry harder. However, before the two fillies could continue to taunt, tease, and torment Nyx, Diamond Tiara was shoved from the side. The sudden push sent her off balance, and both she and her namesake tiara fell into the dirt.

“Oh my gosh, Tiara!” Silver Spoon exclaimed as she looked to where Diamond Tiara had been standing moments before. A furious looking Apple Bloom was now standing in Diamond’s place, and she was glaring down at the two schoolyard bullies.

“Like, you’re going to be in *so* much trouble now, Apple Bloom! Cheerilee says no fighting in school,” Silver Spoon snapped at Apple Bloom as she helped Diamond Tiara off of the ground. “I’m going to tell Cheerilee!”

“Fine, go ahead!” Apple Bloom snapped back. She didn’t falter, even at the mention of their teacher’s name. “If you do that, then I’ll tell her that you were bein’ mean!”

“And you think she’ll believe you?” Diamond Tiara asked once she had gotten back up on her hooves.

Apple Bloom nodded her head firmly. “Nyx is cryin’, and Twist is watchin’ the whole thing from over there on the swing.”

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

Silver Spoon grabbed Diamond Tiara’s tiara and did her best to wipe the dirt off the treasured crown before giving it back to Diamond. “Come on. This is, like, not worth our time getting in trouble for.”

“Hmph. Fine. You win *this* round, blank flank. Have fun with your new friend and all of her ticks.” Diamond Tiara sneered before turning away. “Let’s get out of here, Silver Spoon.”

Silver Spoon stuck her tongue out at Apple Bloom as a final parting shot before she and Diamond Tiara retreated. Apple Bloom watched the pair leave, and only when she was sure they were out of ear-shot did she huff and scrape the ground with her hoof. “Someday I’d like to buck some sense into those two, just like my big sister would. *She* may have gotten in trouble at school, but ya can bet your mane *she* never got teased by the likes of them.”

Apple Bloom finally lowered her guard. She blew a tuft of her mane out of her face and turned to look at Nyx. “You okay?”

Nyx, who had watched the exchange between Apple Bloom, Diamond Tiara, and Silver Spoon, nodded her head as she pulled herself up. She closed her eyes, carefully removed her glasses, and used a hoof to rub away the tears on her cheeks. She did not open her eyes again until her glasses were back where they belonged: perched squarely on her nose.

“W-why are those two so mean?” sniffled Nyx.

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

Nyx looked at the hoof for a bit, cautious of the kindness she was being shown after Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon’s cruelty. Still, she eventually managed a weak smile as she reached out and gently shook it.

“I’m Nyx.”

• • •

“Well howdy, Twilight! What brings you round these here parts?” Applejack greeted as she caught up to Twilight Sparkle, who was walking down an earthen path in Ponyville.

“Oh, hey, Applejack. I’m just on my way to the schoolhouse,” Twilight replied.

“Well, that’s just where I’m headin’,” Applejack said as she began to walk with Twilight. “I’m pickin’ up Apple Bloom from school today. Need her help runnin’ some errands in town. What about yerself?”

“I’m picking up Nyx.”

“Nyx? That cousin of yours?” Applejack asked, surprised. “Since when did that little filly start goin’ to school?”

“Today was her first day, actually.”

Applejack whistled before glancing in Twilight’s direction. “First day of school is never easy, ‘specially when you just moved to a new place.”

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

“Yep, right along with Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo. You think they’ve met?” Applejack asked.

Twilight opened her mouth to reply, but, at that moment, the school came into view. Just outside the schoolhouse’s front door, Twilight saw a pair of fillies running and laughing merrily. It was a sight that made Twilight smile. “I’d say they’ve more than just met.”

“Applejack!” Apple Bloom called out when she caught sight of her older sister. Soon, she and Nyx had scampered over to meet Twilight and Applejack, who were smiling down at the pair of young ponies.

“Hey Apple Bloom, how was school today?” Applejack asked.

“It was really fun, and I’ve made a new friend,” Apple Bloom said with a smile before motioning to Nyx with her hoof. “Applejack, this is Nyx. Nyx, this is my big sister Applejack.”

Apple Bloom put on a big smile and looked back at Nyx. She expected to see a similar expression but instead found only confusion. “Wait... your big sister is Applejack?”

“You already know my big sister?” Apple Bloom asked in return, reflecting Nyx’s confusion.

“She should,” Applejack interrupted. “Twilight brought Nyx around the orchards yesterday.”

“Why would she do that?” Apple Bloom asked, cocking her head to one side.

“Because Nyx is my cousin, and she’s staying with me at the library while she’s here in Ponyville,” Twilight answered with her simple lie.

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

Nyx’s eyes went wide, and she looked up at Twilight with her mouth agape. “You did?”

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

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

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

“Well... some of the other fillies in class were mean to me... and Cheerilee wanted me to give you something,” Nyx said. With her horn glowing, she clicked open the latch on her saddlebags and pulled out a note. Twilight quickly took the note into her own magic and lifted it to her face so she could read it.

“What does it say? Did Nyx do something bad?” Apple Bloom asked, her only experience with teacher’s notes being referrals for bad behavior.

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

Applejack leaned to one side and whistled while she read the note over Twilight’s shoulder. “That ain’t just *some* subjects, Twi. That’s a lot of book learnin’ Nyx has to catch up on.”

“Yes, but with my help, I’m sure we’ll get through it really quickly,” Twilight said confidently as she rolled up the note and put it back into Nyx’s saddlebags. “We’ll, of course, start right away. We could probably get through basic mathematics this afternoon if we really hit it hard.”

“Awww,” Apple Bloom muttered in disappointment.

“What’s the matter, sugarcube?”

“I wanted to ask Nyx if she wanted to join the Cutie Mark Crusaders. I’m meeting Scootaloo and Sweetie Belle this afternoon so we can try and find our cutie marks. Nyx doesn’t have hers either, so I thought she might like to come along.”

“Well, how about you let Nyx go get some learnin’ done with Twilight, and then you and your friends can go find her at the library later?” Applejack suggested before she glanced over at Twilight. “That is, ‘course, if it’s okay with you, Twi.”

Twilight opened her mouth to answer, but, before she could, she saw Apple Bloom and Nyx looking up at her. The pair of them were putting on the biggest, most pleading puppy-dog eyes and smiles they could muster, and Twilight couldn’t help but giggle. She nodded, causing a pair of cheers to erupt from the two young fillies.

• • •

Diamond Tiara groaned as she dropped her face into her open book. She glared coldly at the letters on the page, even though she’d rather be focusing her glare on her newest classmate. Nyx had just asked *another* question, right before recess, and now Cheerilee was continuing to lecture past class time.

Thankfully, the answer to Nyx’s question was short, and the fillies and colts of the school were soon free to run and play outside. Nyx rushed out with Apple Bloom and Twist, and the three ran to meet Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo near some of the school’s playground equipment.

Diamond Tiara, on the other hoof, lingered near the schoolhouse and watched Nyx as she waited for Silver Spoon to get outside.

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

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

“A total egghead,” Silver Spoon agreed.

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

Silver Spoon then smiled when an idea popped into her head. “Hey, you want to put gum on her chair?”

“No, that won’t do it. It might make her cry, but not much else. No, if we’re going to prank her, it needs to be a prank that teaches her to not be so curious,” Diamond Tiara said. She shifted her gaze away from Nyx, searching for some inspiration for the perfect prank. She looked at her other classmates playing, at the playground equipment, and then her gaze shifted to the forest in the distance. Diamond began to smile devilishly.

“Oh... that is *too* perfect.”

“What is?” Silver Spoon asked.

Diamond Tiara motioned for Silver Spoon to get close before she started whispering in her friend’s ear. Still, as Diamond Tiara explained the idea, Silver Spoon’s smile weakened. “I don’t know Diamond. It’s a good idea, but what if something happens to her? We could get in trouble.”

“It’s a *great* idea,” Diamond corrected, “and it will teach Nyx a lesson. Besides, she’ll be in there for like ten minutes before she turns around and runs away crying like a baby.”

Silver Spoon bit her lip for a moment, but then smiled and nodded. “Okay, let’s do it.”

“Bump! Bump! Sugar-lump, rump!” the pair said in unison, doing their strange, special hoofshake before they laughed and strolled off to set their plan in motion.

• • •

KNOCK... KNOCK... KNOCK

“Coming!”

Twilight set down the book she had been holding and trotted towards the library door. She had been organizing a few books while Nyx worked on some math problem as part of Twilight’s efforts to catch her up with the rest of her class. Nyx was currently sticking her tongue out and scratching her head as she tried to solve one particularly difficult problem.

“Nyx?” Twilight called from the door.

Nyx looked up from the math worksheet Twilight had made for her and called back. "Yeah?"

"There are a couple of your friends from school here. Do you want to take a break and go play with them?"

Nyx was at the door in a flash, expecting Apple Bloom, Scootaloo, Sweetie Belle, or Twist... but her smile quickly withered when she saw it was Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon standing on the library's doorstep.

"Hey, Nyx, we were just going to Sugarcube Corner to get a snack. You want to come with?" Diamond Tiara offered with a big, friendly smile.

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

"Oh, nonsense," Twilight said, using a leg to push Nyx out the door. She fetched Nyx's saddlebags and put a few bits into the right pouch. "Go have a break with your friends. Oh, can you bring me back a sugar cookie too? Pinkie Pie was bragging about how the sugar cookies she made this morning are her best ever, and I was hoping to try one."

"But, but..." Nyx stammered, but, before she could say anything else, she was outside, and the door to the library had been shut behind her. Nyx lowered her head and looked at the two other fillies, afraid of what they would say to her. But rather than insult her, Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon continued to smile.

"First, I just want to say, Silver Spoon and I are sorry for being so mean."

Nyx raised her head and made no effort to hide the expression of confusion and surprise that formed on her face. "You... you do?"

Diamond Tiara nodded and motioned with a hoof. The trio began to walk down the street in the direction of Sugarcube Corner while they continued to talk. "Yeah, like, we thought about what we did, and we're so sorry we did it. It's not easy being the new kid in town, and it was wrong of us to be mean to you like that."

"O-oh, um... that's okay. I forgive you," Nyx said with a weak smile as she walked between Diamond and Silver Spoon. "You two did say a lot of mean things, though."

"We know, and we feel really bad, but, like, we got to make sure the new ponies in town are cool," Silver Spoon said, as if judging a pony's coolness was their job.

“So all that was a test?”

“Yes,” assured Diamond Tiara, “and you passed. Congratulations.”

“But how is saying I have ticks a test?” Nyx asked, focusing her questioning gaze on Diamond Tiara. There was a moment of pause from Diamond, who smiled weakly while she glanced anxiously at Silver Spoon.

“Like, uh,” Silver Spoon interrupted, “we wanted to make sure you actually cared about being covered in ticks. That way, we would know whether or not you cared about... being clean.”

“Well, of course; what kind of pony would actually *like* being covered in ticks?” Nyx asked.

“A pony that’s, like, a real weirdo,” Diamond Tiara answered, jumping back into the conversation after Silver Spoon’s rescue, “and you’re obviously not a weirdo, because you do care. Still, we are, like, sorry we made you cry. We just had to be sure you are a cool pony.”

“And am I a cool pony?” Nyx asked anxiously.

Silver Spoon nodded. “Totally cool, and that’s why we wanted to be, like, friends with you.”

“R-really?!” Nyx asked with a grin. Twilight often spoke of the importance of friendship over the two weeks since Nyx had started school, and Nyx was excited by the prospect of extending her circle of friends.

“Oh yea. We can, like, be total BFFs,” Silver Spoon assured eagerly.

“What’s that?” Nyx asked as she continued to walk with the other two fillies.

“BFFs... Best Friends Forever,” Diamond Tiara explained. “Oh, and just so you know, black is *so* totally cool.”

Nyx’s eyes lit up, and her smile widened. “It is?”

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

“Totally cool,” Diamond Tiara agreed.

“Well, thanks... I’m glad we can be friends,” Nyx said with a wide smile. Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon smiled as well, but they also winked at each other behind Nyx’s back and began to snicker.

“What’s so funny?”

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

• • •

“Really?” Nyx asked in disbelief as she sat with Silver Spoon and Diamond Tiara just outside Sugarcube Corner. Nyx levitated the food to her mouth, doing her best to remember all the lessons on being a proper mare Rarity had taught her as she ate her snack, since Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon seemed to be the kind of fillies that would care about that sort of thing.

“Oh yes, the Everfree Forest really is *amazing* once you go deep enough inside,” Diamond Tiara reassured Nyx. She and Silver Spoon had just spent the last half hour convincing Nyx that once you got by the scary trees on the forest’s edge, it became a beautiful place filled with all sorts of gentle animals, babbling brooks, and huge fields of flowers.

To Nyx, it sounded like the best place ever.

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

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

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

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

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

“Oh, well... that’s good, but—” Nyx hesitantly rubbed her forelegs together and glanced over her shoulder. “Twilight’s expecting me back at the library.”

“Oh, don’t worry. Silver Spoon and I will go tell her where we’re going.” Diamond reached into her saddlebags, pulled out a map, and rolled it flat on the table. A red, dotted line had been drawn on the map, leading deep into the Everfree Forest. “Just follow this, and you’ll get to the really beautiful part of the woods. We’ll be right behind you.”

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

“Well, okay, I’ll see you there. But... could you take Twilight a sugar cookie when you go to tell her where we’re going?”

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

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

Nyx nodded, jumping down from the table and trotting off in the direction of the forest. Diamond Tiara smiled, watched Nyx until she had rounded a corner, and then burst out in laughter. Diamond Tiara laughed until Silver Spoon came back out of Sugarcube Corner carrying two freshly purchased cookies.

“Oh... that was *too* easy.”

Silver Spoon nodded, offering one of the cookies to Diamond Tiara. “Yea, and we, like, got free cookies out of the deal.”

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

“Totally,” Silver Spoon replied before the pair high-hoofed and began to enjoy their ill-gotten sweets.

• • •

Twilight trotted through the streets of Ponyville as she anxiously looked around. She hadn’t seen Nyx in two hours and was starting to worry. She hadn’t been able to find her

or the two fillies that had come to play with her. For the moment, she was willing to believe they had just gotten caught up in playing and lost track of time.

Trotting into the market, Twilight looked around but still saw no sign of Nyx. She did, however, catch sight of Applejack. Applejack was tending her market stand while keeping an eye on Apple Bloom, Scootaloo, and Sweetie Belle, who were trying to balance on top of each other a few feet away. Twilight could only guess the trio were making another attempt to get their cutie marks, but she didn't have time to try and figure out what they were doing.

"Hey, Applejack!"

"Hey there, sugarcube," Applejack greeted as Twilight trotted up to her market cart. "What can I do ya for? Want some Red Delicious, Gala, or maybe some Granny Smith apples?"

"Applejack, you haven't seen Nyx have you?"

Applejack cocked her head to the side. "Nyx? Why no, I haven't. Is she missin'?"

"I... I don't know!" Twilight fretted as she glanced about. "Two fillies from her class came by to see if she could play. That was hours ago, and I'm starting to worry."

Applejack chuckled, her eyes drifting over to Apple Bloom for a moment. "Oh, Twilight, I'm sure you got nothin' to worry yourself about. You know fillies that age. They're probably just off playin'."

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

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

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

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

"Yes... is that bad?" Twilight asked, her concerns increasing from the filly's tone.

“Twilight, those two are bullies! Don’t you remember how they made fun of me and called me a blank flank at Diamond Tiara’s Cute-ceañera?”

Her eyes grew wide, the memory of that day causing her to stagger. She did remember those two fillies. They had been teasing Apple Bloom about not having a cutie mark. She hadn’t recognized them without their party dresses on, and she hadn’t spoken or really seen that much of them in a year at least.

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

“I know where Silver Spoon lives,” Sweetie Belle claimed. “Rarity does a lot of business with her father, and sometimes when I go with her, I see Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon doing their homework at Silver Spoon’s house.”

Applejack nodded and began to lock up her apple cart. “Alright then. Sweetie Belle, you show Twilight where Silver Spoon lives and see if they’re there. Apple Bloom, Scootaloo, y’all can come with me and we’ll go see if they’re over at Filthy Rich’s store.”

Twilight and the three fillies nodded their heads, and soon the quintet of ponies had raced off in hopes of finding Nyx safe and sound.

• • •

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

The line crossed a river, and Nyx could hear the babbling of a stream just ahead of her. Still, after she rounded a corner, Nyx let out a small panicked yelp before she ducked behind a tree. Just in front of her, a giant purple sea serpent was splashing around in the water. The purple sea serpent, who oddly had well-styled orange hair, was in the process of eating some rough gemstones he had gathered from the river bed.

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

• • •

Twilight and Sweetie Belle were unable to find anypony at Silver Spoon’s house, and Applejack, Apple Bloom, and Scootaloo were just as unsuccessful. Diamond Tiara, Silver

Spoon, and Nyx were simply nowhere to be found, and Twilight was officially starting to panic.

The search quickly expanded. Applejack and Apple Bloom asked ponies around the market if they had seen the trio of fillies. Sweetie Belle ran to get Rarity while Scootaloo used her scooter to quickly race out of Ponyville to where Rainbow Dash was practicing tricks. That left Twilight to continue to run around Ponyville, trying to find Nyx and the two fillies she had last been seen with. She asked anypony she came across, growing more frantic as more time passed. Where were they? Where was Nyx?

“Twilight!”

Looking skyward, Twilight saw Rainbow Dash circling above her. “I’ve found them! This way!”

“I’m right behind you!” Twilight shouted to Rainbow Dash before calling on her magic. With a flash and a pop, she used her teleportation spell to move to a nearby roof. She kept teleporting between rooftops, following Rainbow Dash until they arrived at the edge of a park. “Where are they?”

Rainbow Dash pointed with her hoof to a park bench, on which Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon were chatting and making fun of ponies walking by. Twilight was a little disheartened because it didn’t look like Nyx was with them, but she kept herself focused on the task at hoof. “Rainbow, find the others and have them meet in the town square, just in case we have to find Nyx, while I see what these two know.”

“You got it,” Rainbow Dash assured her before she sped off to gather all the others.

Twilight watched her friend leave before turning her eyes on the park bench. Sweetie Belle had told her how mean the two school bullies could be while they were looking for them at Silver Spoon’s house. She had also been told of how cruel the pair had been to Nyx on her first day. She wanted to scream, but Twilight forced herself to smile gently. As the old saying went, you catch more flies with honey than vinegar.

“Excuse me,” Twilight said sweetly to Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon as she approached the bench. “You two wouldn’t happen to know—”

Diamond Tiara glanced over at Twilight Sparkle like she was regarding an ant before she turned back to Silver Spoon and began to speak as if Twilight wasn’t there. “Oh look, Silver Spoon, it’s the town librarian. What, trying to find ponies that have overdue books?”

“No, actually,” Twilight said sweetly, though she was struggling to maintain her kind demeanor. “I was wondering if you two know where Nyx is. The last I saw her, she was going with you two to Sugarcube Corner, and I haven’t seen her in a few hours.”

“Wait, she isn’t—” Silver Spoon tried to ask, only to yelp and promptly fall silent when Diamond Tiara stepped on her hoof.

Diamond Tiara looked back at Twilight with a sympathetic grin. “Nyx? We don’t know any Nyx, *do we*, Silver Spoon?”

Silver Spoon continued to rub her hoof, but shook her head. “N-no, it doesn’t ring a bell.”

Twilight chuckled under her breath; it was the kind of chuckle somepony made when they were doing their very best to keep their anger in check. “Now girls, we all know that isn’t true. You came to the library earlier to play with Nyx, my cousin. You know, she has a black coat and wears a vest.”

“Sounds like a real nerd to me,” Diamond Tiara commented, “and we never hang out with ugly nerds, *do we*, Silver Spoon?”

Silver Spoon laughed weakly, withering under Twilight’s intense glare. “N-no, we don’t.”

“Now *girls*,” Twilight said through gritted teeth, “I know you—”

Diamond Tiara leapt down from the park bench and turned her nose up and away from Twilight. “Come on, Silver Spoon, let’s get out of here before she tries to make us read a book or something.”

“Uh, D-diamond?” Silver Spoon stammered as she pointed a hoof at Twilight. Diamond Tiara turned her head back, confused as to why her friend was suddenly scared. Fear quickly sprang up in her own chest when her eyes fell on Twilight.

While reports of such things are rare, some books have records of exceptionally magically inclined unicorns performing something called a “rage-shift”. Twilight had studied it closely, especially after going through her own rage-shift for the first time when she was trying to understand Pinkie Pie’s sixth sense. The book she had read said that the shift occurs when a unicorn’s anger feeds into their magic to cause a physical change to the unicorn’s body.

And, in that moment, Twilight had rage-shifted for the second time in her life. With her mane and tail set ablaze by her magic, with her eyes a burning red, and with her coat a bright, angry white, Twilight glared down at Diamond Tiara like she was a pony of the apocalypse.

“Unless you want me to turn you two into cacti, you *will* tell me where Nyx is RIGHT NOW!”

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

Twilight’s rage-shift ended. Her mane, tail, and coat returned to normal while her eyes narrowed into pinpoints. Then, without another word to the fillies, Twilight spun on her hooves and galloped back towards the center of Ponyville, where Rainbow Dash would be gathering her friends. It would be dark soon, and the Everfree Forest only got more dangerous in the dark.

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Nyx trembled, just barely keeping herself moving without crying. The growing darkness had made the forest very, very scary. She looked around the path anxiously, watching the many long shadows that surrounded her and seeing things that may or may not have been there. Still, Nyx counted it a small miracle that she could see at all. The moon was three-quarters full, providing just enough light to see the path ahead.

Nyx had given up on trying to find the nice part of the forest. Now all she wanted to do was get back to Ponyville, but she had lost her map. A rustling in the bushes had startled her earlier, and when she ran, she had left the map behind. Now she was wandering around aimlessly, hoping to recognize some landmark.

She tried to follow familiar paths, ones she thought she had traversed before, but she hadn’t crossed the river again. It was the one landmark Nyx was desperately hoping to see, even if the sea serpent had returned.

Following a bend in the path, Nyx came to a stop. Before her, shrouded in curling mist, a creaky rope bridge hung over a deep expanse. It groaned as it shifted gently from side to side, nudged by small breezes. Beyond the bridge, on the far side of the gorge, were the ruins of an ancient castle that had been long forgotten and partially overtaken by the Everfree Forest.

Nyx knew she hadn't passed by a castle on her way into the forest, and yet... it was strangely familiar. Curiosity starting to replace fear, Nyx carefully stepped out onto the bridge. Thankfully, none of the wooden planks gave way under the weight of her small body, and she was able to cross to the far side without incident.

As Nyx approached and looked up at the long-forgotten castle, something began to bubble up in her mind. She tried to force whatever it was away, tried to clear her mind, but the blurry images and voices persisted, playing out inside her head.

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

"What did you do with our Princess?"

"Whoa there, Nelly!"

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

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

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

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

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

"You're here to... to..."

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

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

Putting the strange occurrence out of her mind, she began to climb the steps to the castle. She didn't know why, but she *had* to see inside, no matter how scary the Everfree Forest

was. It was as if the castle was calling out to her. She climbed steps, navigated old hallways, and eventually entered the one remaining tower. There were no defining features to the room, which had suffered under the passage of time, but Nyx recognized that it was the palace's throne room, and it felt... like she had been there before.

Nyx stepped into the center of the room, looking up at the broken glass windows at the far end. She winced in pain, images bursting to the front of her mind. These were far more aggressive than the images from before, and they were much clearer. They would not be ignored, and they shoved all other thoughts out of Nyx's mind as they demanded attention.

She... she realized they were memories, that she could remember standing at the far end of the room, looking down across it. In the memory, she was looking down at a small purple unicorn: a unicorn she knew... Twilight.

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

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

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

Dark shadows shifted around the room: Dispelled magic that had lain dormant was now being awakened by Nyx's presence. Trails of indigo smoke began to creep towards Nyx, and, as the magic seeped into her, the memory continued.

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

No, the rainbow lunged at her like an angry snake. It encircled her, and it burned. It was burning her away, tearing her away from something else. It was like a savage animal with

razor-sharp claws. It tore her to ribbons, despite her cries. Then, the memory faded and stopped, as if the rainbow had caused her to simply not exist anymore.

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

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

Among these thoughts, a few began to stand out and mingle with Nyx's memories of her friends and Twilight. They began to poison those memories, filling them with hatred. She wanted to hurt Twilight. She wanted to make her suffer, to torture her.

These were thoughts that Nyx didn't want to have. She clapped her hooves against the sides of her head and shouted at the castle's silence. "NO! I don't want to hurt Twilight! She takes care of me, teaches me things, lets me go to school! I don't want to hurt her!"

Despite her cries, the thoughts relentlessly continued. She thought of how she would hurt Twilight and how she would torture her. She'd snap off her horn, keep her locked in a dungeon, and other horrible things that started to make Nyx physically ill.

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

The thoughts were reaching a boil. As Nyx tried to push them away, more rose in their place. Thoughts of how she'd hurt Twilight's friends, how she'd go after Twilight's family. She just kept thinking of all the ways she could break Twilight's spirit.

"NO! NO NO NO NO NO NOOOO!"

With that final scream, something sparked to life inside Nyx and her eyes glowed white. The creeping tendrils of indigo smoke suddenly shifted, swirling faster and faster as they were sucked down into her like water in a whirlpool. At the same time, the dark desires in her mind began to fade, ebbing away as more and more of the smoky tendrils were absorbed.

Then, when the last traces of the cloud were gone, Nyx's horn sparked and sent a crack of lightning lancing up into the sky with a thunderous boom.

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Celestia bolted up in bed and turned her eyes to her window, through which she could see Ponyville and the Everfree Forest. Her breathing was still, and her ears turned forward in erect attention. Like a pony hearing an unexplained thump in her home at night, for a moment, Celestia had felt something in Equestria that did not belong. She stretched out her magic and senses, trying to find the presence she had detected, but it was already gone. It had felt like... No, that was impossible. She could sense Luna in the castle, in the main hall.

Yet, Celestia could not get over what she had felt. It was short lived, but she had sensed *her* presence... a presence she hoped to never sense again.

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In another part of Canterlot, a dark-blue unicorn with turquoise eyes was sitting in his study when a crack of lightning from the Everfree Forest lit up the room. With the light came a surge of magic, which drew the unicorn's gaze from the book he was reading to a window. He listened to the thunder that trailed, and, even after it had passed, he continued to stare through his window at the distant Everfree Forest. He then shut the book he had been reading, a rare tome on theoretical resurrection magic, and shouted out into the silence of his home.

"Proper Etiquette!"

The door to the study opened within moments, and an all-white unicorn with a fabric collar and tie stepped into the room. He adjusted the monocle that was over his right eye and looked across the room with his own turquoise eyes. "You called, sir?"

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

"Of course, sir. I will have them summoned."

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Twilight cried out, tripping over her own hooves as she landed in a heap on the side of the path. She and her friends had been racing through the Everfree Forest when a bolt of lightning launched into the sky. Twilight had been in the lead, galloping as quickly as her legs would carry her when she heard the thunder and tripped.

Rarity and Fluttershy quickly galloped up to assist Twilight while the others were transfixed skyward, where they had just seen the bolt of magic.

“Whoa! Did you *see* that!?” Rainbow Dash asked.

Applejack nodded and tilted her hat back, so she could have a better look at the sky. “Sure did, sugarcube. Where do you reckon it came from?”

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

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

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

Dash slapped a hoof to her forehead while Twilight struggled to her hooves with Rarity and Fluttershy’s help.

“Twilight, dear, you okay?” Rarity asked.

“Yes, I’m fine... I just tripped,” Twilight assured, pushing her friend away as her horn glowed. The group had stopped just momentarily at the library before heading into the forest to get a compass and map. Pinkie Pie had volunteered to carry the map in her curly mane, while the compass hung from Twilight’s neck by a thin piece of string. Twilight drew both items out, levitating them in the air as she looked skyward.

“Okay,” Twilight began after taking a breath to calm herself, “where was that lightning bolt again?”

“Right over there,” Pinkie Pie answered, pointing at the sky with her hooves.

Twilight quickly positioned herself by Pinkie Pie, holding up the compass as she turned the map over in the air. “Okay... using the mountains as a reference, we’re about... here. Now, if we’re here and the lighting bolt was there... and how long would you say it was between the lightning flash and thunder?”

“A second, maybe two tops,” Rainbow Dash answered.

Twilight nodded and, making very rough calculations in her head, began to move her hoof across the map. “All right, then the lighting came from—” Twilight fell silent,

staring at the map. She double checked her rough measurements and guesses, but in the pit of her stomach she knew she was right.

“I... I know where Nyx is!” Twilight said, dropping the map and compass in the mud. “I need to get to her right now!”

“But, sugarcube, how do you—” Applejack began to ask, only to be cut off as a bright light enveloped Twilight as she teleported away.

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Twilight finished her teleportation spell and waited for the magic in the air to settle from her arrival before she opened her eyes and looked around. She was in a room she had not been in since the Summer Sun Celebration two years ago, the throne room in the Ancient Castle of the Royal Pony Sisters. It was where she and her friends had defeated Nightmare Moon, and the room was just as Twilight remembered it except for a single, small detail.

Nyx was lying in the center of the room, and, for a moment, a wave of relief began to wash over Twilight. That relief, however, receded like the tide from the shore and was quickly replaced by a powerful, gripping fear that threatened to squeeze the very air from her chest. Nyx’s normal mane and tail had been replaced with flowing masses of star-dotted magic. Nyx was now truly Nightmare Moon’s doppelganger. All she lacked was the armor, the eye shadow, and Nightmare Moon’s cutie mark.

This... this was Twilight’s fears made real. With that mane and tail, could she deny the truth any longer? Could she honestly believe that the cultists’ spell had not accomplished its intended purpose? Nyx was young, but there was no denying that she was—

Crying.

Nyx’s wails filled Twilight’s ears, derailing her train of thought. She was bawling her eyes out, and Twilight had to catch herself. She had already taken a few steps forward because of her desire to comfort Nyx, to tell her everything was okay. Nyx was terrified, more so than she had been the night Twilight found her.

Still, Twilight held herself back as her mind rebelled against itself. She couldn’t dismiss Nyx’s resemblance to Nightmare Moon, especially now that Nyx had the mane and tail the Mare in the Moon was infamous for. Yet, would Nightmare Moon be crying like that? Would she be wailing so loudly?

Unable to bear it anymore, Twilight inched towards Nyx. She approached the filly as she would a slumbering Ursa Major, as if the sobbing form before her could turn around and maul her to death at any second. Twilight pushed forward, and, when she was close enough, she reached out at Nyx and nudged her with a hoof.

Nyx spun her head around at the touch, a frightened look in her eyes. That fear, however, died almost immediately when she saw Twilight. She scrambled to her hooves and buried her head in Twilight's chest, bawling, "I'm sorry!"

"Shhhh... it's okay. It's okay," Twilight reassured, cautiously wrapping her hooves around Nyx's trembling form.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry! Please don't hate me! Please! I don't want to hurt you!" Nyx wailed into Twilight's chest, her voice muffled.

Twilight's heart skipped a beat, but she fought the urge to pull away. "Hurt me? When did you want to—"

"I... I don't know!" Nyx sobbed miserably. "I-I came in here and then... and then I remembered looking down on you. W-we were both here, and you looked so scared, and I w-was happy to see you were scared... and-and I wanted to hurt you, b-because you tried to stop me from doing s-something... but I d-don't *want* to hurt you, Twilight! Please... please don't hate me! I don't want to hurt you!"

Twilight felt a tension in her chest, a physical manifestation of her inner conflict. Nyx wasn't crying because she was scared of the castle or the forest. She was crying because she felt she had done something horrible, and she was apologizing for it. Apologizing for things that Nightmare Moon had done, had thought, had felt. It worried Twilight because, if Nyx had Nightmare Moon's memories, it was almost conclusive evidence that the two were one and the same.

Yet, as Twilight looked at the filly crying into her neck, she was no longer able to see Nightmare Moon, and it made her realize how close she had grown to Nyx. She had only taken Nyx into her home originally to keep an eye on her, to make sure she knew where the possible reincarnation of Nightmare Moon was at all times.

That was it; she was never supposed to bond with Nyx. She had intended to only be a caretaker, an observer, but... things had changed so quickly. She needed a way to get Nyx to sleep at night, so she started reading her bedtime stories. She saw Nyx struggling with homework, so she sat down and helped her. Nyx came to her asking questions, and,

through their conversations, Twilight had grown to know Nyx as a filly. She was a filly who loved the sun, had friends, and was curious about the world around her.

That familiarity had bred care. Twilight cared about Nyx. She wanted her to get a good night's sleep, to do well in school, and to ask questions. She wanted Nyx to be safe.

Twilight still wasn't sure who Nyx was or how much—if anything—she shared with Nightmare Moon beyond the physical similarities. She did, however, know one thing: Nyx was crying in terror of her own memories, and Twilight couldn't ignore Nyx's wails.

“I know you don't,” Twilight finally comforted, hooking a leg around Nyx and hugging the filly as tightly as she could. “It's okay, I know you don't want to hurt me.”

Twilight's words, however, were not enough to soothe Nyx. She continued to cry and beg for forgiveness, and again and again Twilight said that it was okay. Twilight did not force Nyx to stop, even after her mane and tail had returned to normal. Nyx needed to cry, to get it all out. She had remembered something terrible, something she couldn't understand, and she just needed Twilight to be there, to assure her everything was okay.

To protect Nyx from her memories.

Twilight placed a hoof on the door as she used her magic to douse the lights in the room. She had just finished tucking Nyx into bed, and the filly had fallen asleep as soon as her head had hit the pillow. Twilight was sure that was for the best. It had been a long day.

She looked in on Nyx for a few seconds longer before gently shutting the door. She then descended the library's staircase, climbing down to the ground floor where many ponies with worried faces were waiting. Twilight greatly appreciated the fact that all of her friends had stayed to make sure Nyx was all right, especially since Rarity and the Cutie Mark Crusaders were the only ones who knew Nyx well enough to be so concerned.

"She's okay, just tired. I put her to bed," Twilight assured with a gentle smile. Her words dissipated the tension in the room, letting everypony finally relax after what had been a long and stressful day.

"Well, I don't know about the rest of you, but I am exhausted," Rarity noted. "I hope you don't mind, Twilight, but I'm going to take Sweetie Belle home and get some sleep myself."

Twilight shook her head. "No, I don't mind. I know you are all tired. You should all go home and get some rest."

"Would you, maybe, want some of us to stay?" Fluttershy kindly offered.

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

Applejack laughed a little. "Well shoot, sugarcube, that's what friends are for. You'd do the same if Apple Bloom went missing."

"Or Sweetie Belle," Rarity added.

"Or Gummy!" Pinkie Pie chirped.

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

“It wouldn’t be right if you *weren’t* concerned; she is your cousin after all,” Applejack said before she started to head for the door. “Still, Twi’s right. We all should be in bed, includin’ three certain fillies.”

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

“No dice, Apple Bloom. You got school tomorrow. You can come and check on Nyx after class.”

“The same goes for *you*, Sweetie Belle,” Rarity added before giving her little sister a small nudge. “We need to get you home.”

“And I know your mother’s got to be worried too, Scootaloo,” Twilight remarked.

Scootaloo blinked before her eyes widened, a panicked frown forming on her face. “Oh no! My parents are going to flip!”

“Hey, don’t worry, kid; I’ve got you covered,” Rainbow Dash said before she gave Scootaloo a noogie. “I know your mom. How about I fly you home and explain everything?”

“Wow, you’d really do that?”

“Hey, you stayed here just to make sure Nyx got home safe. That’s a kind of loyalty I can appreciate.” Rainbow landed on the ground and motioned for Scootaloo to get on her back. “Now, get up here.”

Scootaloo grinned ear to ear, more than eager to accept Dash’s offer for a flight home. With that, the mass of ponies filtered out of the room. Twilight said “good-nights” and “thank-yous” as everypony left and shut the door after the last one had departed. She let out an exhausted sigh and began to head for the stairs. An empty stomach tempted her to go to the kitchen, but, in the end, she decided to wait and have a big breakfast in the morning. Her first priority was sleep.

KNOCK... KNOCK... KNOCK...

Twilight turned and eyed her front door. She debated opening it. She really, *really* just wanted to go to bed, but her courteous nature got the better of her. She turned and walked towards the door before opening it magically.

“That’s her, daddy!”

Twilight's eyes hardened at the sight of Diamond Tiara standing on her doorstep, this time accompanied by an older stallion and an older mare. The stallion was brown in tone, with blue eyes similar to Diamond Tiara's and a slicked back mane that may have once been black but had lightened a few shades with his age. He was wearing a firm frown, but it was nothing compared to the glare the older mare was shooting at Twilight.

The older mare had a sand colored coat, light purple eyes, and seemed to be struggling to keep herself from assaulting Twilight verbally, or even physically. Her medium length, two toned, white and light blue mane was styled in an up-do, though a few hairs had fallen loose. Yet, the older mare paid no mind to her slowly coming-apart hairdo, instead turning her attention to the stallion.

"Well, Rich, what are you waiting for?"

"Miss Sparkle?" the stallion began as he took a step forward and offered his hoof. "I know we haven't properly met, but I know you through our mutual friends over at Sweet Apple Acres. I'm Mr. Rich, a business associate of theirs, though it should be said that I'm not here on business."

Twilight shook Filthy Rich's hoof. "Well, it's nice to meet you, but can this wait until morning? I just got back from finding—"

"This most certainly can *not* wait! Why, you're lucky—" the older mare began to rant, only to be interrupted by Filthy Rich.

"Now, Affluent, please, I said I'd handle it."

"You had *better*, Rich," the older mare, Affluent, spat before returning her stare to Twilight, who forced a smile before looking back to Filthy Rich.

"Would you care to tell me what all this is about?"

"Yes, I was just getting to that," Filthy Rich said. "Miss Sparkle, did you threaten my daughter earlier today?"

"She did, daddy!" Diamond Tiara shouted as if she was appalled he was asking Twilight to confirm the story. "She said she was going to turn me and Silver Spoon into cacti!"

"Miss Sparkle?"

Twilight frowned a little, but then she sighed and nodded her head. "Yes, and I'm—"

“I will *not* stand to have my foal threatened!” Affluent barked harshly. “Consider yourself lucky we’re even *giving* you a chance to apologize because, if you weren’t one of the ponies that stopped Discord last year, we would have gone straight to the authorities!”

Twilight furrowed her eyebrows and stepped directly in front of Affluent, returning her hateful glare. “And has Diamond Tiara told you *why* I threatened her?”

“No, she didn’t, but I—”

“Honey,” Filthy Rich interrupted, “we agreed we’d let Miss Sparkle explain herself.”

Affluent shut her mouth and puffed up her cheeks like she was a tea kettle trying to hold in its steam. When she looked like she was about ready to burst into another enraged rant, Affluent released the breath she had been holding through her nose and nodded. “Yes dear.”

“I *am* sorry I threatened her,” Twilight said, “but your daughter sent my cousin Nyx into the Everfree Forest alone, and then she refused to tell me what she had done. The only reason I threatened her was to find out where Nyx was before something happened to her.”

“Well, maybe you wouldn’t have had to threaten my daughter if you had told your cousin how dangerous the Everfree Forest was,” Affluent said with a huff.

“Nyx *does* know how dangerous the Everfree Forest is,” Twilight snapped back, “but *your* daughter convinced her that the forest wasn’t dangerous when you got far enough in, *and* she gave her a map.”

Filthy Rich glanced at his daughter, who was also glaring at Twilight. “You wouldn’t happen to still have this map, would you?”

“No,” Twilight said. “Nyx lost it when she was in the forest.”

“Well, I guess that explains it then,” Affluent said as her voice took on a haughty tone. “Your *cousin* is lying to you. She was probably off getting into trouble, and, when you found her in town, she told you some sob story about how she got lost in the Everfree Forest. She lied to you, and now you’re lying to us about why you threatened our daughter. We should have you arrested for that lying mouth of yours alone.”

Twilight furrowed her eyebrows and took a step towards Affluent. “You want to hear the truth? Here’s the truth. I found Nyx in the Everfree Forest, crying her eyes out, and she

was sent in there *by your daughter*. Your daughter even gave her a map, and, from what I've heard, she's been a bully to the rest of her classmates as well. You're doing her no favors protecting her from the consequences of her actions.

"And I know I can't make you punish her for sending my cousin someplace where she could have been hurt, or worse. But let me make this perfectly clear." Twilight leaned forward, her voice taking on a low, strong, threatening tone as she glared down Affluent. "If Diamond Tiara does *anything* like this to Nyx again, being turned into a cactus will be the *least* of her problems."

"Why you little tramp!" Affluent snapped back. "Who do you think you are?! We're upstanding members of the community! Why, if it wasn't for my husband's family, there wouldn't even *be* a Ponyville! How *dare* you speak to us like this. I should teach you a lesson in respect!"

Twilight bristled and shoved her face up against Affluent's, so their foreheads and noses were pushed together. "And *I'm* the unicorn that beat an Ursa Minor barehoofed, and I'm *also* Princess Celestia's private pupil! So, if you *really* want to push your luck, I'd be happy to take this outside. Otherwise, get out of my face and *get out of my library!*"

"Miss Sparkle!" Filthy Rich interrupted. He forced himself between the two mares and looked down at Twilight with a firm, steadfast frown. "I can respect that you did what you did earlier today under duress. I doubt I'd act much differently if I was in your position. That, however, does not give you license to threaten my family."

"Yeah," Diamond Tiara added. She smiled triumphantly, caught up in the fact her father was winning the argument. "You can't threaten me because Nyx is stupid enough to go into the forest, even if I gave her a—"

Diamond Tiara realized what she was about to say, and she quickly clapped a hoof over her mouth. However, the damage had already been done. Mr. Rich glanced at his daughter and said, "Young lady, you're grounded."

"Rich, you can't really ground her for—" Affluent tried to protest.

"We'll discuss this when we get home," Mr. Rich said firmly as he turned to leave. "Until further notice, she is grounded. But, Miss Sparkle, don't think this means you're off the hook. Princess Celestia's pupil or not, I will be discussing this matter with the mayor in the morning."

With that, Filthy Rich turned and walked away. Diamond Tiara and Affluent followed soon after, but only after they had each thrown the dirtiest glare they could muster at Twilight. Twilight, however, ensured she got the last word, or rather sound, in the conversation. She stepped back and slammed the library door shut with a sharp, loud bang.

“Whoa, Twilight,” Spike said from the back of the library. He had heard the argument and had come to investigate what was going on. “I’ve never heard you pull rank like that, using your position as Princess Celestia’s student to threaten somepony.”

“Yeah,” Twilight sighed, mentally kicking herself for what she had said in the argument. “And the princess wouldn’t be happy if she found out I did. So, Spike, if we could—”

“Hey, my lips are sealed,” Spike assured her. “Personally, I think you should have turned one of them into a cactus just to prove a point. Still, aren’t you worried about what the mayor will do? She might tell the princess.”

“We’ll cross that bridge if or when we come to it. I still can’t *believe* that little filly actually sent Nyx into the Everfree Forest. I mean, what was she *thinking?*”

“Couldn’t tell you, I don’t make a habit of trying to understand bullies,” Spike replied before he yawned and glanced at the clock. “Well, it’s late. I’m surprised Owloysius hasn’t come in yet. He’s usual—”

“Hoo.”

Spike jumped, spinning around to see that the horned owl in question was sitting on top of a nearby book shelf. “Seriously, we need to tie a bell on you. You’re like a ninja owl or something.”

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

“You.”

“Hoo.”

“You! I’m talking about you!”

“Hoo.”

“I’m... You know what? No. I’m not getting into that,” Spike said, heading towards the staircase. “I’m going to check on Peewee, and then I’m going to bed. Night, Twilight.”

“Good night, Spike,” she replied as she watched him climb the steps. She then turned to look at Owloysius, who tilted his head somewhat expectantly.

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

“Hoo,” was all the owl replied before taking flight. He swooped around the room, grabbed a book off a shelf, and dropped it on the reading table. The book fell open, and within moments Owloysius had landed and begun reading. Twilight couldn’t help but giggle, happy to see that the owl was able to keep himself busy at night, even when she wasn’t up late studying.

Leaving Owloysius to his reading, Twilight climbed up to the library’s second floor. Spike had already shut off the lamps and curled up in bed. The only light came from the moon outside the window, and it illuminated the room just enough for Twilight to cross without any trouble.

Next to Twilight’s bed was a smaller one, one she had purchased for Nyx. She had expected to find Nyx curled up there, but, in the few minutes Twilight had been downstairs, Nyx had crawled into the larger bed. Normally, Twilight would have encouraged Nyx to sleep in her own bed, but, after the day they both had, she would overlook it for one night.

Making sure not to wake Nyx, Twilight slipped herself slowly beneath the covers. She levitated the blanket off Nyx’s bed and covered the sleeping filly with it so she wouldn’t get cold in the night.

Despite being asleep, Nyx sensed Twilight’s presence. Almost like she was sleepwalking, Nyx stirred, got to her hooves, and, with the blanket hanging off her body, she moved over beside Twilight. She then lay back down so that her little head rested in the crook of Twilight’s neck.

It brought a smile to Twilight’s face as she gently nuzzled the sleeping Nyx.

The smile, however, slowly died as Twilight watched Nyx sleep. Her gaze drifted to the window, looking up at the distant moon. For a moment, she remembered how it used to look. How it used to bear the dark silhouette of the Mare in the Moon. She had a lot to think about, a lot to consider, but it would have to wait until morning. Her eyes were

already drooping from the soft embrace of the bed, and soon Twilight drifted off into a well-deserved sleep.

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KNOCK... KNOCK... KNOCK

A trio of ponies stood on the doorstep of the manor, glancing over their shoulders to ensure there were no guard patrols passing on the connecting street. The manor itself was nestled in the company of other similarly grand homes. Every lawn was trimmed, every shrub sculpted, and every flower was in bloom in the part of Canterlot where the elite made their homes. Celebrities, politicians, and anypony else that was widely known and very well paid could be found within those few blocks of the city, living the high life in their stately homes.

The stallion of the trio was about to knock again when the locks clicked open. The door swung open as a white unicorn with a perfectly trimmed and slicked back black mane and a monocle poked his head out of the door. He looked over the two pegasi mares and earth pony stallion before giving a small, snooty sniff. “Yes? May I help you?”

“Just open the stinking door, Etiquette!” the gray pegasus with a darker gray mane and swirling tornado cutie mark snapped.

“Of course, Miss Gale.” The butler, Proper Etiquette, stepped back and opened the manor’s door wider, allowing the trio of ponies to slip inside. The other pegasus was a dark purple mare with a black mane and swirling wind lines for a cutie mark. The sole earth pony was a dull clay-red stallion with a tall build. His blond mane was cut very short and his cutie mark was a stone wall that looked like castle battlements.

“Sir Spell Nexus is in his study. I believe you know the way,” Proper Etiquette said as he shut the manor’s front door.

Gray Gale fluttered her wings in irritation. “Yeah, yeah, we know the way, but Nexus *better* have a good reason for calling us like this.”

“Indeed,” Night Wind, the purple pegasus, said in agreement. “We are, after all, trying to lie low after that grand failure in the Everfree Forest. The town guard are much more alert and are stopping ponies on the street if they run across them this late at night.”

“I do not know why Sir Spell Nexus called for you as he did,” Proper Etiquette remarked as he began to walk away. “But I do believe you will find it difficult to get an answer

unless you go and speak with him. Now, I must be off to the kitchen; Sir Spell Nexus does not like to host company without refreshment.”

“Seriously, that pony takes his job *way* too seriously,” Gray Gale mumbled to herself as the three made their way through the manor. After climbing a flight of stairs and passing down a lavishly furnished hallway, they arrived at a door they all knew quite well. Since they had been summoned, they didn’t bother to knock before they entered the manor’s study.

It was a cozy little room with very large windows and a fireplace. One wall was lined with bookshelves which were filled to capacity with books, some small knick-knacks, and the occasional framed picture. The windows looked out over the elegant cityscape of Canterlot, a view that the manor’s owner had been complimented on a number of times.

Finally, an oil painting rested above the fireplace. The regal portrait depicted a dark blue unicorn with a light gray mane sitting behind a very elegant-looking desk while wearing a gentle smile. Below the portrait, set into the picture’s polished wooden frame, was an engraved plaque.

Spell Nexus
Headmaster of Celestia’s School for Gifted Unicorns
Mystical Advisor to the Royal Court

The manor’s owner, Nexus himself, stood in front of the study’s fireplace, its flames reflecting in his turquoise eyes. He did not turn to look at the three ponies who had entered his study, instead motioning with a hoof to some chairs.

“Please, have a seat.”

“What’s this about, Nexus?” Gale asked as the three ponies sat down. “You never send messengers for us in the middle of the night.”

“It is strange,” Night Wind agreed. “You are the one who is always telling us to keep our movements subtle and hidden, and this is far from being subtle *or* hidden.”

“And not all of us have cushy jobs like *you* do,” Stonewall grumbled. “The commander is already suspicious of why I was late reporting in after what happened in Everfree. I’m skating on thin ice with the Town Guard.”

“Yes, I apologize for the late hour, my sisters and brother, but there has been an... interesting development.”

“It *better* be interesting.” Gray Gale grumbled under her breath before she stifled a yawn.

Nexus turned away from the fireplace and began walking towards the three seated ponies. “I assure you it is, for it would seem that our efforts on the night of the last full moon were not wasted.”

“How were they ‘not wasted’?!” Gray Gale ranted, waving her hoof in a wide arch. “It was a disaster! Nightmare Moon’s remains were blown to smithereens, and how many of our brothers and sisters got arrested again?”

“Approximately three dozen,” Night Wind answered.

Gray Gale raised her hoof and slammed it on the ground. “Three dozen, Nexus!”

“It is true. Things did not go as planned.” A grin spread onto Nexus’s lips as his eyes gleamed. “But it was all worth it, for Nightmare Moon *lives*.”

There was a dead silence in the room. Stonewall, Night Wind, and Gray Gale glanced at each other, unable to believe what they had heard. Gray Gale broke the graveyard-like silence by shaking her head and asking, “Wait... wait wait wait... Are you saying the spell *worked*?”

“I did not dare to hope so,” Spell Nexus mused before giving his head a nod, “but yes, at least in part.”

“And just how do you know that Nightmare Moon lives?” Night Wind asked skeptically. “If that were true, wouldn’t she have overthrown Celestia by now?”

“Yes, if our queen was at full strength, Equestria would already be bathed in the glory of a night eternal, and we would have received our just rewards as her loyal servants. Still, I cannot deny what I sensed and saw. Early this evening, a brilliant bolt of magical lighting shot up from the Everfree Forest, and, in that moment, I sensed her. I sensed our queen in all her power and glory. It was like a firework bursting and fading in the night sky, but it was there.”

Spell Nexus swept to one side, light on his hooves for a moment. “It was... so magnificent, and it made something inside me shift for a moment. I felt positively giddy, and it took all my willpower to keep myself from racing to the forest to find her.”

“Well, it’s nice to hear that we weren’t wasting our time with that spell,” Stonewall remarked, his very flat tone bringing Nexus back to the serious nature of the conversation.

“Yes, and now we have purpose once again. Brother, sisters, we *must* find our queen. I believe her form, like the spell we cast that night, is incomplete. She can be saved, can be given the life she deserves, but we must find her. I believe she is in hiding either amongst the trees of the Everfree Forest or in some area close to that, and we must find her before she can become truly lost to us.”

“And just how are we supposed to do that?” Gray Gale asked cynically before she began speaking in a forced, overly perky tone. “Hey boss, I wanted to take some more of my vacation days. Why? Oh, I just want to take a leisurely stroll around one of the most dangerous forests in Equestria while I look for a partially reincarnated Nightmare Moon.”

Nexus rolled his eyes and rubbed the bridge of his nose with a hoof. “Please spare us your sarcasm, Gray Gale.”

“She does make a point, Nexus,” Night Wind said smoothly. “How can we search the Everfree Forest without drawing attention?”

“Not all of our brothers and sisters were arrested by the guard after Celestia’s interruption,” Spell Nexus assured his cohorts before turning his attention back to Gray Gale. “In the morning you will find I’ve contracted out your services as a pair of wings for hire to deliver important letters to a number of individuals around Ponyville. Some of these letters are simple letters from Celestia’s School for Gifted Unicorns, but a few of those letters are notes to our brothers and sisters who call the town home. They, who are closest to the forest, will be able to search for our queen.”

“Will I know who is who?” Gale asked.

Nexus shook his head. “No, their anonymity must be preserved; it is how we’ve been able to function so long without detection. Only I truly know all those who stand with the Children of Nightmare.”

“Which, as I’ve said before, is *really* creepy,” Gray Gale remarked, only to get elbowed in the side by Night Wind.

“And what about us, Nexus?” Stonewall asked.

Nexus stepped over to Stonewall and set a hoof on his shoulder. “You must continue your duties with the Town Guard. The information you provide is invaluable to us remaining undetected.” Nexus then turned and looked at Night Wind. “And you, sister, will find yourself assigned to a new post in the morning.”

Night Wind arched an eyebrow. “And just where am I being stationed, Nexus?”

“I have little doubt that Celestia has sensed the same thing I did this evening, and I believe this will drive her to step up the research team she has working on analyzing our spell. You have now been reassigned to guard this team. Keep tabs on their progress, impede it if you can, and, if Celestia speaks with the team, I want you to tell me *exactly* what she says.”

A treacherous smirk spread onto Night Wind’s lips. “And here I thought you’d finally given me a challenge, Nexus, but eavesdropping?”

“Do not take your role lightly, Night Wind, for, if the team makes a dooming discovery about us or the spell, you are the only one who will be able to warn us of the coming danger.”

Nexus then looked over his three conspirators and let a smile play upon his lips. “Celestia was able to stop us once, but fate has given us another chance to see our queen rise. I will not see it slip through our hooves. For the Night Eternal.”

“For Equestria’s True Queen,” the three other ponies chimed back in practiced harmony.

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KNOCK... KNOCK... KNOCK...

“Just one moment,” a light-blue unicorn stallion called as he sat up in bed. Bastion Yorsets glanced at the clock, grumbled at the late hour, and then pulled himself out of bed. His eggshell-white mane and tail were a mess, but he continued to move towards his front door all the same. He had no desire to try and make himself presentable for anypony who would come knocking at such an hour.

Horn glowing, Bastion opened his front door, intending to chew out whoever thought to disturb him so late at night. Yet, he froze up like a statue when he saw Princess Celestia standing on his doorstep.

“Your... Y-your Highness!” Bastion stuttered out.

“I do apologize for the late hour, Bastion, but may I come in?” Celestia asked sweetly, as if Bastion had every right to turn her away.

“O-f course... Please, make yourself at home. I’ll be with you in a moment,” Bastion said before letting Celestia inside. Bastion Yorsets was a teacher at Celestia’s School for Gifted Unicorns and was there when the young Twilight Sparkle revealed her immense aptitude for magic. He was among the senior teaching staff and was the pony Celestia charged with the responsibility of leading the team studying the cult ponies’ spell.

Once he had ensured Celestia was comfortable, Bastion disappeared back into his bedroom. He reemerged a few minutes later in a far more presentable state. He had quickly brushed out his mane and tail, and he had also slipped into his normal work attire: a collared shirt, a light brown sweater vest, and a thin black tie to finish the ensemble.

“I do apologize for making you wait, Your Highness,” Bastion said when he stepped back into the living room.

Celestia glanced up from her seat on Bastion’s couch, which was just large enough to support her larger stature. “Do not apologize, Bastion. I would not normally disturb you at your home or at such a late hour, but I was curious as to how things were going in deciphering the spell.”

“It is progressing, but slowly,” Bastion answered as he took a seat in a cushion chair. “The unicorns were making use of several very old forms of magic of which there are few records. The oil-soaked powders they were burning came from zebra magic. We also found records of unicorns using arcane designs to direct the flow of magic, but there are no actual books describing how such magical lines work.” Bastion sighed tiredly and ran a hoof through his mane. “Things would undoubtedly be going better if we were able to get some information from the cultists. Have your guards been able to get any of them to talk?”

“No,” Celestia admitted with a shake of her head. “The cultists we’ve arrested are proving to be very strong-willed. The interrogators have not been able to convince any of those ponies to give up any new information.”

“Then I am sorry, Princess, but I fear my team is doing the best it can, considering we’re dealing with lost knowledge.”

“Well... ‘purposefully hidden’ may be a more accurate turn of phrase,” Celestia mused aloud.

“Princess?” Bastion asked as he cocked an eyebrow.

“Bastion, I want you to move your team out of the castle’s main library and into the royal archives tomorrow morning. I have already arranged for your team to have full access to anything in there, including the Starswirl wing.”

Bastion’s eyes widened. “Princess, the archives guard the most precious literature in Equestria. Tomes of ancient knowledge and stories that haven’t been viewed firsthoof in centuries.”

“Yes, but that is the point. The tomes in that collection are the final copies of books and knowledge that I wished to have preserved but not available to all of Equestria. There is very powerful magic in some of those books: spells that, if attempted by ponies who do not fully understand them, could have dire consequences. Some of those books, however, describe the arcane magic the cult’s spell is based upon. They would undoubtedly help your team understand the spell more quickly.”

Bastion nodded in understanding as the weight of this new privilege sank in. “We will move to the archives first thing in the morning.”

“Good,” Celestia said. A tiny smile tried to form upon her lips, but the seriousness of the situation forced it to wither like a water deprived plant. “There is one other thing, Bastion.”

“Yes, Your Highness?”

“While I do not want to distract your team from figuring out the spell’s intended purpose, I must ask that you also start investigating what the spell did.”

“What it did?” Bastion echoed in confusion.

Celestia gave a single nod before she rose from her seat. “Yes, for you see, the cult was already casting the spell when I arrived with the guards. I was able to stop the spell, interrupt it, but now I fear what it was able to accomplish before my arrival.”

Bastion stood up from his seat as well and began to follow Celestia as she moved to his front door. “That is a very theoretical branch of magic, Princess. Incomplete spells have been known to do a variety of things, and some never do the same thing twice.”

“As I am well aware, but I have faith in you, Bastion. You *are* the greatest mind in the field of theoretical magic at the school, after all.”

Bastion couldn't help but blush and bow his head. “You flatter me, Princess.”

“I make no habit of flattery, Bastion; I only offer the compliments ponies deserve,” Celestia corrected as she opened the front door with a flick of her magic. “Now, I'd best depart. I wouldn't want to impose any further.”

“You are never an imposition, Princess... though, none of this seems terribly pressing. Might I ask why you felt this could not wait until morning?”

Celestia paused at the door, having already put one hoof outside, and looked over her shoulder at Bastion. “I have simply realized that I have not been providing your team with the materials it needs to analyze this spell quickly, and... I have also come to realize this evening that swiftness in this matter is of the utmost importance.”

It had been nearly a week since Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon's prank had gone wrong, and Nyx was back at school. It was recess, and, while the rest of her classmates were out enjoying a large game of hoofball, Nyx was by herself. She was sitting on the swing, moving, at most, two inches back and forth as she stared at the ground and tried her best to keep herself from crying.

She didn't want to be at school, and, the first morning after she had been brought back from the Everfree Forest, she had just wanted to stay at the library. She wanted to stay where it was safe and, maybe more importantly, away from Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon.

Yet, during the first few days after the forest incident, things were different at the library. Twilight had been avoiding her. She was trying to hide it, had tried to tell Nyx that she was just imagining things, but Nyx knew things were different. Twilight kept looking at her with this weird expression, like she was looking through her and expecting to find some monster. It was that strange look alone that made Nyx finally agree to go back to school.

But school was no better. Over the few days she had been back, Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon had become unbearable. Diamond's father, Filthy Rich, had grounded her for what she did, and now she was doing everything in her power to get back at Nyx. They had spread nasty rumors around the school, picked on Nyx openly, and even tried to frame her for putting a tack on Cheerilee's desk chair.

Thankfully, Cheerilee had seen through their ruse. Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon were now missing recess, sitting at their desks as punishment for the tack. It gave Nyx her first peaceful recess in days, though it did little to raise her spirits. She still felt horrible. She had wanted to hurt Twilight sometime in the past! She didn't know when or why, but the fact remained, and she knew it was because of that fact that Twilight kept watching her with that strange, almost-scared look in her eyes.

How could she have ever wanted to hurt Twilight? She was such a nice pony. It was Twilight who had found her in the forest, had taken her in her home, and had been taking care of her. It was Twilight who helped her catch up in school and read her bedtime stories. How could she want to hurt somepony who was willing to do all that?

"Hey, Nyx, how are you doing?"

Nyx jumped a little. She hadn't noticed that somepony had come up beside her and quickly looked up, fearing Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon had been released from their no-recess punishment by Cheerilee. Yet, instead of the school bullies, Nyx saw the faces of her classmates and friends. Apple Bloom and Twist were near the swing, with Scootaloo and Sweetie Belle just behind them.

"I'm okay," Nyx lied before she looked back down at the ground.

"You don't sound okay," Twist pointed out.

Scootaloo nodded her head. "Yeah, and you don't look that good either. Are you sick? Cause you look like you're about to throw up."

Nyx winced at those words, flattened her ears against her head, and turned away. At the same time, Apple Bloom glared over her shoulder at Scootaloo and whispered, "You're not helpin'!"

"But I didn't mean—" Scootaloo tried to protest, only to find Sweetie Belle pushing her away.

"Come on, let's just let Apple Bloom and Twist talk to her."

"But I was just making a joke to make her laugh. I didn't mean—"

Scootaloo's voice faded as she was led away from the swing set by Sweetie Belle. That left Apple Bloom and Twist standing beside Nyx, and both waited for Scootaloo to be well out of earshot before they looked back to Nyx.

"You know she didn't mean it like that, right?" Apple Bloom asked.

Nyx nodded her head but did not look up at her friends. "Yeah, I know."

"So, why are you sad, Nyx?" Twist asked. "Is it because Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon tried to get you in trouble?"

"No, it's not that."

"You know, my sister says a pony always feels better when they tell the truth, especially when somethin's botherin' them," Apple Bloom said before putting on a smile.

“Well, I guess,” Nyx began before she sniffled and rubbed her hoof across her nose. “But... can you two keep this a secret?”

“Of course,” Apple Bloom assured.

“And you promise not to tell anypony else?”

“Cross my heart, hope to fly, stick a cupcake in my eye,” Apple Bloom rattled off.

“What was that?” Twist asked, confused by Apple Bloom’s odd movements and rhymes.

“It’s a Pinkie Pie Promise.”

Twist arched an eyebrow. “There’s a promise named after Pinkie Pie?”

“Yep! It’s a promise between friends that you have to keep forever.”

“Forever?” Twist echoed.

“Foorreeevvveerrr!”

Nyx, Apple Bloom, and Twist jumped and turned to look towards the path that ran alongside the school. Standing on the other side of the fence that surrounded the playground was Pinkie Pie, glaring seriously at the three fillies. She was carrying a tray of cupcakes on her back, and her saddlebags were loaded down with other assorted goodies.

“Uh, hey, Pinkie Pie,” Apple Bloom said, giving the earth pony a weak wave.

The serious expression on Pinkie Pie’s face quickly shifted back to its normal, cheerful nature. “Hey, girls! I was just taking some sweets to a party. Well, I’d better get going. You have fun.”

“Uh... Okay, see ya,” Apple Bloom replied. The three watched Pinkie Pie bounce down the path, and, only when they were sure Pinkie Pie was out of earshot, did Twist say something.

“That... was weird.”

“It’s Pinkie Pie being Pinkie Pie; that’s just how she is,” Apple Bloom assured Twist. “Still, you have to keep a Pinkie Pie Promise, since breaking one makes you lose a friend’s trust, and losing a friend’s trust is the fastest way to lose a friend forever.”

“FOOOOREEEVVVEEEER!”

The three fillies jumped again and turned once more to see Pinkie Pie. She was standing a long way down the path, almost out of sight of the school. At the moment she was staring down the three fillies as if she was able to hear their conversation despite the distance. Her hardened gaze drifted between each one like she was peering into their very souls.

Yet, just as quickly as she had spoken out, Pinkie Pie returned to her normal perky nature, turning and bouncing around a bend in the path as she continued on her task of delivering food for a party.

“If it’s okay with you, Apple Bloom, I think I’ll just use a normal promise,” Twist said.

Apple Bloom nodded and instead focused her attention back on Nyx.

“So, what did you want to tell us?”

“W-well, when I was in the forest... I-I remembered things, and... and, in some of those memories... I wanted to h-hurt Twilight.”

“Why would you want to hurt Twilight?” Twist asked.

“I don’t know!” Nyx half blubbered, half shouted at the ground as tears formed in the corners of her eyes. “But I wanted to. I really wanted to... but I don’t know why. And I don’t want to hurt Twilight because she’s so nice... but... but...”

“Whoa, easy, Nyx,” Apple Bloom said, seeing her friend start to hyperventilate. “Is that why you’ve been so sad, because you thought you wanted to hurt Twilight?”

Nyx nodded, trying to dry her eyes. “I’m not even sure when it happened or why, but... I remember wanting to hurt her. We were both standing in some old castle ruins, and I was really tall, and when I spoke, my voice was all strange, but I remember wanting to hurt her, and—”

“Are ya sure you weren’t just dreamin’?” Apple Bloom asked.

“D-dreaming?” Nyx echoed, looking up at Apple Bloom. She sniffled, rubbed her nose, and adjusted her glasses, which had fallen down a little.

“Yeah, dreamin’. I mean, Twilight said you were way out in the Everfree Forest. Maybe you just got tired, passed out, and dreamed the whole thing up. You just didn’t know it ‘cause of how scared you were. I mean, you ain’t exactly taller than Twilight, are ya?”

“Well... no... but even if it was just a dream, I still feel bad about it.”

“Have you told Twilight about this?” Twist asked.

“Yes.”

“And did you apologize?”

Nyx sniffed and nodded. “Yes, I apologized, and she said it was all right.”

“Well then why are you worryin’ about it, you silly filly?” Apple Bloom asked, smiling gently. “Like you said, you don’t *really* want to hurt Twilight, and it sounds like she’s already forgiven you. As my big sister would say, ‘it’s all water under the bridge now.’”

“What does a bridge have to do with any of this?” Twist asked.

“It’s an expression.”

Twist cocked her head to one side. “What does it mean?”

“Well... it kind of... look, I don’t know for sure, but I know it does mean somethin’ like once you’ve apologized for doing somethin’ and somepony has forgiven you, then it’s okay just to forget about it.”

“Oh, so since Twilight’s forgiven Nyx for thinking she ever wanted to hurt her, they can both just forget about it and go back to being happy?”

“Exactly!” Apple Bloom said with a smile.

“But... I don’t think Twilight has forgotten about it. She keeps looking at me funny, almost like she’s scared of me. And what if it wasn’t a dream? What if I wanted to hurt Twilight for real? What if I want to hurt her again? I don’t want to hurt her!”

“Okay, we’re going in circles. Time for an Apple family remedy,” Apple Bloom said before she stepped behind Nyx.

“Wait, what are you— WHOA!”

Nyx went wide-eyed as she sailed forward. Apple Bloom had put all of her applebucking practice to use by turning and bucking the swing. The buck sent Nyx rocketing skyward, her purple mane flowing behind her as she clung tightly to the chains. The swing had reached its peak and begun swooping back when Nyx finally realized what had happened.

Apple Bloom stepped out of the way before Nyx swung back. She joined Twist, and, together, the pair couldn't help but laugh at Nyx's panicked face. Apple Bloom lifted a hoof to her mouth and shouted, "Come on, go higher!"

"Yeah! Higher!" Twist added in her nasally tone.

Nyx gulped. She was already swinging higher than she ever had before, but Twist and Apple Bloom's cheers filled her head. Taking a deep breath, Nyx began to throw her weight into the swing, causing it to travel higher and higher. Eventually, she reached the point where the swing began to hang loose at the top of its arc, a few moments of free fall before the chains snapped taut again.

Nyx swung back and forth a number of times before her courage ran out, and she let the swing slow down. When she did stop, she was smiling and laughing along with Apple Bloom and Twist who quickly moved up beside her.

"See? The Apple family remedy works every time."

"What's the remedy? Swinging on a swing?" Nyx asked.

"No, havin' fun. Nothin' can get a pony feeling better like havin' a little fun. Now scooch over. It's my turn," Apple Bloom said.

Nyx gladly relinquished the swing, and, once Apple Bloom was seated, she used her magic to give it a push. Soon, Apple Bloom was swinging high while Twist and Nyx cheered her on. Apple Bloom's laughter filled the air and drew Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo back over. The quintet of fillies would spend the rest of recess taking turns on the swing, challenging one another to go higher than they ever had before.

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Twilight smiled as she looked at the calendar on the wall, striking off another day. Time had flown, as it often did, and it had been about a month and a half since Nyx's arrival.

And, all things considered, Twilight was happy with how Nyx was doing. Nyx was caught up in school, so now she could spend afternoons outside playing with friends instead of stuck in extra lessons. There were, however, still days where Nyx chose to come back to the library, wanting Twilight to teach her more about something she had learned in school. Sometimes her curiosity was simply insatiable.

School itself had been going better as well. After Twilight's confrontation with Diamond Tiara's parents and a few other altercations between the fillies at school, Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon started going to Cheerilee's afternoon class, which in turn let two other students move to the morning class. Nyx hadn't really had a chance to meet or talk to Dinky Doo or Pipsqueak, but Twilight was just happy with the fact that Nyx didn't have to deal with Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon on a daily basis anymore.

Moving away from the calendar, Twilight began to shuffle and clean up the library. Spike was over at Rarity's place helping her with a dress, Owloysius was asleep, and Nyx was at school. All in all, it gave Twilight a quiet morning to clean up the mess caused by her usual study practices.

After popping a small treat to Peewee, whose nest was on the windowsill at the moment, Twilight went about stacking books on the shelves. As she did, she glanced at the titles. After living in the library for over two years, she had read most of the collection. There were, of course, some books she hadn't cracked open. Some books had been skipped by choice, and she was sure there were a few that had slipped under her radar.

All the books Twilight put away were ones she had read, but she couldn't stop herself from lingering on the last book. It was brown with golden clasps on the corners and a gold unicorn on the cover. It was a book of folklore, old stories from Equestria's past, and it was the book that contained the legend of Nightmare Moon and the prophecy of her return.

Without even thinking about it, Twilight opened the book and quickly turned to the folktale in question. Her eyes glanced over the beautiful illustrations before moving to the first lines of the story.

Once upon a time, in the magical land of Equestria, there were two regal sisters who ruled together and created harmony for all the land. To do this, the eldest—

"I'm home!"

Twilight smiled and set the book down on the reading table as Nyx came scampering into the library and up to her.

“Hey there, Nyx. How was school today?”

“Great!” Nyx chirped. “Cheerilee told us that we’re going to be putting on a play.”

“Really?”

“Yep! She says that every spring the school puts on a play for the Ponyville Spring Festival. It’s this really cool thing where a bunch of musicians, artists, and entertainers come to Ponyville and everypony has a lot of fun.”

“That’s right, the Spring Festival is coming up soon, isn’t it?” Twilight lifted a hoof to her chin and smiled as she recalled a book she had read on the subject. “If I remember correctly, it was started by a traveling group of musicians that came to Ponyville every year around this time as they toured Equestria. Eventually, other musicians started showing up at the same time, and, after a few years, it grew into the festival it is today.”

“Yeah, that’s what Cheerilee told us,” Nyx confirmed as she took off her saddlebags. “Cheerilee also said that we can pick what the play will be about and that we’ll all have something to do.”

“Well, doesn’t that sound fun? Do you have any ideas?”

“I... was kind of hoping I’d find a good story in one of the library books,” Nyx sheepishly admitted.

Twilight smiled and gave an approving nod. “That’s a great idea. Books have some of the best stories, but remember that it’s meant to be a school play. Try to pick a story that’s short and everypony in your class will like.”

“Okay,” Nyx agreed. She was going to ask for Twilight’s help in picking out a story, but, before she could, Applejack burst in through the library door.

“Twi, there you are! I need your help with somethin’ fierce!”

“What’s wrong, Applejack?”

“Some nasty plant showed up in Sweet Apple Acres! It’s a vine and it’s startin’ to grow up around some of the trees. You got any books in here that can tell us what it is?”

Twilight nodded and, with her magic, grabbed a number of phytopathology books from the shelves. She stuffed the tomes into her saddlebags and settled the bags onto her back before she looked over her shoulder at Nyx.

“I’ve got to go help Applejack. Will you be okay by yourself for a little while?”

“Sure, I’ll just try and find a story for my school play.”

Twilight nodded while she tightened the straps on her bags. “Good. Now, I’ll be back soon, but if you need help, Spike is at Rarity’s and Owloysius is asleep upstairs.”

“Okay, Twilight.”

“Thanks again, Twi,” Applejack said as she and Twilight galloped out the door. “I don’t know what that nasty plant is, but I know it ain’t good for my apple trees.”

Twilight pulled the library door shut as she and Applejack left, leaving Nyx to her studies. Nyx looked about the room for a few minutes, mindlessly skimming the books on the shelves for something that looked like a storybook until she took notice of one book that was left sitting out.

Nyx approached the book and was soon drawn in by its beautiful illustrations. She flipped through the pages, reading the titles of the stories. Some of them Twilight had told her as bedtime stories, but others she hadn’t heard before. One in particular caught her attention, and she eagerly began to read.

Once upon a time, in the magical land of Equestria, there were two regal sisters who ruled together and created harmony for all the land. To do this, the eldest...

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“So, do you know what the play is supposed to be about?” Twilight asked as she and Rarity walked in the direction of the Ponyville Elementary School. The pair of unicorns had volunteered to help the students prepare the show, though all the actual work was going to be done by the fillies and colts. It was a chance for the students to find their cutie marks, after all. The two mares were going to be there to not only help with things the students could not manage, but also to help Cheerilee keep all the energetic students on task.

“I’ve asked Sweetie Belle, but she’s refused to tell me. She says we’ll find out today,” Rarity answered Twilight. “She seems particularly excited, though.”

“Is she going to be acting in the play or is she helping some other way?”

“My sister wanted to help with the costumes. But, well, I may have mentioned in passing to Cheerilee that Sweetie Belle was the one that made the costumes for the Crusaders’ appearance in that one talent show. After that, Cheerilee *encouraged* Sweetie Belle to take on one of the acting parts, a part with singing.”

“Oh, that’s good. Sweetie Belle has such an amazing voice. It will be nice to hear her sing.”

“Yes, it will. Personally, I’d bet that singing is her special talent, but we can’t be sure until that little cutie mark of hers appears, can we?”

Twilight shook her head as the pair began to get close to the schoolhouse. While the school and its playground were set up on one side of the path, the school’s outdoor stage, the one and only permanent stage in Ponyville, was set up on the opposite side of the road.

Cheerilee stood in the center of the many colts and fillies, giving directions to the eagerly listening young ponies. Yet, when Cheerilee saw Twilight and Rarity approaching, she let the students slip off to recess a little earlier than scheduled, so she could talk with the two unicorns.

“You two have excellent timing,” Cheerilee said while greeting Rarity and Twilight with a smile. “I was just telling the class how you were kind enough to volunteer your time to help us make this play.”

Twilight took a moment to wave to Nyx, who smiled and waved back before running off to recess with her classmates. Twilight then turned her attention back to Cheerilee and said, “Always glad to help, Cheerilee. Though, we still haven’t been told just what the play is supposed to be about.”

“Oh, of course. Here, take a copy of this.” Cheerilee moved over to a nearby stool and quickly picked up a copy of the play’s script. She held it out to Twilight, who gingerly took it in her magic. She opened it to the first page as Rarity looked over her shoulder.

“*Reunion of the Royal Pony Sisters*,” Twilight read aloud.

Cheerilee smiled. “Yes, it was Nyx’s idea. She found an old fairy tale about how Princesses Celestia and Luna kept the world in balance, and then how Luna became the frightful Nightmare Moon. Apple Bloom then had the idea to incorporate the adventure

you and your friends had where you defeated Nightmare Moon and restored Princess Luna back to normal.”

“Wow, that’s actually not a bad story. A wonderful little tale for a little school play. Much better than the usual fare,” Rarity mused.

“What are the plays usually about?” Twilight asked.

“Well, when Cheerilee and I were in class together, our Spring Festival play was about a pony picnic that got stolen by ants. It was... *cute*... but not exactly what you would call *great theater*, though it *was* because of that particular play that I got my cutie mark.” Rarity’s horn lit with magic, and she took another copy of the script off of a short stool and began to flip through the pages. “This, however, sounds *far* more interesting.”

“It’s so exciting! Usually, the school play is held the day before the Spring Festival and we just have it on our little stage here, but I told the mayor what we were planning, and she said if the students can do a good enough job, we might get our own slot in the festival. It would be a wonderful opportunity for the kids. They would get to perform in front of everypony on that big stage they set up in the town square,” Cheerilee explained.

Rarity perked up, nudging Twilight as she pointed to a spot in the script. “Oh, look here; they have Pinkie Pie’s song.”

“You mean the song she sang in the Everfree Forest when she was telling us to giggle at the ghostly and crack-up at the creepy?” Twilight asked, flipping to the same page in the script.

“The very one. Oh, I can only *imagine* how Pinkie Pie will react when she hears about this. We won’t be able to stop her from bouncing for days.”

Twilight giggled, picturing Pinkie Pie’s reaction. “Yeah, she’ll probably start singing along right there in the audience. Still, this looks fun.”

“Oh yes, it’s going to be one of the best plays the school has ever put on!” Cheerilee energetically agreed. “I’ve actually pulled together both classes because there are just so many parts to play and things to be done. And we’ve already got all the characters cast. You can see who is who on the second page.”

Twilight and Rarity nodded and flipped to second page of the script.

Reunion of the Royal Pony Sisters
A Ponyville Elementary School Production

Written by Cheerilee
Music composed by Lyra Heartstrings

Narrator.....Zecora
Twilight Sparkle.....Dinky Doo
Applejack.....Apple Bloom
Rarity.....Sweetie Belle
Rainbow Dash.....Scootaloo
Fluttershy.....Cotton Cloudy
Pinkie Pie.....Sunny Daze
The Mayor.....Little Hoof
Sea Serpent.....Tornado Bolt
Manticore.....Archer
Princess Celestia.....Diamond Tiara
Princess Luna.....Silver Spoon
Nightmare Moon.....Nyx

Ponyville Residents & Everfree Forest Trees
Hot Rod, Ruby Pinch, Paradise, Tootsie Flute,
Flash, Peachy Pie, Lily Dache

Set Design
Ruby Pinch, Paradise, Peachy Pie

Costumes
Sunny Daze, Tootsie Flute, Lily Dache

Stage Hooves
Hot Rod & Flash

“You have Zecora as the narrator,” Rarity noted before she glanced up from the page.

“It was Apple Bloom that not only suggested it, but also got Zecora to agree. From what the fillies and colts say, she did an excellent job telling stories on Nightmare Night.”

“Too good even,” Twilight mentioned as she recalled the events of the Nightmare Night when Princess Luna had come to Ponyville. “I think she’s half the reason Pinkie Pie and all those fillies and colts got as worked up as they did.”

“Nightmare Night aside, Zecora *does* have the perfect voice to narrate a story of this genre,” Rarity mused before looking thoughtfully at Cheerilee. “Though, I would suggest you let her come up with her own lines.”

Cheerilee arched an eyebrow. “Why is that?”

“Zecora speaks in rhymes *very* naturally, and having a rhyming narrator would just give the whole play a very old world, fairy tale appeal. That, and I can’t imagine what her voice would sound like if she *didn’t* rhyme like she does.”

“I’ll be sure to sit down with her and work on the script then.”

Rarity nodded and read further down the page. “Well, would you look at that. Sweetie Belle is going to be playing me! Though, I suppose that does make sense. She does have my wonderful white coat. Oh, and Scootaloo gets to be Rainbow Dash! She must be positively ecstatic!”

“Oh yes.” Cheerilee said with a small laugh. “Scootaloo was practically begging for the chance to play Rainbow Dash the moment she realized she’d be a character. One could argue it’s a role she was born to play.”

“Yes, Scootaloo is definitely the filly you hear saying ‘awesome’ just about as much as Rainbow,” Rarity agreed before looking back at the page. “Let’s see, don’t know her, or her, or her... wait, Sea Serpent? Do you mean Steven Magnet?”

“Who?”

“Steven Magnet, that’s the name of the sea serpent we met on our way to find the Elements of Harmony. Oh, I *do* hope you are portraying him well. Such a well-groomed and polite sea serpent shouldn’t be relegated to a role of a simple monster. Wouldn’t you agree, Twilight? ...Twilight?”

Rarity and Cheerilee turned to look at Twilight, who was stiff as a statue and a few shades paler than normal.

“Twilight, dear, what’s wrong?” Rarity asked before taking notice of where Twilight’s eyes were focused. Returning to her own copy of the script, Rarity read down a few more lines and then froze up as well.

“Is... is something wrong?” Cheerilee asked, concerned as to why the two unicorns were acting so strangely.

“Oh... Oh, of course not,” Rarity replied, regaining her composure. “I was just curious about some of your casting. For example, what makes you feel Nyx will play a good Nightmare Moon? She’s a sweetheart, and, well... she’s also very timid and sensitive. Nightmare Moon, on the other hoof, was... well...”

Cheerilee raised a hoof to her mouth and suppressed a chuckle. “Yes, but isn’t that the point of acting, Rarity, to be characters we usually aren’t? Besides, it was Scootaloo that suggested it, and everypony in class agreed that Nyx would be the best Nightmare Moon, if only because she has a black coat. I asked Nyx if she was okay with that, and she didn’t seem to mind at all.”

“Oh, well, I suppose that if Nyx agreed to the role...”

“I think she’ll be just fine,” Cheerilee assured them. “I’ll admit, I think it will be a little challenging for her. Nightmare Moon’s Character has a lot of lines. Not as much as, say, your character, Twilight, but still a significant amount. Nyx, however, is a smart filly, and I think she should be able to memorize everything she’ll need to say.”

“Of course, I’m sure she’ll be a *perfect* Nightmare Moon. Don’t you agree, Twilight?” Rarity said before she elbowed Twilight in the side, snapping her dazed friend back to reality.

“O-oh, yes, of... of course. Perfect,” Twilight said with a forced grin.

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“It’s going to be so much fun!” Nyx chirped as she bounced out of the kitchen with Twilight following a few steps behind. Over the course of dinner, Nyx had chattered almost constantly about the upcoming play. She had just come back from the dress rehearsal in her full Nightmare Moon regalia.

“Are you sure?” Twilight asked. “You’re going to be up on stage in front of a lot of ponies.”

“It... is kind of scary,” Nyx admitted, her enthusiasm diminishing as she turned to face Twilight, “but everypony else is really excited about it and are having a lot of fun.”

“But what if you forget a line?”

“Cheerilee promised she’s going to be just offstage, so she can whisper our lines to us if we forget,” Nyx answered. “But I’ve been studying my lines really hard.”

Nyx frowned a little, glancing off to the side. “That and Diamond Tiara’s been saying I’m not good enough to play Nightmare Moon. She’s been saying that Cheerilee should get a rock since it would do a better job, but I’m going to show *her*,” Nyx snapped with determination. “I’m going to do my best and I’m not going to forget a single line. I’m going to be the best Nightmare Moon I can be!”

Twilight winced, cursing to herself quietly before sighing. “I’m... I’m sorry Nyx, but you can’t be in the play.”

Nyx stood stunned for a moment, her brain having trouble processing what she had just heard. “What?”

“I said you can’t be in the play,” Twilight repeated with more authority in her voice.

“B-but... but,” Nyx stammered in confusion, “why can’t I be in the play? Did I do something bad?”

“No, you just... I’m sorry, Nyx, but you just can’t be in the play.”

“But the play is tomorrow and they won’t be able to perform without me!”

Twilight frowned, feeling her heart clench in her chest. It had been a few weeks since she had found out Nyx was going to be Nightmare Moon in the play, and, over those two weeks, Twilight had agonized over what to do. Did she let Nyx participate in the play or make up an excuse to keep her at the library?

Twilight had actually started leaning towards letting Nyx be in the play, considering how much fun she seemed to be having. Two things, however, quickly changed Twilight’s mind.

The first was the announcement that Princess Celestia and Princess Luna were going to be attending the Spring Festival. Princess Celestia had attended the festival in the past, but the sisters were especially eager this year. They seemed particularly interested in seeing the school’s play, which would be the first stage performance of the story of Princess Luna’s return. Twilight knew Nyx’s disguise could fool common ponies, but she couldn’t expect it to fool the princesses. Princess Luna had *been* Nightmare Moon, and Princess Celestia was arguably just as familiar with her. They would surely notice Nyx’s resemblance, and Twilight feared Nyx would be banished on the spot.

The other thing that had swayed Twilight was Nyx’s costume. The armor was made of stiff fabric and wire, the wings were fake, and the sparkling mane was obviously just

indigo fabric with glitter... but it was enough. The costume made Nyx look too much like Nightmare Moon, especially with the crescent moon cutie mark painted on her flank. Sure, some ponies in Ponyville might just think the costume was wonderful, but Twilight feared others would draw unwanted connections.

“I’m so sorry, Nyx, but they’ll just have to make do without you.”

“But—” Nyx pleaded, only for Twilight to shake her head firmly.

“I said no, Nyx.”

Nyx tensed up, sniffing a little. She didn’t break down and cry, though. Instead, Nyx glared up at Twilight and stamped her hooves against the floor.

“But it’s not fair! If I haven’t done anything wrong, then I should be able to go to the play!”

“Nyx—”

“NO!” Nyx snapped, cutting Twilight off as she threw her first temper tantrum. “It’s not fair! I’ve worked really hard, and I learned all my lines, and—”

“Nyx.”

“IT’S NOT FAIR!”

“NYX!” Twilight barked, forcing the filly to fall silent, though she continued to glare coldly at Twilight.

“I’m sorry, I really am, but this is just how it has to be! Now, I want you to go upstairs and take that costume off.”

“But—”

“Upstairs!” Twilight said, stamping her hoof. Nyx met Twilight’s hard gaze and attempted to glare her into submission. When that failed, Nyx broke down. She bolted upstairs, wailing the whole way and slamming the bedroom door shut behind her.

“Twilight, don’t you think you could just let her be in the play?” Spike asked, having watched the confrontation from the sidelines. “I mean, she was really looking forward to it.”

Twilight's face fell as she looked over at Spike. "I know she was, Spike, and I *want* to let her, but... it's just too risky. If Princesses Celestia and Luna were to figure out the truth, that she was made by the spell those cultists were casting, they'd banish her to the moon. They'd take her away, and I can't let that happen."

Spike crossed his arms and looked at Twilight with a very skeptical expression. "Do you really think Princess Celestia would just do that? I mean, she trusts you completely. I'm sure you could convince her that Nyx isn't Nightmare Moon."

"I'm glad you think so, Spike," Twilight said before heaving a heavy sigh, "but I just can't risk it."

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"Now, Spike and I have to meet with the princesses this evening. Princess Celestia expects the both of us to be there to watch the evening performances with her and Princess Luna," Twilight said. She was talking to Nyx, who was sitting on the floor nearby in her normal, everyday clothes instead of the costume she'd rather have been wearing. "Owloysius will be keeping an eye on you, and I expect you to behave for him."

"Yes, Ma'am," Nyx said, the tone of disappointment thick in her voice. It was the first time Nyx had ever been angry like this, but Twilight knew it was for the best.

"I'm sorry, Nyx, and I'll make this up to you," Twilight promised as she turned to leave. "Try not to think about it. Spike and I will be back soon." With that Twilight stepped out the door and closed it tightly behind her. Owloysius then flew across the room, took the key from the door lock in his talons, and flew back to Twilight's writing desk where he landed with a flutter of his feathers.

Nyx scampered to the window and peered outside. She watched Twilight leave, holding onto some small flicker of hope that Twilight would change her mind, come back, and say she could be in the play. However, when Twilight disappeared around the corner of a distant building, Nyx scrunched up her nose, jumped down from the window, and began to stomp across the floor.

"It isn't fair... it isn't *fair!* Cheerilee is expecting me to be there. They're all counting on me! I practiced so hard! It isn't fair!"

"Hoo?"

Nyx looked over at Owloysius, who was watching her with his head cocked to one side. Nyx stared back at him for a few moments before going wide-eyed and scampering over. “Please, Owloysius, let me go! They won’t be able to do the play without me! I’m supposed to be Nightmare Moon, and you can’t tell the story without Nightmare Moon.”

“Hoo?”

“Nightmare Moon, the bad mare! Please, Owloysius. Please please please please PLEEAASSEEE,” Nyx begged. She looked up at Owloysius with the biggest, most pleading eyes she could muster. She even pushed out her bottom lip, pouting just as Sweetie Belle had taught her.

Despite Nyx’s pleas, Owloysius continued to stare blankly at her while his clawed grip on the door key tightened. His beady eyes and non-expressive beak were a perfect poker face crafted by nature itself, and thus Nyx had no clue if her tactics were having any affect on him.

Nyx, however, had one more trick. While the school had been rehearsing, Silver Spoon and Diamond Tiara were asked to try and learn to cry on command. This was because the Royal Sisters were supposed to cry when they were reunited at the end of the play. Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon had whined it was impossible. Nyx, out of curiosity and a small, spiteful desire to prove them wrong, wanted to see if she could learn to do it. It had taken practice, but, if she thought about the right things, she could get her eyes to water. It was a trick she had yet to put to use, but, with the Royal Sisters as her witness, she was going to get to the play!

So she began to add her own touch to her carefully crafted display of begging. She let her eyes water, and, soon, a few pitiful tears streaked down her cheeks. “Please, Owloysius.”

Owloysius stared at Nyx as coldly as he had before but, within a few moments, was forced to look away. He hooted in defeat before taking off from the desk. Nyx watched him circle the room a few times and then smiled as Owloysius expertly placed the key back into the door’s lock. He made another pass, turned the key, and unlocked the door with a resounding click.

“Oh! Thank you, Owloysius! Thank you, thank you, thank you!” Nyx said with several bounces before running upstairs. In a flash, she got out of her vest, tossed off her glasses, and pulled out her costume. With a single leap, Nyx landed in all four of the costume’s shoes. She then began putting on her fake armor.

Cheerilee would paint on the fake cutie mark once Nyx got to the performance, but she would have to get the rest of the costume on herself. The fake armor was easy enough, but then came the challenging part: the costume's wings. They were comprised of feathers glued on a wooden skeleton that was then attached to an all-black vest similar in design to the purple one she wore on a daily basis. Personally, Nyx didn't see the point of wearing fake wings when she had real ones, but Twilight had insisted that, if she was going to be in the play, she had to wear the whole costume.

Nyx, however, struggled and fumbled with the fake wings. They were the one part of the costume that was poorly designed, and they usually needed to be put on before the helmet. Unfortunately, Nyx had already put on the helmet, and she was in such a rush that she didn't want to waste time taking it off.

As Nyx was working on getting the last part of the wings secured, she tripped on her own hooves. She stumbled and let out a panicked "eep" as she fell to one side. The wings hit the floor first, Nyx landed on top of them, and the end of the fall was punctuated by the sound of splintering wood.

"No!" Nyx cried, now starting to shed genuine tears while looking at the horribly bent wings. She nudged at them with her hoof, which caused one of the fake wings to snap in half and flop to the floor. Nyx might have started to wail if she hadn't glanced back at where the fake wings would have been and noticed the real wings that were already there.

"Well if I keep them straight all night... that might work," Nyx mumbled to herself as she extended her wings vertically. She knew she was going to be in *so* much trouble with Twilight once she got home for sneaking out to the play and for going out with her real wings visible.

Still, at the moment, she was less afraid of being punished by Twilight than she was of disappointing the rest of her class. She did not want to let down her few friends, and she was already unpopular enough with the rest of the class. Everypony in class, except her friends, thought of her as a crybaby, a teacher's pet, or both. Ruining the play would only make things worse.

Her decision made, Nyx broke the fake wings off the costume vest and used a pair of scissors to cut some crude holes in the fabric. She then slipped it on and did everything she could to make her wings look like the costume's fake ones.

With vest on, Nyx double checked her costume in a mirror. She went down a mental checklist, and, when she was sure she had everything, she galloped downstairs and out

the front door. She doubled back only once, to poke her head in the library door and offer a final “Thank you!” to Owloysius. Then, Nyx ran as fast as her little hooves could carry her towards the center of Ponyville.

Twilight, along with the rest of the audience, applauded as the actors on the stage bowed and the curtain fell, marking the end of another performance. All of Ponyville, as well as a number of ponies from other towns, was sitting in the town's central square, which had been transformed into an outdoor theater for the Spring Festival.

A large, temporary stage with a professional setup of lights and similar grade equipment had been constructed on one side of the plaza that surrounded the town hall. The rest of the area was packed with ponies and lit by long strings of paper lanterns that arched from building to building. The members of the audience were packed tight and were all eagerly waiting to see the next scheduled performance. Yet Twilight, Spike, and their friends were not amongst the crowd on the ground. Instead, they had been invited to sit with Princesses Celestia and Luna in what was being called the VIP section, for "Very Important Ponies", which had been established on the second-floor balcony of the town hall.

"Oh, that was a funny one! I loved that one part where they threw a pie!" Pinkie Pie cheered as she bounced on her seat cushion.

"Yeah," Rainbow Dash agreed as she tried to stifle her giggles. "That one pony just reared back and POW! Face full of banana cream!"

Spike, who had rolled onto his back and was holding his stomach, managed to quell his laughter just long enough to say, "Total laugh riot!"

"Yes, I do suppose it was enjoyable, if a little lowbrow," Rarity remarked. "Though I particularly liked the joke about blues music."

"Really? 'Cause that one was kind of stupid if you ask me," Applejack argued.

"It must have simply gone over your head."

"Really? Then wouldn't it have hit her hat?" Pinkie Pie asked, making Rainbow Dash snort.

"Oh... oh geeze," Rainbow Dash laughed, "somepony should tell those stallions that one. It should be in that play."

The others were giggling right along with Dash, including Princesses Celestia and Luna. While the group of ponies had been a little tense around the royal sisters at first, a few

good performances, along with Celestia's casual, friendly personality, helped to lighten the mood. Princess Luna had joined in the conversation from time to time as well. While not as vocal as Celestia, Luna had, at the very least, practiced speaking with a more modern dialect since her public appearance at Nightmare Night. She had even cracked a particularly witty joke about the first performance, further helping Twilight and company feel more at ease around the royal sisters.

"And what is next on the festival program, sister?" Princess Luna asked, eager to see the next performance but keeping her enthusiasm in check.

Celestia casually cracked open her copy of the festival program and glanced across the page. "Let's see... the *Reunion of the Royal Pony Sisters*, by the Ponyville Elementary School."

"Oh yeah, *this* is the one I've been waiting for," Dash said eagerly, sitting up on her cushion. "This is the one about *us!*"

"Personally, I ain't as excited," Applejack admitted. "I know Apple Bloom wouldn't mean ta, but she could right easily make me look like a fool, and I don't need no ponies snickerin' behind my back because of this."

"I'm sure Apple Bloom will do fine," Fluttershy reassured. "After all, she actually knows you. I don't even know the pony who's going to be playing me."

"Yeah, I guess yer right," Applejack agreed as she flipped open the program sitting at her hooves. "Hey, says here they got Nyx to play Nightmare Moon."

"Really? Huh, I... I guess that's kind of cool. I mean, sure, she's got the right coat color... but I don't know if she's Nightmare Moon material."

"Rainbow Dash, that's mean!" Fluttershy scolded.

Dash shrugged. "Hey, I just call it as I see it."

"Well, I... I wouldn't get your hopes up, girls. Nyx wasn't feeling well earlier," Twilight lied.

"Oh, the poor thing; did she have a stomachache?" Fluttershy asked.

“Oh yes, really nasty tummy ache,” Twilight said, more than willing to latch onto Fluttershy’s provided excuse. “I actually left her back at the library with Owloysius. I doubt she’ll be able to make it.”

“Twilight, do correct me if I’m wrong, but it sounds like this little filly is living with you,” Celestia said casually. “I’m surprised you haven’t told me.”

“Oh... really? Ha ha... I thought I’d told you. She’s my cousin... half-cousin, really... but yeah, she’s been staying with me for a while now.” Twilight was trying to speak as casually as possible but was unable to stop herself from putting on a stupid, forced smile before quickly changing the subject. “So... uh... Princess Luna, are you going to be okay? I mean, this play is kind of about—”

“Do not worry about me, Twilight Sparkle,” Luna said flatly. “I will be quite alright. The story of my return can not be told without telling the rise and fall of Nightmare Moon. If I didn’t want ponies to know about that part of my past, then I never should have let my jealousy get the better of me.”

Luna turned to face Twilight and put on a reassuring smile. “Furthermore, I’ve been informed that this play is not meant to dwell on my sins but to celebrate my return to my true self. It is also performed by elementary school children. If anything, it will make ponies laugh at Nightmare Moon... and I think it would be nice to see that particular part of my past portrayed comically. You do not need to worry about my welfare, though I thank you for asking.”

“Oh, you’re welcome, Princess,” Twilight said, smiling both because Luna was doing well and because she had successfully redirected the conversation. It was then the Mayor Mare of Ponyville, Ivory Scroll, walked out to the center of the stage, once more playing her part as the Spring Festival’s Master of Ceremonies.

“Fillies and gentlecolts,” Ivory began with her usual flair, “I am now proud to present the Ponyville Elementary School’s original play: *The Reunion of the Royal Pony Sisters*.”

The crowd applauded, the parents in the crowd with noticeable vigor, as the mayor stepped off the stage and the curtains opened. Smoke began to curl out from the stage, and a few dark set pieces loomed in the sea of mist. The only light came from the stars and moon in the sky above, and, for a moment, all things were quiet.

“Beware, beware you pony folk, for the tale I am about to tell is no joke. It is a story, begun in days, months, and years gone by, about the pony sisters who, in harmony, ruled the sky.”

At this, one of the set pieces on the stage moved, causing some ponies in the audience to jump and others to gasp. What had appeared at first to be a set piece was, in fact, a cloaked equine figure, who moved to the center of the stage as a light clicked on. The single light cast heavy shadows across the figure, whose body was hidden in the darkness of the cloak until she lifted a white-and-black striped hoof.

Zecora couldn't help but smile as she removed the hood of her cloak. She looked out across the audience, who stared back at her with varying levels of shock.

“The eldest did raise the sun, bringing forth the dawn,” Zecora narrated, continuing the performance's introduction. “The other brought the moon when the sun to bed had gone.”

Two more lights clicked on, revealing two small figures. Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon were standing on the opposite sides of the stage, dressed in costumes that made it easy to identify them as Princesses Celestia and Luna. The two fillies climbed up steps hidden behind the painted backdrop of rolling hills and came to a stop when they each stood on the peak of a painted mountain. At the same time, Zecora retreated from center stage to continue her narration while a number of other students came out and began to dance and play.

“The two sisters brought harmony and balance to the moon and sun,” Zecora continued, her voice carrying out over the crowd though she was currently hidden from view. “Beneath their guidance all different ponies lived, laughed, and had fun.”

“Wow, Zecora is doing a really good job with the whole narrator thing,” Dash whispered to Applejack.

“You got that right, sugarcube.”

“But not all was well; the younger grew envious. To her, the ponies were ignorant and oblivious. They frolicked, laughed, and played through bright days. They lived their lives under the sun's golden rays. Yet they ignored her stars and slept through her night. To her, it just wasn't fair; it just wasn't right.”

While Zecora spoke, the fillies and colts on stage performed the scene. Diamond Tiara, dressed as Princess Celestia, stood proud as the ponies on stage played and laughed, but,

when she hid and Silver Spoon came out as Princess Luna, the other ponies on stage all quickly pretended to fall asleep, some playfully snoring.

“In time, it all became too much for the younger to bear; to have her night ignored... to feel as if no pony cared. One fateful night she did protest. She refused to lower the moon in the west.”

“Luna, why won’t you lower the moon? It’s time for the sun to come up,” Diamond Tiara said, overextending the words as she gave a very forced regal tone to her voice. She and Silver Spoon were facing one another from opposite sides of the stage, standing on wooden steps hidden behind the plywood mountains. Below them, their classmates continued pretending to sleep, as if ignorant to what was going on.

“I am tired of no pony seeing my night,” Silver Spoon shouted back while she faked a regal tone. “I work so hard on it, and all they do is sleep through it. It’s beautiful, but no pony ever sees it but me.”

“Well... well...” Diamond Tiara stammered.

“Looks like some pony has forgotten her lines,” Rarity whispered. *“Personally, I don’t think it could have happened to a nastier filly.”*

“Well... what else are ponies supposed to do? It’s too dark to work at night and, like, it’s too bright to sleep during the day,” Diamond Tiara finally answered. This caused some chuckles to go through the audience, Luna herself snorting. Diamond Tiara, in her moment of panic, had reverted to her normal, snooty way of speaking, and her voice was a comically inappropriate match for any princess. Celestia just smiled and took it in good humor. She even chuckled under her breath.

“I don’t care!” Silver Spoon yelled, able to remember her lines better than Diamond Tiara. “I won’t have my work be ignored anymore! They are going to see the majesty of my night, whether they want to or not.”

“But sister...” Diamond Tiara called out, only for her voice to fall silent as the light on Silver Spoon grew dark and Zecora began narrating again.

“But it was too late for kind words to soothe the younger’s heart, too deeply had she been hurt by the ponies who ignored her sky-bound art. The bitterness inside her twisted, writhed, and contorted, to the point that even the princess’s exterior became distorted.

“Gone was her gentle visage in the emotional monsoon; leaving behind only the dreadful Nightmare Moon!”

The light on the right side of the stage clicked on again, and gasps cut through the audience. Silver Spoon had been replaced by another little filly, one with an all-black coat and supposedly fake wings that were stretched high and held perfectly still. On her flank was a fairly well-painted crescent moon cutie mark, and the fake armor she wore looked genuine from a distance. The most convincing part of her costume, however, were her eyes: they were shaped like a dragon’s, with brilliant turquoise irises and whites that were a lighter teal.

“Hey, look! Nyx made it!” Applejack whispered energetically. “Sweet apples, that little filly does pull off a convincin’ Nightmare Moon.”

“Oh... oh yes, of course,” Rarity agreed, glancing nervously at Twilight. “She’s... positively a doppelganger.”

Celestia leaned over to whisper to Twilight. “And it’s good to see she’s over her tummy ache. Must have just been pre-show butterflies.”

“Uh... uh... yeah, butterflies,” Twilight answered weakly, suddenly feeling as if she were about to lose her lunch.

Nyx looked at the audience and realized just how many ponies she was standing in front of. She instinctively closed her eyes and struggled against a growing temptation to hide. She had been so excited about the play, so excited to do the story, and so excited to make some new friends that she hadn’t realized that there were going to be *this* many ponies watching her.

Nyx licked her lips and swallowed, thinking about her friends. She had just gotten herself in deep trouble with Twilight for them, and she wasn’t going to let them down now. She just had to get through her lines, and she had practiced those lines so many times she could recite them in her sleep. She just needed to take a breath and say them.

“N-Never again will the ponies of Equestria see the sun! I hereby decree that this night shall last forever! MUWAHAHAHA!” Nyx boasted, though her fake evil laugh at the end did nothing but draw a small round of laughter from the crowd. It, however, wasn’t the mean, mocking laughter of bullies, but the kind, supportive laughter of ponies enjoying her performance; it was laughter that gave Nyx more courage. She could do this, and she would do this... because she was already in trouble for it anyway.

Yet, while the laughter gave Nyx courage, the reaction of the crowd baffled Twilight. Why hadn't an angry mob formed? Nyx looked too much like Nightmare Moon, but nopony seemed to take the resemblance seriously. Were they all convinced that Nyx's costume was just that good? She couldn't contemplate it for long as Zecora's voice drew her attention back to the stage.

“And night did last across the pony lands, despite the elder's pleas and demands. In the end, with no other choice to be made, the sister had to take up the crusade. With the Elements of Harmony, a power beyond all measure, the elder banished her sister, an act in which she took no pleasure.”

The lights on the stage began to flicker on and off in a rainbow of colors as Nyx faked cries of anger and pain. When the lights returned to normal, Nyx had disappeared from view, and, in her place, a plywood moon painted with the visage of the Mare in the Moon had been lowered.

“To the moon was the younger one then sent, so that the ponies of Equestria she would never again torment. The elder then took on duties two-fold. She tended both the moon silver and the sun gold. Harmony was returned, the elder's actions many did commend. And for a thousand years all was good... but this story is not at its end.”

With that, the curtains quickly shut, the first act of the play ending to an appropriate round of applause. There was only one pony who didn't applaud: Luna. While she had enjoyed the children's performance, she had sunk down into her seat when the filly playing Nightmare Moon had appeared on stage.

Luna hung her head and stared at her hooves as memories of that particular moment in her life came rushing back like angry spirits. Before Luna could get too lost in her own thoughts, she felt a very gentle touch. Looking up, she saw a large white wing gently draped over her shoulder.

“Are you going to be okay?” Celestia asked very quietly, using her wing to gently hug her younger sister to her side.

“Yes... yes, I'll be alright,” Luna replied, resting her head on Celestia's shoulder. “Thank you, sister.”

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While the play had the level of professionalism that one would expect from something put on by colts and fillies, the crowd as a whole was enjoying it, even those who weren't

parents. The first scene of the second act involved Twilight meeting up with her friends and Nightmare Moon's return. That led into the second scene, where Twilight and her friends faced the trials within the Everfree Forest.

Of the crowd, Twilight's friends seemed to be enjoying it the most. Dash was thrilled to see how awesomely she was being portrayed by Scootaloo while Applejack and Rarity were satisfied by how well their little sisters were acting. Dinky Doo put on a fairly good impression of Twilight, though she tripped on her lines occasionally. Pinkie Pie, however, seemed to have the widest grin of all just from hearing her song about giggling at the ghostly being sung on stage.

Twilight even found herself able to enjoy the play, though not until her concerns had calmed from a boil to a simmer. She was still going to scold Nyx at the first opportunity for not only disobeying her, but also for forgetting her glasses. Still, so far, nothing bad had happened. Princesses Celestia and Luna hadn't winged down to the stage to capture Nyx, and no angry mob had formed out of the audience. They all just thought Nyx had a great costume, and Twilight wasn't about to give them a reason to think otherwise.

So, for the moment, Twilight could only sit and watch. The performance was now entering the third scene of the second act, and the climax was about to begin. The backdrop had changed to resemble the interior of the old castle, and Zecora began her narration once more.

"And with the final trial passed they did arrive. They could plainly see the elements they hoped to revive," Zecora said as the six ponies playing Twilight and her friends stepped into view and drew close to the wooden pedestals that held the fake Elements of Harmony.

"The Elements of Harmony! We've found them!" Dinky Doo cheered as the group of young actresses moved forward. Unlike the real elements, the fake ones were set on pedestals low enough to the ground that the little fillies were able to reach them without being able to fly.

As the other fillies worked to take the stones down, the one playing Pinkie Pie began to point and count the stones. "One, two, three, four... There's only five!"

"*Squeee!*" Pinkie Pie whispered, trying to keep her voice down but finding it difficult. "*I said that... I said that! This is so cool! They got everything just right.*"

“That’s mostly because of you, sugarcube, since you somehow remembered everythin’ we said.”

“Oh, that was easy. I just read the transcript.”

“You read the what now?”

“Shhh! I’m trying to watch!” Dash grumbled as she continued to watch the stage intently.

“Where’s the sixth?” Scootaloo asked as she and the other fillies looked around.

Dinky Doo moved closer to the five fake elements. “The book said when the five are present, a spark will cause the sixth element to be revealed.”

“What in the hay is that supposed to mean?” Apple Bloom asked, pulling off her sister’s thicker accent fairly well.

“I’m not sure, but I have an idea. Stand back, I don’t know what will happen.”

“Come on now, y’all. She needs to concentrate,” Apple Bloom ordered, ushering the other fillies off the stage and leaving Dinky Doo alone with the fake elements. Dinky knelt down beside the painted, round props and made her horn glow, making it look like she was attempting a spell.

As Dinky Doo concentrated, a fog, borrowed from the Cloudsdale Weather Factory and tinted indigo by special lanterns, began to envelop the stage. The pedestals that had held the prop Elements of Harmony were pulled out of view by ropes. At the same time, students backstage tugged on fishing line connected to the elements, making them slide across the stage.

When Dinky noticed them being dragged away from her, she reached out a hoof. “The Elements!” Her shout, however, did nothing but draw, evil laughter from offstage.

The laughter had come from Nyx. She stepped onto the right side of the stage while the lights flickered and students behind the scenes smashed pots and pans together, simulating thunder and lightning. Yet, despite Nyx’s ominous entrance, Dinky did as the real Twilight Sparkle had done: She lowered her head and beat her hoof at the ground aggressively.

Nyx lifted a hoof in disbelief and arched an eyebrow. “You’re kidding. You’re kidding, right?”

Dinky, however, was not kidding. She charged at Nyx, and Nyx did the same. They raced towards one another, and, just as the two were about to cross paths, the stage lights went dark, causing a small gasp of confusion to cascade across the audience.

When the lights came back on, Nyx was standing alone in the center of the stage, and Dinky Doo was over by the elements. Her horn was glowing while some of the backstage students covered and uncovered theater lanterns in an attempt to make it look like the elements were beginning to activate.

Nyx raced across the stage, but before she could reach Dinky Doo, a number of lights, which were aimed out at the audience, flashed. The bright light blinded most of the crowd and obscured the stage for a few key moments. The lights were then dimmed, and, with the blinding effect gone, the audience was able to see Dinky Doo on the far side of the stage. She was pulling herself off the ground, as if she had been thrown back, while Nyx stood in the center of the fake Elements of Harmony.

“No, no!” Nyx snapped, shrinking back in fear of the fake elements, but, as in reality, the elements did not activate. The students playing with the theater lanterns stopped while Dinky Doo put on an overly large expression of shock.

“But... where’s the sixth Element?!”

Nyx broke out her playful, evil laughter before she stomped on the fake elements. They crumbled under her hooves, and, when they were nothing but shattered pieces, Nyx turned to face Dinky Doo. She put on the wickedest smile she could manage and lifted a hoof to point at Dinky.

“You little foal! Thinking you could defeat me!?” Nyx called out, her voice turning very dark, very serious, and very convincing. “Now you will never see your princess or your sun!”

“The *night* will last *forever!*” Nyx finished before letting out an evil laugh, the most convincing evil laugh the audience had heard from her all evening. It sent a shiver down Twilight’s spine. She had heard Nightmare Moon say those very same words and in a very similar way. She swallowed nervously and risked a glance at Celestia and Luna. The princesses still seemed to be just enjoying the play, but Twilight still couldn’t shake the worrisome thought from her mind.

Nyx had said those last lines too well.

• • •

“And thus the night again became ruled over by the younger, and banished from her body was the vengeful hunger. And from this story may a lesson you firmly grip: There is nothing stronger than the power of friendship.”

With those last lines from Zecora, the curtains fell and the audience broke into a roaring round of applause. A few moments later, the curtains reopened as Cheerilee stepped onto the stage and gave a few quick bows and waves.

“Thank you all!” Cheerilee said to the crowd. “I’m happy to see that you all enjoyed the play. The students worked really hard, and, because of their efforts, this became one of the best plays ever put on by Ponyville Elementary School. Now, let’s welcome the students back to the stage! First, a round of applause for those who played our story’s heroes. Dinky Doo, Apple Bloom, Sweetie Belle, Scootaloo, Cotton Cloudy, and Sunny Daze!”

The crowd eagerly complied, stomping their hooves as the students began to stream onto the stage. Applejack gave out an extra-loud holler for Apple Bloom, and Rarity put her hooves together and whistled when it was Sweetie Belle’s turn to take a bow.

“Next,” Cheerilee continued, doing her best to shout above the applause of her crowd, “we have the fillies who portrayed our dearest Princess Celestia and Princess Luna, who have graced us with their presence this evening: Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon.”

Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon came out, acting like proper divas as they smirked and bowed in their Princess Celestia and Princess Luna costumes. They lingered on the stage a little longer than they should have, soaking in the applause. It took Cheerilee motioning towards them to get the two fillies to back up and stand in line with the others.

“And now, playing the wicked and dastardly Nightmare Moon, give a big round of applause for Nyx!”

Twilight was shocked when the crowd cheered loudly as Nyx nervously walked onto stage, the cheering only slightly quieter than the applause had been for Dinky Doo and the other fillies who played the main characters in the play. Still, the applause Nyx was receiving was louder than what Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon had received, and, by the looks on their faces, the two snooty fillies knew it.

Twilight couldn’t keep herself from applauding either, even though Nyx was still in *so* much trouble. Twilight even heard a whistle come from her side, and, when she turned

to look, she saw it had come from Celestia. Even Luna was applauding, despite the fact Nyx had been portraying something that she probably wished to forget. Did the two princesses really just believe Nyx was in costume?

It was a miracle Twilight would never have believed possible.

Nyx shakily bowed before stepping back to stand with the rest of her class. Cheerilee proceeded to introduce the rest of the class. She then called the names of some students a second time, letting them step forward and take credit for the work they had done making costumes, constructing set pieces, or working behind the scenes. The final two ponies invited up were Lyra and Zecora. Lyra was thanked for her work composing the play's music, and Zecora, of course, deserved a round of applause for her expert narration.

The final mare to be credited was Cheerilee herself. Zecora introduced her to the crowd as the playwright and director, and, with a small blush, she bowed to the many applauding ponies. After that the whole cast bowed a final time, the stage's curtains closed, and the Spring Festival entered an hour long intermission.

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"Mommy!" Dinky Doo chirped as she ran up to a gray-coated, blonde-maned pegasus. "Did I do good?"

"You were wonderful, Muffin," Ditzzy Doo replied, giving her little filly a nuzzle and a hug. Twilight passed by the warm scene with Rarity, Applejack, and Rainbow Dash as they moved backstage to where the students were getting out of their costumes.

It didn't take long for the quartet to find the fillies they were looking for. Apple Bloom, Scootaloo, Sweetie Belle, and Nyx were drinking water from paper cups. Three of the fillies had already gotten out of their costumes while Nyx was still completely in hers.

"Darlings, that was positively *fabulous!*" Rarity chimed, alerting the four fillies to the group's approach. Apple Bloom, Scootaloo, and Sweetie Belle all quickly turned and ran over, grinning ear to ear. Nyx, however, hung back and tried not to meet Twilight's gaze.

"Really, was it good?" Sweetie Belle asked.

"Positively *pitch* perfect," Rarity assured.

"Yea, big props, Scootaloo, you got me down pat."

“Ohmygoshohmygoshohmygoshohmygosh,” Scootaloo rattled off, overwhelmed by the fact that she was getting such a compliment from her personal hero, Rainbow Dash.

“How about me, big sis?”

“It was like lookin’ in a mirror, sugarcube,” Applejack praised, giving Apple Bloom a little noogie. “Y’all did a great job, didn’t they, Twilight?”

“Yes, they all did amazingly well,” Twilight agreed. Nyx chanced a look up. Her currently undisguised dragon eyes met Twilight’s, and she was able to smile. She smiled because Twilight wasn’t glaring at her with disappointment or anger.

“By the way, Twi, nice work on Nyx’s eyes,” Dash said before fluttering over to inspect Nyx more closely. “I didn’t know you knew a spell for this.”

Twilight nervously smiled, thankful that Rainbow Dash had assumed it was a spell. “Oh, uh, j-just something I found in one of my books.”

“That is so awesome. I’ve got to try it.”

“Say what now?” Twilight asked as her smile weakened.

“Come on, Twilight,” Dash said. She landed and used a hoof to motion towards her face. “Lay that spell on me. I want to see what I look like with dragon eyes.”

Twilight swallowed nervously, only now realizing that she might actually be asked to perform the spell. There was no going back. She’d have to try at least once, and, if she failed, then she could tell Dash she’d do it tomorrow, buying herself enough time to actually figure out the spell.

Maybe she could pull it off. It would just be an illusion spell like the one she put on Nyx’s glasses. Yes, it shouldn’t be too hard, but it wouldn’t last very long. That’s why she had chosen to enchant glasses instead of Nyx’s eyes directly. With glasses she could attach other spells to ensure the magic was resilient and long lasting. Yes, in theory the illusion spell could be applied straight to Dash’s eyes. It was no big deal, she just had to use it on a live pony with the opposite effect. She could do it... maybe.

Closing her own eyes, Twilight focused her magic. She gritted her teeth, concentrated, and felt the flash of the spell going off. For a moment, she didn’t dare to look. She feared that the spell hadn’t manifested, and she had just made a fool of herself in front of her friends.

But the gasps of amazement from the other ponies encouraged Twilight to open her eyes, and she was relieved to find that her spell had worked. Dash's eyes had been transformed and now looked very dragon-like. They had strong irises with dagger-shaped pupils, and even the whites of her eyes had been tinted a light pink.

"Whoa, this is so awesome!" Dash said, catching her reflection in a nearby wall mirror.

"Well, don't get used to it. The illusion spell will wear off quickly," Twilight lectured.

"Yeah, yeah, I hear ya," Dash said as she looked away from the mirror. "Still, I'm going to enjoy this while it lasts. After we're done here, we have to find Pinkie Pie. She is *so* going to freak out when she sees this."

"Yeah, I suppose she will," Applejack agreed. "I reckon all you little fillies have worked up quite the appetite with all this actin'. How about we catch up with Fluttershy and Pinkie and then all get dinner together?"

"Yeah!" the fillies cheered in unison.

"Sounds good," Twilight agreed. "Why don't you go on ahead and find us a place to eat? I need to help Nyx out of her costume."

The others nodded in agreement and headed off stage to begin their search for food. Twilight waited until her friends were out of sight before she turned, arched an eyebrow, and tapped her hoof as she gazed expectantly at Nyx.

"I'm... in trouble, aren't I?" Nyx asked.

"Yes... yes you are. You did disobey me," Twilight said firmly, though the frown on her face was soon replaced by a smile. "But... you were right. It wasn't fair of me to try and keep you from the play, and you did do a good job."

"R-really?"

"Yes, really," Twilight reassured as she nuzzled Nyx before stepping back. "But now, would you mind telling me why I can see your real wings and why you don't have your glasses?"

Nyx sat down and began to trace circles on the floor with her hoof. "Well, when I was trying to get my costume on, I kind of... broke the costume wings. I've been keeping my wings up like this all night though, so no pony has been able to tell the difference."

“And the glasses?”

“I... forgot them,” Nyx admitted. “Cheerilee thought you must have cast a spell on my eyes since you’re so good with magic.”

“Well, if there was a night to forget your glasses, this was it,” Twilight said with a chuckle. “Now why don’t you get on my back? We’ll use my teleport spell to get back to the library. Then we’ll get you out of that costume, get your glasses and vest, and come back so we can eat dinner with the others.”

“Really? You... you aren’t going to make me stay at the library?”

“Kind of pointless now that the play is over,” Twilight remarked. “So, no, you can come back with me and have dinner with everypony.”

Nyx gave a wide smile as she hopped up onto Twilight’s back. “T-Thank you, Twilight!”

“And then we’ll discuss your punishment in the morning.”

Nyx flattened her ears, realizing she had not gotten off the hook. “Oh... okay.”

• • •

“But *daddy*, how could they cheer louder for *her*? She was the bad mare, and *I* was Princess Celestia!”

“Diamond Tiara, please be quiet and eat your dinner,” Affluent scolded. Diamond Tiara’s and Silver Spoon’s families were seated together at one of Ponyville’s cafes. The restaurant was a fair distance from the Spring Festival, so it wasn’t too crowded. The parents had chatted lightly about the performance, but had long since moved on to other topics despite Diamond Tiara’s continued desire to keep whining about what had happened.

The worst of it was that Diamond Tiara hadn’t been able to escape Nyx. Within twenty minutes of her family’s arrival at the restaurant, Nyx had arrived with Scootaloo, Apple Bloom, Sweetie Belle, and a bunch of other, older ponies. Now, the large group was laughing and chatting at the far end of the restaurant despite the many dirty looks Diamond Tiara had shot in their direction.

“Oh, look, honey,” Affluent whispered, drawing Filthy Rich’s as well as Diamond Tiara’s attention. The whole restaurant, in fact, had turned their heads to watch as Princesses Celestia and Luna walked into the restaurant.

“I wonder what brings them to this quaint little eatery. It’s not exactly what I would consider royal class,” Silver Spoon’s mother whispered.

“Well, isn’t it obvious? They were so enamored by our daughters’ performances that they came looking for them. Now, everypony, look your best,” Silver Spoon’s father assured, and soon the four adults and two fillies were doing just that. They quickly primped and preened themselves as the princesses began to walk in their direction. However, despite Diamond Tiara’s wide grin, the princesses strolled right on by as if they weren’t even there.

“Where are they going?” Diamond Tiara whispered harshly as she turned around in her seat. “No, they aren’t... they are! They’re sitting with those losers!”

“Diamond Tiara, hush. It isn’t our place to judge who the princesses sit with,” Affluent scolded.

“But it isn’t fair! I actually had to dress up and put on a real costume to look like Princess Celestia. Nyx didn’t have to do *anything* but put on some fake wings to look like Nightmare Moon.”

Filthy Rich opened his mouth to tell his daughter to be quiet, but, as he did, he looked over his shoulder and caught a glance of the filly in question. “She does look a great deal like Nightmare Moon, doesn’t she?”

“Like, totally. She didn’t have to even dye her coat or mane or anything. Those are her natural colors. It isn’t even fair.”

Diamond Tiara’s father just kept staring, his blue eyes flashing a bit before he turned back to the table. “Yes, it’s an uncanny resemblance.”

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“Well,” Twilight yawned, “that was a long night.” She had just arrived back at the library. Both Spike and Nyx were sprawled out across her back and sleeping soundly. It was cute to see them like that. The cuteness, however, didn’t make them any lighter. Twilight was worn out after carrying them back from the restaurant.

Owloysius gave a welcoming hoot when Twilight came in the door, and she returned his welcome with a nod. She moved to and climbed the library staircase, carrying Spike and Nyx up to the bedroom.

Spike was the first to get tucked in. He mumbled something about Rarity and donuts before he turned over and snuggled into his blanket. Nyx was next, and Twilight gently slipped her out of her vest and glasses before tucking her beneath the covers. Then, with the two tucked away, Twilight turned to head downstairs, only to hear a small voice call out to her.

“Twilight?”

“Sorry, Nyx. I didn’t mean to wake you,” Twilight apologized. She turned back to see Nyx’s bright eyes staring at her in the dark.

“It’s okay. Thank you for letting me go to dinner with everypony.”

Twilight moved back over beside Nyx’s bed and made sure she was properly tucked in. “You’re welcome. Now, you should get some sleep. You’ve had a long day.”

“Okay,” Nyx whispered hesitantly, “but, Twilight?”

“Yes?”

Nyx looked down at her hooves and anxiously fiddled with her blanket. “You remember what happened in the forest, that thing I remembered or dreamed about in the castle... how I wanted to hurt you?”

“Yes, I remember,” Twilight answered with a nod.

“Was,” Nyx paused and swallowed nervously, “was that Nightmare Moon’s memory?”

Twilight glanced away from Nyx and rubbed the back of her neck. “W-what makes you ask that?”

“When I was on stage, when I was saying my last lines, I remember that I heard those same words in that nasty memory,” Nyx confessed. “T-then I started saying them just like the nasty voice I heard did, and it was like I had really said them before. Was... what I acted out in the play... was it really the same thing Nightmare Moon did?”

Twilight froze for a moment, debating how to answer the question. She had been striving to try and protect Nyx from what she feared was the truth. Yet, after the long day, Twilight didn't have the mental strength to try and contrive some new lie to shield Nyx, who was too smart for anything overly simple.

In the end, Twilight could only nod.

“And when I went to the play, every... everypony kept telling me that I-I looked j-just like Nightmare Moon,” Nyx stammered. “They said my eyes were perfect and so were my wings. T-they thought they were fake, but... they're not. A-and I don't know of a-anypony else besides the princesses who's an alicorn like me either, a-and before the play started, I saw that book again and looked at the picture... and... and after hearing what everypony else said, I—”

Nyx tried to brush away some tears that had formed in her eyes and looked up at Twilight. “Is the reason... is the reason I remember that night, r-r-remember you, a-and remember wanting to hurt you... Is the reason that I look like Nightmare Moon... i-is it because I'm.... am I... am I somehow—”

“No,” Twilight said firmly but comfortingly. “You are *not* Nightmare Moon.”

“But, what about—”

Twilight gently shushed Nyx and sat down beside the small bed before gathering her thoughts.

“Nyx, I know you may not understand all of this, but I think you deserve to know the truth... or, at least, what I think the truth is. You remember where I found you in the Everfree Forest? How, at the time, you didn't have any memories before then? How you didn't even have a name?”

Nyx nodded silently.

Twilight exhaled, trying to figure out how to word her explanation properly. “Well, I think that is because that was where you were born and because you had only come into existence a few hours before I arrived. You weren't even a pony until that first moment you woke up tangled in that bush.”

“W-w-what do you mean?” stammered Nyx.

“Nyx, I believe you were created by a spell.”

“A... spell?” Nyx asked, her eyes wide with confusion.

Twilight nodded. “You see, there were some very mean, very evil ponies who I believe were trying to bring Nightmare Moon back.”

Nyx sat up in her bed, pulling the covers up to her neck. “Why... why would they do that?”

“I don’t know, but that’s what I think they were trying to do. They ponynapped me, and, while I wasn’t able to really see or hear what was going on, I know what I felt. When they started to cast the spell, I felt powerful magic... magic I have only sensed once before, when I was in the presence of the real Nightmare Moon.

“So, if my theory is correct, they were trying to bring Nightmare Moon back. They were actually able to start the spell, but then Princess Celestia arrived and stopped the mean ponies. She interrupted the spell, rescued me, and her guards arrested all who were involved.”

“And that’s where I came from?” Nyx asked cautiously.

“The thing about magic is that if you interrupt a spell, you can’t really be sure what you’ll get,” Twilight explained. “The spell wasn’t complete when it was interrupted, and... I think you’re the result. I found you right next to the same clearing where the spell was cast.”

At this, Nyx began to sniffle, tears already starting to stream down her face as she bit her lower lip. “But... but that means... I’m Nightmare Moon.”

“No! No, Nyx, you’re not.”

“B-b-but you said that I c-came from that spell!” Nyx blubbered, her crying turning into full-fledged sobbing. “A-and you said that spell was supposed to b-bring back Nightmare Moon! If that spell made me, and I look like Nightmare Moon, and I have her memories, then I must *be*—”

The tears Nyx had been trying to hold back came flooding out and she wailed, “I’m Nightmare Moon! I was the one that did all those bad things in the play! I banished Princess Celestia to the sun and hit those poor guards with lightning! I broke the elements and tried to hurt you and your friends!

“I’m a monster! I’m a bad pony! I’m—” Before Nyx could continue her breakdown, Twilight brought her head close and nuzzled Nyx’s neck while she used a hoof to gently rub Nyx’s back. Nyx responded by hooking her little front legs around Twilight’s neck, hugging her tightly, and continuing to sob.

“Nyx, you are *not* Nightmare Moon,” Twilight assured, her voice both comforting and firm.

“B-but—”

“You do look like her, and... and you do seem to have some of her memories,” Twilight admitted, “but, Nyx, you are *not* Nightmare Moon. What you are is a perfectly normal, wonderful, little filly. A sweet little filly that likes going to school and was willing to get in *big* trouble just so she didn’t let her classmates down.”

Twilight gently pulled herself out of Nyx’s hug and began to wipe away some of Nyx’s tears. “Nightmare Moon wouldn’t do any of that. She wouldn’t even *have* friends. Nightmare Moon was a bitter, vengeance-driven pony who was willing to doom Equestria to eternal night just because ponies didn’t stay up to look at the stars.

“And that isn’t you,” Twilight continued. “You aren’t the same pony. You are *not* Nightmare Moon, and you never will be.”

Nyx sniffed loudly. “You... you promise?”

“I promise,” Twilight assured as she nuzzled Nyx once more. This drew a smile from Nyx, but the moment of happiness was doomed to die quickly as a fresh frown and new tears appeared on her face.

“What’s wrong?” Twilight asked.

“I-if I was created by a spell, then... then that means I don’t have a mom and dad... I... I don’t have a family like my friends... I... I...”

Twilight winced, realizing too late that Nyx had figured out more than she wanted her to. She had to think fast; she didn’t want Nyx to have to go to sleep with the knowledge she was born from a spell in the forest *and* that she had no real family. That was just too much to put on her, at least all at once.

“Nyx, just because you weren’t born like a normal pony doesn’t mean you don’t have a family.”

Nyx rubbed her tear-streaked face with a hoof. "It... it doesn't?"

"No. You have all the family you could want right here in Ponyville," Twilight reassured her. "Family is more than just the ponies you're related to. Family can also be your friends and the ponies who care about you. After all, don't you have really great friends?"

"I... I do."

"And there are plenty of others who care about you too. Just look at Spike. He's practically your brother."

Nyx frowned again, though this time in confusion. "But... Spike is a dragon; how can he be my brother?"

"Well," Twilight paused, needing to find the right words. "Spike keeps an eye on you when I can't, and he really appreciates it when you help around the library. I know sometimes he teases you and gives you a hard time, but he only does it in good fun. I also promise he'd be among the first to jump up and help if you were ever in trouble.

"There's also Owloysisus. While he's my second assistant and pet, he also helps look after you. He brings you those little flowers and other presents once in a while and helps you with your homework when I don't have the time. He even got himself in trouble so you could go to the play.

"Then there's Peewee," Twilight continued. "You spoil him with treats when Spike isn't looking, and he loves you for that. He even let you have one of his feathers for show and tell one day. So, even though Owloysisus is an owl, Peewee is a phoenix, and Spike is a dragon, they treat you like you're part of our family."

Nyx tilted her head to side, contemplating what she had been told. "But if Owloysisus and Peewee are pets, and Spike is my older brother... what does that make you?"

Twilight felt the air catch in her lungs at the question that had just been posed to her. What was she to Nyx? What was Nyx to her? She could easily say she was just an older sister like Spike was a brother, but... that didn't feel right.

Applejack was an older sister to Apple Bloom. Rarity was an older sister to Sweetie Belle. Both of her friends had shared some responsibility in raising their younger sisters. Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle got on Applejack and Rarity's nerves from time to time, and, once in a while, Applejack and Rarity had to reign in Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle. They had sisterly relationships.

But... that wasn't the kind of relationship she had with Nyx. Twilight began to think of all the things she had done for Nyx since her arrival. She had sent her to school, read bedtime stories to her, made her meals. She helped Nyx catch up to the rest of her class and tended to Nyx when she was hurt.

Most of all, Twilight thought of the day Nyx got lost in the Everfree Forest because of Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon. Twilight had never been so furious or worried. She was really on the verge of turning those spoiled little brats into cacti.

And, yes, one could argue protecting a filly with such force was something a big sister would do. Applejack would have probably beaten the tar out of Affluent for trying to defend what Diamond Tiara had done. But... "sister" just didn't seem to fit. Twilight... Twilight felt Nyx was more to her than a sister. Nyx depended on her. If it weren't for her, Nyx could have easily died in the Everfree Forest.

No, Twilight was no older sister to Nyx, but there was another name that seemed to fit: one that slowly floated to the top of Twilight's mind.

"Well... Nyx... if I was really honest, I'd say that I'm—" The words caught in her throat, and Twilight swallowed to force down the knot before saying, "I'm like... well... your mother."

The word hung in the air, and, to Twilight, it felt like the rest of the library had gone silent. She watched Nyx, gauging her reaction as it moved through several stages. First Nyx looked shocked. Her mouth hung open in disbelief. Then, slowly, a weak but honest smile formed.

"You really want to be my mom?"

"I'd love to be your mother if you'd let me." Twilight said, leaning her head in close so she was at eye level with Nyx.

Nyx's answer was not in word but in gesture. She sat up in her bed, and, before Twilight knew it, Nyx was once again hugging her neck. She nuzzled the side of Twilight's face, and her voice trembled a little as she whispered, "I... I would love to have you as my mom. You're the best mom ever."

Twilight's lip trembled, and her eyes started to tear up even though she was smiling ear-to-ear. She brought her own hooves up and returned Nyx's embrace. The pair remained like that for several seconds until finally Nyx once more whispered quietly to Twilight.

“I love you, Twilight.”

“I... I love you too, Nyx,” Twilight replied as tears started to roll down her cheeks. She gently pulled herself away, quickly rubbing the tears off her face with her forelegs before using her magic to tuck Nyx back into bed. “Now, it’s time to go to sleep.”

“Okay,” Nyx replied before she yawned and snuggled into her bed. Twilight smiled and, thinking of her own mother, bent forward and gave Nyx a gentle kiss on the forehead as she drifted off to sleep.

Sighing contently, Twilight stepped back from the bed and moved towards the door as quietly as she could. It wasn’t the way she had expected to be called mom for the first time. She had always thought she’d have a husband and a filly of her own some day. It had never occurred to her that Nyx could become so important to her.

Still, Twilight realized that she had really been acting like Nyx’s mom for a long time. She had been reading her to sleep at night and made sure she went to school. She had run into the Everfree Forest and nearly turned Diamond Tiara into a cactus, all for Nyx.

Yeah... she’d been acting like it, but it was a whole other bucket of hay to actually be called mom. Twilight would think about that in a minute. First, she needed to go have a word with Owloysius about why he had let Nyx sneak out to the play.

Yet before Twilight could reach the door, a voice whispered to her. “Hey, why am I just ‘the older brother’? Can’t I be her uncle or something?”

Twilight turned and smiled across the room at Spike. He was sitting up in his bed, arms crossed over his chest as he eyed Twilight.

“Spike, I was the one who hatched you, and I helped raise you before you could talk and look after yourself. Also, technically speaking, you’re still a baby dragon, and that kind of makes me your mother too.”

“Pfft. Whatever, I still say I’d make a better uncle,” Spike stated before bringing his claws to his face. “Especially if you let me have that awesome mustache back. No uncle is complete without a mustache.”

“Sorry, Spike, no mustache. Now you should get some sleep.”

“Yeah yeah, I heard you the first time ‘*Mom*’,” Spike scoffed before he lay back down and threw the blanket back over himself. He was asleep almost instantly, and Twilight couldn’t help but giggle quietly as she crept out of the bedroom and headed downstairs.

“Owloysius, can I have a word with you?”

“Hoo-hoo.”

“Uh-oh is right, Mister,” Twilight firmly asserted.

Dear Revered Brother Nexus—High Prophet of The True Queen

I hope this letter finds you well, Brother Nexus, for I have both good and bad news that needs to be brought to your attention. First, in regard to your orders, our search of the Everfree Forest is still ongoing. We have yet to find any real traces of our queen, and, recently, even the lingering portions of her aura at the ancient castle have dissipated.

But, this past evening, I became aware of a filly that has been living in town that bears, if I may say, a striking resemblance to our queen. The filly in question, Nyx, is currently in the care of Twilight Sparkle. Yes, the same Twilight Sparkle we are all so familiar with. I first saw her at an elementary school play, and I saw her a second time that evening when she shared a meal with Twilight Sparkle, the princesses, and a number of other local mares and fillies.

After speaking with my daughter, who shared a class with the filly for a number of weeks, I've come to discover that the filly was admitted as a new student to Ponyville Elementary around the same time our spell was cast, near the beginning of spring.

While this news alone is promising, I have been unable to learn anything else. Due to an incident, which was made worse thanks to my “darling” wife, I am now at odds with Twilight Sparkle. Also, my daughter, who might have proved useful in this matter, has made herself just as unwelcome around the Golden Oaks Library. Thus, I'm reaching out for your guidance, Brother Nexus, in how you wish me to proceed.

I patiently await your reply.

For the Night Eternal

For Equestria's True Queen

Honored Brother Rich—Prophet of Ponyville

The scroll, which had been hoof-delivered to the manor, lay across the desk in Spell Nexus's study. Nexus himself was standing near one of his windows, horn glowing as he held a glass of fine orange juice. He gently swished the glass, and its contents danced under the gentle motions. His turquoise eyes focused on the moon, which was a beautiful crescent in the sky.

“A filly,” Nexus whispered to himself before sipping from the glass. “A filly who attends school, who lives with Twilight Sparkle, who was seen in the presence of Princess

Celestia, no less. A filly who participated in a school play of all things. A filly... it is not what I would have expected.

“What are your plans; what are your schemes?” Nexus asked, as if posing his questions to the moon itself. “Do you act to keep your enemies close? Do you seek to find a weakness to exploit? Do you bide your time until you can overcome the Elements of Harmony and the ponies who wield them?”

Nexus drank from the glass again, draining every drop. The glow about his horn grew just a bit brighter as he took hold of a large, elegant pitcher on the nearby table. From it, he poured more orange juice and refilled his cup. He then resumed swirling the contents of his glass as he set the pitcher down and returned to the window.

“Perhaps you are merely waiting for us, your children, to discover you. Is that your plan, my queen? Do you wish us to prove ourselves capable and deserving of your grace?” Nexus mused, crossing the room. “Though... I assume much taking Filthy Rich at his word. This filly may *resemble* Nightmare Moon, but a resemblance is not enough. No doppelganger will do.”

Nexus sighed as he neared his reading table, on which he set down his glass. “In any case, this warrants further investigation.” A book floated out from the shelves, gripped by Nexus’s levitation magic. Yet, what Nexus sought was tucked behind it. It was a small black book, which floated from its hiding place in the shelves. Nexus then returned the first book to its place while his magic laid the small one out on the writing desk.

Nexus opened the book, revealing pages filled with names etched out in his own hoof-writing. It was the only true record of the Children of Nightmare; the only record of all the ponies who had sworn strength, magic, and life to the return of Equestria’s true queen. It was his duty alone to guard such precious information, for, if such a list were to be found by Celestia, all their hopes would be lost.

As his turquoise eyes flowed across the names, Nexus began to ponder what his next move would be. He would need agents that could travel to the small town of Ponyville and verify Filthy Rich’s reports. He would need ponies he trusted; ones like Gray Gale, Night Wind, and Stonewall. He would need ponies who were not just honored brothers and sisters, but ponies among the Exalted. Those who were just below him in the order. He, the one and only Revered Brother of the Children of Nightmare.

Other books began to make their way off the shelves, cradled by levitation magic, as Nexus began checking information. Every move made by the Children of Nightmare had

to be planned with such care, for his opponent in this high-stakes game of chess was none other than Celestia herself. He faced a mare with a thousand years of rule and wisdom behind her; a mare who had unearthed less thoroughly thought-out plans during the cult's infancy.

He'd spread his agents like a fine powder, sprinkling them amongst the ponies of Ponyville. They'd start by simply watching. Then others would try to get closer so they could sample her magic and her nature. Then—

“Sir?”

Nexus looked up from his work and saw Proper Etiquette had poked his nose in the study doorway. “Yes?”

Etiquette stepped in through the door and walked over to Nexus. He held out a scroll, which was bound shut with a purple ribbon and a silver full moon seal. “There is another letter for you, sir.”

“Thank you, Etiquette,” Nexus replied as he took the scroll with his own magic.

“Will you be needing anything else, sir?”

Nexus shook his head. “No, not at the moment.”

“Very good, sir.” With that, Etiquette bowed respectfully before he turned and removed himself from the room.

Nexus watched and waited until Proper Etiquette had left before he began setting down the many books he had pulled off the shelf. He propped open the books on the floor so he could quickly resume his work once the letter had been attended to. The scroll was bound with a purple ribbon and a silver seal: it was the sign of a letter from a brother or sister. The full moon on the seal indicated it was of the utmost importance.

Dear Revered Brother Nexus—High Prophet of The True Queen

This is a written report on the comings and goings of the unicorns assigned by Princess Celestia to study and understand the nature of the resurrection spell we attempted.

I realize this report comes fairly soon after my last and that you did not expect it for several days. There have been, however, a few developments I believe you would want to know about without delay.

First, with the research team moved to the royal archives, their endeavors in understanding our spell have started to make steady headway. They have begun to decipher the arcane lines we used to augment and focus the magic in the Everfree Forest clearing. While I will act, as I have, to try and stall their efforts, I can at this point only slow their progress.

They will, in time, decipher the spell.

Second, Princess Celestia came to the research team this morning to check on the progress. They reported to her exactly as I have reported to you, that their progress has now become steady and dependable. Bastion Yorsets and Celestia then began to chat casually. The princess talked about the Spring Festival she attended yesterday evening with her sister in Ponyville. She spoke highly of many of the performances and offered particular praise for a play put on by the town's elementary school.

At this point, the princess divulged to Bastion Yorsets that her student, Twilight Sparkle, was now taking care of a young filly by the name of Nyx. The only description she offered was that the filly was a black-coated unicorn and that the filly was also a half-cousin.

I would have dismissed this as idle chatter if Bastion Yorsets hadn't made a very interesting comment. He divulged that he had grown up knowing Twilight's father. He had even written a letter of recommendation, at the father's request, to help her secure an invitation to take the entrance exam for Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns.

In his comments, Bastion admitted it was strange that Twilight had called Nyx a half-cousin. According to Bastion, while Twilight's father has siblings, her mother is an only child. He further pointed out that Twilight's father and his siblings all share the same two parents, making it impossible for Twilight to have any half-cousins.

Princess Celestia's reply to this was that Twilight must have misspoken when introducing Nyx, or that she had a misunderstanding of what a half-cousin was. Bastion accepted this answer, and soon their meeting was over.

Again, I would have believed this to be nothing but idle chatter. Yet, later that day in the barracks, I overheard Princess Celestia's private guards talking. The two pegasi were discussing the princess's day, and, after eavesdropping for a time, I discovered that the princess made an unscheduled stop on her daily routine. She went to the Equestria Central Records Office, during what was supposed to be her lunch hour. From the ponies there she requested that family records pertaining to Twilight Sparkle be delivered to her royal chambers this evening.

I was unable to discover more, since my shift had ended, and I dare not risk lingering around the castle after work. Thus, this is all I have to report. I will continue my observation of the research team, and will alert you if I discover anything pressing.

I will submit my next regular report at the scheduled time.

*For the Night Eternal
For Equestria's True Queen
Exalted Sister Night Wind*

Nexus licked his lips to wet his mouth, which had gone dry. The situation had become much more perilous. Just as his attention had been brought to the filly in Ponyville, so had Celestia's gaze. Her interest had been spurred by the blabber mouth, Bastion Yorsets. Of course, he would *have* to have been a childhood friend of Twilight's father.

Taking up the orange juice glass, Nexus tilted it up to his mouth and drained it with a few swift gulps. He then shook his head, fighting back the brain freeze the chilled juice had incurred before refocusing on the task at hoof. There was now a need for both subtlety and haste. The truth about who the filly truly was needed to be ascertained before Celestia could act in a way to make such investigation impossible.

The books that had been left on the floor were carried back into the air by Nexus's magic. He drew out a feather pen and several pieces of parchment. Then Nexus began to feverishly work. His eyes moved between the little black record book, the many other tomes that now encircled him, and the pieces of parchment he was scrawling partial plans out on.

Spell Nexus would get no sleep that night.

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Twilight yawned, making no effort to control or stifle it as she walked down the path to Ponyville Elementary. The sun was still rising from the horizon, and the sunrise's tapestry of colors was just starting to fade to the constant blue of midday. Normally, it would have taken an important research trip to make Twilight get out of bed this early. That was, however, before Nyx came into her life. Now it was not an expedition to some far-off archaeological site or a rare celestial event that drew Twilight from her warm bed covers. It was a far simpler event that, to a certain little filly, was nearly as important.

A few days after the Spring Festival, Cheerilee announced that she wanted to try something new for the school. It was a Saturday event where students would set up

educational exhibits and the school would host food and games: something Cheerilee was playfully calling “Learn and Play Day.” It was an event that had quickly grown, even Ponyville’s schools for older students were more than eager to join in.

It was because the event had grown so quickly that Cheerilee had called on Twilight, Ponyville’s number one organizer, to help get everything in order. Twilight had been working alongside the teacher for the past two weeks to plan the event while the students researched and built their educational exhibits. It had turned into quite a lot of work, but it was worth it. Nyx had only grown more excited as the “Learn and Play Day” drew closer.

Approaching the schoolhouse, Twilight walked around the brightly painted building to the open field behind it. There, Cheerilee was working with a few other volunteers to get everything set up. Tables, chairs, colorful strings of flags, and numerous signs decorated the grassy field behind the school, making it almost as inviting as the schoolhouse itself.

“Good morning, everypony,” Twilight greeted. She attempted to put on a smile as well, but it was ruined when she was gripped by another yawn.

“Not much for mornings?” Cheerilee teased as she walked over to meet Twilight.

Twilight covered her mouth with a hoof, and laughed through the end of her yawn. “Not usually, no.”

“Well, thank you for coming out and giving everything one final check-over before the big day. Everypony seems so excited! This little weekend may turn into a new Ponyville tradition if it goes off right.”

“Well, let’s get through today first before we start planning for next year,” Twilight said. She opened her saddlebags and floated a checklist with a pencil into the air. “Now, let’s see. Are the exhibit tables set up?”

Cheerilee nodded and pointed a hoof to the area just behind the school. Several circular tables had been borrowed or rented from a number of ponies around Ponyville. Each one was covered in a white tablecloth and bore a pair of numbered signs. “Thirty round tables with tablecloths and sixty exhibit signs on yellow paper.”

“Perfect,” Twilight replied. She made a check on her list and started to look around the area the pair were standing in. “What about food?”

“We’re just about to finish setting up the tables for our little food court. Big Macintosh has brought in a food cart from Sweet Apple Acres. That just leaves Danver and the Cakes, who need to arrive and set up their food stalls.”

“Danver?”

“His family owns and runs the carrot farm next to Sweet Apple Acres.”

“Oh,” Twilight said before she lifted a hoof to her mouth to mask a giggle. “Let me guess: Danver is a type of carrot.”

“You’d be guessing right,” Cheerilee replied with a chuckle of her own.

“Then I’d say the food and eating area is all taken care of,” Twilight commented before she checked the next item of her list. “That just leaves the afternoon activities. Still, I doubt we’ll be able to mark that one off just yet.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Well, we put Rainbow Dash in charge of that. She’s reliable, but she likes to procrastinate. I wouldn’t be surprised if she was still back at home, snoozing away the morning.”

“Boo!”

Twilight quickly turned her head to the side, a little startled by the sudden addition of a third voice to the conversation. It was only then that she noticed the sky blue pegasus hovering in the air near her head. Cheerilee had to cover her mouth to keep herself from laughing as Rainbow Dash looked at Twilight with a smug grin.

“Back at home snoozing, huh?”

Twilight laughed nervously, forcing a smile. “Rainbow Dash, I... didn’t expect you to be here this early.”

Rainbow chuckled, landed next to Twilight, and folded her wings. “Relax, Twi. On any normal day, I *would* still be asleep, but this is just going to be too awesome! I just had to get up early, not only to clear the skies, but to make sure all my cool sporting events were ready.”

“What do you have planned, anyway?” Cheerilee asked. “I’ve been too busy making sure the student exhibits would be ready to keep up with everything else that’s been going on.”

“Oh, tons of stuff!” Rainbow Dash energetically answered. “When I was at Twilight’s library last week, I checked out a book with a whole bunch of killer ideas and now I’ve got something for everypony. Got things for just the kids to do, things for kids to do with their parents, and things for the parents to do so the kids can cheer them on. We’ve got games for pegasi, for earth ponies, for unicorns, and games where you get to mix it up. It is all just going to be *so awesome!*”

“Wow, that... sounds like a lot,” Twilight said, unable to hide how impressed she was.

Rainbow Dash smiled smugly, lifted a hoof, and brushed it against her chest. “Yeah, I pretty much outdid myself.”

“And, since we got so many ponies to volunteer their time and things for free,” Cheerilee began as she reached under a nearby table and pulled out a box. “I actually was able to spend the last of the budget on some prizes for your—”

Cheerilee didn’t even get to finish what she was saying. Without a word of warning, Rainbow zipped forward, stuck her head in the box, and began to rummage around inside with a gleeful squeal. “You got *prizes!*?”

“Uh... yes, yes I did.”

“And good prizes too,” Dash commented with her head still inside the box. “There’s some choice stuff in here. Oh cool, yo-yos!” At that, Rainbow Dash pulled her head out of the box with a yo-yo pinched gingerly in her teeth. In a flash, its string was around her hoof. Then, with an expert flick, Rainbow Dash sent the little plastic disk up and down the string in a smooth motion. Another flick and the yo-yo was in a simple sleeper trick, where it stayed at the bottom of the string but continued to spin.

“Heh, I used to be pretty good at this,” Dash bragged as she flicked her hoof to bring the yo-yo out of the sleeper trick. Rainbow Dash then gave the toy a few more flicks to build speed before she wrapped some of the string around her hooves, resulting in the yo-yo swinging back and forth inside a triangle of string. “This here is called ‘The Pendulum.’”

“That’s great, Rainbow, but shouldn’t you leave the prizes for the ponies who actually win them?” Twilight asked.

“Sure, just one more trick. You heard of ‘Around the World?’ Well, this is my super, double loop, around the sun trick.” With that, Dash gave the yo-yo a firm flick, jumped into the air, and used her wings to spin herself. A few seconds after starting the trick Dash flopped to the ground, hog-tied in the string.

Cheerilee and Twilight couldn’t help but burst out laughing as Dash struggled to free herself from the string. “Oh wow, Rainbow Dash, that was *really* something,” Twilight deadpanned.

“Yeah yeah— laugh it up. Now, are you two going to just stand there giggling, or are you going to lend me a hoof?”

• • •

The Learn and Play Day was in full swing the moment it opened to the public at nine o’clock that morning. The students had set up their exhibits, and each exhibit had been done on a different topic of interest. There were exhibits about farming techniques, about history, about how weather was made, and dozens of other topics that usually caught the interest of school age fillies and colts.

That was the “Learn” part of the “Learn and Play Day.” The students learned more about subjects they wanted to know more about, and some parents and other ponies in the community had a chance to learn as well.

“Isn’t this so super-duper fun, Fluttershy?!” Pinkie Pie chirped as she bounced along between the student exhibits while Fluttershy walked calmly beside her. “I mean, I knew cotton candy was good, and I knew how to make it. Still, I never knew how little pieces of sugar turned into stringy sweet goodness.”

Fluttershy nodded. “Yes, that was a really interesting display.”

“Which one’s been your favorite so far?” Pinkie asked excitedly.

Fluttershy shrank slightly under Pinkie’s undivided attention. “Well... um... I liked the one about how caterpillars become butterflies. I already knew about that, but the student did such a wonderful job explaining it.”

“All the kids did a really good job,” Pinkie Pie agreed before her eyes lit up. “Oh, I wish I could have an exhibit! I’d do one about parties!”

Fluttershy blinked. “Parties?”

“Parties aren’t as easy as everypony thinks. There are lots of rules I have to follow for my parties: the Pinkie Pie Party rules,” Pinkie stated matter-of-factly.

“Really?” Fluttershy asked in disbelief as the pair continued to move through the crowd. “I would never imagine you actually had rules for your parties.”

“Of course! How do you think they turn out so good? I have rules I can never ever ever ever never ever break. And, as long as anypony else doesn’t break them, the party is a guaranteed success. Like, rule number one: Every party must have decorations, or rule number one hundred and fifty-seven: If the ratio of fillies and colts to mares and stallions is at least two to one, there must be a piñata.”

Fluttershy couldn’t help but tilt her head to one side and arch an eyebrow. “Rule number one hundred and fifty-seven? How many rules are there?”

“Three hundred and seventy-six,” Pinkie replied nonchalantly.

“Oh... oh my... that’s... that’s a lot of rules.”

For a brief moment Pinkie Pie stopped bouncing, and her usually happy expression turned stone-cold. “Hey, throwing parties is my special talent, and it is serious business to make them seriously fun.” Pinkie Pie’s normal, cheerful demeanor returned a moment later. She then scanned the exhibits, looking for the next one she and Fluttershy would visit. “Oh! Hey, there’s Nyx’s booth! We should go see what she did.”

Pinkie Pie bounced ahead, forcing Fluttershy to break into a quick trot just to catch up. A group of stallions and mares were just stepping away from Nyx’s booth when the pair of mares came up.

“Hi Fluttershy!” Nyx said with a wide smile, one that withered a little as Nyx turned to look at the, at times, overwhelming pony that stood beside Fluttershy. “H-hi, Pinkie Pie.”

“Hey there, Nyx,” Pinkie Pie chirped. “What super cool, amazing thing did you do for your exhibit? Give us the whole rundown.”

“If you don’t mind, that is,” Fluttershy added, trying to curb Pinkie Pie’s enthusiasm.

“O-of course not, it’s—” Nyx stated, before she coughed into her hoof to clear her throat. “I chose to make my exhibit about transfiguration magic.”

Pinkie tilted her head, confused but still excited. “Transfigurwhatiewhat?”

“Transfiguration. It’s the magic that focuses on turning one thing into another.” Nyx pointed to a number of pictures she had set up on the cardboard backdrop of her exhibit. “Transfiguration magic can be used to transform practically anything into anything else. Like a stick into a fancy walking cane. Or a stone into a hat. Or even an apple into a horse-drawn carriage.

“Transfiguration magic is only limited by the skill and the ability of the pony casting it. Skilled unicorns, such as Rarity, can use transfiguration to turn fabric into a dress, and Twilight Sparkle is able to transfigure four common mice into four full-sized horses.”

“Hey, I remember that!” Pinkie Pie said with a giggle. “They didn’t exactly *look* like horses.”

Nyx stammered a moment, trying to recover from Pinkie Pie’s interruption. “A-and that leads me to the next part of my exhibit: the limits of transfiguration magic. Transfiguration magic is always temporary. Everything transfigured will eventually turn back to normal. This is why anything that needs to be permanent is still hoofmade, like houses and clothing. Otherwise there wouldn’t be a need for construction workers, carpenters, or any other ponies who make things.

“And, as a final part of my exhibit, I-I would like to provide a live demonstration of transfiguration magic.”

Nyx pointed to the rock sitting on the table at the center of her exhibit. She then shut her eyes, her horn and the rock beginning to glow. Her face contorted with concentration, and she puffed out her cheeks as she strained her young magic. After a few tense moments, a small pop and flash of light enveloped the rock before it was turned into a potted flower.

“Oooooooooooooo,” Pinkie Pie said before she leaned in and sniffed the flower. “It even *smells* real.”

Nyx smiled bashfully. “So, um, any questions?”

“No, none at all. That was *very* well done, Nyx. You should be—” Fluttershy began to praise, only for Pinkie Pie to put her head in between Fluttershy and Nyx.

“Oh, I got a question! Have you tried changing anything bigger than a rock? Oh, do you take requests?”

“W-well... no,” Nyx stammered, “b-but I guess I could try. Um... what did you have in mind?”

“Turn that grass into cotton candy!” Pinkie Pie said ecstatically. “No, wait, turn that into a candy apple! No, wait, you should turn that stallion’s bowtie into a squirty flower! Oh! No no no no! I know what you should try to do!” Pinkie Pie was grinning ear to ear as she pointed a hoof at Fluttershy. “Turn her into a tree!”

Nyx’s head lowered and her ears flattened as she took a step back from Pinkie Pie and her manic behavior. “A... a tree?”

“Yeah! Turn Fluttershy into a tree.”

“W-why would you want me to be a tree?” asked Fluttershy, looking incredulously at Pinkie Pie for her odd suggestion.

“Because, this one time, on a train, I got talking with Rainbow Dash and Twilight, and, for some strange reason, Rainbow thought you were a tree, even though you obviously aren’t. But then you said you’d *like* to be a tree,” Pinkie Pie answered Fluttershy before turning her excited blue eyes back to Nyx. “So, can you turn her into a tree?”

“I don’t know.”

“Oh, come on, just give it a try. You never know unless you try,” Pinkie Pie encouraged.

“But—” Nyx tried to protest.

“Come on, Fluttershy doesn’t mind, do you, Fluttershy?”

Fluttershy scratched at the ground, drawing anxious circles in the dirt. “Well... um, you do seem really excited so I guess I don’t mind, but are you sure it’s safe?”

“We saw Twilight turn mice into horses, and she wouldn’t put your animal friends in danger.”

“Well... I guess that’s true,” Fluttershy admitted, “and I guess it would be kind of nice to see what it’s like.”

“Yay!” Pinkie Pie cheered before she looked back to Nyx. “So, come on, let’s see some of that unicorn magic!”

Nyx took a step back, shying away. “Pinkie Pie, I-I d-don’t know... I don’t think Twilight—”

“Aw, come on, please? It will be so totally fun!” Pinkie Pie pressured as she bounced with excitement.

“Pinkie Pie, maybe—” Fluttershy began, trying to tell her friend she was being a little overbearing. However, she didn’t get to finish her sentence as she felt magic wrapping around her. Nyx had shut her eyes and focused her magic into her horn. She was making an attempt at the transfiguration spell, if only to appease the energetic Pinkie Pie.

• • •

“Boy, some of these booths are really cool!” Rainbow Dash said, she and Twilight trotting amongst them. “I mean, did you *see* what Scootaloo did? She actually explained how my Sonic Rainboom works! I didn’t even know how it worked, besides the fact that I was breaking the sound barrier.”

“Yes, all the students have really done—” Twilight began, only to be silenced as the ground shook and a loud noise cut through the air.

ssssrrrr-RRRRUUUUGGGGHHHH-RRRUUUGGGGHHH-frgggggh...

Trrrsss-sssstthhh-sttssh...

“What was *that*?” Twilight asked once she had regained her footing from what had felt like a minor earthquake. When she got no answer, Twilight turned to look at Rainbow Dash, who was staring wide-eyed in the opposite direction. Following Rainbow’s gaze, Twilight nearly choked on the air in her own lungs at what she saw.

A young tree had appeared in the center of the exhibits. It was just barely as tall as the schoolhouse’s roof with a trunk about as wide as a metal bucket. It was a young weeping willow, and its long, hanging branches and leaves draped across nearby exhibits. The tree, however, was very unusual; its bark was a bright yellow and all of its leaves were a light, frilly pink.

“Oh my gosh! You did it!” Pinkie Pie’s voice burst out above the crowd, drawing Rainbow Dash and Twilight out of their stupor. The two quickly raced through the network of tables and shoved their way through the crowd to reach the tree. Pinkie Pie had climbed up into the branches, hanging off one of the few branches thick enough to support her weight.

“Pinkie Pie, where the hay did this tree come from?” Rainbow asked as she took flight to catch up to Pinkie Pie in the tree’s crown.

“It was *amazing!* Nyx did it with her magic!”

“Nyx did?” Twilight said as she looked up and down the tree in disbelief before her eyes narrowed. “Wait, where is Nyx?”

Twilight’s question was answered with a whimper that emanated from beneath one of the exhibit tables. When Twilight lifted the tablecloth, she found Nyx shaking like a leaf. Her head was in her hooves, and a few tears were pulling at her eyes.

“Nyx, what did you—” Twilight began, which only caused Nyx to break down.

“Tw-Twilight, I’m sorry! I-I didn’t want to, but Pinkie Pie kept asking and Fluttershy said it was okay and... and I’m sorry! I didn’t want to do it!”

“Do what?” Twilight asked, still unsure exactly what had happened.

“She turned Fluttershy into a tree!” Pinkie Pie cheered.

“Wait... wait, wait, wait, hold on a sec,” Dash began, pointing a hoof at the yellow and pink weeping willow. “This, this tree right here. *This* tree is Fluttershy.”

“Well *duh*. Of course it is! I just *told* you that Nyx turned Fluttershy into a tree. Seriously, Rainbow Dash, I’d think you’d be happy. After all, *you* were the one that thought Fluttershy was a tree when we were on our way to Appleloosa.”

“I did not! I was being sarcastic.”

Pinkie Pie flopped her head to one side. “You were being sarcastic?”

As Rainbow Dash tried again to explain to Pinkie Pie why she had once called Fluttershy a tree, Twilight began to glance nervously around the steadily growing crowd of ponies. They were all murmuring and whispering about Nyx.

Nyx picked up on the growing crowd as well and also the growing concern on Twilight’s face. With another whimper, she retreated further beneath the table. “I... I’m sorry.”

“No, no, Nyx, it’s okay,” Twilight whispered, trying to reassure her. “Just... uh... give me one moment.” At that Twilight turned to look at the tree, and she took in a deep breath to brace herself.

After the accident during her entrance exam to Celestia’s School for Gifted Unicorns, when she had turned her own parents into potted plants, one of the first spells Twilight had been taught by the princess was a transfiguration reversal spell. Yes, a transfiguration would wear off in time, but it was also important to be able to reverse a transfiguration at a moment’s notice.

Closing her eyes, Twilight began to focus and her horn started to shimmer as she called on her magic. The same glow began to engulf the tree, and Rainbow Dash grabbed Pinkie Pie out of the tree’s crown before Twilight completed her reversal spell. The crowd watched in awe, and the display even drew Nyx out from beneath the exhibit table.

Then, after a few tense moments, the tree imploded on itself. It compressed down to a single point, and with a magical pop, Fluttershy reappeared and dropped to the ground with a small thud.

“Fluttershy, are you okay?” Twilight asked. She quickly rushed up to help her friend back to her hooves.

“Ye... y-yes,” Fluttershy said, though both her voice and her knees were shaking. “I-I’m fine.”

Twilight breathed a sigh of relief. “Good. You were never in any real danger; transfiguration magic is inherently temporary. Still, from what my parents told me, being turned into a plant can be a bit disorienting.”

“Oh, what was it like? What was it like?” Pinkie Pie asked, bouncing in excitement.

“It was...” Fluttershy began, and then paused a moment to collect her thoughts. Not only did Pinkie Pie, Twilight, and Rainbow Dash lean in to hear the answer, but any ponies nearby who had witnessed the feat of magic leaned in as well. They were all eager to hear the first hoof account of what it was like to be a tree.

“Nice,” Fluttershy finally concluded, causing a groan of disappointment to sweep through the crowd. With a lackluster climax to the small spectacle, many of the ponies in the crowd turned to leave. Pinkie Pie, however, was unfazed.

“Oh, now I want to be turned into something! A rose bush... no, a balloon! No! Turn me into a cake, turn me into a—”

“Wow, would you look at that! It’s almost lunch time,” Twilight interrupted as she put a hoof against Pinkie Pie’s mouth and forced a smile. “Personally, I’m starved. Aren’t you starved, Nyx? Of course you are, you just turned a pony into a tree. That kind of thing must really work up an appetite. Why don’t we go get something to eat?”

Not even waiting for an answer, Twilight grabbed Nyx with a levitation spell and galloped out of the crowd of ponies. This left Pinkie Pie, Fluttershy, and Rainbow Dash standing dumbfounded in the wake of Twilight’s abrupt retreat.

“Aw, but I want to be a cake,” Pinkie Pie whined in disappointment. Yet, she then perked up, scratched at her neck, and began to look around, as if searching for something.

Dash took notice of her pink friend’s sudden shift in mood. “What’s wrong, Pinkie Pie?”

“Itchy neck, itchy neck,” she replied.

Dash arched an eyebrow. “Itchy neck... wait, like twitchy tail?”

Pinkie Pie shook her head and got to her hooves as she continued to search the crowd. “No, silly. Twitchy tail is when something is about to fall.”

“Then what does itchy neck mean?” Fluttershy asked.

“Somepony is watching us,” Pinkie Pie answered with a low hiss.

“Pinkie Pie, Fluttershy just got turned into a tree,” Dash pointed out before waving her hooves at the crowd. “*Everypony* was watching us.”

Pinkie shook her head violently from side to side. “No no no no no! That was an innocent ‘wow that’s a really cool thing that happened’ watching. No, itchy neck is a *bad* kind of watching.”

“What the hay is bad watching?” Rainbow Dash questioned.

“Ssssspyyying,” Pinkie Pie hissed quietly, “and the spy is... that way!”

Without another word Pinkie Pie was off. She galloped at a full sprint through the crowd, dodging ponies before she made a hard turn and disappeared behind a table. That left

Dash and Fluttershy to anxiously glance at one another, worried about what kind of chaos Pinkie Pie was about to unleash on the “Learn and Play Day.”

Twilight looked on in a daze as she and Nyx sat behind the apple stand where Big Macintosh was hard at work. Big Mac, in a simple but much appreciated act of kindness, had allowed the pair to hide from the crowds after the tree incident. Nyx was still visibly upset about what had happened. She was, however, slowly recovering, thanks in part to the red apple Twilight had purchased for her as lunch.

Yet, while Nyx was recovering, Twilight's state of panic only seemed to be growing. She kept up a calm facade for Nyx's sake, but that didn't stop her mind from spinning faster than Rainbow Dash could fly.

Dragon-shaped eyes could be hidden with glasses. Wings could be concealed with a vest. Magic was different. Nyx had almost blown her cover, and everypony at the Learn and Play Day had to be talking about what happened.

Sure, it was a feat of magic Twilight herself was capable of performing, especially with her years of practice and study under Princess Celestia. She had even accomplished a similar feat of magic when she was Nyx's age; she had turned her parents into potted plants. At that time, however, it was a manifestation of magic she didn't have full control of. Nyx, on the other hoof, had just turned a pony into a tree on purpose, something that should have been impossible for a normal filly.

A normal filly had turned a pony into a tree.

No, despite what Twilight told herself and everypony else, Nyx wasn't entirely normal. She was an alicorn, but not an alicorn like her old foalsitter, Cadance. No, Cadance was only of partial royal blood, and thus a mortal alicorn. Yes, Cadance's talent for love magic was unique. In terms of sheer power, however, Twilight herself was more magically gifted.

But Nyx... what if Nyx was different?

Doubts and fears, both old and new, began to rear their ugly heads in Twilight's mind. Nyx had come from the spell meant to resurrect Nightmare Moon, and Nightmare Moon was not a mortal alicorn. She was the jealousy-twisted form of Princess Luna. She was a member of the rare breed of immortal alicorns. Nightmare Moon had the power to move the moon in the sky, an act that had become impossible to even a team of unicorns after Discord's reign over the world.

And Nyx had been born of a spell meant to resurrect Nightmare Moon. She was likely just a young Nightmare Moon. Had she somehow inherited the gift of immortality? Would she, when she was older, be able to move the sun, the moon, or other heavenly bodies? Would she become as grand and regal as Princess Celestia?

The full weight of parenthood came crashing down on Twilight. What was she getting herself into? She was taking care of Nyx like a daughter, and she was barely an adult herself. That, and, for all she knew, she was raising a filly that could someday be like the princesses.

How long would she be able to keep the truth hidden? Dragon-shaped eyes and wings could be disguised, but that kind of magical power? How much longer would it be before Princess Celestia heard of this prodigy in Ponyville? Even if the hiccup with turning Fluttershy into a tree was a one-time thing, what would happen as Nyx got older?

Would Nyx's magic get more powerful? How big was she going to get? Princess Luna, after all, was only a little bigger than the average pony, but she was still the younger of the royal sisters. She could easily get bigger in time, and that made Twilight think of Princess Celestia. What if Nyx grew as tall as her, and what about her mane? What if Nyx's mane turned into a swirling cloud of indigo magic with stars like the real Nightmare Moon's mane?

What would ponies think when they realized what Nyx was? How long would it be before the torches and pitchforks came out? How long would it be before the royal guard was hunting Nyx down? How long would it be before Princess Celestia banished Nyx to the moon? Nyx didn't deserve any of that... well, unless she was, in fact, Nightmare Moon.

"Twilight, you okay? Yer lookin' mighty pale," a deep voice on Twilight's right commented.

Snapped out of her spiraling thoughts, Twilight looked up at Big Macintosh, who had a moment free from customers to check on her and Nyx. "Oh... yes, sorry... I'm fine. Just... just a little light-headed."

"You want another apple?" he offered kindly.

"No, no thank you," Twilight replied. "Uh, have they started the afternoon activities?"

"Don't think so, but I reckon it's going to start right soon," Big Macintosh answered. The straw in his mouth twitched as he spoke. "Saw Applejack and Apple Bloom headin' in that direction."

“Are... are we still going to that, even after what happened?” Nyx asked.

“Yes, we are,” Twilight replied, getting to her hooves. She knew Nyx was looking forward to the afternoon activities, but the greater and unspoken reason was that Twilight was worried about what would happen if they left. After what had happened, if she and Nyx left abruptly, her friends would wonder where they went. They would then come looking for her and Nyx, and they would expect an explanation.

In truth, Twilight feared leaving would only invite more unwanted attention. If they stayed, however, they could try and act like what had happened was nothing out of the ordinary. Twilight’s family, after all, was known for being magically gifted. She could just act like what Nyx did was perfectly normal. This was far from the truth, but Twilight didn’t have a lot of options. It was either stay at the school or retreat to the library, and the former appealed to her as the best option.

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“I know you’re here somewhere, Spy Spyerton McSpy,” Pinkie Pie whispered to herself while she surveyed the crowd of ponies moving about the lunch area and exhibits. Whoever had been watching her, Rainbow Dash, and Fluttershy had slipped away once, but now Pinkie Pie knew the spy was there, and she would find him or her.

Itchy neck...

Pinkie Pie sharply turned her head to the right and began looking across the crowd. Her vision eventually met with a pair of brown-gray eyes, eyes that were looking back at her. It took a moment for the other pony to realize Pinkie Pie was staring right at him, but, when he did, he ducked around a corner in the student exhibits.

Creaky knee...

“Gotcha,” Pinkie Pie whispered with a slightly devilish grin before breaking into a gallop. Creaky knee told her somepony was trying to get away from her, and the knee closest to the pony was the one that got creaky. It was what allowed Pinkie Pie to follow Rainbow Dash wherever she tried to hide, and, at the moment, it meant Pinkie Pie would be able to track the spy.

Rounding the same corner the spy had just disappeared behind, Pinkie Pie maneuvered through the crowd and student exhibits in hot pursuit. She caught small glances of somepony moving just ahead of her. The spy knew she was onto him, but that wouldn’t

stop her. Nopony went about being a nasty Spy Spyerton McSpy, especially around her and her friends.

Creaky knee front left... Creaky knee front right... Creaky knee front right... Creaky knee back left... Creaky knee front right... Twingy ankle...

Pinkie Pie put all four of her hooves to the ground, braked hard, and skidded to a stop. Twingy ankle... Now the spy wasn't running, the spy was *hiding*. Pinkie's eyes narrowed, and she found herself once more on the side of the food court that had been set up for the Learn and Play Day. There were ponies at almost every table, eating their lunches while other ponies mingled about, talking and laughing.

"Oh, he's *good*, but hide and seek is one of my favorite games," Pinkie Pie whispered, before taking in a deep breath and shouting, "**You hear that?! I'll find you!**"

All the ponies who had been eating their meals and chatting turned to look at Pinkie Pie, most quite startled by her sudden and very loud proclamation. Still, Pinkie Pie ignored the confused stares. She scanned the crowd and eventually spotted a pony sitting alone at a table who had not turned around. He was the only stallion that hadn't turned to look at her. Her eyes fell on the back of his slicked-back navy blue mane.

"Gotcha... again," Pinkie Pie hissed with a menacing grin. She moved across the food court slowly, stepping between ponies as she did her best to approach the spy from behind. She circled around chatting ponies, ducked behind a baby carriage, and even hid in a bundle of balloons. Each move brought her closer to her prey.

Yet, when she was within a few tables, a familiar face popped in front of her. "Oh, there you are, Pinkie Pie. I was worried when you ran off," Rainbow Dash said. "It's almost time to start the afternoon sports and games. You still want to help?"

Pinkie Pie glowered, trying to strain her neck and look around Rainbow Dash. "No... I... don't... because... I'm tracking... a pony and..." Eventually, she gently pushed the hovering Rainbow Dash out of the way, only to find the pony she had been creeping up on had vanished. Pinkie grunted in aggravation before turning an accusing glare onto Rainbow Dash. "And you let him get away!"

Dash put her hooves up defensively. "Whoa... sorry, I didn't mean to mess up... whatever it is you're doing."

Creaky knee front right...

Pinkie Pie's frown quickly turned back to a sinister smile. She turned her head in the direction of her creaky knee. "Don't worry about it, Dashie; now the spy is trying to run away from me again, and nopony can run away from Pinkamena Diane Pie."

Dash cocked an eyebrow. "Wait, you're still chasing this imaginary spy?"

Pinkie Pie offered no answer. Instead, she broke into a gallop, leaving Rainbow Dash behind as she charged across the food court. She caught sight of a navy-blue tail ducking behind the front of the schoolhouse, and she broke into a full sprint to catch up. She leaped around the corner but saw no sign of the mysterious pony.

Creaky knee front right... Twingy ankle...

Pinkie Pie smiled triumphantly as she put a hoof on the schoolhouse's front door. "Oh, you silly spy. You thought you could hide in the schoolhouse, but nopony can hide from me." She pushed on the doors, throwing them open with a resounding crash. She then somersaulted once, jumped up onto her back hooves and pulled off a few karate poses as she shouted into the dark.

"Come out now, Spy Spyerton McSpy! I know you're in here, and you're going to tell me why you're being a big meanie and spying on me and my friends!"

"Enough of this," a voice snarled from the back of the room. Pinkie Pie turned, her eyes meeting the same brown-gray eyes she had seen among the exhibits. Those eyes closed, then reopened with brilliant, turquoise irises.

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"All right, ponies!" Rainbow Dash hollered over the remaining crowd. "It's time for the last event of the day: the Tug of War Tournament!"

The parents and other ponies who had come out for the Learn and Play Day cheered, having formed a sizable audience around three tug of war ropes.

"So, here's how it's going to happen. There are teams of four, and each team has been placed on our tournament roster. There are also three age groups, and teams will fit into the age group of its oldest member. The last team standing in each age group will get prizes, and then we'll let the top teams tug it out to see which one is the Tug of War Champion of the day.

"Now teams, report to the rope you were assigned to and let's get tugging."

The fillies and colts, who had been watching near the front of the audience, all cheered and separated themselves into their age groups. At the red rope, for the youngest age group, Rarity stood with a clipboard floating gently in front of her. Cheerilee was moderating the middle age group, and Applejack was keeping the oldest of the school age ponies in line.

“All right,” Rarity said in a singsong manner above the little fillies and colts that had crowded around her. “First up are the Cutie Mark Crusaders versus the Carrot Clan. Those two teams, get to your sides of the rope, and everypony else, please stand back.”

The young ponies followed her directions. On one side of the rope were three colts and a filly, all of them with some form of a carrot themed cutie mark, who took up the rope in their teeth. On the other side of the rope, the four fillies wearing bright red Cutie Mark Crusader capes got in line. Sweetie Belle was in the front, Scootaloo behind her. Nyx, who had been officially inducted into the Cutie Mark Crusaders just after the Spring Festival, took up the third position. Apple Bloom was at the end, acting as the team’s anchor.

“Now, while *I* suggested that having a rope to pull across a line would have been much cleaner and safer, Rainbow Dash saw fit to use mud pits; something about it being easier to keep track of winners,” Rarity mused as she looked over the colts and fillies she would be refereeing.

“Now, the goal is to pull all members of the other team into the mud pit. The rules are simple: if your team as whole lets go of the rope or gets pulled into the mud, then you lose. Magic is not allowed, and pegasi must keep their hooves on the ground. Everypony understand?” Rarity asked. The two teams nodded their heads in agreement, already starting to pull the rope taut between them.

“And remember, there is a wash station set up if you lose, but... Well, everypony just try their best and have fun, okay?”

The two teams both stared at each other, ready to begin, and Rarity didn’t waste another moment.

“Ready... Set... Go!”

With tightened jaws, the two teams pulled on the rope and began their struggle to drag the other team into the mud pit. For a moment, the Carrot Clan team had the advantage and managed to pull the Crusaders a few steps forward. Yet, the tide soon

turned when Scootaloo began flapping her wings while keeping her hooves on the ground. The added force let the Crusaders regain their footing, and, soon, with a few hard pulls and four splashes from the other team, they had won the first match.

“Yay! Cutie Mark Crusader Tug of War Champions!” the four cheered in unison before they stepped away from the rope and let the next two teams approach.

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The Cutie Mark Crusaders won two more rounds before they reached their age group’s final match, and the Crusaders couldn’t be happier with whom they were facing.

Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon had gotten two of the strongest colts in the age group on their team, and they reached the final match by relying on those two colts. Still, the Crusaders weren’t about to lose to the fillies who regularly called them blank flanks, and Nyx still had a score to settle with Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon for the Everfree Forest prank.

“Ready... Set... Go!” Rarity shouted, and the two teams pulled the rope taut. Almost immediately the two colts on the other team began dragging the Cutie Mark Crusaders forward. They were colts just barely in the youngest age group, which gave them a noticeable physical advantage over the Crusaders.

“Come on!” Apple Bloom grunted through the rope in her mouth. “Pull!”

“We are!” Scootaloo grunted back. “But our hooves are slipping!”

“Looks like you four are going to be losers *and* blank flanks,” Diamond Tiara heckled with a laugh. She even took her mouth off the rope since the two older colts on her team were doing all the work.

“We are not losers!” Sweetie Belle shouted. She dug her hooves into the ground and halted her team’s slow defeat just before she would have fallen into the waiting mud pit.

“Everypony,” Apple Bloom said through the rope in her teeth, “pull hard together. Ready... Pull!”

The four Crusaders put their weight into their unified tug and managed to regain some ground, each taking a single step back. Once more, Apple Bloom called “Ready... Pull!” and again the fillies were able to reclaim a single step, slowly dragging back the older stallions.

For the first time in the tournament, Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon had to do what little they could to help the two colts on their team. It was enough to stop the Crusaders, but not before they had regained the ground they'd lost.

It was then that the two teams entered into a tense stalemate. Neither team was able to gain an inch. Even Apple Bloom's tactic was soon rendered useless. Diamond Tiara's team had figured out the counter-strategy of pulling on the rope whenever Apple Bloom shouted "pull". Soon, both teams broke down to just pulling on the rope with all their strength, hoping to win the competition through brute force alone. That strategy, however, began to take its toll.

"My jaw is starting to hurt," Sweetie Belle mumbled out.

"Just hold on, we can win this," Scootaloo said, trying to pep up the team as she flapped her wings as quickly as she could.

Apple Bloom nodded, huffing through her nostrils. "Yeah, we just got to keep pullin'."

"No, we don't," Nyx grunted as the Crusaders began to lose a little of their hard earned ground.

"You better not be sayin' we should give up, Nyx!" Apple Bloom grumbled.

"I'm not," Nyx stressed. "I'm just saying we can't overpower them. We have to out-think them."

"And just how are we supposed to do that?" Apple Bloom asked.

"Hey, I think I got an idea!" Scootaloo called out, before she began whispering. Her voice was just loud enough for her friends to hear, and soon her idea had been formed into a plan by Apple Bloom. It was a gamble, but the four fillies got ready as Apple Bloom began to count.

"Three... Two... One... PULL!" Apple Bloom shouted through the rope in her teeth. Diamond Tiara's team, hearing this, quickly pulled, trying to counteract the rallied tug the Crusaders were about to perform. The Crusaders, however, did not pull back. They instead let Diamond Tiara's team have some slack.

The sudden lack of opposition threw Diamond Tiara's team off, causing the colt they had in the back to trip over his own hooves and fall to the side. This was what the Crusaders had been hoping for. Apple Bloom shouted out another "PULL," and with one of the two

big colts off his hooves, the four fillies were able to pull the rest of team into the mud puddle with a resounding splash.

“Match over; the Cutie Mark Crusaders win!” Rarity sung out to the cheers of the crowd.

“No!” Diamond Tiara cried out in anger as she tried to stand up in the mud pit. “We were supposed to win!” Diamond Tiara then tried to stomp her hoof in protest, but the slick ground beneath her caused her to lose her balance and fall back into the mud.

Diamond Tiara’s minor tantrum, however, only made the victory sweeter for the four Cutie Mark Crusaders. The fillies shared a victory high-hoof and went to where Rainbow Dash was hovering so they could wait for the other age groups to finish.

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“All right, it’s time for our awesome championship round,” Dash announced to the applause of the crowd. The crowd had gathered around the one remaining tug of war rope, which Rainbow Dash was hovering above. “It’s going to be between the Cutie Mark Crusaders and The Boulders.”

Apple Bloom, Sweetie Belle, Scootaloo, and Nyx all looked wide-eyed at their opponents. By some luck they had managed to beat the middle age group champion team, but now the four little fillies were facing The Boulders, a team of four colts that were very close to being considered young adults.

“Now, since one team has an obvious advantage,” Dash said, motioning towards the four earth ponies of the other team, “we’ll allow the Cutie Mark Crusaders to have an advantage as well: They can either add another pony to their team, have one unicorn be allowed to use magic, or they can pick a pony from The Boulders to sit out.”

The Crusaders huddled up, and Apple Bloom quickly offered her opinion. “We should ask my big sister to join our team. No! Wait! We should ask Big Macintosh to be on our team! I bet he could beat those four big ponies all by himself.”

“No, I want to beat these colts ourselves,” Scootaloo argued, taking a moment to poke her head out of the huddle and glared at the other team before looking back at her friends. “I say we take the biggest and make him sit out. It’ll be four versus three.”

“What about magic?” asked Sweetie Belle, “I’m not that good, but Nyx knows some magic. She turned Fluttershy into a tree!”

“You heard about that?” Nyx asked, a bit embarrassed.

“Hard not to, considering everypony here saw the tree,” Scootaloo pointed out. “Still, I think Sweetie Belle is right.”

“I don’t know,” Apple Bloom said hesitantly. “Nyx, do you think you have enough magic?”

“I... I don’t know... Maybe, I guess.”

“Come on, Apple Bloom, just think about it,” Scootaloo said as she nudged her friend. “The four of us beating the four of them without any help. It would be so awesome.”

Apple Bloom smiled a little. “Well, I guess it would be cool, and it’s not like we’ve got anything to lose. We already beat Diamond Tiara, and seeing her fall in the mud was all I really wanted to get out of this here tug of war tournament.”

“All right, it’s decided. Nyx will be our anchor and use her magic,” Scootaloo concluded. The Crusaders ended their huddle and told Rainbow Dash their choice. Rainbow echoed their choice to the crowd, and most of the ponies cheered at the team’s courage, though Twilight looked with a forced, anxious smile.

The four nearly full-grown stallions on the other team took the rope in their mouths, smiling like they had already won. Sweetie Belle, Apple Bloom, and Scootaloo took the rope up as well, biting down hard as they prepared for what was going to be a very hard match to win. Nyx stood at the end, gripping the very end of the rope with her teeth. Her horn was also glowing as she used her magic to try and keep the team’s hooves from sliding.

“All right, is everypony ready?” Dash asked, looking at the two teams. They all gave a nod, and with a smile, Dash lifted a hoof high into the air.

“Ready... Set... GO!”

SPLASH!

Sweetie Belle was down within moments of the match starting. All it had taken was a sound tug from the big stallions on the other team to send her falling into the mud pit. The rest of the Crusaders tried their best to pull back, but from the first moment, the match had become one-sided. Even with Nyx doing her best to use her magic, The Boulders were able to drag them forward with little difficulty.

SPLASH!

Scotaloo crashed face-first into the mud pit right beside Sweetie Belle, who had just barely managed to get out of the way.

SPLASH!

The older colts were grinning, finding some perverse joy in sending four little fillies crashing into the mud. With that third splash Apple Bloom had joined Scotaloo and Sweetie Belle, leaving Nyx alone on the rope. Her hooves were sliding across the ground, the other team dragging her closer and closer to the mud. Nyx, for a moment, considered just letting go and giving up. After all, what hope did she have to beat the four big colts?

“Come on, Nyx!” Apple Bloom called out as she clambered out of the mud. “Use more magic!”

“Yeah, don’t let them beat you!” Scotaloo shouted. She also stomped her hoof, but soon regretted the action as it splashed more mud onto her face.

Nyx began to panic. With her friends cheering, letting go of the rope wasn’t an option. Still, how in Equestria was she supposed to beat four colts by herself? They were bigger, stronger, the only advantage she had was her magic, and it hadn’t been enough to keep Sweetie Belle, Scotaloo, and Apple Bloom out of the mud. She just didn’t know what to do.

“Come on, dig your hooves in and pull!” Apple Bloom shouted as Nyx was pulled inch by inch closer to the mud pit.

Nyx whined and tried to do that, but her hooves were being pulled across the ground. She couldn’t pull if she couldn’t get a grip on the ground, and she didn’t have the strength to pull the older colts even if she managed to get traction. That was what she needed, traction and strength! Maybe she could do that with her magic. One of the spells would need to be something she could cast and forget, but maybe she could pull that off.

The mud pit was drawing closer. The older colts on the other team were all wearing smiles, playing with Nyx as they inched her closer and closer to the pit. Most of the crowd had given up cheering and was now just waiting for the inevitable. The only ones still cheering were supporters of The Boulders. The only cheers that still rang out for Nyx came from Sweetie Belle, Scotaloo, and Apple Bloom.

Nyx tightened her grip on the rope, despite the tightness already present in her jaw. Traction and strength, that's what she needed. First, traction, to stop the other team from pulling her closer to the pit. Shutting her eyes, Nyx cast her first spell with a flash from her horn, and a moment later her hooves became rooted to the ground. This stopped The Boulders from pulling her closer to the mud pit, but stopping them alone wouldn't win the match.

With the first spell cast, Nyx began to pour the mystical energy into herself, bending the magic from her horn down into her legs and jaw. Nyx could feel it working almost immediately; she could feel herself getting just a little stronger as her body became fueled by the magic. Her jaw no longer hurt, and, with her grip on the rope secured, she lifted one of her hooves and revealed the effect of her first spell. She had transfigured some of the dirt on the ground into horseshoes with long cleats, which kept her from sliding.

With magic coursing through her body and her eyes shut tight in concentration, Nyx took a step back and began to pull. The rope gave a little, just enough to let Nyx know that what she was doing was working and all she needed was more magic.

Calling on her horn, Nyx poured as much magic as she could into her little body, and she felt it giving her strength. It also made her mane and tail tingle, as if they had fallen asleep, but she couldn't focus on that. She had to focus on her legs, taking one step after another. She pulled with her neck, then used the slack to take a step. Slack, step. Slack, step. She kept up that pattern, repeating it over and over until her ears were greeted with four sounds.

SPLASH... SPLASH... SPLASH... SPLASH...

The moment Nyx heard the fourth splash, she dropped the rope, released the magic, and collapsed on the ground as she panted heavily. The magic she had poured into her body began to evaporate, and she began to feel sore all over, her jaw especially tender. Still, despite her exhaustion, Nyx smiled.

She had beat the big ponies all by herself, and maybe now everypony wouldn't just think of her as the coward, the crybaby, or the teacher's pet. Maybe they would start cheering her and wouldn't think she was a loser anymore. She'd get a first place ribbon, just like her friends, and...

It was then Nyx noticed the crowd's silence.

Crawling back to her hooves and looking around, Nyx was surprised to see that everypony was staring at her, many with their jaws hanging open. Nyx even caught sight of Twilight, and she looked like she was about to faint. Her eyes kept darting around the crowd, as if she was expecting something bad to happen.

The unpleasant silence sank into Nyx, and she wondered if she had done something wrong. She shrank back, trying to make herself as small as possible. Everypony was staring at her—just staring—and she didn't like it. She looked around desperately, hoping to find somepony, anypony, who was actually happy she had won the match.

Thankfully, Nyx found three such ponies: her friends. While it had taken them a moment to process what she had done, the realization soon hit the other Cutie Mark Crusaders. The three other fillies raced towards their friend with wide, excited grins on their faces.

Scotaloo, the first to reach Nyx, cheered at the top of her lungs. "That was awesome!"

"You did it! You did it!" Sweetie Belle added as she bounced excitedly up and down.

The cheers and admiration from the Crusaders snapped the crowd out of their stupor. Some of them applauded and offered sincere cheers while others just stomped their hooves on the ground to be polite. The rest didn't applaud at all and instead whispered to each other quietly.

Amongst those who applauded was one pony with brown-gray eyes and a blue, slicked back mane. He applauded with a gentle smile on his lips while his eyes remained focused on Nyx.

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"Boy, that was *crazy*," Rainbow Dash stated as she fluttered through the air with a box in her hooves. "I mean, can you believe little Nyx beating that whole team of older colts? I didn't think the crybaby had it in her. What are the chances?"

"It really was amazing," Fluttershy replied as she walked along the ground with a box on her back. The pair was taking some of the leftover prizes and other things into the schoolhouse as part of the effort to clean up the Learn and Play Day. "I wonder if everypony in Twilight's family is that good at magic."

"I wouldn't be surprised," Rainbow Dash replied as she put a hoof on the door. "I mean, Shining Armor can cast that huge shield spell, and Twilight is like a one unicorn army with all the magic she can do." She entered the darkened schoolhouse, but, before she

could get two feet into the door, she ran into something. Caught off guard by the sudden collision, Rainbow quickly flew backwards and tried to register what she had run into.

“Pi... Pinkie Pie?” Rainbow Dash mumbled. She and Fluttershy set the boxes they were carrying down and moved around in front of Pinkie Pie. Pinkie was standing still as a statue on her hind legs in a karate pose, and her eyes were focused on a point on the far side of the room.

“Is... is she even breathing?” Dash asked, noticing how very still Pinkie Pie was standing.

Fluttershy looked Pinkie Pie over, only for a panicked frown to form on her face. “Oh no! She’s been *Stared!*”

Rainbow Dash couldn’t help but cock an eyebrow as she waved a hoof in front of Pinkie Pie’s eyes. “What does that mean?”

Fluttershy turned her gaze on Dash, and motioned towards her own eyes. “You know, *The Stare.*”

“Ooooooh, yeah,” Rainbow Dash replied, “It’s what you do when you want to make some animal do something, right?”

“Well, not *exactly*... but... yeah, sort of,” Fluttershy replied as she gingerly poked Pinkie Pie’s hoof. “Anyway... sometimes, when I use *The Stare* I can... well... I can make the pony or animal I’m staring at just freeze up.”

“Wait, so you did this to Pinkie Pie?”

“Oh no, it wasn’t me,” Fluttershy quickly clarified. “I haven’t done this to anypony in years. It was only when I first found out I had *The Stare* that I accidentally did this once in a while, but I’d never do it on purpose to another pony. No, some other pony did this.”

Rainbow Dash turned her attention back to Pinkie Pie. “Okay, but how do we fix it?”

“Well, um... I usually just throw a bit of water on them, but anything that gives the pony a little shock is enough to snap them out of it.”

“Oh, I got an idea,” Rainbow Dash said, hovering up near Pinkie Pie’s ear and beginning to whisper. “Hey Pinkie Pie! Twilight just got a letter from Princess Celestia. She wants *you* to plan the next Grand Galloping Gala.”

Pinkie Pie's eyes, which had been narrow and transfixed on a spot on the far side of the room, grew wide, and, in a flash, Pinkie was bouncing off the walls and ceiling, her giggles filling the air.

"Oh, that is so super-duper *amazing!* I am going to make it the best party *ever!* I'll make it the most amazing incredible tremendous wonderfully terrifically humongous fun party in all of Equestria! *Oh the Grand Galloping Gala will be the greatest party. Oh the Grand Galloping Gala will be the greatest party. Hip hip, Hooray, It will be the best, all thanks to me, to Pinkie!*"

"Yeah, Pinkie Pie," Rainbow said, wearing an apologetic grin. "About that... I was lying."

Pinkie Pie froze up mid-jump, defying gravity for a moment before dropping down to the ground. She then trotted over to Dash with a cold glare in her eyes. "That was *not* an okay prank, Rainbow Dash."

Rainbow rubbed the back of her neck while she glanced away, unable to meet Pinkie Pie's disappointed stare. "Yeah, I'm sorry about that, but it wasn't meant to be a prank. I needed to say something to snap you out of being *Stared.*"

Pinkie's expression shifted from irritation to confusion. "Wait, I was *Stared?*"

Rainbow looked back at Pinkie Pie, since it was now her turn to be confused. "You actually know what that is?"

"Oh... um, yes," Fluttershy admitted sheepishly. "When... well, when I first met Pinkie Pie she kind of, well... scared me and, I didn't mean to but... I used The Stare on her, and she got *Stared.*"

"It was the last time she ever did it," Pinkie Pie pointed out, "unless you count today."

"But Pinkie, I wasn't the one who used The Stare on you," Fluttershy corrected.

"You weren't? But then who..." Pinkie Pie began, only for her eyes to narrow. She turned to look at the far end of the room, intending to glare at a pony that was no longer there. "It was him!"

"Him who, Pinkie?" Dash asked.

"The spy!" she seethed as she trotted across the room and pointed to a spot on the floor. "I followed him in here, and he was standing right here. Right here! I had him cornered,

but then he opened his eyes, and they had changed color. The next thing I remember is you telling me Princess Celestia wants me to plan the next Grand Galloping Gala, which, by the way, is *still* a mean prank, Rainbow Dash!”

“Look, Pinkie, I said I was sorry!” Dash countered as she flew over to her friend. “But, I guess you weren’t kidding about the spy. I mean, it’s not like an imaginary pony could have *Stared* you.”

“But why would anypony spy on us?” Fluttershy asked as she made her way across the room, walking between the desks.

“I don’t know, but I’m going to find out,” Pinkie Pie assured firmly, only for her normal, happy, bubbly attitude to return a moment later as she bounced towards the schoolhouse door. “Well, after all the fun afternoon games; I would hate to miss the six-legged race and watching the tug of war. Oh, and I just have to play Pin the Tail on the Pony!”

“Uh, Pinkie Pie, you *did* miss all that.”

Pinkie Pie froze up half way through the schoolhouse door before she spun around on her hooves to look at the two pegasi. “**What!?**”

“Yeah, you’ve been in here all afternoon,” Rainbow Dash informed her friend. “We’re actually cleaning up right now.”

“Oh... oh now I *am* going to find that spy!” Pinkie Pie declared, her eyes dark with resolve. “Not just because he was being a Spy Spyerthon McSpy. No, now it’s *personal*. Nopony makes Pinkie Pie miss Pin the Tail on the Pony!”

Twilight walked back to the Golden Oaks Library with Nyx as the sun began to set beneath the western horizon. Rainbow Dash and a few others were still back at the school, cleaning up the Learn and Play Day. Normally, she'd be right there beside them. But after everything that had happened and all the time she had spent helping organize the event, Twilight was thankful she had opted out. The last thing she wanted to do at the moment was to linger around the school with Nyx.

Nyx, however, was oblivious to Twilight's concerns and as happy as she could be. She bounced alongside Twilight, proudly wearing her first place ribbon from the tug of war competition and her Cutie Mark Crusader cape. She used a kazoo, her chosen prize, to play a triumphant fanfare that only she knew the notes to. It was a sight that let Twilight relax a little.

She was happy that Nyx had enjoyed herself. The silence from the crowd after the last round had been deafening. Twilight could only imagine how bad Nyx would have felt if nopony had cheered for her. Thankfully Apple Bloom, Sweetie Belle, and Scootaloo broke the silence, letting Nyx laugh and enjoy her victory.

It was, however, only a small drop of happiness in a sea of fear and anxiety. While Nyx was unaware of what had happened, Twilight had been in the crowd, watching when she used her magic to win that last round of tug of war. It had started off simply enough, but then Nyx started using more and more magic. It was more magic than Twilight had ever seen from her, and there didn't appear to be an end in sight. And, as Nyx filled herself with it, things about her began to change.

Nyx's mane started shimmering at first, something that could have easily been waved off as a trick of the light. Yet, Nyx's mane and her tail continued to change, revealing the energy flowing through her body. They grew lighter and began to float and wave in the air as though Nyx was deep underwater. The shimmering of her hair also condensed, changing from what could be mistaken as glitter to defined, constant dots.

It was one of the worst things Twilight could imagine happening. Nyx's mane and tail had started to change into the night-blue mane and tail that Nightmare Moon was known for with everypony at Learn and Play Day watching.

The timely defeat of the other team kept Nyx's mane and tail from changing completely, but several unwanted thoughts still lingered in Twilight's mind. For the first time since the evening Nyx had called her "mom", Twilight doubted herself. Could Nyx really be

Nightmare Moon? She had always argued that Nyx just *looked* like the infamous Mare in the Moon, but, with those memories returning and her level of magic, was it possible she really was Nightmare Moon?

Part of Twilight's mind snapped at these thoughts, cracking a mental whip like an animal tamer driving a beast back into its cage. No, Nyx was *not* Nightmare Moon! The filly was too sweet, too well behaved, too... *sensitive* to ever be Nightmare Moon! She was happy. She played and laughed with her friends. Yes, Nightmare Moon laughed at times, but her laughter was maddening and born of scorn and thoughts of domination, not true happiness.

Yet, Twilight did know one thing: Nyx was showing signs of being an immortal alicorn. The filly that she was taking care of, that she was raising... There was a chance she would be alive for thousands of years with the power to do things that would boggle the minds of other ponies. Was she really up to that kind of responsibility, to shape the life of a filly that could live for the rest of time?

Nyx noticed how silent Twilight had been and stopped her happy kazoo playing before looking up with a hint of concern. "Twilight," she asked, "are you okay?"

"Huh, what?" Twilight turned her head down to face Nyx and put on a forced smile. "Oh, I, uh... Yes, I'm fine. Just tired, that's all. We've had a busy day. Now, why don't you run in and show Spike your ribbon? I'm just going to stay outside for a little while longer."

Nyx nodded, returned the kazoo to her mouth, and blew on it loudly as she ran inside. Twilight smiled at this, but it was a smile destined to wither and die.

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"Now, let's see. I went by the train station to pick up my fabric order. I've been to the grocery store and the jewelers. The only place left is the—"

"Augh!"

Rarity stopped in her tracks. She had been running errands in Ponyville, but they were now a trivial concern. Twilight had been uncommonly reclusive for a few days, ever since the Learn and Play Day. Now, that alone wasn't too abnormal, but the aggravated shout Rarity had just heard made her worry. Abandoning her planned route, she strode right up to the library's front door and knocked several times.

Twilight, however, didn't answer, and neither did Spike. Fearing the worst, Rarity opened the door herself and poked her head inside. "Twilight, darling, are you—"

The words died in Rarity's mouth as she stepped into the library. Crumpled up pieces of paper littered the floor, and Twilight was standing at her writing desk. Her mane and tail were ragged with stress, and another aggravated groan escaped her lips before she crumpled up the page she was working on. She tossed it over her shoulder, inadvertently hitting Rarity on the nose.

"Ow!"

Twilight quickly turned, and, for a moment, panicked like she had just been caught breaking the law. Her expression, however, quickly softened, and she breathed a sigh of relief. "Oh, Rarity, I thought you were Nyx."

"And just what are you doing that you don't want Nyx to know about?"

Twilight glanced around, and, with a surge of magic, quickly gathered up all the crumpled pieces of paper that were scattered across the floor. She stuffed them all under her desk, and turned to Rarity as if the papers didn't exist. "S-so, how are you? Do you need help with anything? Can I help you find a book?"

Rarity eyed Twilight a moment, glanced down at the pile of crumpled paper, and looked back to Twilight. "Well, perhaps I do need something to read," she said calmly.

"Wonderful! What kind of book would you like?" Twilight asked before she began to walk towards the shelves. "An adventure story? A mystery? Maybe I can interest you in—"

"Don't worry Twilight, I've found just what I wanted to read."

Twilight turned, expecting to see Rarity holding a book. Instead, while Twilight's back was turned, Rarity had taken one of the crumpled pieces of paper and spread it out flat. She was now reading it, much to Twilight's horror.

"Rarity, no, you can't—" Twilight tried to protest. She galloped towards Rarity with the full intent of snatching the page out of her magic. Rarity, however, turned to one side, letting Twilight leap past her and crash to the floor as she continued to read.

"Twilight, this is a letter to Princess Celestia... about Nyx."

Twilight groaned and didn't even bother trying to pick herself up off the floor. She just turned over and lay on her back as she covered her face. "I know."

Frowning a little, Rarity folded up the letter and tucked it in her bags before looking back to Twilight. "I would also venture to guess, from your mane and eyes, you haven't had a decent night's sleep in days."

"I know," Twilight groaned again.

"And just how long have you been like this?"

"Three days," Twilight admitted, her hooves still covering her eyes.

Rarity nodded her head and picked Twilight up in her magic. "Twilight, I believe you and I have something to discuss, something both of us are going to need a cup of tea for."

• • •

Despite the odd looks she received from passersby on the street, Rarity carried Twilight all the way back to Carousel Boutique. She then sat Twilight at her kitchen table and prepared an early afternoon tea. The blend was Twilight's favorite. Its aroma alone seemed to bring a little energy back to her. Rarity set a full cup in down on the table before sitting down with her own. She took a single sip and waited for Twilight to do the same before breaking the near-silence that had befallen her kitchen.

"Feeling better?"

"A... a little, yes," Twilight replied weakly.

"Good. Any improvement is a step in the right direction. Still, I believe we have something to talk about, and I believe this is part of it." At that Rarity withdrew the half-written letter to Celestia she had folded and placed in her bag back at the library.

"I... I don't know what to do, Rarity," Twilight finally admitted, holding her teacup between her hooves and looking at her reflection in the tinted liquid.

"You don't know what to do about what?"

Twilight sighed and looked up at Rarity with her bag-lined eyes. "Nyx."

“What’s the matter?” Rarity asked. “Has Nyx gotten in trouble, or has she gone missing again?”

“No, she’s fine and at school. I just... I think... I know...” Twilight couldn’t bring herself to finish her sentence. She groaned and dropped her head to the desk with a loud thump.

“What do you know?” Rarity asked. Twilight, however, didn’t answer, only fueling Rarity’s concerns. Fearing the worst, she leaned forward and placed a hoof on Twilight’s shoulder. “Twilight, what do you know?”

Twilight didn’t lift her head from the table. She only rolled her head enough to look at Rarity from the corner of the eye before she said, “Rarity... I know, I finally know for sure that Nyx is Nightmare Moon.”

Rarity lifted her hoof from Twilight’s shoulder, unable to believe the words she had just heard leave Twilight’s mouth. “You know? How do you know?”

“Didn’t you see what happened at the tug-of-war finals?”

“I did, but—”

Twilight sat up, her eyebrows furrowed. “Then you saw what happened to Nyx’s mane. You saw how she was able to beat those colts by herself.” Twilight lowered her head, once more staring at her partially emptied cup of tea. “It’s just... too much to deny anymore. She doesn’t just *look* like Nightmare Moon. She was made by a spell meant to resurrect Nightmare Moon. She has some of Nightmare Moon’s memories, now I’m sure she has Nightmare Moon’s power. Body, memories, and magic... I just can’t deny it anymore.”

“And this letter, along with all the others?” Rarity asked before she gently nudged the uncrumpled letter towards Twilight.

“I promised you, the day you helped me with Ny—” Twilight stopped, and shook her head before continuing. “The day you helped me with Nightmare Moon’s disguise, you made me make a promise. You made me swear that if I figured out who she really was, then I would send a letter to Princess Celestia. I promised I’d tell the princess everything, and I’ve been trying to. I’ve been trying for days, but I just can’t find the words.”

Twilight looked up at Rarity, desperation in her eyes. “Rarity, what if she takes her away? What if she sends her to the moon? I’d never see her again. She’d be all alone, and she hates that. And what would I tell her friends when they ask where she’s gone? They’d want to see her, want to write her letters, but how would I send letters to the moon?”

Twilight's frown deepened. She rested her forelegs on the table and held her head in her hooves. "But what will happen when she grows up and remembers more about her past? She could overthrow Princess Celestia again, bring back the eternal night. This might be our only chance to stop her, but... but..."

Unable to find anything more to say, Twilight turned to look at Rarity. "What do I do?"

That question ushered in a silence between the two mares. Twilight continued to look to Rarity, hoping for some advice, but Rarity looked just as unsure. She wore a contemplative expression and sipped at her tea not just once, but twice before she set down the cup and returned her attention to Twilight.

"First, you're right. It would be foolish of us to deny the facts in front of us. Nyx and Nightmare Moon are the same pony." Rarity's voice grew stronger and gained a commanding tone. "That, however, is who she *was*, Twilight, not who she *is*."

"But Rarity—" Twilight began, only for Rarity to lift a hoof.

"Twilight, do you know what happened last week? The Cutie Mark Crusaders, Nyx included, came stumbling into my shop covered in honey, leaving sticky hoofprints all across my front room. I was, of course, furious, but, before I scolded them for making a mess of my boutique, do you know what they were doing?"

"No," Twilight answered flatly.

A smile spread onto Rarity's lips. "They were laughing. They were laughing, together, at their latest escapade, and Nyx was laughing just as loudly as the others. Twilight, I can understand your fears. I shared those fears when you first brought Nyx into my shop.

"But," Rarity continued, ensuring that Twilight did not interrupt, "there is a difference between '*was*' and '*is*,' Twilight, and what matters is who Nyx *is*. Nyx *is* a curious little filly with good friends, three of whom ensure she gets into more than an appropriate amount of trouble for a pony her age."

"But what if she grows up evil? What if she—"

"Twilight, being worried is perfectly normal," Rarity assured her. "Heaven knows I worry about Sweetie Belle every time she goes off with her friends to do their 'Crusading'. For the longest time my parents trusted me to foalsit her, and she's gotten into more trouble than I ever did growing up. I'm always afraid that somepony will come running into my shop to tell me Sweetie Belle had gotten hurt or worse." Rarity paused to take a sip from

her tea before continuing. “Despite this, I can’t always be there to keep Sweetie Belle safe, and I can’t keep her from enjoying her childhood. She should be out there with her friends, having fun and getting into trouble... not too much trouble, mind you, but some.”

Twilight frowned, unconvinced. “But Sweetie Belle is just a normal little unicorn, Rarity. Nyx is—”

“Nyx is just as normal,” Rarity interrupted firmly. “Yes, she’s an alicorn, and, yes, she may very well be Nightmare Moon reincarnated. I’m not ignoring those facts, Twilight, nor am I ignoring the fact that Nyx could become the same Nightmare Moon that threatened Equestria. There is something, however, you are failing to take into account.”

“What’s that?”

“You,” Rarity said as she pointed her hoof at Twilight. “Nyx could become the same Nightmare Moon she was, but she also has a chance to be something else, and, so far, you’ve been helping her do that.”

Rarity’s words rang through Twilight’s head and left her in a mild stupor. She leaned back in her chair, her body so limp she could have fallen to the floor if the chair was nudged. “But what hope do I have of changing a mare like Nightmare Moon?”

“Well, if you were to ask my opinion, I’d say there isn’t anypony better. Twilight, not only have you changed since you came to Ponyville, but you’ve helped a lot of us change for the better. You helped Applejack learn to ask for help when she’s overwhelmed. You helped Pinkie Pie learn not to jump to conclusions. You helped Princess Luna have fun and make friends on Nightmare Night.

“And, Twilight, even if you hadn’t done all that, you’d still be the pony with the best chance of helping Nyx be something else.” Rarity smiled and set her hoof on Twilight’s. “Because you’re the pony Nyx cares the most about in the world, and you care about her just as much.”

Twilight looked at Rarity as those words worked their way through her mind. At first, her expression was of disbelief and uncertainty. But soon, like dirt was being rinsed off her face, Twilight’s worried expression fell away. It was replaced by a small smile as her doubt was replaced by hope, hope that Nightmare Moon could be a different mare.

“Thank you, Rarity,” Twilight finally said before she leaned in and gave her friend a grateful hug.

“I’m happy to help, Twilight,” Rarity said, returning the hug. When Twilight pulled away, Rarity flashed a smile and lifted her cup of tea. “We mares have to stick together, after all.”

Twilight chuckled and picked up her cup. “I guess we do.” She then sighed, and looked at the uncrumpled, half-written letter on the table. “Now I just have to figure out what I’m going to tell Princess Celestia, if I tell her anything at all.”

“If I may say so, Twilight, you may still want to write to her about this. It’s only going to get worse the longer you put it off.”

“I know, I just... I just want to wait a little longer. I’ll try writing the letter again next week, when I’ve had a chance to catch up on my sleep.”

“Speaking of sleep, I *do* hope you’re going to let Nyx go to the Cutie Mark Crusader sleepover Apple Bloom is having at Sweet Apple Acres. I can only imagine that she’s just as excited about it as Sweetie Belle is.”

Twilight laughed a little as she remembered how Nyx was bouncing happily when she was told what a sleepover was. “Probably *more* excited, considering it’s her first, and I think I’ll let her go.”

Rarity paused to take a sip of her tea. “That’s good. Not only will it make Nyx happy, but it may help dispel some of the rumors that are undoubtedly floating around. If ponies see you and Nyx walking to Sweet Apple Acres, it may help them believe that what happened at Learn and Play Day wasn’t out of the ordinary. After all, if something was wrong, most ponies would expect you to hide Nyx away.”

“Which is something I seriously considered,” Twilight admitted before taking a sip of tea, “but, if our friends are any indication, they all just think Nyx is really good at magic, like me. So, for the moment, I can just say that strong magic runs in our family. After all, I did turn my parents into potted plants when I was taking my entrance exam for Celestia’s School for Gifted Unicorns.”

“You mean the day you got your Cutie Mark? Yes, I heard it was quite the impressive display, at least from what Sweetie Belle told me of the story. I would like to hear about it, if you don’t mind sharing.”

“I’ll love to tell you. It all started when—”

“Just a moment,” Rarity interrupted as she lifted a hoof. “Why don’t you tell me once we’re at the spa?”

Twilight tilted her head. “Um... why would I tell you once we’re at the spa?”

Rarity looked at Twilight as if the reason was obvious. “Twilight, dear, just look at yourself! Split ends everywhere, and the bags under your eyes; if Nyx were to see you like this, she’d never be able to enjoy herself at the sleepover. She might even stay at the library out of worry.

“No, if you’re going to send Nyx off to her first sleepover, then you and I must take a trip to the spa. I’m not taking no for an answer.”

Twilight laughed a little, and stood up from the kitchen table. “Actually, the spa sounds really good right now.”

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“Well, I don’t think our Cutie Marks have anything to do with bein’ rodeo ponies,” Apple Bloom said dejectedly. She pushed open the door to her bedroom and walked inside with Sweetie Belle, Scootaloo, and Nyx following close behind. Their sleeping bags were rolled out on the floor, surrounding Apple Bloom’s four-post, apple-themed bed.

“It was kind of fun seeing Big Macintosh tied up like that,” Scootaloo said with a chuckle. “He didn’t even know what hit him.”

“Tell that to my sister,” Apple Bloom replied before she jumped onto her bed, “‘cause if she had found it funny, we wouldn’t have been sent to bed already.”

Sweetie Belle lay down on her sleeping bag. “Yeah, but that isn’t so bad. I’m pretty tired.”

“Aw, don’t tell me you want to go to sleep already?” Scootaloo complained. “Sure, we had to go to bed, but there’s still a lot of fun things we could do.”

“Like what?”

Scootaloo grabbed a lantern off Apple Bloom’s bedside table, turned it down so it was barely flickering, and then held it beneath her chin. The weak flame cast hard, spooky shadows across Scootaloo’s face. “We could tell ghost stories!”

“No offense, Scootaloo, but your ghost stories aren’t that scary,” Apple Bloom said. “Even Nyx isn’t afraid of them.”

“Hey!” Nyx whined.

Scootaloo lowered the lantern from her face before turning it back up so it lit up most of the room. “Okay, then what do you think we should do?”

“We could play a board game,” Sweetie Belle suggested.

Apple Bloom and Nyx perked up at the idea of a board game, but Scootaloo shook her head. “No, that’s too boring.”

“Well shoot,” Apple Bloom grumbled, “what are we goin’ to do then?”

“Um... well, Twilight gave me a book she said really helped with her first slumber party,” Nyx said. She levitated a book from her saddlebags, which were stacked with the rest by the bedroom door.

“Are slumber parties the same as sleepovers?” Sweetie Belle asked as Nyx cracked open the book.

“Well, you spend the night with friends, so I guess they’re the same,” Scootaloo said before scrunching up her nose. “But I don’t want to do any sort of makeover stuff.”

Nyx flipped through a few pages of the book in her search for ideas. “Me neither. We... could... have a pillow fight.”

“We’ve only got four pillows, and my bedroom is too small,” Apple Bloom said, shooting down the idea.

“We could make s’mores.”

“We don’t have marshmallows. Or chocolate. Or graham-crackers. Or even a fire to roast the marshmallows on,” Sweetie Belle pointed out.

“Well, ghost stories are in here too,” Nyx said with a slight quiver. She shook her head before the thoughts of scary stories could sink in and continued reading. “But I think we’ve already decided not to do that.”

“Bet you’re glad about that, huh?” Scootaloo teased.

Nyx glared at Scootaloo for a moment before turning back to the book. “Here’s another game: ‘Truth or Dare.’”

“That sounds kind of fun,” Sweetie Belle offered with a smile.

“How do you play?” Apple Bloom asked.

Nyx held a hoof on the page in the book, reading the instructions out loud. “Somepony starts by asking if another pony wants to tell the truth or take a dare. If the pony chooses truth, they have to answer one question truthfully. If they take the dare, they have to do whatever dare the first pony gives them. Once the question is answered or the dare is completed, the next pony in the circle takes their turn. Play continues for as long as desired.”

Scootaloo turned over on her sleeping bag, looking at the rest of her friends from her now upside-down perspective. “That sounds kind of boring. I mean, the truth part sounds all right, but what could we dare each other to do?”

“Oh, I know!” Apple Bloom perked up. “Let’s make it ‘Truth or Challenge.’”

“What’s the difference?” asked Scootaloo.

“Challenges are a lot harder than dares, because you actually have to do something... well, challenging. Something that might be hard to do. If you don’t want to answer a question, then ya have to complete a challenge. If you can’t, then ya have to answer the question.”

“That sounds *way* better,” Sweetie Belle agreed. “Let’s do it.”

Nyx looked up anxiously, a little worried about the idea. Still, her three friends were very eager to get the game started, so she just put the sleepover guidebook back into her bags and forced some enthusiasm. “Okay, so who wants to go first?”

Scootaloo shot upright, enthusiastically thrusting a hoof into the air. “Oh, me! Me! Apple Bloom, truth or challenge?”

Apple Bloom paused to think. “Um... I’ll go with... the challenge.”

“I challenge you to stand on your head for ten seconds.”

“Ha, is that all?” Apple Bloom replied confidently. Within moments, she was balancing on her head, back legs waving around as her friends counted down.

“10... 9... 8... 7... 6... 5... 4... 3... 2... 1... 0!”

Apple Bloom got back to her hooves, smiling triumphantly before wavering. She shook her head to try and clear it. “Whoa, that makes my head all swimmy.”

“Really? Let me try!” Sweetie Belle said before flipping onto her head. Soon, the other three Cutie Mark Crusaders were on their heads, laughing and giggling as the blood rushed to their brains.

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“Okay, Nyx... truth or challenge?” Apple Bloom asked about an hour later. The game had proven to be an ideal way to end the sleepover. The four friends had done a lot of strange and silly challenges, from seeing how long they could hold their breath to having hoof wrestling contests. It was all in good fun, and Nyx was ready for more. She bit her lower lip and focused on Apple Bloom as she tried to decide what she would do.

“Truth,” Nyx finally answered.

Apple Bloom leaned in, lowering her voice. “Tell us something you’ve never told any other pony.”

Nyx blinked in confusion and tilted her head to one side. “Like what?”

Apple Bloom shrugged. “Anything.”

“Yeah, just make it something cool,” Scootaloo added.

“Well, I can’t really think of anything to tell you, but...” Nyx fell silent and glanced back at her vest. “There... is something I can show you.”

“Really? What is it?” Sweetie Belle asked.

“I think it’s better if I just show you, but you have to promise not to tell any other pony. Twilight and Rarity know, but they told me I couldn’t show anypony what I’m about to show you.”

“Oh boy, this has to be *good* if Twilight told you to keep it a secret,” Scootaloo grinned. “Yeah, we promise not to tell anypony.”

Nyx turned to look at Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle, ensuring that the two other fillies also promised to keep her secret. Despite their nods, Nyx had one more condition. “And you have to promise me you won’t hate me, and we’ll still be friends after I show you.”

“Well, that’s a silly thing to promise,” Apple Bloom said as Sweetie Belle nodded her head in agreement. “We’re the Cutie Mark Crusaders. We’re going to be best friends for life.”

“No matter what,” Scootaloo stated firmly with a strong, confident smile.

Nyx smiled nervously, looking at her three friends. Her decision made, she got up from her sleeping bag and walked across the room into Apple Bloom’s closet. She slipped inside and shut the door behind her. For a moment, all Apple Bloom, Scootaloo, and Sweetie Belle could hear was the sound of rustling. They craned their necks, watching and waiting anxiously until the door opened.

Nyx nervously walked out, carrying her vest in her teeth. Once she was a few steps out of the closet, she spread her wings, stretching them for a few moments before letting them fold to her sides.

Sweetie Belle, Scootaloo, and Apple Bloom all stared with eyes wide and jaws hanging open. Nyx set down her vest and waited for her friends to say something. They, however, remained unnervingly silent. She frowned and looked away from her friends anxiously. Tears started to pull at her eyes, and she began to retreat back into the closet. She was sure she had just made a horrible mistake.

Yet, before Nyx could flee or hide, her three friends surrounded her.

“Why didn’t you tell us sooner you had wings?” Apple Bloom asked.

“Well, Rarity told me that if ponies knew I had both a horn and wings, they would get jealous of me. I didn’t ask for them; I just have them, and—”

Sweetie Belle nodded. “Oh, yeah! You could *so* make Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon jealous.”

“But aren’t you jealous? Rarity said everypony would be, and I don’t want to make you three jealous.”

“Naw, why would we be jealous?” Apple Bloom asked. “It’s just part of who you are. It’d be as silly as me being jealous of how well Sweetie Belle sings.”

“Or me being jealous of how well Scootaloo rides her scooter,” Sweetie Belle chimed in.

Scootaloo motioned to herself with a hoof. “Or me being jealous of how good Apple Bloom is at fixing up things like our clubhouse.”

“Yeah, it’s like my big sister Applejack says, ‘There ain’t no point in bein’ jealous because it doesn’t change how things are.’”

“Why *do* you have wings and a horn?” Sweetie Belle asked, unable to contain her curiosity. “The only ponies I know that have both are Princess Celestia and Princess Luna.”

“Don’t forget ‘bout Princess Cadance,” Scootaloo added.

“Well, isn’t it obvious?” Apple Bloom asked, looking at her friends who only answered her with silent, blank stares. “Well, okay, maybe not so obvious.”

“Just spit it out, Apple Bloom,” said Scootaloo.

“I bet that one of Nyx’s parents is a unicorn and the other is a pegasus.”

Sweetie Belle cocked an eyebrow. “Does it really work like that? I mean, isn’t there somepony else in our class that has a unicorn for a mom and a pegasus for a dad?”

“Maybe it doesn’t happen all the time,” Scootaloo guessed. “I mean, isn’t there also a pony in our class who has a pair of unicorns as parents but doesn’t have a horn of her own?”

Apple Bloom nodded as she turned to jump back up onto her bed. “Yeah, there is, and I think Scootaloo is right. It must only happen some of the time. Anyway, Nyx, it’s your turn.”

Nyx, Sweetie Belle, and Scootaloo returned to their sleeping bags. She couldn’t deny that it felt nice not having to wear her vest. Her wings always felt kind of scrunched up beneath the fabric. She allowed her wings to flutter a little as she lay down on her sleeping bag. She then turned her attention back to the game. “Okay, Sweetie Belle, truth or challenge?”

“Truth!” Sweetie Belle answered without a moment’s hesitation.

“What’s the funniest story you have of your big sister Rarity?”

Sweetie Belle snorted and started giggling. “Oh, you’re going to like this.”

It didn’t take long for Sweetie Belle to tell the story, and, by the end, all four fillies were giggling loudly until a pounding came at the bedroom door.

“Apple Bloom, you and yer friends get to sleep right this minute or I’m goin’ come in there and hogtie all of you in your sleepin’ bags!” Applejack threatened, clearly irritated by the late-night noise. “I’ve got applebuckin’ to do in the mornin’, and I won’t have you four keepin’ me up all night.”

The four fillies chimed back a “We’re sorry”, and, with their game over, decided to call it a night. Apple Bloom blew out the lantern in her room, and the four friends lay down to go to sleep.

Still, before anypony could fall asleep, Nyx broke the silence. “Um... girls, thank you for still being my friends, even after I showed you my wings.”

“Aww, of course we’re still your friends!” Sweetie Belle replied from her own sleeping bag. “We’re the Cutie Mark Crusaders; that’s like being friends for life with a cool theme song.”

Sweetie Belle gently cleared her throat and began to sing.

*We are the Cutie Mark Crusaders
on a quest to find out who we are.
And we will never stop the journey,
not until we have our cutie marks.*

While Sweetie Belle had been the one to start singing, the other three soon joined in. It wasn’t the intense, arguably painful, rock ballad that had been performed at the talent show. Instead, the three sang it softly, softly enough that even Scootaloo’s voice was bearable.

The four drifted off to sleep to the sound of their own theme song, none resting as well as Nyx. She had shared a secret about herself with her friends, and they accepted her all the same.

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Nexus stared at the moon with turquoise eyes through his study window, floating a glass of orange juice nearby. He swirled the contents gently while intently examining a scroll. It was one of the reports he had received from the spy, and, while some of the information was welcoming, other pieces were troubling.

His plan had gone off without a hitch, for the most part. Through his connections at Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns, he had sent out flyers to every school in Equestria pitching the idea of a "Learn and Play Day." He had then instructed Filthy Rich to approach Cheerilee and convince her of the idea's merit.

In the end, Cheerilee held her own Learn and Play Day, and, during the event, the spy had been able to accomplish his goal. He had observed and spoken with Nyx while Twilight Sparkle was preoccupied elsewhere. He had been able to learn a great deal, despite being interrupted by one particular pink mare.

He witnessed and reported the two feats of magic Nyx had performed: turning a pony into a tree and her performance in the game of tug of war. It was a kind of magic that only a few ponies could control at such a young age. There was no denying that the magical potential was there, but potential was not enough.

Nyx did not act like Nightmare Moon. She did not speak condescendingly to the country bumpkins of Ponyville. The spy described her as a nervous and timid filly that only had a few friends her own age. He would have expected to hear she was a troublemaker. He would have been happy to hear that she was the most popular filly in school, swaying the minds of her classmates like any young queen should. Nyx, however, was far from these standards.

But the potential was there, and that would be enough to *make* her Nightmare Moon. Making a second attempt at the resurrection spell without the lingering shreds would be impossible. But Nyx could be used as a seed. She could be used to draw in the traces of Nightmare Moon's magic which had been dispersed by Princess Celestia's interruption. That magic would bear with it the echoes of Nightmare Moon. The memories, the emotions, the essence of the great dark empress would fill Nyx, and she would become the queen Equestria deserved.

But completing the spell would be difficult. He would need time to prepare, resources, and, above all, power. The spell would need to be obscenely powerful. That

was the only way to be sure the ritual would be completed before Celestia could interfere a second time.

A powerful spell, however, could not be set up secretly. One precluded the other, and thus Spell Nexus found himself thinking in circles. There was a need to act quickly, before something happened, but he could not act overtly. The spell had to be powerful, but had to be done secretly. If he could not strike a perfect balance, he risked another failure or revealing his true intentions to Celestia. What he needed was—

“Sir?”

Nexus glanced over his shoulder and at his butler, who was standing the study’s doorway. “Yes, Proper Etiquette?”

“Princess Celestia is at the front door and wishes to have a word with you. Shall I see her in?”

“Yes, please,” Nexus replied, closing his turquoise-colored eyes. When he reopened them, they had reverted to their original slate gray color. He finished the rest of the orange juice in his glass and walked across the room. He sat in his favorite chair and picked up a book, all an effort to make Celestia believe that the only thing she had interrupted was a quiet evening reading.

The timing was near-perfect. Nexus had just settled into one of his chairs with a book when the doors opened and Princess Celestia strolled in. Her guards remained in the hallway and pulled the door shut once she was inside.

“Thank you for allowing me into your lovely home at such a late hour, Nexus,” Princess Celestia said as she strode across the room. “I do hope I wasn’t interrupting anything.”

Nexus set his book down on a nearby end table. “A good book and nothing more. Still, I find it surprising you are out and about at such an hour. You are usually in bed by this time.”

The princess came to a stop beside Nexus. “If I may be honest with you, I have been having trouble sleeping.”

“Then please,” Nexus began. He motioned to a large cushion that was kept in his study specifically as a seat for royal alicorn guests. “Make yourself comfortable and tell me what troubles you.”

Princess Celestia took Nexus's offer, sitting down on the cushion as she began to speak. She told Spell Nexus about the spell in the forest, about the research his co-worker Bastion was doing, and of many other things Celestia had learned about the Children of Nightmare. It was information Nexus knew already, but he feigned interest all the same. He listened and offered appropriate levels of shock and disbelief.

"To think, there are ponies trying to resurrect Nightmare Moon. It is hard to believe some would be so foolish," Nexus mused when Princess Celestia finished. He poured a fresh glass of orange juice for himself and offered some to her. She replied with a smile and a shake of her head.

"But you stopped them," Nexus pointed out. He lifted his glass in a casual toast. "And Equestria continues to thrive in your protective embrace. So why have you not been sleeping well?"

Princess Celestia was silent for a moment before looking at Nexus with a grave expression. "I've come to believe that the spell, while interrupted, may not have been completely unsuccessful."

"What makes you say that?" Nexus asked with a concerned frown.

"Do you know my student, Twilight Sparkle?"

A chuckle escaped Nexus's lips. "The most magically gifted unicorn I've ever had the pleasure of meeting? Of course I know your student. I would bet that everypony at your school knows of her, both staff and students. Why do you ask?"

"At the Spring Festival in Ponyville, I discovered Twilight was taking care of a young filly by the name of Nyx, who she said was her half-cousin," Celestia explained. "A filly that, if my sources are to be believed, started living with her shortly after the incident in the forest. A filly who, in recent days, performed two very profound feats of magic at a school weekend event."

Nexus took a sip from his glass, not finding the information at all troubling. "I can only imagine powerful magic runs in her family."

"Yes, if Nyx was related to Twilight, such magical power would be expected," Princess Celestia said. "Yet, I have checked the family's records. There is no listing of Twilight having a half-cousin named Nyx. In fact, there is no listing of a Nyx being born in Equestria in the past several decades. It's as if she appeared out of thin air."

Nexus, who had been taking another sip from his orange juice, froze up for a single moment. He eyed Celestia over the rim of his glass and resumed drinking before she could notice.

“Appeared out of thin air?” Nexus echoed after clearing his throat. “Your Highness, do you believe that Nyx didn’t exist until a few months ago, that she literally appeared out of thin air?”

“I don’t think she just appeared, but I do believe Nyx’s origins are far different from a common pony’s. Based on the research done by Bastion Yorsets and his team, I’ve come to know for certain that the ritual I interrupted was designed to bring back Nightmare Moon.

“It was also within days of the spell’s failure that Nyx appeared in Ponyville. There are no records of her existing before she was registered for school. No pony in Ponyville knows anything more about Nyx’s history than what Twilight herself has told me. As I have said, it seems like she appeared out of thin air... as if by magic.”

Nexus nodded. “I see. You believe Nightmare Moon and Nyx are one and the same.” Nexus took a deep breath. “I do believe I understand why you’ve been losing sleep.”

“No, Spell Nexus, you don’t,” Celestia replied. She stood up and walked across the room. “For it is not as simple as you make it sound.”

“What is there to make it complex?” he asked. He sipped at his orange juice, trying to quell a tremor of fear that had slipped into his voice.

“The fact that Nyx doesn’t act anything like the mare I once knew,” Princess Celestia replied as she reached the study’s window. She looked at the moon while memories of the past overwhelmed her. “Nightmare Moon, the real Nightmare Moon, was a vindictive, deceptive, hateful pony. She desired to plunge Equestria into eternal night, not just so ponies would appreciate the beauty of the stars and moon, but also so they would be deprived of the sun they loved so dearly.

“She was a threat to all Equestria... and I watched it happen. I watched as Luna, my dear sister, became that monstrous mare bent on vengeance. It was my duty as a big sister to protect her, and I failed. I failed so horribly that I had to banish her to the moon and wait a thousand years for six ponies to do what I could not.

“And now,” Celestia continued, lowering her head. Her regal composure was failing, and a tired expression took its place on her face. “The past few nights, my dreams have been

haunted. I see Nyx growing to become the monster I once knew. She laughs and plunges Equestria into eternal night. She takes away my sister and Twilight Sparkle. I scream and reach out to help them, only to find myself sitting up in my bed in an icy sweat.

“I fear this filly, Nexus,” Celestia concluded with a heavy sigh, “but, at the same time, I feel guilty for fearing her.”

“Why would you feel guilty?” Nexus asked.

Celestia turned her back on the window. “Because Nyx has done nothing to warrant such fear. I have met Nyx personally, over a short dinner, and she acted nothing like the Nightmare Moon I knew. At first, she was scared of me and my sister. She shied away, and only after some encouragement from Twilight was Nyx even able to say hello to us.

“Eventually Nyx drew herself out of her shell, and, after that, she laughed and spoke excitedly on many topics. She spoke of friends, spoke of school, spoke of things a normal filly her age would want to talk about, things Nightmare Moon would never care about.

“And thus I am torn,” Princess Celestia explained. “I worry about what Nyx might become, but I wonder if she is different than Nightmare Moon. She is the product of that spell, and yet she acts like any normal filly. That, Spell Nexus, is what is troubling me.”

“It would trouble anypony,” Nexus said, faking concern. “I am honored you would come to speak with me about this, but, I must ask... what does Princess Luna think of her? Certainly she, who was once Nightmare Moon, would be able to judge Nyx’s true nature.”

“I... I must confess, I have been doing everything in my power to keep this a secret from Luna,” Princess Celestia said, her words burdened with guilt. “It has not been easy. She was able to sense the same surge of magic I felt rise up from the Everfree Forest some time ago. By some stroke of luck I’ve been able to convince her it was nothing to worry about and have kept the rest of what I’ve told you hidden.”

Nexus frowned. “I find it strange you would want to keep this a secret from Luna. Do you not trust her with this matter?”

“No, I do trust her, but I choose to keep this a secret to protect her,” Princess Celestia admitted. “Call me a fool if you wish, Nexus, but I’m Luna’s big sister. I lost her once to Nightmare Moon, and I don’t want her getting anywhere near this.

“This is why I’ve come to you,” Princess Celestia continued as she moved away from the window, retaking her seat next to him. “Because, while I cannot turn to Luna in this, I need somepony to talk to. I need somepony to give me an honest opinion. Am I wrong to fear Nyx? Am I wrong to doubt in my student’s ability to judge character? Assuming Twilight has noticed the similarities between Nyx and Nightmare Moon, would she not have come to me if she felt Nyx was a danger?”

“And, even if Nyx grows to be the same in body and power, could she not be her own mare? Or... do my dreams tell me the simple truth? That, in time, Nyx will become the only mare in the world I truly fear.”

Silence fell upon the study as Nexus slowly took his gaze off of the princess. He closed his eyes and swirled his glass. He tried to make it look like he was pondering the question, but, in truth, he was considering the situation as a whole.

Princess Celestia saw there was a chance the filly was a threat to Equestria, but did not act because of her feelings. An alicorn of her power and stature, hesitating because of her bleeding, tender heart. He’d pity the princess if her weakness wasn’t so pathetic. Above that, the thought of Nightmare Moon’s return scared her. She feared having to face Equestria’s true queen, and for good reason. Nightmare Moon would be a much greater threat without Princess Luna’s feelings holding her back.

Indecision, compassion, and fear... all weaknesses that only proved to Nexus that Princess Celestia wasn’t fit to rule Equestria. Only the cold wisdom of Nightmare Moon would ensure the kingdom’s future. Yet, these weaknesses were not without their purpose. Nexus took a sip of orange juice, using it to hide the smile that was trying to creep onto his lips. Only once he was able to force the smile away did he lower the glass and begin to speak.

“You are not wrong to fear Nyx. It is your job as a ruler of this kingdom to try and foresee anything that would arise to threaten Equestria. Right now, Nyx is a credible threat. Nightmare Moon is among the worst things to happen to Equestria in recorded history, and, if there is even a small chance Nyx could become her, then she is a threat you should take seriously.”

“But I cannot condemn Nyx for what she might do, just as I cannot punish a normal pony for a crime they have not yet committed,” Celestia argued. “Not only would that go against Equestrian law, Twilight would never forgive me.”

“Your concern for your student is heartwarming, Princess Celestia, but I shouldn’t need to remind you that you have a whole kingdom to worry about. Is it not better to save everypony in Equestria from the danger that is Nightmare Moon, even if it means one particular unicorn doesn’t like you anymore?”

“It is better, Nexus,” the princess admitted reluctantly, “and perhaps, if I were a stronger mare, I could do what is best for the kingdom without batting an eye. I, however, cannot, and will not, act against Nyx unless more evidence becomes available, even if it means I must endure sleepless nights.”

“Then maybe I can offer that evidence,” Nexus replied, smiling gently.

“And how would you do that?”

Nexus turned his head, looking across the many books tucked away on the study’s shelves. “If I remember correctly, there is a magical ritual from the zebra homelands that may just be the answer to this predicament.” With a delicate touch, he levitated a book from the shelves and cracked it open. He flicked through the pages, not truly reading the words but doing it more for appearances. He continued to turn pages for several moments before finally settling on a spot deep within the tome.

“Hmm, yes. It would take time to study it, even longer to prepare, but, if the spell works, you will be able to take a glimpse inside Nyx’s mind. From that glimpse, you should be able to see whether or not the filly is somepony you need to fear.”

Celestia smiled as the weights of fear and doubt began to lift off her chest. “Spell Nexus, do you honestly believe you can prepare this spell? Can you promise that this spell will do as you say?”

“I don’t know if I can outright promise, but I am very certain,” he replied with a confident grin.

“Then please, coordinate your efforts on the spell within the palace. I will make arrangements so that anything and everything you will need to perform this spell is provided,” Princess Celestia said as she crossed the room and approached him. “Do whatever it takes to get this spell prepared as quickly as possible.”

Nexus bowed respectfully. “It would be my pleasure to do so, Princess, but I should warn you of something. If I remember correctly, Nyx will need to be present. This isn’t something that can be done unless she’s at least in the same room. Nyx would need to be brought to the spell, taken from Twilight.”

The smile that had only just made its way onto Princess Celestia's face vanished, replaced by a frown. For a moment, she sat in silence, contemplating the one catch to her and Nexus' newly hatched plan. "Nyx would need to be taken from Twilight Sparkle?" The princess asked, as if hoping she had misheard.

"Yes," Nexus stated coldly. "I would strongly suggest Nyx is brought here while Twilight is left in Ponyville."

"But couldn't Twilight accompany her?" Princess Celestia asked. "Would they truly need to be separated?"

"I believe so," Nexus answered, a heavy tone of regret in his voice. "I think it would be unwise to have such a magically talented unicorn present for the test. While you easily outclass Twilight with your power, she could do something regrettable before you could stop her if she feels we're harming Nyx. Even if Twilight managed to control herself, watching Nyx be tested would be difficult for her."

Nexus sighed and scratched his forehead. "To put it simply, Princess, do you really want to put Twilight through something like that? Do you want to have her there, to watch the test, knowing what it could reveal? Personally, I feel Twilight's presence at the spell would only cause more trouble for us and more heartache for her, especially if she is as attached to Nyx as you suggest. I must strongly advise that Twilight remains in Ponyville."

"Then that shall be my part in this," Princess Celestia said in defeat, her heart once again heavy in her chest. "Spell Nexus, I would ask you to simply focus on preparing the spell. I... I will handle the task of fetching Nyx personally."

"Are you sure?"

The princess nodded. "Twilight deserves as much."

Nexus snapped the book shut and placed it on his desk before smiling reassuringly to Princess Celestia. "Very well. I will begin preparations in the morning. I will need time to study the spell, and then I will need time to gather the materials and prepare. Once the spell is ready, however, I will inform you so that you can perform your part. After that, it will take but a few minutes to know whether or not Nyx poses a threat to Equestria."

"Thank you, Nexus," Princess Celestia said, managing a weak, half-hearted smile. "You have been of greater service this evening than I could have hoped for."

Nexus offered a short bow as a playful smile pulled at his lips. “Do give me some credit, Princess. My special talent is, after all, creating and understanding complex spells.”

“Oh, I haven’t forgotten. After all, it wasn’t so long ago that you were one of my faithful students,” Princess Celestia teased with her usual, playful tone. “Now, I believe I’ve taken up enough of your evening. I shall return to the castle to get some rest, but please send word to me when you are ready to begin preparing the spell. Also, do not share our conversation here with more ponies than necessary. I do not want to burden Luna with this, and I do not want to cause a public panic about Nightmare Moon’s return.”

“Of course, Princess,” Nexus replied. He got out of his chair and walked with the princess to the door of his study. “I will keep what we discussed here a secret to all but those who need to know about it. I hope you have a pleasant evening.”

“Good night to you as well, Spell Nexus,” Princess Celestia said.

Nexus returned the farewell with a wave of his hoof as the princess slipped out the study doors. He waited until she rounded a corner further down the hall before he pulled the doors shut and moved to the far side of his study. With a gentle smile, he looked out the window and watched as the princess entered the courtyard and boarded her chariot. He even waved briefly as the chariot departed.

It was only when Princess Celestia was out of sight that Nexus allowed his slate gray eyes to return to the turquoise color that marked him as a member of the Children of Nightmare. His gentle grin turned menacing, and he had to fight the urge to laugh out loud.

Horn glowing, Nexus began pulling books off his study shelves. Yes, he would need time to prepare, but now he had all the time he would need. He had no fear of the princess acting, for she was waiting for him to help her act. He had even convinced her to keep Twilight in Ponyville, which would make things much easier for him.

A second opportunity: He had been given a second chance to complete the spell, and it had been laid in his hooves by none other than the sun tyrant herself. Fate and destiny were on his side. The world itself worked to help him bring back Equestria’s true queen.

“Celestia, you have become a contributing architect in your own demise,” Nexus whispered before diving into the work that lay ahead of him.

The doors to the Ponyville schoolhouse burst open with cheers as little fillies and colts raced out wearing wide smiles. Among them were the Cutie Mark Crusaders, who laughed and giggled along with all the others. Behind them, Cheerilee walked to the school's doorway. She too had a small bounce in her step and a bright smile on her face, for it was a day both she and her students had been looking forward to. School was officially out for the summer.

“No more school, no more school, no more school!” Apple Bloom cheered several times, bouncing around like Pinkie Pie as she and the other crusaders made their way into the center of Ponyville.

“Yeah, a full summer vacation to find our cutie marks! This is going to be awesome!” Scootaloo exclaimed. “So, what should we try first? Skateboarding? Paragliding? Wait, no... we should be Cutie Mark Crusader Bungee Jumpers!”

“That all sounds kind of dangerous, Scootaloo,” Sweetie Belle said anxiously.

“And scary,” Nyx added quietly.

Sweetie Belle nodded in agreement. “Yeah, maybe we could start off with something else first. We... uh, we don't want to go through all your awesome ideas straight away, do we?”

Scootaloo and the others slowed down and began to walk through Ponyville side by side. “No, I guess not.”

“How are we gonna keep track of all our ideas, anyways?” Apple Bloom asked. “After all, haven't we tried paragliding before?”

“Did we?” Scootaloo asked, looking at her friends for an answer.

“I don't remember,” Sweetie Belle said with a shrug.

“Well,” Nyx began cautiously, “Twilight's always making lists to keep herself organized, so how about we do that? We can each make a list of ways to find our cutie marks, and then we can combine them and make one big list. That way, we'll know what we have and haven't done.”

“That’s a great idea!” Apple Bloom praised. “If we do that, we’ll be sure to find our cutie marks in no time!”

Scotaloo and Sweetie Belle both agreed, and the quartet quickly began hammering out the details of the plan. They each agreed to make a list that night and bring them all to the Golden Oaks Library after lunch the next day. Then, after a final “Cutie Mark Crusaders” chant, the group disbanded with a cascade of excited giggles. Each was eager to get home and start thinking up as many things as they could.

Nyx practically galloped all the way back to the library, bursting through the door when she arrived. She raced across the floor towards Twilight, who was working to put some books back on the library shelves. Unable to contain her excitement, Nyx tackled her, an endless stream of giggles escaping her lips before she shouted, “I’m home!”

“So I see,” Twilight replied. She sat up from her new place on the floor and picked up some of the books she had dropped while Nyx bounced excitedly around her. “And how was your last day of school?”

“Really fun,” Nyx replied. “Cheerilee ordered some treats for us, and she passed out our final grades.”

“And how were your final grades?” Twilight asked.

To answer Twilight, Nyx eagerly opened her saddlebags and held out her grade report. Twilight took it in her own magic, and a smile spread across her face as she read over it. Nyx’s grades weren’t perfect, but they were still good for a filly who started two-thirds of the way through the school year.

“So,” Nyx asked nervously, “did I do good? Cheerilee said I did good, but... did I do good?”

“You did great,” Twilight replied, setting the grade report on a nearby table. “In fact, I think we need to celebrate. What do you think, Spike? Should we take the rest of the afternoon off and do something fun?”

Spike, who had been sitting in the corner as he played with and fed Peewee, glanced up at Twilight. “What about the library? You’re always saying we have to keep it open during the day, so that ponies can check out any books they want.”

“Oh, come on, Spike, it’s a special occasion,” Twilight said happily. “The end of school only comes once a year.”

“Hey, you don’t have to ask me twice,” Spike said with a laugh. He jumped out of his seat and carefully placed Peewee back in his nest. Peewee was just as small as he had been when he was hatched, and he was more than willing to settle in for a nap in his nest. Spike tucked the phoenix in, smiled, and jogged over to where Twilight and Nyx were standing. “So, what are we going to do?”

Twilight smiled as she placed a few final books onto the shelves. “I think Nyx should decide.”

Nyx blinked in disbelief, and the smile on her face grew wider. “Really? I get to pick?”

“Yep, whatever you want to do, Nyx,” Twilight confirmed.

“Can we get lunch at Sugarcube Corner?”

“Yes.”

“And then can we go play at the park?”

“Yes.”

Nyx was on the verge of exploding with excitement. She bounded over towards the door and kept bouncing until Twilight and Spike had caught up. The trio stepped outside, Twilight locked up the library, and Nyx happily bounced in the lead as the three of them headed off in the direction of Sugarcube Corner.

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“That was the best afternoon ever!” Nyx cheered.

Twilight laughed in agreement and looked over her shoulder. Both Nyx and Spike were riding on her back as she carried them to the library. After eating lunch at Sugarcube Corner, the three of them had spent the entire afternoon playing in the park. They enjoyed a game of tag, played hide and seek, and Twilight even played the part of a pretend monster that Nyx and Spike defeated a number of times. It was the kind of random, unplanned day of fun that Twilight had often missed growing up because of all the time she spent studying.

Yet the day was coming to an end. The sun was nearing the far horizon, and Twilight was thankful that it would soon be going down. It had been fun playing with Nyx and Spike,

but it had also been exhausting. Her body was worn out from all the playful running and laughing.

Nyx, on the other hoof, was still full of energy. “Can we do this again tomorrow?” she asked.

“Not tomorrow,” Twilight replied with a tired smile. “But maybe next weekend. After all, weren’t you going to do something with your friends tomorrow?”

“Yeah, we’re each supposed to think up a bunch of things we could try out over the summer to try and find our cutie marks,” Nyx answered before her smile turned into a panicked frown. “Oh no! I forgot to start my list!”

Twilight chuckled. “I wouldn’t worry about it too much, Nyx. You have until noon tomorrow. I’m sure that if you start on the list tonight, you’ll have more than enough things to share with your friends.”

“Yeah, don’t worry about it, Nyx,” Spike said from his seat on Twilight’s back. “You got all night to... Hey, Twilight?”

“Yes, Spike?”

Spike leaned to one side and pointed with his claw. “Isn’t that Princess Celestia’s chariot outside the library?”

Twilight, who had been paying most of her attention to Nyx and Spike, looked forward. He was right; the princess’s royal chariot was parked just outside the library with a pair of pegasus guards hitched to the front.

Without giving Spike or Nyx any warning, Twilight broke into a panicked gallop. She burst into the library, drawing the attention of Princess Celestia, who was sitting on a cushion at the reading table.

“Ah, Twilight, I was wondering where—” Princess Celestia began, only to be cut off. Twilight galloped around the room, horn glowing as she hurriedly cleaned the library. All the while, Spike and Nyx hung onto her back for dear life.

“Princess, you should have told me you were coming! I would have cleaned the library! I would have organized a dinner at Sugarcube Corner! I would have—” Twilight’s panic was interrupted as she felt herself being lifted off the ground. She twisted around in the air to face Princess Celestia, who was wearing a gentle smile as her horn glowed.

“Please calm down, Twilight. There is no reason to get yourself so worked up,” the princess said soothingly.

“But—” Twilight tried to protest.

“This is meant to be a casual visit,” Princess Celestia said before she set Twilight down on the floor, “and I apologize for not telling you in advance. Still, if I had, you would have gotten the whole town to decorate for my arrival, and I don’t want that this evening.”

Twilight sighed in defeat, bowing her head. “Of course, Princess, but you have to at least let me offer you something to eat. We were about to make dinner.”

“I appreciate the offer, my faithful student, but I’m not hungry at the moment,” Princess Celestia said. “But please, don’t let me stop you. It looks like you three have had a long day.”

“Yes, but it was fun,” Twilight replied before turning to look at Spike and Nyx, who had managed to stay on her back despite her panicked galloping. “Spike, Nyx, would you two mind starting dinner? I know I said I’d cook tonight, but—”

Spike waved her off. “Don’t worry about it, Twilight. Come on, Nyx, let’s go rustle us up some grub.”

Nyx nodded eagerly before she and Spike jumped off Twilight’s back and quickly made their way into the kitchen. At the same time, Twilight moved over to the reading table and sat down across from Princess Celestia. She put on a smile and asked, “So, what brings you to Ponyville? Is there another dragon taking a nap in the mountains?”

“No, but there is something important I need to talk to you about,” Princess Celestia replied, her usually cheerful, almost whimsical tone growing more serious.

The princess’s horn glowed, and there was a flash from behind Twilight. When she turned to look, she saw a few lingering sparkles around the kitchen door. It was a spell she recognized immediately, having seen Princess Celestia use it before. It blocked sound, which meant that what the princess wanted to talk about wasn’t meant to be heard by Spike or Nyx.

“Now,” Princess Celestia continued calmly, “Twilight Sparkle, I’m here because I need to talk to you about Nyx, who I know is *not* your cousin.”

Twilight felt her heart skip a beat, and she turned back towards Princess Celestia. Her first instinct was to continue her lie, but the knowing look in Celestia's eyes told Twilight she couldn't get away with that. It was just like the few times in the past she had been in trouble; there was no point in trying to lie to the princess.

"How much do you know?" Twilight asked quietly.

"I have my suspicions, which is part of the reason I'm here. Before I say another word, I want you to be completely honest with me about Nyx. Tell me everything."

Twilight felt her mouth go dry, but she began to speak all the same. She held nothing back, made no effort to conceal any truth. She divulged every hard fact she could offer and presented every one of her theories about Nyx's origins, existence, and nature to Princess Celestia.

And, as Twilight spoke, Princess Celestia listened. She maintained her regal composure and didn't show a drop of emotion. The line of her lips was flat. Her eyes were steely and knowing. It was not the face of a teacher, mentor, or friend that Princess Celestia wore. It was the face of a monarch.

When she finally finished speaking, Twilight was exhausted. With every word she had spoken her anxiety had grown, and she was beginning to feel just a little weak because of it. But now she was done. Now she had said everything she could say about Nyx, and it was Princess Celestia's turn to speak.

"Thank you for your honesty, Twilight," the princess began, offering a truly warm smile with her words, "and I want to say how proud I am of you. Few ponies would have done what you did. Not only did you help a filly who was lost in the forest, but you did so even though you believed she had once been your enemy. You must care about her greatly if you felt it was necessary to keep this a secret."

"I-I do," Twilight replied, letting herself smile a little.

"Might," Celestia began, coughing once to try and improve the strength in her voice. "Might I ask how much you care?"

"What do you mean, Princess?"

"What is Nyx to you?" Celestia elaborated. "Are you simply a caregiver? Does Nyx perhaps look upon you as a friend? Does she see you as you once looked upon your foalsitter, Princess Cadance?"

Twilight chuckled nervously, rubbing the back of her neck. “Well, actually, it’s funny you should ask that. Nyx kind of thinks of me as…” Twilight grew very quiet, muttering out her final few words so quietly that they were unintelligible to the princess.

“Could you please say that again, Twilight?”

“S-she thinks of me as her mother,” Twilight admitted.

Those words ushered a dead silence into the library. Princess Celestia sat perfectly still for a time, as if Twilight’s admission had locked up her brain. She began to frown, her regal composure failing as a mixed expression of exhaustion and guilt formed on her face.

“Twilight.” Princess Celestia sighed. “I wish I had not asked, for you have only made what I have to do that much more difficult.”

Twilight tensed, leaning in anxiously. “What do you have to do?”

“Twilight, your theories about the night you were ponynapped are correct,” the princess said. “Bastion Yorsets led a team of unicorns in studying the spell performed by the cult. He confirmed that it was intended to resurrect Nightmare Moon using the shreds.”

Twilight blinked in confusion. “What shreds?”

“You may not have noticed them, but, when you used the Elements of Harmony on my sister, a number of shreds were left behind. The Elements of Harmony literally shattered my sister’s old armor and peeled the power and hatred of Nightmare Moon away from her just as you would peel the skin from an onion.

“The end result of the peeling was the shreds, which held lingering amounts of Luna’s old power and echoes of the mare she was when she called herself Nightmare Moon. I entrusted Spell Nexus with studying these shreds, to see if they were dangerous and what, if anything, needed to be done with them. They, unfortunately, were stolen from Nexus’s manor. We now know that the cult ponies who ponynapped you were responsible for the theft and that they took the shreds to use them in the resurrection spell.”

Princess Celestia took a deep breath, shoring herself to tell Twilight something she wouldn’t want to hear. “Thus, Nyx did not simply come from that spell. She was made from those lingering shreds. Nyx is the very essence of the mare my sister used to be given a body and mind of her own. Twilight, she is Nightmare Moon.”

“No... no no no no!” Twilight shouted, shaking her head furiously. “That doesn’t mean anything! She doesn’t want to take over Equestria. She doesn’t want to hurt anypony! She actually likes the sun and—”

“Please understand, Twilight, I take no joy in this,” Celestia interrupted, trying to calm her student down. “While Nyx currently shows no signs of being dangerous, you cannot deny she could be a threat to Equestria. For all we know, Nightmare Moon could just be disguising herself as the filly you care for. She could be biding her time, waiting for an opportunity to strike.

“Even if that is not the case, you just admitted to me that Nyx has some of Nightmare Moon’s memories,” Princess Celestia pointed out. “Should more of her memories return, Nyx might also remember her hatred of me and her jealousy of the sun. She could become a threat to Equestria once again.”

“But Nyx would never do that!” Twilight argued firmly. “Nyx *hates* those memories. She was crying when she remembered them because she remembered wanting to hurt me and she couldn’t understand why.”

“Twilight—” Celestia tried to interrupt again, but Twilight continued her rant.

“And I’m not blind. I realized who Nyx was after what happened at the Learn and Play Day. I don’t think she’s trying to trick me though. I have no evidence to prove it, but I think—” Twilight stopped there, shaking her head once. “No, I *know* Nyx is a good pony. She’s good, she’s changed, and—”

Twilight found herself silenced, not by harsh words or anything violent. Instead, in a span of a few moments, Princess Celestia had circled the table and pulled Twilight into a warm embrace, holding her student with her neck and one hoof.

“Please stop, Twilight,” Princess Celestia pleaded, her voice ringing with the echoes of desperation. “You are only making this more difficult for me. I am sorry, but Nyx is Nightmare Moon, and I must take her with me to Canterlot.”

“But why?” Twilight asked in desperation. “She isn’t bad. She hasn’t tried to hurt you. Why do you have to take her?”

“Because I must, Twilight,” Celestia admitted, her words ringing out in the silence of the library. “My dreams have been haunted with visions of Nyx growing into Nightmare Moon. I see her threatening not just Equestria, but everypony I hold dear. I see her

threatening you, my sister, and the kingdom. I see her stealing everything away from me, and I'm powerless to stop her."

Celestia began to hug Twilight more tightly, bitter memories surfacing in her mind. "Powerless, just as I was powerless to save Luna a thousand years ago. It is my duty to do what is necessary, Twilight. It was my duty a thousand years ago to defeat my own sister, so the sun could rise over Equestria again. It was my duty, and I would do it again. My actions saved lives and brought joy back to the ponies of this kingdom, but that day still weighs heavily on my heart."

A tremor entered Celestia's voice, her conviction wavering. "This is something I have to do, Twilight. I cannot wait until Nightmare Moon has risen again before acting. I cannot give her a chance to take my sister away again, to hurt anypony... especially those I care for so dearly. I cannot let her have that chance."

Twilight tore herself away from Princess Celestia, tears streaming down her face. "But she's not the same Nightmare Moon my friends and I defeated. She's a different pony now. She's changed, and I *won't* let you take her away for things *your* sister did."

Twilight gasped and covered her mouth with her hoof, realizing all too late what she had said. At the same time, Princess Celestia looked as if she had just been stabbed in the heart.

"Princess, I didn't mean... I would never—" Twilight tried to apologize.

"No, you're right," Princess Celestia said in a solemn tone as she turned away from Twilight. "Back then, Luna and Nightmare Moon were one and the same, and, thus, they share the guilt of what they've done. I've tried to assure Luna that she has been forgiven, but my sister still carries the burden of her actions."

"But if you've forgiven Princess Luna, can't you forgive Nyx too?" Twilight pleaded.

"You misunderstand, Twilight. I am not taking Nyx away to punish her. I am taking her to, hopefully, put my fears to rest," Celestia explained. "Spell Nexus has prepared an old, powerful spell that will allow me to take a glimpse at who Nyx really is. It is a spell that will let me see into both Nyx's mind and her soul. In that glimpse, if I find nothing more than traces of what Nightmare Moon used to be, then I will return Nyx to you with the sunrise."

"And what if you find more than a few traces?" asked Twilight.

“As long as Nyx does not contain the malice, jealousy, and hatred that once defined Nightmare Moon, then she will be returned to you,” Celestia assured her student. “It was those feelings and emotions that drove my sister. If they do not exist in Nyx, then she cannot truly be the same mare my sister once was. This spell can also be used to monitor Nyx as she grows, to keep a constant gauge on the kind of mare she is becoming.”

“But what if you find that she does have these feelings? What if you find—”

“Twilight, don’t make me tell you something you don’t want to hear,” Celestia almost begged.

“NO!” Twilight raged, picking up on the truth behind Princess Celestia’s words. “I won’t let you banish her to the moon! Yes, Nyx is Nightmare Moon, but she is also my daughter, and I’m telling you she’s changed! That should be enough for you, or do you doubt me like you did when I told you Cadance was acting evil? Didn’t I turn out to be right then?”

“You were right and I do trust you, but—” Celestia tried to reply, only to be cut off.

“Then *listen* and believe me!” Twilight pleaded. “Nyx. Is. Not. A. Bad. Pony. Anymore!”

Celestia approached Twilight again, and, even though Twilight tried to shy away, the princess pulled her into a comforting embrace for a second time. Celestia, not only to put her hoof and neck around Twilight, but also sat down and wrapped her wings around her student. It was the most tender and comforting hug the princess could offer.

“Twilight,” Princess Celestia began, a single tear rolling down her cheek. “I am sorry. I promise, I swear to you, that, unless I am utterly convinced Nyx is a threat, I will return her to you in the morning. I, however, cannot ignore my own instincts. I fear Nyx could pose a great threat to Equestria, so I will do what I must to protect the ponies of this kingdom.

“But you know me, Twilight. I am not heartless. If Nyx has changed, if she is not the Nightmare Moon she used to be, then I will give her the chance she deserves. It is no less than what I did for my sister. It was only when I felt all hope was lost that I used the Elements of Harmony.

“So please,” Celestia whispered. “Please, Twilight Sparkle, I ask this of you not as a princess of Equestria or as your teacher, but as a pony who fears for those she cares about. Let me take Nyx. Allow me to put these fears to rest, for you do not know how much they torture me.”

Twilight squirmed weakly in the princess's embrace, trying to escape, but her resistance was failing. The doubts that had haunted her more than once rose up in full force, filling her mind. Celestia was right; it was better to be safe than sorry. It was better to know for sure whether or not Nyx was a threat to Equestria.

Breaking down, Twilight allowed herself to sink into Princess Celestia's embrace. "I've wondered, sometimes, who Nyx really is. I've seen what she can do. I've seen the power she holds and the memories she has. But even if she is Nightmare Moon, that doesn't mean she has to grow up to be evil, does it? Can't she still be a good pony? Can't she change?"

"Yes, Twilight, she can," Princess Celestia said, attempting to comfort her. "Anypony can change. I've seen you grow into a strong young mare with dear friends, and I know that if anypony could heal Nightmare Moon of her pain, it would be you, my faithful student. Though, it seems you share my fears. So please, let me take Nyx to Canterlot. Allow me to put our doubts to rest."

With Celestia's final plea and the promise that the test would kill off the doubts that had, at times, flitted through her own mind, Twilight's last defenses fell. It was a chance to know, without a doubt, whether Nyx was or was not a threat to Equestria.

"O... o-okay, Princess," Twilight surrendered. "But... can I at least come with her? She'll be scared without me."

"I'm sorry, Twilight, but Spell Nexus has asked that you remain here in Ponyville during the test. He doesn't want you there, watching, should the worst be revealed, and I feel he's right. I do not want to make this harder for you than it has to be."

Twilight choked up and leaned into Celestia's embrace. She cried quietly, and Princess Celestia let her. The princess held her, comforted her, and waited until Twilight was able to dry her tears. Then, and only then, did she pull away from Twilight and begin making her way towards the kitchen door.

After sucking in a breath to regain her own composure, Princess Celestia flicked her horn and removed her spell of silence from the door. The sounds of cooking started to echo into the library's main room, breaking the uneasy silence as Celestia pushed her head into the kitchen.

"Oh, hey Princess," Spike greeted. "Change your mind about eating dinner with us?"

“No, I’m afraid not, and—” The princess was forced to pause to clear her throat and bring back her normal, motherly voice. “And I must ask that Nyx come back with me to Canterlot.”

Spike and Nyx paused from their dinner preparations. “What for?” Spike asked.

“Twilight has told me that Nyx is an alicorn, and we agreed that it would be for the best if she got a checkup from my royal doctor.”

“Can’t you have a doctor come here or something?”

“While I could ask my doctor to come to Ponyville, he also serves as the doctor for many others in the royal palace, and I cannot, in good conscience, ask him to drop everything else he has scheduled to make a trip here,” Princess Celestia lied, keeping up her regal composure in hopes that Spike would believe the story.

“I guess that makes sense,” Spike eventually replied, “but why right now? Isn’t it kind of late?”

“My intention is to take Nyx back with me this evening and have her see the doctor as soon as we arrive,” the princess explained smoothly. “Then, I thought Nyx might like to spend the night in the castle. I can even show her Twilight’s old bedroom at my school for gifted unicorns.”

Nyx lit up with excitement at the prospect of not only getting to see not only the castle but also Celestia’s prestigious school. On more than one occasion, Twilight had told Nyx bedtime stories about the time she had spent with Princess Celestia, learning magic as the princess’s private student.

“Well, I guess if Twilight is okay with it,” Spike said, not entirely sure about what he was being told. Still, like Twilight, he had never been given a reason to doubt Princess Celestia, and he had no reason to start. Nyx, on the other hoof, was bouncing with excitement, willingly following the princess out of the kitchen.

Yet, as Princess Celestia moved to the library’s front door, Nyx glanced over to Twilight. She had intended to tell Twilight how excited she was and how thankful she was that Twilight was letting her go. Instead, the excitement that had been filling Nyx died away. Twilight was sitting with her head turned down, her eyes hidden by the bangs of her hair, and Nyx thought she saw a tear fall to the ground.

Before Princess Celestia could stop her, Nyx strayed from her path to the door. She trotted over to where Twilight was sitting and asked gently, "Twilight? What's wrong?"

Twilight didn't answer, didn't even turn to look at Nyx. She just kept looking down at the floor, body trembling as tears flowed from her eyes.

"Twilight?" Nyx ventured to ask again, only for Princess Celestia to move beside her.

"Twilight will be all right," the princess tried to reassure Nyx, using a hoof to gently guide her towards the door. "Now come along. If we hurry, we might be able to get back to Canterlot in time to watch Luna raise the moon."

Nyx squirmed away from Princess Celestia, running back over to Twilight. "No, I don't want to go any more. Twilight... Twilight, what's wrong? Why are you crying?"

"Nyx, please, we need to leave," stressed Princess Celestia.

"NO! I don't want to go!" Nyx snapped. She got right up beside Twilight and nuzzling one of her legs. "I want to stay here with Twilight."

Princess Celestia took a step towards Nyx, her tone growing firmer. "I promise you'll be back in the morning, but I need you to come with me."

"NO! I don't want to see the doctor! I want to stay here with Twilight!"

"I'm sorry, Nyx," the princess said, struggling to stay strong as her horn began to glow, "but you have to come with me."

Slowly, Princess Celestia began to wrap her magic around Nyx, levitating her away from Twilight. Nyx began to toss and turn in the magic, trying to free herself even though she had no chance of escaping the spell. All the while, she panicked and screamed.

"NO! Let me go! I don't wanna go! I want to stay here!"

"What's going on out here?" Spike asked, starting to open the kitchen door. Princess Celestia, however, quickly diverted some of her magic, slamming the door shut and locking it. Spike began to pound and shout from the other side, but she ignored his protests. Her conviction was already failing, crumbling like a sand castle being eaten away by ocean waves. She needed to leave with Nyx quickly, before she lost the will to do what needed to be done.

Celestia quickly slipped out the door, Nyx floating in the air behind her. Nyx had now given up trying to free herself from the magic and was now focusing on Twilight, flailing and calling out to her in panic.

“Twilight! TWILIGHT! Please, don’t let her take me, Twilight! I don’t want to go! Please, I want to stay here, Twilight! If I did something bad, I’m sorry! Please, I don’t want to go! Twilight! TWILIGHT!”

The last of Nyx’s cries were muffled as Princess Celestia shut the door to the library, carrying Nyx out to her waiting chariot. The princess motioned to her royal guards, who quickly snapped to attention and prepared to take off as she stepped into the chariot. It was then Nyx cried out with all the force and volume her small voice would allow.

“MOMMY!”

• • •

“I’m sorry Twilight, but Spell Nexus has asked that you remain here in Ponyville during the test. He doesn’t want you there, watching, should the worst be revealed.”

Twilight’s thoughts spiraled as she looked down at her hooves. She became numb to the world. She could hear Spike and Princess Celestia talking but could not process what they were saying. She could not feel the floor beneath her hooves or the tears running down her face. Her mind was too preoccupied with its internal struggle to handle anything else.

Princess Celestia was right; every argument she had given was valid, and Nyx wasn’t being taken away forever. The princess was just going to test her. If Twilight was right, Nyx would be back at the library in the morning, no worse for wear. On the other hoof, if she was a threat or a danger, this was for the best. Princess Celestia would be able to stop her before she threatened anypony. Equestria would be safe and secure.

That, and Twilight couldn’t ignore the fact Princess Celestia had been her mentor for years. She would trust the princess with her life, just as the princess had trusted her and her friends to defeat Nightmare Moon. If there was one pony she could trust to take care of Nyx, to be fair and forgiving, it would be the prin—

“MOMMY!”

Twilight’s head snapped up. From outside, Nyx’s cry pierced the night. The cry rang loudly in the library, surged deep into Twilight’s mind, and broke the mental stalemate

that had gripped her. Twilight realized all too late that she had zoned out, that Princess Celestia was gone, that she could hear Spike pounding on the kitchen door, and that Nyx was nowhere to be seen.

Heart skipping a beat, Twilight scrambled to her hooves. It didn't matter if Nyx was Nightmare Moon or not. It didn't matter if someday Nyx brought about the destruction of Equestria. It didn't matter how much she trusted the princess. Nyx was her *daughter*, and she had to protect her. She understood why Princess Celestia was scared, but this wasn't right.

Nyx was her daughter, and no real mother would let anypony take her child away.

Moving as fast she could, Twilight burst through the library's front door. She couldn't really hope to face off against the royal guards, let alone Princess Celestia. Still, she couldn't just let Nyx be taken away. She could try and appeal to the princess one more time, beg her to be allowed to stay with Nyx. If that didn't work, she could at least calm Nyx down and assure her everything was going to be all right. Twilight didn't know what she was going to do, but she had to do something. Nyx deserved that much.

Yet it was too late. The chariot had taken off and was flying away. Twilight tried to chase it, running with her eyes turned skyward. She began to call on her magic, hoping to teleport herself into the chariot, but her concentration was abruptly broken. In focusing on the chariot, Twilight had taken her eyes off the path ahead and was unable to see the rock she was racing towards. Her hoof caught on it, and she tripped, tumbled, and crashed to the ground with a brutal thud.

By the time Twilight was able to climb back to her hooves, the royal chariot was even farther away, whisked back to Canterlot by the strong wings of the royal guards who pulled it. She had no hope of catching it, no hope of teleporting onto it. Nyx was gone.

Twilight broke into tears right there, not caring who saw her or where she was as she cried openly. She had just done the unforgivable. Even if Nyx was returned to her the next day, even if Nyx was officially decreed to not be a threat to Equestria, she would never be able to forgive herself for what she had just done.

It all came rushing in too fast. The realizations and heartaches filled Twilight to the brim. She couldn't cry hard enough or fast enough; the pain was just too severe. In the end, it simply overwhelmed her, and she screamed. She cried out to the night with the loudest, most pain-filled voice that had ever escaped her lips.

“NYX!”

• • •

Spell Nexus stood, slate-gray eyes focused on the approaching chariot. He stood just outside the entrance into the grand throne room of the palace. Inside the Children of Nightmare worked to set up the ritual, though they did not look the part of Nightmare Moon’s followers. For the moment, the cult looked simply like normal ponies Nexus had recruited to assist in the delicate spell.

The royal chariot floated down from the sky, landing at the door. Princess Celestia stepped down, looking as if she had been crying. Behind her, a pair of guards moved to the chariot and brought out the sleeping Nyx.

“Are you all right?” Nexus asked, faking concern.

“No... no, I’m not,” Princess Celestia replied, trying to keep her composure but finding it difficult. “I just stole a filly away from her mother. If Nyx isn’t a threat, then what I’ve done is inexcusable.”

“Such a task should not have fallen to one with a heart as tender as yours, Your Highness,” Nexus offered solemnly. “But, hopefully, you shall be able to return her to Twilight unharmed in the morning.”

“No,” Celestia corrected, “the harm has already been done.”

The princess stepped past Nexus and approached the ritual that had been constructed in the throne room. Four stone columns, with torches burning at their tops, stood in a perfect square around a mural. The mural, which had been magically infused into the stone of the floor, was comprised of a sun and a crescent moon standing together in perfect union.

To Celestia, it was an image meant to celebrate her and Luna’s long-awaited reunion. Spell Nexus, however, struggled to suppress the grin that wanted to crawl onto his face. In his mind, the floor mural was a fitting place to perform the spell: a perfect backdrop for the event that would mark the beginning of the end of the Royal Sisters.

“How does this spell work, Nexus?” Princess Celestia asked as her guards gingerly placed Nyx on a single soft pillow in the center of the elaborate ritual.

“You need not concern yourself with the mechanics,” Nexus assured the princess. “The spell will handle all the work. All you need to do is stand in the center and feed your magic into the columns. When it has built up enough energy, it will activate.”

Princess Celestia nodded and strode into the center of the ritual. At the same time, all the unicorns, pegasi, and earth ponies that had been finishing the spell moved away. Nexus, however, stayed close, standing just on the edge of the spell circle as he watched the princess with slate-gray eyes.

Celestia approached the center of the spell slowly, her towering shadow falling over Nyx. She had put Nyx to sleep with a sedation spell during the flight to Canterlot. It had been necessary. Nyx’s wails and pleas had almost caused her to falter. She had almost ordered her guards to turn the chariot around, so she could return Nyx to Ponyville and beg Twilight for forgiveness.

But she, as the princess, could not let her resolve waver. This had to be done. It was better for all of Equestria if they knew, for certain, if this filly posed a threat. Still, as she prepared to begin the spell, Princess Celestia bent in close to Nyx and whispered a prayer into the filly’s ear.

“Please, my little pony... Please, let Twilight be right about you.”

With that, Celestia took in a deep breath and spread her wings. Her horn began to glow, and slowly trails of energy, which danced and moved like threads in an intangible wind, formed between her horn and the four columns.

With each passing moment, more and more of the spiderweb-like threads formed. The stone columns began to glow with spell runes, and even the edges of the floor mural began to give off light. The spell was building in power, and, as it did, Nexus slowly circled. He stayed just beyond the border of the ritual, striding slowly without taking his eyes off the princess. He passed behind a column, and, when he reemerged from the other side, his eyes had turned turquoise.

“How much magic does this require, Nexus?” Princess Celestia called out, her voice strained from her effort.

“Just a little more, Your Highness. The columns just need a little more charge.”

Princess Celestia tossed her head and furrowed her brow in concentration as she put more of her magic into the spell. She felt a twinge in her horn. The spell reached full

power, and she prepared herself for it to activate. She didn't know what to expect. Perhaps she would see visions or see Nyx transform into the mare she would become.

Yet the nature of the magic in the spell changed. The stone columns, which had been glowing pastel colors, shifted to a threatening red tone. Celestia felt something hit her in the chest with the strength of a hard buck. The force was enough that her hooves were lifted off the ground, and she was sent flying across the room. Her flight ended when she crashed into the throne room doors.

The force of the impact knocked the wind from her chest, and it left Princess Celestia momentarily stunned. When she did recover, however, she scrambled to her hooves and looked in the direction of the spell.

The ponies that had been around the room had converged on the spell. They all moved inside the ring drawn on the floor, and standing in the very center of them was Nexus. He looked across the room at Princess Celestia, turquoise eyes dancing in joyous victory.

“For the night eternal, for Equestria's true queen!” Nexus called out, grinning devilishly before his horn lit up. Energy began to crackle across the stone columns, and their harsh red color grew brighter and brighter. The light soon enveloped Nexus and the other ponies, and, with a final flash, they all disappeared.

It was then, all too late, that Princess Celestia realized the treachery that thrived in her royal court.

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FLASH... KRAC-CROOO-OOOM!

Nexus and the rest of the Children of Nightmare appeared in the center of Ponyville, their arrival announced with a flash of light and a rumbling sound of thunder. It was a thunder that woke everypony in the town from their sleep, many moving outside to see where the noise had come from.

“Form a perimeter,” Nexus ordered the ponies around him. “Let none draw near. The spell that will finish our queen's resurrection has already begun, but it will take time for her to draw in the magic needed.”

The cult members nodded and quickly spread out. The earth ponies and unicorns formed a tight ring around the still-glowing red pillars while the pegasi took to the sky and circled, becoming a threatening air force. Other members of the cult, who had been

told to wait in Ponyville, quickly rushed in from the nearby streets and alleyways. They brought with them saddlebags filled with cloaks. All the ponies present quickly donned their uniforms as their eyes turned turquoise.

Night Wind, Gray Gale, and Stonewall, Nexus's lieutenants, were among those who had been waiting in Ponyville. Joining them was a thin earth pony with a regal blue mane and a gently turned mustache. To the locals, he was known as Horte Cuisine, a waiter at a local restaurant. To the Children of Nightmare, however, he had been the spy at Nyx's school on the Learn and Play day.

"So, is it really her?" Gray Gale asked, looking at the black filly who was still sedated by Princess Celestia's spell.

"Yes. While Princess Celestia would doubt this filly's power, I can see the truth. Our queen lies before us," Nexus assured, looking skyward. The red glowing columns acted as mystical magnets, drawing in the wild magical energy that lingered in the air. The magic, along with some trails of indigo smoke, began to circle, spin, and spiral down like water in a whirlpool. It all fed into the sleeping Nyx, who began to physically grow and mature. Her vest ripped as her torso grew too large for it to contain, and her glasses fell to the ground and cracked on impact.

"Should we be worried about the villagers?" Stonewall asked. He looked over his shoulder and took note of the crowd of ponies that was growing beyond the perimeter formed by the rest of the cult. The residents of the small community looked on in confusion, fear, and awe.

"Our brothers and sisters will keep the crowd at bay, and Princess Celestia will not be able to follow us quickly enough to interfere," Spell Nexus assured before smiling down at Nyx, who had already grown much larger. "Look, our queen is already at half the size she should be. We have nothing to fear. No pony can stop us."

• • •

Twilight galloped at a full sprint. She had seen the flash of light. She had heard the thunder. Yet the thing that had Twilight worried was the powerful surge of magic she had felt. She didn't know what was going on, but, for that much magic to be used at one moment, it had to be something very large.

After rounding a corner, Twilight slowed and joined the huge crowd of ponies gathered around the glowing-red stone columns in the center of the town. She jumped a few times,

struggling to see past everypony else. She caught glimpses of the ponies near the columns and felt her blood run cold. It was the cult who had ponynapped her.

In a panic, Twilight tried to push her way through the crowd. She didn't know what the cult was doing in the center of the village, but she knew it was going to be bad. She had to try and stop them. She couldn't just let them finish whatever spell they were casting. She just had to get through the crowd, she just had to—

A crack of thunder stopped Twilight in her tracks and drew her eyes skyward. Above the town, trails of indigo smoke circled, conducting sparks of fierce blue energy. A second crack of thunder came as a ring of energy spread out through the air, stretching across the night sky like a ripple across a pond.

The ring of energy, however, abruptly stopped and began flowing back. It collapsed into a single tight sphere, taking with it the indigo smoke and other lingering magics that had been floating in the sky. Then, with a third and final crack of thunder, the energy shot down to the ground, striking the center of the spell like lightning.

• • •

Nyx awoke just as the last of the magic fed into her. Her body crackled and tingled with the last traces of energy, and, for a few moments, she was unable to move. Then she was able to feel her heart beating in her chest and the air in her lungs. She was able to stretch her wings, and, slowly, she climbed to her hooves, standing taller than she had ever stood before in her life.

No, that wasn't quite true. She had been this tall before, though... it had been a long time ago.

Once on her hooves, Nyx looked down at the five ponies standing near her; they retreated quickly under her gaze. They bowed as low as they could, pressing their noses against the ground in respect. And, as Nyx looked upon them, she began to smile... and then she began to laugh.

She laughed, but it wasn't the giggle of a filly. It began as a dry chuckle, but grew in volume, becoming loud and haughty. She raised her head, looking at the night sky as her laughter became crazed and maniacal. It rang out, silencing all other sounds across Ponyville.

It was the laughter of somepony who had just realized a cruel and terrible truth.

Nyx finally understood everything. She understood why she woke up in the Everfree Forest when she did. She understood why she had memories of fighting Twilight Sparkle. She understood why she was able to say those lines in that school play so well.

She remembered what she was, *who* she was.

Nyx turned her gaze away from the night sky and looked across the crowd of ponies that filled the center of Ponyville. They were ponies who had towered over her mere moments before, but were now dwarfed by her stature. She remembered another time when she stood over them, looking upon their sun-loving faces. She recalled how, on the day of the Summer Sun Celebration, they looked upon her with fear.

And now... now they were looking over her with *greater* fear, for now they *knew* who she was. It should have made her happy. Inspiring such fear should have filled her with joy. Yet it made her feel... uneasy.

Nyx gave her head a slight shake to banish that small, stray thought. She was enjoying this, she was sure of it. She put on a wicked smile and spoke to the crowd with a voice that was regal, smooth, and threatening.

“My friends, neighbors... *subjects*, why do you look upon me with such fear?” Nyx asked. “You of all ponies should feel honored! For you will be able to tell your children and your children’s children that it was *you* who witnessed your queen’s rebirth. That it was *you* who witnessed her moment of ascension and enlightenment. That it was *you* who showed her kindness when she was incomplete.”

Nyx took a step forward, moving past the cloaked ponies who bowed to her. She walked into the crowd, and ponies in her way quickly cleared a path, as they *should*. “Yes, I was among you this entire time, though I was by no means trying to deceive you. No, I truly had no idea who I was, where I was, what was going on. And yet you graciously accepted me into your community. When I take what is rightfully mine, I’ll be sure to remember your kindness... as long as you obey me and give me the respect I deserve.

“There are, however, those who deserve to be mentioned,” Nyx continued as she walked through the silent crowd. “Ponies who deserve special thanks, for, without them, I may not be standing here tonight with my mind clear and power restored. Among those are two *very* special fillies. Now, I wonder where they could be.

“Ah, there you are, Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon.”

An entire group of ponies stepped to the side, clearing a path between Nyx and the two young bullies who had tormented her so. She approached them slowly, and her smile grew with each step. She towered over them now, like a giant, and now they cowered in fear.

“Yes, everypony, take a good, long look at these two. When I was but a meek filly, it was *they* who set me up with a prank. It was *they* who sent me into the Everfree Forest, and it was there, amongst the trees, that I came across some lingering bits of my magic. It was because of *them* that I regained my most important memories and regained enough of my power to attract the attention of those who would finish the spell that gave me a life and body of my own.

“So,” Nyx continued, her voice taking on a venomously sweet tone, “you could say that *they* are *directly* and *fully* responsible for me being able to stand among you as I am. For, without that fateful trip, I may have simply stayed a harmless, timid, little filly.”

Nyx leaned down, staring at the two fillies who were now terrified beyond belief of the pony they had once bullied and teased. Nyx, however, wore the gentlest of smiles. “Thank you, you two, from the bottom of my heart, for helping me change from the biggest loser in Ponyville into the mare I was meant to be.”

Nyx stood up and smirked maliciously as several ponies glared at the two fillies with anger and contempt. Oh *yes*, this was a revenge *much* sweeter than merely pulling them into a mud pit. Maybe her new subjects would do her a favor and take care of the two eyesores for her.

“N-Nyx? Is that you? Why are you doing this? What’s wrong?”

Nyx froze upon hearing the small voice. Her body became rigid, and her dragon-shaped irises pulsed feverishly with surprise. She turned to its source and saw a single young filly staring up at her. It was Scootaloo, who was looking at her, not with eyes filled with fear, but ones brimming with confusion.

Nyx could not stand to meet Scootaloo’s gaze or speak a direct reply to her question. She could only make a violent turn and stride away as quickly as the crowd could clear a path. It was only after she had distanced herself from Scootaloo that Nyx stopped and cast her head back. “No, I am not your friend... or, more accurately, I am no longer her.”

With those few words spoken, Nyx turned her head forward again, searching for somepony else to focus on. She caught sight of a familiar mulberry-colored pony in the

crowd, Cheerilee. Instantly, Nyx's mind latched onto verbally attacking her, if only to forget that Scootaloo was watching from a distance.

"Hello, Cheerilee, my teacher. Yes, I am no longer Nyx, but I'm sure *you* could tell all these ponies who I really am. After all, *you* saw the resemblance just as everypony else did. And was it not *you* who called me 'wicked and dastardly'? Was that not why I was perfect for the part in your little spring play?"

Cheerilee shakily took a few steps back, cringing as Nyx's mystical indigo mane held her chin. It was easy for Nyx to see the fear in Cheerilee's eyes and how intently she watched her star-field of a mane. Cheerilee feared it as though it were a snake that would strike out at any moment, and Nyx enjoyed the fear in her teacher's eyes. Her attention, however, was drawn away from Cheerilee when she noticed movement out of the corner of her eye.

She turned away from Cheerilee and approached the pony that was forcing her way through the crowd. The pony was a mare, a purple unicorn, who came to a stop directly in front of Nyx. She looked ragged, was panting, and had a face stained with tears, some fresh while others were long dry.

"Hello, Twilight Sparkle, my savior, my best friend... and the only one I have ever called 'mother'," Nyx said coolly. "Are you here to *lie* to me again? To tell me that I'm not a 'bitter, vengeance-driven mare'? To tell me that the most obvious answer is wrong even when the proof is right in front of your face?! *Are you here to try to comfort me with false words?!*

"Or are you here to apologize to me? To beg and grovel at my hooves? To admit that you were *wrong* to keep me in the dark? Or were you simply so desperate to care for a filly of your own that you didn't *want* to believe the truth?"

Twilight couldn't bring herself to say anything, which made Nyx furrow her brows and grit her teeth.

"*Well?!? ANSWER ME!*" Nyx shouted, anger welling up inside her from the mere sight of Twilight. It should have been pure anger, pure hatred for what Twilight Sparkle had done in the past, but, at the same time, she felt her eyes trying to water. Nyx didn't know why she suddenly felt like crying, but she forced her eyes to stop. She would not cry in front of the crowd.

She instead waited. She waited for Twilight to say something, but, when no words came, Nyx huffed and glared down at her. “You have nothing to say. Well, that’s fine, because your actions have said enough already. You *conspired* with Celestia, you *let* her take me away, and you abandoned the only pony you have ever called a daughter.”

Nyx turned her back to Twilight, her voice cold as ice as she once more forced back the tears trying to form in her eyes. “I suppose that shows how little I meant to you. Well... I don’t need you any more, and I am *ashamed* that I ever called you my mother.”

Nyx stomped a hoof, stepping away from Twilight. She did not allow herself to look back, forcing her gaze on the cloaked ponies approaching her. From those ponies, one blue unicorn stepped forward and quickly bowed in her presence.

“Our most powerful and majestic queen,” the unicorn of the group said, “Celestia and Luna can be seen in the distance along with a large contingent of the royal guard. It would not be wise to linger here and face the Royal Sisters. You are reborn, but your power may not yet be complete. Let us retreat, so that you can gather your strength. Then, when you are ready, you can bring the princesses beneath your hooves.”

Nyx looked at the unicorn, smiling. Already there were those who were willing to accept her, to regard her with the same respect others had for the Royal Sisters. “I assume you have someplace prepared.”

“Of course, my queen,” the unicorn said with the utmost reverence. “Take us in your magic, and I shall guide you to the fortress we have made ready for your rule.”

Nyx smiled and gave an approving nod to the unicorn. She looked back at the rest of the crowd, raising her voice once more to a deafening volume. “Remember this night well, for it marks the beginning of the end of the old order of Equestria! Treasure the days that come, for they shall be your last! Soon the night shall last forever, and I, Nightmare Moon, shall be Equestria’s one true queen!”

After those final words, Nightmare Moon broke into maniacal laughter, and her mystical mane swirled. The magical aura consumed all the cloaked cult ponies, and, in a single flash, they all disappeared into the night.

Nightmare Moon and the cult left the shocked ponies of Ponyville to stand in utter silence in the wake of their departure. Even the arrival of Princesses Celestia and Luna didn’t ease the dread that was pulsing through the crowd. There would be no soothing their fears, no easing of their concerns. The truth was simple and undeniable.

Nightmare Moon had returned.

They were too late. Even when they had her in their sights, they were too late. Princess Celestia's worst fears had come true. Nyx had become Nightmare Moon, and she had been the one to deliver her to those who would complete the transformation.

While Princess Luna lingered in Ponyville to find out more about what had happened, Celestia went straight back to Canterlot. Upon arriving at the palace, she ordered for her generals to be summoned. She didn't care if they needed to be roused from their beds or pulled from their spouses. Celestia needed to speak with them immediately and was making rare use of her royal rank to ensure it happened.

The royal guard took to the princess's orders, and, within minutes, some of the most trusted members of the guard were racing to fetch the generals. This left Celestia with a moment to herself, and she spent it sitting on her throne. She needed some time to rest, some time to think.

Princess Celestia began scrutinizing every recent memory she had of Spell Nexus. Surely there had to have been a clue. Surely there had to have been a sign of his treachery, yet she could not remember a single instance of doubt. Spell Nexus betraying her would be like Twilight Sparkle betraying her; it just didn't seem possible.

Yet that impossibility had become a reality. Spell Nexus had betrayed her, but, before Princess Celestia could try to figure out why, she was drawn from her thoughts. The doors to the throne room opened, and Celestia couldn't help but look to see who had entered the room. She didn't think her generals could have arrived so quickly, and they hadn't. The pony that was now striding across the room, moving with purpose in each step, was her sister, Luna.

Celestia rose from the throne and walked to meet her. "Luna, I'm surprised you were able to return so quickly. Have you already finished interviewing the residents of Ponyville?"

Luna did not reciprocate the warm welcome her sister offered. She instead glared at Celestia with hard eyes and a deep frown. "I delegated the task to a number of guards, because there is only one pony I want to talk to at the moment: You. What have you been hiding from me?"

Celestia winced under the sharpness of Luna's tone. She quickly realized the conversation she and her sister were about to have wasn't going to be one of their better ones. Still, she maintained her composure. "I don't know what you mean, sister."

“Do not speak as if you are ignorant, Celestia!” Luna snapped, her words dripping with anger. “You *know* something about what just transpired in Ponyville and of the strange mare that was seen there. Now, I shall only ask once more: What have you been hiding from me?”

Celestia turned away from her sister, unable to look her in the eyes as she began to recount the truth. “Just after the end of winter, a cult ponynapped my personal student, Twilight Sparkle, as part of an elaborate spell that would have done the unthinkable. I am happy to say that Twilight suffered nothing worse than a small cut on her leg and some rope burns. The spell in question, however, was designed to take the shreds left behind when you were saved by the Elements of Harmony and...”

“And do what?” Luna pressed.

“The spell would have taken those shreds, the lingering magic and echoes of the mare you used to be... and used them to give Nightmare Moon her own body.”

“Give Nightmare Moon her own body?” Luna echoed in disbelief, shaking her head firmly. “No, such a thing is *not* possible. I was Nightmare Moon; she cannot exist without me. She is what I became when I stole magic to make myself more powerful, and she was destroyed by the Elements of Harmony.”

Princess Celestia shook her head. “Not destroyed, Luna. The Elements of Harmony are not a force of destruction. They could only separate you from the power and jealousy that once possessed you. They peeled Nightmare Moon off of you and left behind the tattered shreds like discarded fruit peels.”

“But *how* could that be enough to reform Nightmare Moon?” Luna asked, her rage growing more intense as it was fueled by her confusion. “There is more to a mare, to a life, than power and emotions.”

“I do not claim to fully understand it,” Celestia said, “but you know how magic works just as well as I do. Truly pure magic is a rare thing. Any magic from any pony can carry with it an echo of its owner. It is why some spells are stronger when driven by emotions like anger or happiness. It is why no two unicorns have the same magic. Magic and the soul are very closely tied.

“And, because of this,” Celestia continued as she shifted on her hooves, “I can only assume that an echo of the mare you used to be, an echo of Nightmare Moon, lingered in the shreds that the Elements of Harmony left behind. *That* was what the resurrection

spell was meant to target. It was supposed to distill, reform, and strengthen that echo, so that it would be able to create a new body for Nightmare Moon.”

Luna shook her head firmly. “No, that can’t have been enough. A body could be formed of such magic, and perhaps a mind, but that would not be enough. For Nightmare Moon to exist once more, she would need to possess her own—”

“It doesn’t matter anymore,” Celestia interrupted before she turned back to face Luna. “The simple truth we must deal with is that Nightmare Moon has returned, and we must stand against her.”

“It *does* matter, Celestia!” Luna snapped. She strode up to her sister and did her best to look her straight in the eye, despite the discrepancy in their heights. “You say that all of this happened just after winter, at the cusp of spring and I must ask why? *Why* am I only told about this now?”

“I... I didn’t want to burden you with this knowledge,” Celestia answered with a caring tone. “I was going to handle it, and you already had enough to deal with. I just felt—”

Luna grunted in rage and stomped away from her sister. “I am not a filly to be foalsat anymore, Celestia! I do not need you to handle or deal with things for me, and I do not need you shielding me! I have learned much of the modern Equestria. I can speak the modern tongue and have retaken my royal duties.”

“But Luna—” Celestia tried to interrupt, but Luna stomped her hoof and forced Celestia back into silence.

“No! If the threat to Equestria is Nightmare Moon, then I should have been told. I *was* Nightmare Moon! Everything that mare did was my fault! If, somehow, somepony were to bring that... that... bring *her* back, then it’s my fault for being her in the first place!”

“Luna, stop it! You aren’t responsi—”

“Yes I am!” Luna bellowed. Her starry cloud of a mane was pulsing violently, like enraged waves on a storm-torn ocean. “And, even if I weren’t, you still should have told me about this before it became such a threat! When were you going to tell me?”

“Sister, please—”

“When, Celestia?!” Luna pressed through gritted teeth.

Celestia opened her mouth to answer, but, after a few moments, she shut her mouth again. She was unable to say anything. She had no words, and, from that silence, Luna got her answer. “You weren’t! You weren’t going to tell me anything, ever! You were hoping to keep this whole thing a secret!”

“I was only trying to protect you,” Celestia said, trying to defend herself. “I was just trying to keep you from having to—”

“Keep me from what?! Keep me from taking responsibility for my past? Keep me from doing what I can for the sake of our kingdom, for our ponies?! Nightmare Moon, either as what I was or what she is now, is my responsibility! You should have told me about this from the very beginning!”

Luna brought her hooves up and stomped them on the ground in an attempt to vent some of the rage boiling inside her. “If anything, the fact that she and I were once one and the same makes *me* more qualified to deal with this situation than *you*. At the very least, had our roles been reversed, I would have told you the truth.”

“I know,” Celestia admitted, “and perhaps you are a better mare than me in that regard. But, sister, you’ve had enough to deal with. You’ve been working yourself to the bone. You perform your duties at night and spend the rest of your waking hours trying to catch up with all that has happened during your banishment. I didn’t want to burden you any further.”

“But it was *my* burden to bear, Celestia, and we may have been able to avoid this entire situation if you had told me in the first place.” Luna sucked in a deep breath and let out a ragged, irritated sigh. “You and I, however, cannot change the past nor deny the present. Nightmare Moon is now a mare of her own, and all we can do now is try and stop whatever schemes she has formed. We should send word to your student and her friends. I imagine we will need them to wield the Elements of Harmony once more.”

Celestia tensed and shifted her gaze away from Luna. “We... may not be able to rely on the Elements of Harmony.”

Luna furrowed her eyebrows, sensing that there was still more she hadn’t been told. “Why not?”

“Do you remember Twilight’s cousin, Nyx? The one who played Nightmare Moon during the children’s play at the last Spring Festival?”

Luna's eyebrows shifted, one becoming arched as her rage took a back seat to confusion. "Of course. Why do you ask?"

"That filly is not Twilight's cousin, nor is she even related to Twilight by any familial connection. In fact, she had never been seen before her arrival in Ponyville a few days after Twilight was rescued."

Luna needed a moment to take in the information. When she realized why Celestia would suddenly bring up Nyx, her jaw dropped, and her eyes widened in disbelief. "That filly? You don't mean to tell me that—"

"Yes," Celestia confirmed, "the filly known as Nyx was the incomplete product of the original resurrection spell. This evening the cult got their hooves on her, and they were able to finish the spell they started. In truth, Nyx was always Nightmare Moon, but tonight the cult returned to her all the memories and powers she once possessed."

"But how did the cult get a hold of her?" Luna asked. "I spoke with a few ponies in Ponyville before departing. They said that the cult appeared and Nightmare Moon rose up from the center of the spell. No pony witnessed someone being taken into the ritual, and wouldn't Twilight have sent a letter if she feared Nyx was missing?"

"No, she wouldn't have," Celestia admitted with a whisper.

"Why not?"

Celestia swallowed as she struggled to find the strength to admit her own mistake. "Be... because I was the one that took Nyx. I was the one who delivered her into the hooves of that cult."

Luna was struck silent. She strode up beside her sister, expecting the punchline to what could only be a cruel joke. Yet, the expression on Celestia's face made it clear she was telling the truth. Luna couldn't help but stumble over her words in disbelief. "Celestia... why? Why would you do that?"

"For some time now, I have feared that Nyx was Nightmare Moon," Celestia confessed. "At a school function, she was able to turn another pony into a tree and displayed other magic well beyond unicorns her age. My dreams became tormented with images of her growing into the mare you used to be and threatening everypony I care about."

"I had to be sure she wasn't a threat," Celestia said, trying to defend her actions with words she didn't believe anymore. "I had to know what I was dealing with, so I could act

before Nyx could become a danger to Equestria, to Twilight, or to you. So, I spoke with Spell Nexus, and he promised a spell that would allow me to glimpse Nyx's soul. It was supposed to let me see for myself if she was a danger."

Celestia growled, and tossed her head. "But, of course, it would seem the greatest threat came *not* from Nyx but from the headmaster of my own school. Spell Nexus... How could he be involved in this? He was attacked at the beginning of last fall. His home was ransacked for the shreds of Nightmare Moon. The thieves beat him so badly that he had to be hospitalized for weeks. He showed no signs of treachery.

"He was once my student!" Celestia bellowed, punctuating her words with a stomp. "Why would he betray me?!"

"I do not know, Celestia, but there is a far more pressing question you are avoiding," Luna said firmly, steering the conversation back to the matters at hoof. "The question I've asked, the one that you have yet to answer, is why we cannot rely on the Elements of Harmony."

"Because I dare not ask a mother to strike down her own daughter!" Celestia shouted, directing her anger with Nexus not only at Luna, but also at herself. "Not when I tore that daughter away."

"Mother... daughter? Celestia, you do not mean to tell me..."

"I do. I speak of Twilight and Nyx. Since the end of winter my student has been caring for Nyx. From what Twilight told me, it began innocently enough. Like me, she feared that Nyx was Nightmare Moon, but she did not want to risk an innocent filly being unjustly banished to the moon. Thus, until she could be certain of Nyx's origins, Twilight kept her a secret.

"Yet, over the months they spent together, Twilight Sparkle grew to be more than just a caretaker. She..." Celestia struggled with her words. "She came to care for Nyx like a daughter. She became her adoptive mother."

Luna's face contorted into a horrified expression. "And is that why we cannot rely on the Elements of Harmony?! Because you stole Nyx away from Twilight?! Celestia, it's one thing to keep this a secret from me, but what could have possessed you to... do you realize that—"

"I am fully aware of what I've done!" Celestia bellowed, cutting off Luna's accusation.

“No, I don’t think you are!” Luna yelled back, raising her voice to match Celestia’s. “Don’t you think Twilight would have noticed if Nyx acted like the mare I used to be? Don’t you think she would have sent you a letter if she feared something was wrong? You once told me you trusted Twilight completely. Why would you doubt her NOW?”

“I could not stand by and wait for Nightmare Moon to—”

“Yes, you could have!” Luna shouted back, her voice booming. “If Nyx was going to become Nightmare Moon, there would have been warnings, signs. She wouldn’t have just transformed overnight. Why did you act before there was an actual threat? You realize that it’s your fault this happened, don’t you? It’s your fault Nightmare Moon—”

“**I know!**” Celestia shouted, her composure breaking like a frail twig. “Do you actually think for a moment that I *wanted* to do any of this?! To cause my dear student such pain?! I do *not* need to be told the heinous nature of my actions!

“But I could not wait for Nyx to become Nightmare Moon!” Celestia said with a flare of her wings. “I could not wait until that witch was standing on our doorstep with half of Equestria destroyed in her wake! I *had* to act preemptively. I *had* to be able to prepare, to get ready, so that if Nyx *did* change into Nightmare Moon, I would be ready to stop her before anypony got hurt.”

“But why?!” Luna demanded. “Why couldn’t you wait?! Why did you feel you had to act?!”

“***Because the last time I waited, I lost you for a thousand years!***” Celestia screamed.

The fire of Luna’s anger cooled under the weight of those words, and she couldn’t look away as Celestia crumbled in front of her like a sand castle being eroded by the ocean’s waves. Celestia’s wings fell limp, and she hung her head so low her nose almost touched the floor. Tears began to stream from her eyes, forced out by the guilt, fear, and pain welling up inside of her.

“The last time I waited,” Celestia said quietly, “the last time I decided to just wait and see if things would get better or worse was when you were showing the first signs of your jealousy. I thought, I hoped, you would get through it. I thought that surely the ponies of Equestria would appreciate your night as I did. I decided to wait, to let things work themselves out... We both know how successful that was.

“So condemn me for what I’ve done, Luna; it’s no less than I deserve,” Celestia said. She raised her head to meet Luna’s gaze as tears continued to flow down her face. “I stole a

daughter from her mother because I feared the monster she could become, and, in the process, I hurt my dearest student, Twilight. Even worse, because of my actions, my fears have become reality.

“I, however, couldn’t just sit by and wait. I couldn’t give Nightmare Moon the chance to cast her dark shadow over Equestria once more. I couldn’t let her hurt Twilight. I couldn’t let her hurt you. I just... couldn’t stand by and hope that things would work out.”

“Sister,” Luna said. Her voice had a kind tone for the first time since the conversation had begun. Celestia, however, shied away from the comfort. She turned and walked slowly back to her throne, doing her best to magically dry her eyes.

“But I can’t think about that now. I have to focus on the threat Nightmare Moon poses. I must be ready to stand against her.”

“Not ‘I’, sister, ‘we’,” Luna corrected. She moved beside Celestia as a reassuring smile spread onto her lips. “Just as Nightmare Moon threatens me, she threatens you, and I’m *not* going to let her hurt my elder sister. We’ll work together, we’ll find her, and, if she won’t listen to reason, we’ll do what is necessary to protect Equestria.”

Celestia smiled, nodded, and leaned into Luna. “Thank you, sister. I don’t think I could face this if you weren’t beside me.”

“That’s what sisters are for.”

• • •

Nightmare Moon stood in an elegant hall, taking in its finely-crafted beauty. Regal black marble columns flanked either side of the hall and rose to support a high, arched ceiling. Rich purple curtains were draped from the columns, and torch holders glowed with white, magical gems. The finest detail of the room, however, was the ceiling. It was encrusted with diamonds, using the precious gems as stars in a mural of the nighttime sky. One gem in particular, which looked to be as big as Nightmare Moon’s head, had been used to mimic the full moon in all its glory.

“Does it please you, my Queen?” Spell Nexus asked with a respectful bow.

“It does,” Nightmare Moon replied as she moved toward her new throne. It had rich night-blue cushions and a frame made of rare black oak from the dragon country. Nightmare Moon couldn’t help but admire its every detail as she settled into

it. She fluttered her wings, and a contented smile formed as she looked across the room. It was her throne room, and it existed only to compliment her own elegant beauty.

“You have done well, Spell Nexus,” Nightmare Moon said, “but I am curious. How did you manage to construct such a grand room in secrecy?”

“It is not just this room, my Queen, but a whole castle,” Nexus replied. He rose from his bow and approached the throne. “We found an unexpected ally in a clan of wild mutts known as the Diamond Dogs. They were a more than willing workforce once we promised to assist them in their search for precious gemstones.

“They dug out this entire cavern, and then assisted in the construction of the castle,” Spell Nexus continued. “Once you have defeated Celestia and Luna, there are but a few dozen feet of rock separating this castle from the world above. Should you wish, it would be trivial for you to raise the castle to the surface. It would be a grand proclamation of your new place as Equestria’s ruler.”

Nightmare Moon’s smile widened, and she pictured her castle rising up and casting a harsh shadow across the land. Yes, it was a good thought, but one she would save for later. She could not raise the castle before defeating the Royal Sisters, and her curiosity was not yet sated.

“Tell me, why were the Diamond Dogs willing to put forth so much effort for the gemstones?”

“I do not know, Your Majesty,” Spell Nexus answered. “We never questioned why the Diamond Dogs wanted the gems. Perhaps they are like dragons and eat them. Or perhaps they just like to roll around in piles of gemstones as hogs roll in mud. In the end, does the reason really matter? The important thing was that they were a strong, fast, and willing workforce.”

Nightmare Moon’s eyes flashed, her curiosity fed by Spell Nexus’s words. What *did* the Diamond Dogs do with the gems? Was Nexus right? Did they use them as a source of food or did they, in fact, roll around in them? But wouldn’t rolling around in gemstones hurt? Perhaps they had thick skin, or maybe they used the gems in another way. Perhaps they used them to make clothes or used them as a source of currency.

There were simply too many questions, and Nightmare Moon would have at least some of them answered. “Spell Nexus, I want to see the leader of the Diamond Dogs or whichever of them you brokered this deal with.”

Nexus looked up at Nightmare Moon with equal parts concern and confusion. “Forgive me, Your Highness, but part of our agreement with the Diamond Dogs was that, at the conclusion of the deal, they would migrate much further into their tunnels. We could not risk them interfering with our work.”

A frown formed on Nightmare Moon’s lips. She *hated* it when she couldn’t find the answer to a question. Her insatiable curiosity was her vice. It was why she loved to sit in Cheerilee’s classroom every day when she was in school. Oh, how she found such *joy* in learning new things from the mulberry pony who—

Nightmare Moon shut her eyes and seized control of her mind before it could wander further. She could not think of those memories anymore. She was a queen, and Cheerilee was no longer her teacher. Cheerilee, like everypony else, was just a subject that needed to be brought into line, nothing more.

“I see,” Nightmare Moon said as she turned her gaze back to Spell Nexus. “That is unfortunate. Still, if a Diamond Dog is found, have him brought to me. There are some questions I would like answered.”

“As you wish, Your Majesty,” Spell Nexus said with another bow. “Now, your Highness, please allow me to show you the rest of your new castle.”

• • •

Nightmare Moon followed behind Nexus as he gave her a grand tour of her new home. The castle was beautiful, every bit as regal as Canterlot Palace. Yet, Nightmare Moon found herself questioning some of the decorations. Around almost every corner there was a mural or statue depicting her.

The quantity alone would have been creepy, but there was also an unnerving, constant theme in how she was being portrayed. While each mural and statue was unique, each was made up of dark, threatening visuals. One had her standing over the battle-broken bodies of Celestia and Luna. Another had her casting a dark shadow over cowering ponies. They were all images of the future Equestria could look forward to, and it left a strange feeling in the pit of Nightmare Moon’s stomach.

“And here is the royal library,” Nexus announced, drawing Nightmare Moon’s attention away from the castle decorations as the pair entered the grand, bookcase-lined room. “Please forgive the lack of books on the shelves. We built it to house the collection from the Canterlot Palace. Once you have taken your place as Equestria’s true queen, we

intend to move the collection from there to here, should you wish to continue using this castle as your palace.”

Nightmare Moon nodded and let her gaze drift across the mostly empty shelves. The room was just as impressive as the rest of the castle. The towering bookshelves dominated the walls, and the entire room was wrapped in a cool, dark color scheme. Yet, she found one aspect of the decor unappealing. There was a painting above the library’s fireplace which showed her standing over the charred, blackened ruins of Canterlot.

Why did every painting, mural, and statue in her castle have to make her look like she was leading an army from Tartarus?

Deciding she would leave that thought for another time, Nightmare Moon strolled around the room. She noticed a few pegasus ponies fluttering about, putting away some of books that had been gathered. Like all the other servants and guards she had seen, the pegasi possessed something that drew her curiosity.

“Why do all of you have eyes like mine, Nexus?” Nightmare Moon asked.

“It is your blessing, my Queen,” Nexus replied, swelling with pride. “As you may know, I was once the headmaster of Celestia’s School for Gifted Unicorns. Upon your initial defeat, Celestia tasked me with studying your shredded remains. It was upon examining those shreds that I became enlightened to your wisdom and power.

“It was on that same day my eyes turned the turquoise color you see now, and it became a sign of the order. I bestow the gift of these eyes upon each pony who joins the Children of Nightmare when they pledge their service to you.”

Nightmare Moon nodded, turning her attention back to the shelves as she perused the few books in the library’s existing collection. She didn’t recognize most of the titles, but one book did catch her eye. Coming to a stop, she used her magic to remove the book from the shelf. She gently cracked it open and flipped it to the title page. *Grand Tales of Equestria*.

• • •

“And, with that final buck, the wolves were driven from the town,” Twilight said, looking up from the book she was reading aloud. “And the ponies rejoiced. They had once again been saved by the only mare among them brave enough to stay out at night, the village’s own black-coated guardian: Nyx of the Night.”

“Did you really name me after her?!” Nyx asked in disbelief. She squirmed deeper under the covers of her bed and rested her head on the pillow as Twilight shut the book that had been the source of the evening’s bedtime story.

Twilight laughed and set the book down. “Yes, though I’ll admit it was mostly because she has a black coat like yours.”

“Do... do you think I could be as brave as she was someday?” Nyx asked.

“Of course,” Twilight answered with a smile. “Being brave isn’t like a special talent; you just have to be able to stand up against the things that scare you.”

“Have you ever had to stand up to something really scary?”

Twilight nodded. “I have. This one time, my friends and I had to go convince a dragon to leave his cave and go someplace else.”

Nyx’s eyes went wide. “Really!?”

“Oh yes. He was taking a nap in the nearby mountains, and his snoring was throwing all of this black smoke into the air. So, Princess Celestia asked—” Twilight stopped her story, smiled knowingly, and looked at Nyx before playfully tapping her on the nose. “Hey, you just got a bedtime story. You don’t need another.”

“Awwwww,” Nyx complained, “but what about the dragon?”

“I promise I’ll tell you the story tomorrow night,” Twilight assured before she gently kissed Nyx on the forehead. “Now, go to sleep.”

“Okay,” Nyx replied with a yawn, letting her eyes slide shut.

• • •

“Your Majesty?”

Nightmare Moon shook her head, snapping the book shut and replacing it on the shelf before looking to Spell Nexus. “My apologies, I can get caught up in my reading.”

“No apologies necessary, my Queen. This is, after all, your library,” Nexus replied. “Though there is still much of the castle left to see.”

• • •

“Here we have the guard barracks, where we train those new to the order to defend this castle. The word of your return is spreading. Those I have sent out to recruit new ponies to our cause are finding several eager to get on good terms with you. It would seem not all of Equestria is foolish enough to stand against you.”

Nightmare Moon didn't offer any reply as she watched the soldiers. They were standing in a line, each one taking turns attacking a set of training dummies under the watchful eye of their trainer. What drew Nightmare Moon's eye, however, were the dummies themselves, which bore a striking resemblance to a certain set of mares.

“Why do the training dummies look like Twilight Sparkle and her friends?”

“Because it is they who are the greatest threat to you, my Queen,” Nexus explained. “It was they who defeated you, and we shall not let them have the opportunity to do so again. Should they get the idea in their heads to attempt to bring their unified power against you once more, they will be dealt with *immediately*.”

Nexus's words were punctuated as a guard attacked a training dummy that looked like Twilight Sparkle and, with a single swift motion, beheaded it. The cotton-stuffed head bounced on the ground and rolled to Nightmare Moon's hooves. She stared at it and then spoke with a firm tone. “No.”

“My Queen?”

“Should the Bearers of the Elements of Harmony come to the castle, they are not to be harmed. The Elements of Harmony themselves are to be taken from them for safe keeping. Then, Twilight Sparkle is to be brought directly to me and the rest of her friends are to be locked in the dungeon. I will then decide how I want to punish them for standing against me.”

“Of course,” Nexus replied with an approving, devilish smile. “I can fully understand your desire to punish them with your own hooves.”

Nightmare Moon turned her back on the training dummies and began to walk towards the door. “Good, and I want one of the Twilight Sparkle training dummies brought to my bed chamber. It is to be intact.”

“It will be there before the end of the tour,” Spell Nexus assured, choosing not to question his queen's wishes.

• • •

“The dining hall is, of course, spacious enough for any sort of event, should you ever be interested in holding a gala or other such frivolity,” Nexus explained as the pair walked alongside the long, regal table that dominated the center of the dining room. It was made of softly-colored brown oak, covered in a night-blue table cloth, and decorated with sterling silver candelabra, each holding three candles.

“You’ll also be happy to know we already have employed a royal chef who is eager to tickle your taste buds with some of his deserts,” Nexus said happily. He motioned to a unicorn standing in the corner of the room. That unicorn quickly galloped forward and levitated a tray in front of Nightmare Moon. It was filled to the brim with chocolate cupcakes that had been expertly decorated with a thick swirl of purple and a single curl of white chocolate set delicately on top.

• • •

“Seriously, who would have thought making cupcakes would be so hard?” Scootaloo grumbled. The four Cutie Mark Crusaders were standing in the middle of a kitchen, which was covered in the messy aftermath of their baking endeavors.

“I told you,” Apple Bloom said. “I told you it wasn’t easy.”

“So girls, how are things going?” Pinkie Pie chirped, sticking her head into the kitchen.

“Not so good,” Sweetie Belle admitted.

“Please don’t be mad about the mess,” Nyx begged.

“Oh, girls, I’m not mad! You should have seen the mess I made of the bakery when I first started working for the Cakes. After all, my special talent is throwing parties, not baking,” Pinkie Pie reassured them. “Now, why don’t we get this place cleaned up? Then I’ll show you how to make cupcakes one more time.”

The faces of the four fillies lit up with smiles, and they eagerly helped clean the mess. Then, under Pinkie Pie’s close supervision and unending enthusiasm, each filly managed to make a batch of cupcakes that was not only edible, but good tasting. Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle made vanilla cupcakes with apple and chocolate frosting respectively.

Scootaloo and Nyx, on the other hoof, had made chocolate cupcakes. Nyx’s were frosted with a simple vanilla frosting, but Scootaloo tried to frost hers so each one would have a

rainbow on it. Unfortunately, she had not been able to keep the colors separated. They had mixed and swirled together into make a dark purple frosting. Scootaloo was disappointed, but, in the end, the cupcakes still tasted good, and that was what mattered.

• • •

“My Queen, do the cupcakes displease you?” Nexus asked, noticing Nightmare Moon had once more fallen silent.

“No,” she replied, using magic to gently nudge the tray away. “I am just not hungry at the moment. Have some delivered to my chamber. I will taste them later.”

The chef nodded, galloping off to place the best of his desserts in the bedchamber. At the same time, Nexus showed Nightmare Moon into the kitchen to prove it was capable of handling any and all requests she could make of it or its staff.

• • •

The high spirits Nightmare Moon had been in when she first arrived at her castle had faded. Each room Spell Nexus showed her dredged up unwanted memories and desires. She was no longer a weak, cowardly filly; she was no longer Nyx. Still, the months she spent as a filly would not give her any peace, and it was putting her in a foul mood.

Despite the small headache chewing on the front of her brain, Nightmare Moon continued to follow Spell Nexus. Thankfully, he had taken notice of her degrading mood, and had rushed through the tail end of the castle tour. They were just about to enter the last room on the tour.

The moment the door to the chamber opened, a tingling sensation washed over Nightmare Moon. Magic, very powerful magic, was being performed within. It wasn't anything on the scale of the spell that had given her a body of her own, but the power was still respectable.

“Spell Nexus, what sort of sorcery is being performed in here?” Nightmare Moon asked. They walked into the room, and her mood began to lift.

“Research, my Queen,” Spell Nexus answered with a smile, waving his hoof across the room. “Welcome to the research laboratory.”

Nightmare Moon eagerly looked across the lab. A number of desks and tables were set about the space. At each station a unicorn worked, twisting and bending magical energy.

Some seemed to be just casting spells, while others were working with different baubles, trinkets, and equipment. Along with the unicorns, a number of pegasi and earth ponies were assisting the researchers by taking notes and fetching materials.

“Everything,” Nightmare Moon quietly muttered with a faint smile, “tell me everything about the work being done here.”

Spell Nexus gave an uneasy smile. He was glad that this room seemed to please his queen, but the curiosity she displayed was far more intense than he would have expected. Still, he nodded and quickly led her about the room.

The first research station they approached was by far the largest. A series of lamps had been mounted above the table, half of them shining with a bright yellow light, while the other half had a pale, bluish-white glow. On the table itself, beneath the lamps, several different kinds of plants had been organized into neat rows. A single black barrier ran down the middle of the table, ensuring the plants under the yellow lights were separated from the plants under the blue lights.

“What is this?” Nightmare Moon asked, looking between the two batches of plants.

“Here we are testing our latest batch of plants that can grow under eternal moonlight. We initially focused this research on agricultural plants such as grains, fruits, and vegetables. Those plants were finished some time ago, and we’re ready to begin replanting Equestria’s fields, gardens, and orchards with the new plant breeds.”

“Then what are you currently developing?” Nightmare Moon asked as she inspected the plants more closely.

“More frivolous plants such as flowers, grasses, and less productive species of trees,” Nexus answered. “Some of the researchers made the point that Equestria would be far less picturesque without its many forests, plains, and flowered towns. I was inclined to agree with them, but I, of course, asked them to focus on flowers that compliment your beautiful night before proceeding onto other species.”

Nightmare Moon gave a satisfied nod and followed Nexus. Each station held some bit of magic meant to make the eternal night possible, which also meant she was getting abruptly acquainted with the natural effects of never having any sunlight. The withering plants, the creeping cold, these were the things the Children of Nightmare were working to solve. Yet, her gut began to twist with guilt. During the Summer Sun Celebration, she had plunged Equestria into eternal night without considering any of these ramifications.

What was she thinking back then? Why did she not realize what the eternal night meant? Ponies would have seen her sky, but they would not have survived for much longer after that. Nightmare Moon tried to remember why she hadn't considered the consequences of her actions, but found she could not. It was like a piece of her memories was missing, the memories surrounding her motivations. She knew she had those motivations; she knew what they were. Yet, when she tried to remember them directly, what they felt like and why they had driven her, it was like she was grasping at nothing.

"My Queen?"

Nightmare Moon shook her head, realizing she had zoned out once more. She turned to Spell Nexus, who was looking at her curiously. "Yes?"

"I'm sorry, I was wondering if you had any questions for the research team."

Nightmare Moon shook her head, turning towards the door. "No, Nexus, I do not have any questions for them. They have been doing good work, and I'm pleased to see you have endeavored to make Equestria a paradise of the eternal night."

Spell Nexus smiled before he and the whole research team bowed. "You honor us with your kind words."

Nightmare Moon huffed, fluttering her wings. "Just make sure, that once I have unseated Celestia and Luna from Equestria's throne, that you do not waste time transforming Equestria. I will not have this country become a frozen wasteland."

"I assure you, my Queen, we will work with all haste to make Equestria a paradise worthy of your rule."

"Good," Nightmare Moon stated flatly. "Now, I am tired and wish to rest."

"Then I'll escort you to your private chambers without delay," Spell Nexus said eagerly before leading Nightmare Moon back into the hallway.

• • •

"And here are your private chambers, my Queen," Nexus said, his horn opening the large, elegant door. "You will find a pair of guards stationed outside at all hours, should you ever need any assistance. We only used the finest furniture, and I picked out the decorations myself. Does it please you?"

“Yes,” Nightmare Moon replied, though she had barely even looked at the room before she stepped inside.

“I am honored to hear you say that, my Queen. Now, you are undoubtedly tired. I will leave you to rest, and, when you are ready to begin the campaign to seize Equestria, simply have one of the guards come find me.”

“I will,” Nightmare Moon replied flatly. She turned and watched Nexus bow one final time before leaving. He pulled the door shut behind him, and, only then, did Nightmare Moon take in the atmosphere and furnishings of the room. Like the rest of the castle, it was decorated in a nighttime theme, with dark blues and purples accented by moons and stars. A perfectly circular bed sat in the center of the room. It was easily large enough to fit her comfortably, and it rested beneath an intricate fresco of the moon on the ceiling.

With only mild interest, Nightmare Moon circled the room once and examined all of the new furniture. There was a fireplace, a vanity mirror, a set of dressers, a few tables, a bookcase, a door to a small exterior balcony, and a writing desk. It was everything somepony would need to enjoy a quiet night in their bedroom, and, as Nexus said, it was all the finest furniture.

It, however, did little to improve Nightmare Moon’s mood. She finished examining the rest of the room and turned her attention back to the bed. There, resting on the soft looking blanket, were the two items she had requested during the day: a tray of carefully decorated cupcakes and the training dummy that resembled Twilight Sparkle.

Focusing on the desserts first, Nightmare Moon gently lifted and removed the paper from one of the cupcakes. She took a single, gingerly bite and smiled at the flavor. It was good. It was moist, smooth and it tasted so much like the cupcakes Pinkie Pie—

The cupcake hit the door a moment later, thrown across the room by Nightmare Moon’s magic. It bounced off the door, crumbled to pieces, and fell to the floor as some of its frosting clung to its point of impact. Nightmare Moon then took up the tray and slammed it, along with all the remaining cupcakes, against the door. She pressed down hard, using it to flatten each one of the frosted desserts for several seconds before she released her magic.

The tray stuck to the door for a moment, but then fell free to reveal the results of Nightmare Moon’s anger, the squished mess of cupcake crumbs and frosting. With the tray no longer holding it up, the gooey mess began to slide down the door. It left a smear of frosting in its wake and only came to a stop once it had reached the floor.

The next thing to fall under Nightmare Moon's hateful gaze was the training dummy of Twilight Sparkle. She lifted it with her magical mane and held it in front of her face. At first, her grip was careful, gentle, but then she began to squeeze tightly around the dummy's neck.

Nightmare Moon stood there for several seconds, strangling the lifeless doll. She then threw it on the ground and began stomping. Again and again she lifted her body up and brought her forehooves down on the Twilight dummy. Only when it was leaking cotton from a number of holes and a leg was about to fall off did Nightmare Moon cease her assault.

As a final insult to the doll and the pony it resembled, Nightmare Moon hurled the dummy across the room. It bounced off the floor and ended up disappearing into the space beneath the writing desk, where Nightmare Moon chose to leave it. She stomped over to the balcony door, threw it open, and stepped outside to look at the exterior of her castle and the cavern it was contained in.

She would be Equestria's queen, she would overthrow Celestia and Luna, and she... she would make Twilight Sparkle pay.

“Ah can’t believe Nyx turned out to be Nightmare Moon. It... it makes just about as much sense as a blue apple,” Applejack commented.

“I can’t believe you were in on it the whole time and didn’t tell us!” Rainbow Dash snapped, pointing an accusing hoof at Rarity.

Rarity sat up defensively. “Do *not* take that tone with me, Rainbow Dash! Twilight made me promise not to tell. What was I supposed to do, betray her trust? We didn’t think Nyx was capable of this, and you’re not the one bearing the brunt of what’s happened.” Her tone softened, and she looked to the library staircase. “Twilight... she is just devastated. She’s been crying her eyes out since Nightmare Moon disappeared. I had to carry the poor thing all the way back here and put her to bed.”

“Do you think she will be all right?” Fluttershy asked.

“I... I don’t know,” Rarity admitted. “She’s taking what happened very hard.”

“I’d be more surprised if she *didn’t*. She loved that little filly like she was her own,” Applejack pointed out.

“I’d try to cheer her up, but the only way I know how to cheer up ponies is with parties, and Twilight doesn’t need a party right now...” Pinkie Pie said, her voice lacking much of its usual enthusiasm.

“No, she doesn’t,” Rarity agreed. “Right now, Twilight just needs some time. But I’m sure she’ll be back on her hooves soon.”

“She’d better!” Rainbow Dash growled as she hovered above her friends’ heads. “Nightmare Moon is alive! That means we need to stop her again, and we can’t use the Elements of Harmony without Twilight!”

“Rainbow! Sssh, She’ll hear you!” Applejack scolded. Still, even when the friends resumed speaking in hushed voices, their discussion echoed through the quiet tree house. Their words bounced up the stairs, reaching both the bedroom and Twilight’s ears.

Twilight was lying on top of her bed. Her eyes were puffy and red, and a portion of her pillow was soaked with tears. She was hugging a ripped purple vest, a bent headband, and a pair of cracked glasses to her chest and staring at the distant moon through the window. Those three items were all that had been left in the center of Ponyville after Nyx

became Nightmare Moon, all that Twilight had left of her. They, however, offered her no comfort.

Twilight knew why she had done it, why she had been willing to let Celestia take Nyx away, and the truth was tearing her up like a parasprite in a basket of apples. Princess Celestia was her mentor. Some would argue she treated the princess like a second mother, considering how close they had gotten while she was at school.

And when one of the ponies you trust most in the world, a pony who always seems to be right, tells you that the filly you're caring for needs to be taken away, you want to agree. Twilight had tried to argue, but Princess Celestia didn't waver. It was like she was trying to move the sun itself. It was an impossible task.

So part of Twilight submitted. A part of her agreed with what Princess Celestia was saying. The logical part of her brain conceded, even though other parts of her were screaming for her to keep up the fight. She shut down from the mental conflict; she became shell-shocked.

Then Nyx called out to her, called out for her mother, and all too late did Twilight realize what an idiot she was being. She tried to catch up, tried to stop the princess, but Nyx was already gone. And now... now all she had left of the filly were a few pieces of clothing, and she hugged them as tightly to her chest as she could.

But they would never be able to replace Nyx.

There was only one thing Twilight desired more than having Nyx back. She wanted to say she was sorry. She just wanted to say those words, whether or not she was forgiven. Yet Nightmare Moon was the only pony she could say those words to, and Twilight had no clue where she was. She had vanished. Despite an all-out search by the Equestrian army, Nightmare Moon and the cult had left no clues behind. It was like they had disappeared into thin air.

Twilight herself had tried a number of spells to locate Nightmare Moon. Scrying spells, locator spells: They all failed. She could only guess that the cult was purposefully masking Nightmare Moon's location to keep the princesses from finding out where they had hidden themselves.

"Hey, did I tell you yet that I figured out who the spy was?" Pinkie Pie's voice echoed from the main floor of the Golden Oaks Library, drawing Twilight's attention back to her friends' conversation.

“Spy? What spy?” Applejack asked.

“There was a spy at the Learn and Play Day,” Rainbow Dash answered. “Pinkie Pie chased him around until he used *The Stare* to make her freeze up.”

Pinkie Pie nodded. “Yeah, and you know who it was? That waiter pony from the cafe in town, Horte Cuisine. I saw him standing with all those nasty cult ponies, and I recognized his mane and those creepy-weepy turquoise eyes of his.”

“Pinkie, they... um.... *all* had turquoise eyes,” Fluttershy pointed out.

“I know, but I could still tell it was him,” Pinkie Pie said. “When he saw me, my nose got scratchy and my ears got floppy. That means that somepony recognized me, and he was the only one looking at me.”

Applejack sighed and shook her head. “Well shoot; makes you wonder how many other ponies around town were workin’ for that crazy cult.”

“Yes it does, Applejack, but I’m sure we’ll find out the extent of *that* particular poison in the morning,” Rarity huffed. “I’d rather not think about it right now, personally.”

Rainbow Dash said something after that, but Twilight didn’t listen; her attention was on her magic. With her horn glowing, she stuffed her saddlebags with a number of different items. She then pushed open her bedroom window, jumped out onto the small balcony, and levitated herself down to the street below before galloping off into the night.

• • •

Within minutes, Twilight had made her way to Horte Cuisine’s home. The bachelor waiter lived a few blocks away from the restaurant where he worked, a fact Twilight knew from when she had to retrieve an overdue library book from him. Twilight approached the front door, and, making no effort to be stealthy or discrete, she used her magic to force her way inside.

The home looked positively pleasant. It was warm, welcoming, and very clean, not at all the kind of home Twilight would expect a cultist to live in. The decor of Horte’s home, however, wasn’t Twilight’s concern. She made her way upstairs and into the home’s one bedroom. She then moved over to the bed and magically opened her saddlebags. From inside the bags, a number of items floated into the air under the gentle caress of Twilight’s magic. An enchanted map of Equestria, a few smooth stones, and a book, *Skillful Seeking: Scrying and Searching Spells*, all found their way onto the bed.

After flipping open the book to a marked page, Twilight read the instructions and used the smooth stones to keep the map spread out across Horte's bed. She then began to rummage. She opened drawers, searched the closet, and ransacked the room for pieces of jewelry, pictures, and anything else that was both small and seemed personal.

Once she had a sizable cloud of random items floating around her head, Twilight looked down at the book and read the spell's instructions again. She had the magically prepared map, and at least one of the things she had scavenged from the room would be of great personal value to Horte. That would be enough to try and scry for the waiter's location.

That was the hope Twilight clung to. If Nightmare Moon was the only one protected against scrying spells, then there was a chance cultists themselves could still be tracked.

Twilight held each item she had collected from the room above the map and cast the spell. Most items shimmered. Some even began to point at locations on the map. None of them, however, provided conclusive results, and every item that failed was swiftly tossed aside by Twilight.

An old pocket watch finally gave her a good reaction. When the scrying spell was cast upon it, a thin line of light formed between the watch and a place on the map. A smile blossomed onto Twilight's face; the spell was pointing to an area near Ponyville.

Quickly dropping all the other items, Twilight set the watch onto the open spell book. Horn shimmering, she drew out another map from her bag and set it on top of the previous. The new map was of Ponyville and its surrounding area, and Twilight quickly enchanted it as she smoothed it with her hooves.

With the new map magically prepared, Twilight grabbed the pocket watch and cast the scrying spell again. The line of light formed once more and pointed to the edge of town. Twilight also noticed the line was moving, which meant Horte Cuisine was also on the move.

Leaning in close, Twilight tracked Horte Cuisine as he moved farther away from Ponyville. Then, just as the line pointed to old gemstone quarries, the enchantment stopped working and the line disappeared. Twilight blinked a few times and looked up at the pocket watch wondering if she had done something wrong. She tried recasting the scrying spell, but, after flickering back into existence for a brief moment, the line disappeared again. There were only a few reasons the spell would work one moment and stop working the next, and only one made sense to Twilight.

The spell was being blocked.

Hastily, Twilight used a quill to mark the last location the spell had pointed to before she packed up her things. She had a direction to go and a hunch to act on, which was enough for her. She turned towards the door, and didn't even glance at the mess she was leaving. In fact, she smiled a little at the thought of Horte Cuisine coming back home to find his bedroom ransacked. It was her small way of getting back at him for spying on her, her friends, and Nyx.

Still, Twilight didn't let her mind linger on Horte Cuisine. The sun was starting to rise, and she didn't want to run the risk of being caught by her friends or being stopped by anypony on the street. She was a pony on a mission. With her eyes forward and her brow furrowed, she began walking in the direction of the distant gem quarries.

• • •

"Twilight... Sugarcube, are you awake?" Applejack asked. She and the others had decided to spend the night at the library, just in case Twilight needed them or Nightmare Moon decided to attack. Each had kept their Element of Harmony, which had been delivered to Ponyville within hours of Nightmare Moon's return, close to them during the night. The only exception was Twilight. She didn't even want to look at the Element of Magic tiara, but Spike tucked it away in her bedside table so it would be close at hoof if it was needed.

Applejack moved toward the bed, noticing a mound beneath the covers. "Sugarcube, I know you're beatin' yerself up 'bout what happened, but you can't just lie here mopin'. We got to go deal with Nightmare Moon before she can attack the princesses, and we can't do it without yer help."

Twilight didn't reply, and, after a few anxious moments, Applejack reached out a hoof to poke her friend and make sure she was awake. When her hoof sunk deeper into the bed than it should have, Applejack's eyes narrowed, and she tore off the covers.

Where Applejack thought Twilight had been lying were instead several strategically placed pillows, and attached to one was a note.

By the time you read this, I will be long gone. I'm sorry that I left without telling anypony, but this is something I have to do. I have to find Nightmare Nyx my daughter. I have to try to convince her to stop what she's doing.

There are also some things I have to say, to get off my chest, and she's the only one I can say them to. Everything she accused me of last night was true. I betrayed her. I let her down. I failed.

I do not know where I am going, and I doubt that I will return. I don't expect everypony to understand why I am doing this, but I have to see Nyx one more time. I have to convince her to stop, and I have to tell her how sorry I am, even if she doesn't believe me.

*Sincerely,
Twilight Sparkle*

“Horse-feathers!” Applejack cursed. “Twilight, girl, what are you thinkin’?!”

• • •

Twilight peeked around the corner and took note of the two guards standing in the earthen tunnel. After reaching the empty rock quarries outside Ponyville, it didn't take long for Twilight to figure out that she needed to head down into the elaborate tunnel network of the Diamond Dogs. Then, after a few hours of navigating corridors, she almost walked into a pair of patrolling guards. It had been a close call, but it let Twilight know she was in the right place.

The guards themselves were a twisted mockery of the royal guard. The armor was of similar build and color to the night guard, but palette had been darkened to the point many aspects of the armor were black. Also, like Princess Celestia's soldiers, the armor was enchanted to change the appearance of the pony wearing it. The coats of the sturdily built stallions were a haunting, almost sickly gray tone, and they had Nightmare Moon's piercing eyes.

After that first close call, Twilight moved carefully through the tunnels to ensure she avoided any wandering patrols. Now, however, Twilight faced a pair of guards that stood vigilantly at a door in the tunnels. She had no clue what was behind it. It could be where Nightmare Moon was, or it could easily be a guard barracks filled with a whole platoon of armored soldiers.

Twilight slipped back behind the corner and took a moment to both swallow the nervous knot in her throat and shore up her courage. She picked up a nearby loose gemstone with her magic and chucked it down the tunnel. It clattered against the stones, and the tinkling noise it made seemed to echo endlessly..

Yet, after a few tense moments, the guards hadn't come to investigate. Twilight risked another peek around the corner and saw that the two unicorns hadn't moved an inch. They had remained still as statues except for their ears, which were now turned forward and attentive. Her attempt to draw the guards away from the door did nothing but make them more alert, a fact that made Twilight grit her teeth in aggravation.

"Okay, time for another tactic," Twilight whispered as her horn started to glow. She'd have to do this quickly, but maybe it would work. Peeking out from behind the corner one more time, Twilight cast out her magic. The magic reached the door, and, after taking a few moments to build strength, unleashed itself.

The heavy wooden door swung open violently and crashed against the stone wall on the far side. Despite their training, the two guards jumped and quickly turned to see who had thrown open the door. Twilight too was looking through the door, but for another reason. First, she confirmed there were no guards on the far side. Then, she focused on the hallway beyond the door. She studied it and painted a picture of it in her mind. She tried to memorize every detail she could before the guards pulled the door shut, and she was forced to duck back behind her corner.

Twilight waited a good few minutes, staying hidden to make sure the guards weren't going to come searching for her. When she was sure she was safe, she pictured the far side of the door in her head, trying to recall every detail. She then called on her magic and disappeared with a flash.

Twilight held her breath and kept her eyes shut after she felt her teleportation spell finish. She feared for a moment that she may have aimed incorrectly and appeared directly in front of the guards. When nopony reached out to grab her, she risked a look and smiled. She had teleported to exactly where she wanted to be, the far side of the door.

With the guards bypassed and a new trick for getting by any future obstacles, Twilight continued down the tunnel. It went straight for a long time before ending in a right turn, and, upon reaching that bend, Twilight peeked around the corner and almost let out an audible gasp at what she saw.

A huge cavern had been carved out of the solid rock. It stretched on for what had to be twenty or thirty stories and was easily several city blocks wide across. Even more impressive was what was built in the cavern. A castle, both elegant and terrifying, had been erected in the deep underground chamber. Its tallest tower was just a few feet short of scraping the ceiling.

Twilight had little doubt she had found the castle of Nightmare Moon, and she was beginning to regret the fact she hadn't brought her friends. She, however, quickly shook that thought from her mind. If she had brought her friends along, it would be to confront and defeat Nightmare Moon using the Elements of Harmony, and she couldn't be a part of that.

That wasn't why she had come searching for Nightmare Moon.

Not wanting to rush in haphazardly, Twilight hung back in the small access tunnel and watched the many patrols that kept watch from the castle's high walls. As if being underground wasn't enough, the castle still had defensive walls, which only made Twilight's approach that more difficult.

She contemplated dozens of plans to get closer to the castle, but each was made impossible by the patrol routes of the guards. Then, Twilight remembered the trick she had just used. The guards wouldn't be expecting a pony capable of teleporting, so she looked across the castle for any opening she could teleport to.

The opening Twilight chose was a balcony on the tallest tower. She reached it with a single teleport, reappearing with a small flash. She chanced a look back, both to make sure she hadn't been seen and to smile at all the castle security she had been able to bypass. She'd need to tell Princess Celestia about this trick if she made it back. Her mentor would undoubtedly like to know how easy it was for a pony to sneak into a heavily guarded castle by just popping around using a teleportation spell.

For the moment, however, Twilight shelved that thought and poked her head into the room the balcony was attached to. It seemed to be a room that existed only as a means of accessing the balcony, a room elegantly decorated with a nighttime sky on the ceiling and a map of Equestria on the floor. Otherwise, the room was completely devoid of furniture. It seemed a shame to waste a perfectly good room, but Twilight didn't think about it long before she moved towards a nearby stairwell and made her descent into the rest of the castle.

• • •

Twilight felt a lot less sure about what she was doing. Her progress through the castle was slow. She had to keep hiding from passing guards, and she didn't dare go faster than a slow walk. Galloping, even breathing loudly, might draw the attention of the guards or the castle staff. Twilight felt she was lucky she hadn't already been discovered.

Her pace was also slowed by the fact she kept jumping at shadows. The hallways of the castle were kept lit by enchanted gemstones held in metal, wall-mounted holders. They illuminated the hallways well and made more sense than torches, which would quickly choke the underground castle with smoke. The gemstones, however, had a habit of flickering at times. This caused nearby shadows to dance, and it often made Twilight jump, fearing a guard was about to pounce her.

Despite all this, Twilight forced herself to continue searching the castle. She had to find Nightmare Moon, even if every moment she spent looking increased the chances of her getting caught.

And it wasn't like Nightmare Moon was just sitting somewhere, waiting to be found. She could easily walk to another part of the castle Twilight had already checked, making the search all the more difficult. In truth, Twilight was beginning to contemplate trying to find Nightmare Moon's bedchamber. She could simply wait there until Nightmare Moon was alone and then reveal herself.

It was then, as Twilight was turning around to search the higher floors of the castle for Nightmare Moon's bedroom, that she heard hoofsteps. She looked up, and her ears swiveled as she listened. The hoofsteps were coming from the hallway ahead of her, and they were growing louder. Somepony was coming; she needed to hide.

Turning, Twilight moved as quickly and quietly as she could to the closest door. She cracked it open, and, after ensuring nopony was in the room, she ducked inside and pulled the door shut behind her, plunging the room into darkness. For a moment, Twilight held her breath and stood perfectly still in the pitch black. She didn't even want to risk lighting her horn, fearing the guards might detect her magic or see the light.

She backed away from the door, putting more distance between her and it as she listened to the hoofsteps drawing closer. It was then her hoof brushed something, and Twilight had to cover her mouth to keep herself from yelping.

The hoofsteps were still getting closer, but Twilight couldn't stand stumbling around in the darkness any longer. She lit her horn and turned to look at what her hoof had brushed against. It was a piece of rough fabric that had been dyed orange. It almost look like a pony's leg, but a hole on one end exposed the cotton stuffing inside.

That piece of fabric, however, was not alone. Twilight's light followed a short trail of fabric to a large pile in one corner of the room. It was then she saw the X shaped eyes of

several cotton stuffed dummies staring back at her. Almost every dummy was decapitated or otherwise maimed, and every one of them looked like her and her friends.

Twilight's breathing became ragged, and she stumbled back from the pile of dismembered dummies as if it was comprised of real ponies. She slammed her back against the door, causing it to clatter against its hinges, and she had to cover her mouth to keep herself from screaming. There were so many; Nightmare Moon's soldiers had to be using them as training dummies, and they were training to kill.

“What was that?”

Twilight's panic rose exponentially as the hoofsteps grew louder. The guards had heard her back against the door, and they were going to find her. They were going to find her, and they were going to do to her what they had done to the dummies. She had to hide.

The door to the small room opened a few moments later, the light from the hallway flooding inside. There were a pair of Nightmare Moon's soldiers standing in the doorway. One lit his horn and stepped inside to search while the other remained to guard the door.

The guard focused the light from his horn into a cone and began to look over the pile of dummies. He took a step towards the pile, lifting his hoof to dig through it. The other guard, however, called out to his comrade. “Come on, we need to get Spell Nexus. Queen Nightmare Moon wants to see him.”

The other guard huffed in irritation but nodded his head all the same. He turned away from the pile, rejoined his comrade in the hallway, and pulled the door shut behind him. Once more the storeroom became consumed by darkness, but it did not stay that way for long as a light in the pile of dismembered dummies flicked to life.

Twilight, in a last panicked move, had dove into the pile of dummies to hide from the guards. It had been creepy to be surrounded by the dismembered bits of things that resembled her and her friends, but it had allowed her to go undetected. Her motivations, however, had now drastically shifted from wanting to avoid the guards to wanting to follow the pair that had almost discovered her.

They had said Nightmare Moon wanted to see Spell Nexus, and Twilight couldn't help but wonder why he was in the castle. She knew him from her years at Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns. He had been promoted from professor to headmaster while she had been attending. Twilight could only guess he had been recently ponynapped. Nightmare

Moon or her soldiers probably wanted him for information. They were probably going to torture him into telling them how to get by Canterlot's magical defenses, or maybe they wanted to know the princesses' weakness.

Pulling herself from the pile of dummies, Twilight quickly moved to the door, opened it, and stepped back into the hallway. She couldn't leave Spell Nexus to be tortured. She had to help him escape. In fact, helping him to escape would be for the best. He could tell the princesses where Nightmare Moon was hiding. He could help them prepare and plan an attack, and he was also a unicorn with a talent for magic. There was a chance he could wield the Element of Magic in her place. He could possibly complete the Elements of Harmony, since Twilight doubted she'd be leaving the castle once she found and confronted Nightmare Moon.

With only the vaguest thoughts of a plan, Twilight followed the guards down the corridor. She walked as gingerly as she could while still keeping pace with them. She even began matching their steps. This hid the sound of her own hooffalls in theirs, allowing her to follow them through the castle until they approached a door.

Ducking behind a statue of Nightmare Moon, Twilight watched as one guard went inside. She intended to wait for the guard to come back out, and, as she did, her eyes wandered to the statue she was hiding behind. It portrayed Nightmare Moon with wicked, fang like teeth. She was holding a young pony whose face had been carved into a silent scream. It reminded Twilight of the old Nightmare Night fable: You gave Nightmare Moon some of your candy so she wouldn't gobble you up.

Twilight shivered, and prayed that Nightmare Moon hadn't fallen so far that she was willing to cannibalize another pony.

The sound of a closing door brought Twilight's attention forward again. The two guards had fetched Spell Nexus and were now flanking him on either side. They were walking away from where Twilight was hiding, and all three of them had their backs to her. It was probably the best opportunity she was going to get.

After building up her magic and taking a breath to steady herself, Twilight attacked, accomplishing four things in quick succession. First, she teleported behind the soldiers and grabbed Spell Nexus by the tail. Next, she pulled him back so he was no longer standing between the two guards. Then, when the guards turned to see what had happened, Twilight used her magic to smash their helmets together with a wince-inducing clang. Finally, with soldiers incapacitated and Nexus floating in her levitation spell, Twilight turned and bolted.

She ran, rounded a corner, and kept running. She ran and ran, dreading that the guards would be only a few steps behind her. She risked a glance over her shoulders, to be sure the guards weren't following. Only then did she slow down to catch her breath. After that, she called on her magic and teleported herself and Spell Nexus.

The pair reappeared in the highest tower of Nightmare Moon's castle, in the same room where Twilight had first arrived. Just like before, the room was empty and unoccupied, and Twilight breathed a sigh of relief as she set Spell Nexus down on the floor. "Okay, I think we're safe now."

Spell Nexus stumbled a little as he tried to regain his footing. He kept his eyes shut for a time, but, upon opening them, he looked at Twilight with his slate gray irises. "Twilight Sparkle?"

"It's okay," Twilight said as she trotted up to him and put a hoof on his shoulder. "I don't know why you were ponynapped, but you don't have to worry. I can get you out of here."

"But Miss Sparkle, what in Equestria are you doing down here?" Spell Nexus asked. "How did you even *find* this place?"

"My friend, Pinkie Pie, figured out that a pony in Ponyville named Horte Cuisine was part of this crazy cult," Twilight explained quickly as she turned and began to trot towards the balcony the room was connected to. "So I used a scrying spell on some of his things and saw him moving towards the gemstone quarries before he suddenly disappeared. I assumed that the reason my spell stopped working was that something was blocking it, so I decided to investigate the quarries. From there, I made my way into the Diamond Dog mines and eventually found my way here."

Nexus followed behind Twilight, concern and worry ringing in his voice. "But how did you get by the guards?"

"Oh, that was easy," Twilight replied. She put her hooves on the balcony's guardrail and looked outside. The guards on patrol still looked to be going about their business, which meant the guards she had attacked hadn't raised the alarm yet. "I know a teleportation spell, so I just warped past the guards whenever I needed to. That's actually how I plan to get you out of here. I'll teleport you down to a cavern entrance. Then, you can escape into the Diamond Dog caves. You'll have to find your own way back to the surface from there, but I'm sure you can manage."

“Oh, I can assure you, Miss Sparkle,” Spell Nexus replied, his voice taking on a haughty tone, “that *won't* be necessary.”

“What do you mean by—”

THUNK

Twilight felt something firm strike the back of her head, and the world fell away in an instant. She may have tumbled off the balcony, but Spell Nexus grabbed her in his magic and pulled her back from the edge. He shook the hoof that he had just used to strike Twilight and then double checked to make sure she was unconscious. He then turned, and, as his eyes shifted back to turquoise, he bellowed at the top of his lungs, “Guards!”

Nexus’ shout brought six pegasus guards flying up to the balcony where he stood. They landed with a flutter of wings and bowed their heads. “You called, Brother Nexus?” one of them asked.

With a nod, Nexus’s pointed to the left hoof pair of guards. “You two, go downstairs and find the two sorry excuses for soldiers that let themselves get jumped and knocked out by Twilight Sparkle. They should be in the hallway just outside my office.”

The first pair of guards nodded and took flight while Nexus turned to the next pair. “You two, go fetch the best unicorn sorcerers we have and tell them we need to expand the defensive spells. The anti-screaming spell needs to include Ponyville.

“And you two,” Nexus said, pointing a hoof at the last of the guards before he pointed at Twilight. “Grab her and carry her down to the dungeon.”

The two pegasi nodded, quickly scooped Twilight up, and began carrying her unconscious form to the dungeons in the castle’s bowels. Nexus followed a few steps behind them, his gaze fixed on Twilight as a smile spread onto his lips. “My queen will be very happy to hear you’ve been captured, Twilight Sparkle. Before you’re presented to her, however, you and I are going to have a good, long discussion. I need to hear how you cast that lovely little teleportation spell of yours. After all, we can’t have other unicorns like you sneaking into the palace, now can we?”

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The pair of servants at the entrance of the throne room pushed the large doors open and quickly bowed as Nightmare Moon stepped through. Through the course of an hour of cleaning, primping, and armor fitting, she had been returned to the frightful image so

many ponies knew her by. Her coat had been cleaned so perfectly it glistened like obsidian. She was once more adorned in her regal armor, and, as the final touch, she once again had on her purple eyeshadow.

Yet, there was one thing she lacked: her cutie mark. Her flank was still bare, and it perturbed Nightmare Moon to no end. She was a full grown alicorn, a queen, and yet she was still a blank flank. There were explanations and excuses offered by Nexus and other servants. The most popular theory was that her original cutie mark was actually Luna's, and, now that she was her own mare, she might have a different special talent. It made sense, but it did little to curb her irritation.

Of course, Nexus took the opportunity to flatter her endlessly. He was certain her cutie mark would be a crown or something similarly regal, and that it would appear when she took her rightful place as the queen of Equestria. He was a little too eager to please her at times, but Nightmare Moon couldn't deny his words did ease her concerns. Her cutie mark would appear in due time, but right now she had more important things to worry about.

Like why Nexus was smiling so broadly.

"My Queen, you are looking positively radiant in your new armor," Spell Nexus complimented as Nightmare Moon approached and then settled into her throne.

"Thank you," Nightmare Moon replied flatly. "The blacksmith you recruited does fine work."

"The finest, my Queen. You deserve nothing less."

Nightmare Moon rolled her eyes. "Save your flattery, Nexus, and tell me if there is anything else you wish for me to attend to today?"

"There is but one matter, your highness," Spell Nexus answered, his smile growing as large as it could, "and it's some good news."

Nightmare Moon arched an eyebrow. "News?"

"Bring her in!"

At Nexus's beckoning, a set of doors to the side of the throne room opened and a pair of guards came trotting in. They dragged between them a limp body. The pony was still alive, but she was bruised and beaten. The guards unceremoniously deposited her on the

floor at the foot of Nightmare Moon's throne before stepping back to the sides of the throne room.

"She was found sneaking around the castle corridors, and it appears that she came here alone," Spell Nexus explained as he looked over the mare. "A rather *stupid* thing to do, considering she is supposed to be the smartest one in her group of friends."

Nexus chuckled at his own insult but Nightmare Moon remained still as stone. The breath was caught in her chest, and her eyes were fixed on the battered figure on the floor below her. It was Twilight Sparkle, and she looked like she had been on the losing end of a hoof fight. Her mane and coat were a mess, and she was covered in small nicks and scratches. Her right eye was particularly bad. It was puffy and swollen, like she had been hit hard in the face.

"Stand before your queen!" Nexus barked, using magic to lift Twilight off the ground. The sudden movement seemed to snap Twilight out of her stupor, and she attempted to struggle. She waved her limbs weakly and tossed her head with what little strength she could muster. It was a display that was more pathetic than worrisome, and Nexus couldn't help but laugh. He then, to further his own twisted pleasure, released Twilight from his magic while she was still a few feet off the floor.

Twilight flopped down to the floor like a rag doll and whimpered in pain from the hard landing. Still, after a few moments, Twilight struggled to her hooves. She stood before Nightmare Moon, though she kept her right front leg elevated, as if putting weight on it caused her pain.

"So, how do you wish to have her dealt with, my Queen?" Nexus asked eagerly. "I can only imagine some of the tortures you could inflict upon her. Oh, and, then, after you've had your fun, perhaps a beheading? Or maybe it would send a more powerful message to have her hanged?"

Nightmare Moon's tone was flat and cold, but her words washed over the room with the power of thunder from a violent storm. "Leave us."

"P-pardon, my Queen?" Nexus asked.

"*Leave. Us,*" Nightmare Moon seethed before focusing her enraged glare on Nexus. "And we are not to be disturbed until I call for you."

"O-of course," Nexus stammered before quickly galloping away. He called out to all the ponies in the room, telling them to leave even though many had heard Nightmare

Moon's command for themselves. It took but a minute for the room to clear, with Nexus being the last to leave. He slipped out the front entrance, shut it behind him, and then set the locks with a loud click.

Only then, when Nightmare Moon was sure she and Twilight were alone, did she make a move. She rose from her throne and spread her wings wide. Her shadow fell across Twilight, who took an anxious step back as terror glinted in her unharmed eye.

"What are you doing here?" Nightmare Moon asked, her voice dripping with hatred. "Have you come to try and purify me as you did before? Have you come to use the Elements of Harmony to save Equestria? Have you come to destroy me?!"

Twilight shrank away from the imposing alicorn before her and flattened her ears against her head. "I... I... I..."

Nightmare Moon slammed a hoof against the floor and bent her head down to Twilight's eye level. "Why are you here!?"

"I came to say I'm sorry!" Twilight spat out as quickly as her mouth would allow.

Twilight's words echoed hauntingly across the hall, and Nightmare Moon remained still as stone. She simply stared at Twilight for a time, but then she stepped back, folded her wings, and sat back down on her throne. "It is too late for apologies."

"But—"

"Don't try to *lie* to me!" Nightmare Moon snapped. "I see through your charade. Celestia came to visit, you two talked in *private*, and then she came into the library's kitchen. She spoke sweet words about wanting me to see a doctor, to make sure I was healthy, and how I could spend the night at the palace and even see your old room at her school. Of course, I was naive enough to believe her, but *you* knew what was going on. You knew, and that's why you couldn't even *look* at me when she was taking me out the door. You *conspired* with her *against* me, just as you do now! You knew what she was going to do, and you. Did! *Nothing!* To stop her!"

"Please, Nyx, I'm so sorry."

"My name is not Nyx. It is Nightmare Moon," she corrected firmly.

“You can call yourself what you want,” Twilight said, her voice taking on a comforting tone. “Nightmare Moon, Queen Moon, the Empress of Equestria. To me, you’ll always be Nyx.”

The words were sweet, sincere, but the comfort Twilight tried to offer only made Nightmare Moon’s gaze harden. “Oh, how so *very* sentimental of you, Twilight Sparkle. Pity that sentiment wasn’t there when Celestia was taking me away. Now that I think about it, you probably *wanted* her to take me away.”

“No, Nyx, I didn’t—”

“Do not spew your lies here!” Nightmare Moon interrupted with a bellow. “You saw who I was, you saw the *truth*, and, no matter how much you denied it, you were *scared* of what I would become. You let Celestia take me away so you could forget about me and go back to your *happy little life*. Go back and pretend... pretend like I was never even there...”

“I was scared. I’ll admit it,” Twilight said, trying to defend herself. She took another anxious step closer to Nightmare Moon. “Princess Celestia was scared too, and... and she convinced me that I had to let her take you, so that you could be tested. She just wanted to be sure you wouldn’t be a threat to Equestria. Princess Celestia never meant to take you away forever.”

Nightmare Moon flicked her gaze away from Twilight and spoke with a cold, uncaring, yet strangely quiet tone. “Those are sweet lies and nothing more.”

“No, Nyx, it’s the truth,” Twilight assured. “I didn’t want Princess Celestia to take you. I heard you call out to me, and I tried to stop the princess. I ran out of the library after you two, but I tripped, and, by then, the chariot was already gone. I wanted to stop it, Nyx... I did.”

“A touching story, but that’s *all* it is,” Nightmare Moon snipped coldly. “No matter what your intentions were, it was your *actions* that set all this in motion. It is through your actions that you have done ill against me, and it’s your actions for which you shall receive no forgiveness.

“And do not think I have forgotten the stream of *lies* you have filled my head with,” Nightmare Moon continued. “After the spring play, you said that I was not Nightmare Moon, that I could never *be* her. Well, if that was true, we wouldn’t be sitting here, now would we? Tell me, was that lie for my sake or for your own? Were you just trying to

deny the truth that stared you in the face, or perhaps you wished to torture me? Is that it? Did you wish to torture me with the trappings of a normal life before I once more became who I am meant to be?”

Twilight shook her head. “No, Nyx, It wasn’t a lie. You weren’t Nightmare Moon then, and you don’t have to be her now.”

Nightmare Moon fixed Twilight with a contempt-filled glare. “You are *truly* in denial when you can look upon me as I am and *not* see me as Nightmare Moon.”

“Nyx, ponies choose who they want to be,” Twilight insisted, her voice laced with desperation. “We all have that choice. You are only Nightmare Moon if you want to be, and my Nyx wouldn’t want to do all this. She wouldn’t want to take over Equestria or make her friends worry.”

A disheartened chuckle escaped Nightmare Moon’s lips. “*Worry?* Now *that* is your cruelest joke yet, Twilight Sparkle. No pony is foolish enough to worry about *me*.”

“Really? Because I can think of three,” Twilight said firmly as she took another step forward. “Three Crusaders who are your closest friends.”

A memory flashed through Nightmare Moon’s mind. Scootaloo had been the one pony in the crowd, besides Twilight, who hadn’t looked at her in fear the night the resurrection spell was completed. Her eyes had, instead, been filled with concern, confusion, and sadness.

Nightmare huffed and looked away from Twilight, unable to bear the sight of her pathetic, pleading eyes anymore. “They will need to learn that their friend is never coming back, that she’s gone forever.”

“She doesn’t have to be,” Twilight argued. “Nyx, you don’t have to be—”

“*Enough!*” Nightmare Moon screeched as her wings unfurled. Still, she caught her outburst. She took a deep breath, refolded her wings, settled back into her throne, and looked past Twilight to the throne room door. “Nexus! Guards!”

Spell Nexus and two guards slipped into the room within seconds of being called, galloped up to the throne, and bowed to their queen. “What are your orders, Your Highness?”

“With Twilight Sparkle in our custody, the Elements of Harmony pose no threat. Celestia and Luna are defenseless,” Nightmare Moon said proudly as she raised her head high. “We must simply wait for the prime opportunity to strike against the Royal Sisters.”

“No!” Twilight said as a look of panic grew on her face. It was the look of a pony whose desperate gambit had failed, whose last hopes had slipped from her grasp. It was an expression Nightmare Moon couldn’t bear to look at, so she instead focused her gaze on Spell Nexus.

“Soon, I will fly to Canterlot to take the kingdom, but, for today, I wish to retire to my chambers and rest.”

Nexus deepened his bow to the point that his nose was almost touching the floor. “Of course, Your Excellence. And what would you have me do with Twilight Sparkle?”

“You have done *quite* enough already, Spell Nexus,” Nightmare Moon seethed, her words dripping with her disappointment.

The harsh tone of his queen’s voice caused Nexus to raise his head with a look of confusion. “Y-your Majesty?”

Nightmare Moon once again stood up and unfolded her wings, only this time she was casting her dark shadow across Spell Nexus, causing him to cower where he stood. “Do you, at all, recall my orders?”

“Your Majesty, I—”

“Let me refresh your memory,” Nightmare Moon snapped, cutting him off. “I *told* you that if *any* of the bearers of the Elements of Harmony were found, they were to be captured *unharmed* and Twilight Sparkle brought to me *immediately*.”

“Y-your Highness, you must understand—”

“Silence fool!” Nightmare Moon bellowed, “I gave you *one* simple order, and you failed to follow it in spirit or letter! Give me one *single* reason why I shouldn’t have your head for this!”

“My...m-my Queen, I... I-I...” Spell Nexus stuttered. He grappled with his words, trying to find a way to defend his action. When he was unable to do even that, he dropped to the floor and bowed as low as he could. “Forgive me, Your Highness, I was only trying to

act in your best interest. We needed to know how Twilight Sparkle snuck into the castle, but she would not tell us without... persuasion. I beg you, have mercy.”

Nightmare Moon remained silent for a time, glaring daggers at Nexus. She then huffed and turned, walking back to her throne. “I will forgive this *grave* sin you have committed, *if* you can follow my next order to the letter and without fail.”

“Anything, Your Highness.” Nexus said desperately.

Nightmare Moon turned and sat on her throne, tucking her wings away carefully. “Twilight Sparkle is to be taken to the dungeon and given a cell of her own. Her injuries are to be tended by the finest doctors we have available. Ensure that she has a proper blanket and pillow. She is also to be fed properly while she is in our custody, not just bread and water. She is to be given *real* food, food *you yourself* would be willing to eat, Nexus.”

Nexus blinked in confusion before he began speaking. “B-but Your Highness. She—”

“Do you question my will, Nexus?” Nightmare Moon asked, her voice a deep rumble. “Twilight Sparkle has failed utterly. Her foolish ploy at sentimentality has crumbled, and, in her failure, she has ensured our victory. Now, she poses as much threat to me as an ant, and I can deal with her at *my* leisure and at a time of *my* choosing. Until then you shall follow my orders and treat her as I have directed, so that she is in prime condition for when I wish to enact my revenge. And, if I discover that she has been harmed again by you *or* the guards, it will not be *her* hanging from the gallows. Do I make myself clear?!”

Twilight had paled and looked to be on the verge of tears. Spell Nexus, on the other hoof, had quickly scampered up to the throne and offered his queen another bow. “Of course, Your Majesty. I should have never doubted your wisdom. She shall be shown the utmost care, so that she can truly appreciate the pain you will, in time, inflict upon her. I will see to it personally.”

“Good,” Nightmare Moon replied, “but, to ensure you understand the seriousness of your mistake, let me remind you what happens to ponies who cross *me*.”

With that, a small bolt of lightning crackled from Nightmare Moon’s mane and struck Nexus on his flank. He would have yelped in pain, but he bit back the cry and continued to bow. The bolt left a small mark of singed hair, and, though it had done no real

damage, the expression on Nexus's face made it clear it was quite painful. The spot would undoubtedly be tender for days to come.

Once the worst of the pain had subsided, Nexus stood and rushed off, intending to relay Nightmare Moon's orders to everypony in the castle. Nightmare Moon watched him leave, and only once Nexus was out of the room did she allow herself a few breaths to calm herself down. She then glanced over the ponies who were still in the room, the two guards and Twilight.

"I am now retiring for the day," Nightmare Moon announced as she stood from her throne. Forcing herself to look straight ahead, she walked past Twilight and towards the throne room doors. "I expect you to escort Twilight Sparkle to her cell and ensure that everything I told Spell Nexus to do is done. Report to me directly if anypony has failed to obey my orders."

"Yes, my Queen," the two guards replied in unison before moving over to Twilight. While the pair had initially tossed Twilight into the room like a sack of potatoes, they now handled her as if she were the most fragile thing in the world. They escorted her from the room, helped Twilight keep the weight off of her one hurt hoof, and did everything they could to keep Nightmare Moon from redirecting her anger to them.

• • •

Nightmare Moon's anger had not cooled when she reached her bedroom. In truth, it had only reached a more violent boil as she thought about Twilight and Spell Nexus. She threw open the door to her bedchamber and slammed it shut as soon as she had stepped inside. Then, for good measure, Nightmare Moon took her bookcase and slammed it against the door, ensuring she would not be disturbed.

Her solitude guaranteed, Nightmare Moon began to remove her armor. It was comfortable, or at least as comfortable as armor could be. Still, with her patience worn thin by both Twilight and Nexus, she could not stand to wear it any longer. She threw each piece against the nearby wall to form a cluttered pile on the floor. Unfortunately, her attempt at venting her frustration provided little relief.

"How dare she," Nightmare Moon seethed as she approached her vanity. On one side of the vanity, next to her makeup, rested a bowl, a pitcher, and a washcloth. She poured the water from inside the pitcher into the bowl. She then wet the cloth and used it to remove her eye shadow while she continued to rant to her reflection.

“How dare Twilight come to me to spew more of her lies? How dare she call me Nyx? Does she think I am still an ignorant foal? Does she think I’d be swayed by her words again? I should have cut her down where she stood for her arrogance alone.

“And Nexus,” Nightmare Moon seethed. She finished cleaning off her makeup and tossed the wet rag into the waiting bowl. “He is lucky his transgressions only earned him a sore flank.

“They are *all* forgetting who I am,” she said to her reflection, “but I’ll *make* them remember. I’ll show Twilight I am no longer the cowering filly she found, and Nexus will learn I am not a mare to be trifled with. They will both learn that Celestia’s fear of me and my potential was wise.”

The thought of Celestia made Nightmare Moon grit her teeth, “And Celestia... she will learn all too well the depths of my wrath, both her and Twilight. Twilight for abandoning me, and Celestia for taking me away. They will both pay for—”

Nightmare Moon grunted, and, before she could stop herself, she lifted a hoof and smashed it into the mirror. The surface cracked and spider-webbed from her blow, and her reflection became fragmented. Now, instead of a single, pristine image, a dozen reflections of her eyes stared back from the broken surface.

“No,” Nightmare Moon whispered, her words dripping with the venom of her anger. “I do not care that I was taken away in the night. I do not care that I was stolen from my home and that Twilight did nothing. No, they will be judged for their true crimes against me. Celestia shall regret sealing me in the moon, and Twilight will pay for bringing the Elements of Harmony against me. They shall know no remorse, no mercy.

“I am Nightmare Moon,” she told her splintered reflection, “and they will pay for what they’ve done.”

CLANG... CLANG

CLANG... CLANG

CLANG... CLANG

The tolling of the bells at Canterlot Castle signaled both the end of the day and the changing of the guard. As the sun began to sink below the western horizon, the soldiers who had stood ever vigilant on the castle walls retreated from the battlements like a wave from the shore. At the same time, soaring on her pearly wings, Princess Celestia approached the castle. She glided through an opening in Canterlot's shield spell, banked, and looked down on the castle with a small, relieved smile. She circled for a few minutes, ensuring all of the castle was safe, before she allowed herself to land on a balcony.

On that balcony Celestia found her sister, Luna, waiting for her. The pair greeted one another with tired, but grateful, smiles before Princess Luna asked the same question she had asked for the previous seven sunsets. "Were you successful?"

Celestia shook her head. "No, there were no traces of Nightmare Moon or her cult to be found in Las Pegasus. What about here?"

"Nothing, sister."

Celestia nodded, though even that small action revealed her exhaustion. "That's good. Has there been any news from Cadance?"

"Yes," Luna said, "despite her reluctance to leave Canterlot and Shining Armor, she arrived at her fiefdom earlier today. She sent a letter assuring that she would begin a search of her county immediately. If Nightmare Moon is hiding there, she will be found."

"I'm thankful for all her help. She is doing so much more than some of the other minor princes and princesses," Celestia said as she mentally cursed the royal line.

The "royal" family of Equestria was actually the royal lines of the earth ponies, pegasi, and unicorns from the old country combined into one. When Celestia and Luna saved Equestria from Discord and took over the duties of raising and lowering the sun and moon, the populace of the kingdom was overjoyed. The two sisters were seen as saviors, and ponies across Equestria called out for them to rule. This, of course, horrified the old

royal families, but with the kingdom recovering from Discord's reign they couldn't, and didn't, want to fight a civil war.

So an agreement was made. The royal lines merged and adopted Luna and Celestia, who then became the high princesses of Equestria and rulers of the kingdom. The members of the new, singular royal family became minor princes and princesses, in effect lords and ladies. They handled the day-to-day ruling of different counties in Equestria, and, despite their often overinflated egos, it was a system that had successfully governed the country for centuries.

Right now, however, the royal family was proving to be difficult. While some like Cadance aided in the search for Nightmare Moon, others barricaded themselves in their homes like children hiding under their bed covers. The rest, who neither helped nor hid, didn't take the threat seriously and believed that the princesses were simply trying to scare them into subordination.

"You can't worry about them right now, sister," Luna advised Celestia before she spread her wings. "Go inside, try to get some sleep. I'll meet up with my half of the royal army in Manehattan and continue our search there."

"All right," Celestia said as she began to walk inside the castle. Right before she entered, however, she paused and looked back. "Just... be careful. If you find Nightmare Moon, call for me. Do not face her alone."

"I will take the utmost care, sister." With that, Luna fluttered her wings and rose into the sky just as her moon began to rise from the eastern horizon. Celestia watched her sister fly off to continue to search and couldn't help but worry about her. She wished to be at her sister's side, but she was already at the brink of exhaustion. Long days and sleepless nights had worn her down. She wished for nothing more than the sweet embrace of her bed and dreams.

• • •

"Soldiers, attention!"

The ranks of fresh recruits snapped to attention under Shining Armor's firm voice. Though he wished to be with his wife, Shining Armor's duties as captain of the royal guard had not disappeared with his marriage to Cadance. He was needed in the capitol, needed to maintain the shimmering barrier that currently surrounded Canterlot.

His kingdom needed him, just as it needed the new recruits that were standing before him.

“They look scared,” Shining Armor whispered to a nearby lieutenant.

“They are, sir, but they’re all we have,” the lieutenant whispered back. “If you want, I can call back some of the veteran guards. I’m sure they would be willing—”

Shining Armor shook his head. “No, I told them to go home and rest for a reason. The guard is made up of the toughest ponies in Equestria, but they are still ponies. They need time to sleep, they need time to eat, and they deserve to have some time with their families. We’ll just have to make do with these recruits for tonight.”

“What about you, sir? Shouldn’t you be getting some rest as well?”

“I’ll be fine,” Shining Armor assured his lieutenant, ignoring the bags that existed under his own eyes.

“But sir—”

Shining Armor ignored his lieutenant’s protest. Stepping towards the new recruits, he raised his voice and shouted, “At ease soldiers, but keep your ears open.”

The recruits fell to a parade rest but kept their eyes focused on Shining Armor as he spoke. “I won’t sugar coat the truth. Equestria is in crisis. With Nightmare Moon threatening our princesses we need everypony to do their part.

“Now, I know you haven’t had much training. From what your drill sergeant has told me, you’ve barely gotten through the basics. That’s going to have to be good enough. You need to stand watch tonight so that the rest of the guard can get the sleep they need, and you will be relieved when Princess Luna returns at daybreak. Is that understood?”

“Sir, yes sir!” the lines of soldiers responded in unison.

“During this watch, you will each be paired with a seasoned member of the royal guard. You will do what they tell you to do when they tell you to do it. You will not question their orders. You will not talk back. You must treat their orders as if they were coming straight from one of the princesses. Is that clear?”

“Sir, yes sir!” the lines of soldiers responded in unison.

“Good,” Shining Armor said with a nod. “Now, get to your posts and stay alert. Raise the alarm if you see anything suspicious and, should Nightmare Moon or her minions seek to take Canterlot, show them the royal guard is not to be underestimated! Dismissed!”

“Sir, yes sir!” the recruits replied once more before quickly dispersing. Each moved to their post where the veteran guards they were to be paired with were already waiting. Shining Armor watched as some took up watch on the walls while others left to begin patrolling the castle’s interior. He then turned and, with his lieutenant, retreated into the castle.

It would be a long night for both new recruits and seasoned guards, and the sunrise could not come fast enough.

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The night wore on slowly as the moon rose up into the heavens. All was still and quiet around Canterlot Castle. Yet, the peace was not greeted as warmly as it usually was. The smallest sounds became reason for panic, and the young recruits were jumping at shadows.

A small clatter of armor caused one of the veteran guards to pause and look back at the recruit he had been paired with. She had stumbled at the sight of a painting of Princess Luna and had fallen forward onto her nose. She was now picking herself up off the ground and rubbing her sore snout as he watched.

“Keep it together,” he advised her.

The recruit quickly stumbled up beside him and gave a brief salute. “Y-yes, sir. Sorry, sir. I-it won’t happen again, sir.”

The veteran guard rolled his eyes and resumed leading the patrol route as the recruit kept close to his side. She was still shaking in her armor and glancing nervously at shadows. “You’re going to have a nervous breakdown if you don’t relax,” he told the recruit when she jumped in fear of a statue of Princess Celestia.

“I’m sorry, sir,” the recruit apologized as she tried to keep herself calm. “It’s just... what have you heard about Nightmare Moon?”

“Nothing good,” the veteran answered as he continued to lead them through the castle. He knew the patrol route by heart. He had walked it more times than he cared to admit.

“I... I heard that Nightmare Moon is actually more powerful than Princess Celestia. That she was able to—”

“Kid, take a breath and stop thinking about it,” the veteran guard lectured, keeping his tone flat and professional. “You’ll never make it through the shift if you psych yourself out.”

“Sorry, sorry,” the recruit apologized. “I-I just, I’m worried.”

“Well, you’d be a foal not to be, but you can’t let that get to you. Just try and think about something else.”

The recruit nodded her head. “Oh... okay... uh... s-so, where is, um... where is Princess Luna and the rest of the regular army?”

“In the Manehattan area,” the veteran guard replied as he and the recruit rounded a corner. “They’re doing aerial and magical sweeps to try and find Nightmare Moon and the ponies helping her.”

“Y-yeah,” the recruit agreed, trying to calm herself and failing. “S-s-so, what do we do if Nightmare Moon attacks the castle... besides pray?”

“You and me are to go and protect the library. That’s where Shining Armor and the unicorns from Princess Celestia’s school are holed up,” the veteran guard answered.

The recruit took a few quick steps, so she was in line with the veteran guard. “W-why are they in the library?”

“Spells,” the veteran said. He and the recruit rounded another corner, moving deeper into the castle. “The unicorns from the princess’s school are going through the library to try and find spells we can use against Nightmare Moon. Spells to protect the castle and find where Nightmare Moon is hiding. Personally, I hope they find a spell that will let us get rid of her for good.”

“What about Shining Armor?”

“He’s in there to protect those other unicorns, and they’re helping him too,” the veteran answered as the pair continued their patrol. “They’re making sure he doesn’t burn himself out magically trying to maintain his barrier spell. That’s how he’s been able to go without sleep the past week. From what I’ve heard, those unicorns have been taking turns

sleeping for Shining Armor. They sleep for him, and he gets the energy he needs to keep going.”

“B-but what if Nightmare Moon gets through Shining Armor’s barrier?”

“She wouldn’t just ‘get through,’” the veteran said firmly. “Shining Armor’s barrier is smart. He can tell it what to keep out and what to let in. Right now, that barrier’s been magicked so that it will keep out any one thing that’s as strong or stronger than Princess Luna. The only way Nightmare Moon could get in is if she broke the barrier, and that’s why we’re here. To hold her and her minions back should that happen.”

The recruit swallowed nervously and shook in her armor once more. “J-just hold her back?”

“What, do you think you can beat her?”

“No!” The recruit shouted, as if she was about to be thrown to a pack of lions.

“Then yes, we’re just to hold our ground. We keep Nightmare Moon back until word of the attack can reach the armies out in the field. Then, whichever princess is out with the army will fly back here.” A confident smile spread onto the veteran’s face. “No matter how strong Nightmare Moon is, she can’t take on both princesses at the same time.”

“Well then, I guess I need to be very careful no pony raises the alarm,” the younger guard said, her voice shifting in tone. The strange answer, in combination with the change in the recruit’s voice, was enough to make the veteran guard turn. He was about to ask the recruit what was wrong. The words, however, never left his mouth. Before he could react, before he could scream, the veteran guard found himself engulfed in a dark cloud. When the cloud released him, he slumped over onto the floor, lost in a deep sleep.

The cloud itself stemmed from the recruit, who was smiling devilishly as it receded back into her body. She used her magic to levitate the sleeping veteran guard and tossed him into an empty room before turning herself into a cloud and zipping through the castle hallways.

That cloud was joined by others. Each cloud had once been one of the recruits, and each had performed a similar action. They had taken out the veteran guards they were once paired with and now flowed throughout the castle to deal with any guards that remained. Then, when the castle’s armored defenders all lay asleep, the clouds began to converge on the library.

Outside the library's main entrance, the clouds began to merge together into a single mass. It grew larger and larger with each cloud that joined it, and, as it grew larger, it became a swirling field of stars. It twisted and turned as it waited for a few trailing clouds to reach it, and, once it was whole, the cloud floated towards the door.

A single tendril extended from the cloud. It sank into the darkness of the keyhole and began to fiddle with the tumblers inside. It twisted and turned, and, with a resounding click, it made the lock slide into place, sealing the door from the outside. The cloud, as a whole, then sank, slipped beneath the door seam, and entered the library.

At first, the silence of the castle persisted, but then a few muffled shouts began to escape the library. Those shouts were followed by the sounds of spells being unleashed and screams of terror. There was a commotion as furniture was thrown, and a thumping of hooves filled the castle hallways as ponies tried to get through the library's locked doors.

The commotion persisted for a few minutes before ending as quickly as it began. The library and castle fell silent once more: a silence broken only by the sound of the library door unlocking. The doors then swung open, revealing what had happened inside. All of the unicorns that had been in the library, including Shining Armor, lay on the floor, sound asleep, while Nightmare Moon strode into the hallway with a confident smile.

"Nexus was right; that really was too easy," Nightmare Moon mused with a small chuckle as her voice returned to its normal tone. The plan had worked. Much like the time she became the Shadowbolts to tempt Rainbow Dash, Nightmare Moon had divided herself into multiple clones that then took on the shapes of other ponies. In this case, she had taken the place of a few dozen guards in training who had been kept from reaching boot camp by Spell Nexus and the Children of Nightmare.

It had been interesting being a small army of ponies for several days. Nightmare Moon had never before divided herself up into so many copies, but it had served its purpose. She had been able to pass through Canterlot's defensive barrier and infiltrate the castle. Each of her smaller clones had been able to ascertain a portion of information from the veteran castle guard, and, in the end, she had been given everything she needed to take the castle in a single swoop.

It was a grand gambit of a plan, one Nexus hadn't entirely approved of, since it meant sparing the castle guard. Still, it was how Nightmare Moon wanted it done, and it was a plan that had worked. The castle was undefended, no alarm had been raised, and Luna would not be returning to the castle until dawn.

That gave Nightmare Moon all the time she could want to find and deal with Celestia. She'd then lie in wait for Luna to return, for her to walk straight into her own demise. Then, once she had spilt the blood of both princesses, the rest of Equestria would be left to cower in fear as she took her place as queen.

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The first room Nightmare Moon had checked was Celestia's bedchamber, where the princess should have been resting. However, Celestia was not there, and Nightmare Moon was forced to begin searching the rest of the castle. She worked her way through the halls, checking every room as she went.

Each empty room caused Nightmare Moon's concerns to grow. She feared Celestia may have sensed something was wrong and fled, or called for Luna to return. That was one thing the royal guard had correct. She did not dare to face them both at once. She had to pick each of the royal sisters off one at a time if she was to be successful in her coup.

Nearing the ground floor of the castle, Nightmare Moon almost rounded a corner in the hallway when a noise began to reach her ears: hoofsteps. Almost instantly, she turned into a cloud of smoke and disguised herself as a rookie pegasus guard. She then waited a few moments for the hoofsteps to get closer before she jumped around the corner to confront the unknown pony.

"HALT! Who goes there?"

The pony in question flinched, fumbling with his magic. He stumbled and swayed in an effort to keep the covered tray he was carrying from hitting the floor. It was a frantic few seconds of juggling, but eventually the unicorn got a hold of the tray and breathed a sigh of relief before looking up at the disguised Nightmare Moon.

"My-my apologies, I am Silver Platter. I work in the royal kitchens," the unicorn stallion replied hurriedly, thankful that it was only a guard that had startled him.

"Only guards are supposed to be out at this hour," Nightmare Moon snipped, disguising her voice so she sounded like one of the young recruits. "What are you doing?"

"Delivering a meal to Princess Celestia."

Nightmare Moon let her fake anger cool. She relaxed her body and folded her wings. "Isn't it rather late for the princess to be eating?"

“Yes, it is,” Silver Platter agreed, “but her pet phoenix delivered the order to the kitchen, and I’m not *exactly* in a place to question the princess’s eating habits.”

“I suppose not,” Nightmare Moon remarked with a chuckle as an idea formed in her head. “I, however, cannot allow anypony to wander the halls. I will escort you to the princess, though I do not know where she is presently.”

“Princess Celestia has requested the meal be brought to the throne room,” Silver Platter replied as he walked up beside the guard.

Nightmare Moon nodded. “Then we shall head to the throne room. Please, lead the way.”

“Of course,” Silver Platter said as the pair began to make their way through the castle. They strode without speaking for a few moments, but then Silver Platter broke the silence to ease his obviously strained nerves. “So, I thought the royal guards were supposed to patrol in pairs.”

“I’m just a reserve brought in so that the normal royal guard can rest, and there aren’t enough of us to keep paired patrols,” Nightmare Moon answered flatly.

“I guess that makes sense. The royal guard has probably been getting less sleep than the princesses. If what I’ve heard is true, they’ve been pulling double and triple shifts. Princess Celestia tried to tell them all this wasn’t necessary, but the generals wouldn’t hear of it.”

“So all the guards and precautions are being done against the princesses’ wishes?” the disguised Nightmare Moon asked.

Silver Platter nodded. “Yes ma’am, but what else are we supposed to do? The princesses are in danger, and, if we don’t try to protect them, no pony will.”

“So you would face Nightmare Moon, despite being horribly outmatched, just to protect the princesses?”

“Me? Oh heavens, no!” Silver Platter replied, laughing nervously. “I’m just a unicorn that loves bringing good food to good ponies. I wouldn’t stand a chance against Nightmare Moon. She’d squash me like a bug or gobble me up. No, defending the princesses is what you and the other guards are doing, and I can respect that.”

“T-thank you,” Nightmare Moon said, though the words tasted rotten in her mouth. She shouldn’t have been accepting thanks when *she* was the one that the guards and

princesses feared. Still, she kept her composure and let that conversation die before bringing up another. “What are you bringing the princess?”

“Nothing much. It’s just a lot of comfort food, though I can certainly understand why she wants it. Stressful times, after all.” Silver Platter levitated the plate he was carrying lower and lifted up the lid so the disguised Nightmare Moon could see the food. “We’ve got a bowl of Maroon Carrot Soup, a few freshly picked apples from the princess’s golden apple tree, and a very large slice of cloud cake with a frosting flower.”

Nightmare Moon arched an eyebrow. “That soup is purple.”

Silver Platter chuckled, and put the lid back on the tray of food. “Of course; Maroon carrots are purple, so it would make sense that soup made from them would be purple. They are actually sweeter than most common carrots.”

“I prefer celery soup,” Nightmare Moon commented before the pair rounded a corner and a large set of doors came into view.

“I’m a fan of tomato soup myself. Anyways, we’re here now. If you wouldn’t mind, could you wait out here? It will just take me a couple of minutes to give the princess her meal, and then you can escort me back to the kitchen.”

“I don’t believe that will be necessary,” Nightmare Moon answered Silver Platter. “After all, you’re about to go to sleep.”

Before Silver Platter could turn around, Nightmare Moon had transformed into a cloud and engulfed him. In but a few moments the deed was done. She laid the sleeping Silver Platter out on the floor before disguising herself in his image. She then drew the covered serving tray close and ensured the food inside had not been spilled before moving towards the throne room door.

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Celestia sat back in her throne, staring mindlessly at the ceiling. She was tired, and would have rather been asleep, but sleep did not come easily. She dreaded Nightmare Moon’s coming attack, feared for Luna’s safety, and, to top it all off, nopony had seen or heard from Twilight Sparkle in days. There was simply too much weighing on her mind to get any sleep.

KNOCK... KNOCK...

Celestia perked her ears up and moved her gaze from the ceiling to the throne room doors as a figure poked his head inside. “My apologies if I disturbed you, Your Highness, but I have the meal you requested.”

“Thank you, Silver Platter,” Celestia greeted, “and I do apologize for making a request like this so late in the evening.”

“No apologies necessary, Your Highness,” Silver Platter replied. He crossed the room and presented the serving tray to the princess. “Though I hope you do not mind if I linger. That way I can take the dishes back to the kitchen once you’ve finished.”

Celestia smiled and took the tray in her own magic. “I do not mind in the slightest.” She then removed the lid from the tray and sniffed at the warm soup. The aromas offered her some comfort, but not as much as the food itself would bring. It was no secret, especially after that Gabby Gums article, that she had a tendency to eat when she was anxious, to seek comfort in sweet and savory foods.

It was a habit that, thankfully, didn’t cause Celestia too much trouble, though it was still a source of frustration on occasion. She still didn’t know what cruel hoof of fate put that photographer near Canterlot Castle on a day when she did go a little overboard, but that was a minor and distant concern of the past. The present weighed far more heavily on Celestia’s mind. Still, once Nightmare Moon was found and dealt with, she would need to put herself on a diet. She needed to get her eating habits back in order. She had indulged in cloud cake a few too many times over the past week. The pegasus-made dessert was her greatest weakness, at least when it came to food.

The dessert, however, she would save for last. With the help of a spoon, Celestia began to enjoy the soup, which danced across her tongue and warmed her insides. Then came the golden apples, which offered a crisp freshness that was unmatched by any other fruit in the kingdom. Finally she allowed herself to eat the cloud cake. Each bite of it melted in her mouth, coating her tongue in its light, rich flavor.

The last thing to enter Celestia’s mouth was the large frosting flower that had been on top of the slice of cloud cake. She chomped down on the carefully formed mass of frosting and licked her lips to gather every last trace of its sweet flavor. A smile then slipped onto her face, and she leaned back in her throne.

Silver Platter, seeing his princess had finished her meal, took the plate and set it off to one side before he began to walk around the back of the throne. “Was the meal to your liking?”

Celestia nodded. "It was delicious. Be sure to extend my thanks to the kitchen staff. I may just be able to get to sleep tonight thanks to that meal."

"Good," Silver Platter said from behind the throne as his voice began to shift, "everypony deserves a good *last* meal."

Celestia snapped her head to the side, watching as a figure stepped out from behind her throne. While Silver Platter had been the pony that disappeared behind her regal seat, the pony that stepped into her vision was decidedly *not* the unicorn waiter.

Celestia bristled, furrowed her brow, and glared at Nightmare Moon. "How did you get in here?" She glanced out a window and saw Shining Armor's barrier was still in place. "How did you get into Canterlot?"

"I would think, Celestia, that after being betrayed by Spell Nexus, you would be a little more cautious," Nightmare Moon mused with a taunting smile on her lips. She walked out from behind the throne. Each step she took exuded her confidence at the moment, like she was a cat that had outwitted and cornered a mouse.

"Are you saying Shining Armor let you in?" Celestia asked, only to shake her head firmly. "No, that is impossible. He would not side with you."

"True, but I didn't need him to," Nightmare Moon commented before she broke into a cloud. That cloud divided itself into multiple pieces, each piece floating to a clear section of the throne room floor before manifesting into a doppelganger of a royal guard. Each clone looked uniquely different, but they were all looking at Celestia with Nightmare Moon's turquoise eyes.

"Night Wind, one of your *loyal* guards, has been an ally to Spell Nexus since the beginning of the Children of Nightmare," the many parts of Nightmare Moon said in unison. "She told me of Shining Armor's barrier, how it would keep out any single pony that was of sufficient magical power."

Celestia showed no sign of panic. She just furrowed her eyebrows and looked over the clones that stood before her. "It did not, however, stop you from entering in pieces. Yes, I recognize you now, Nightmare Moon. You were the recruits I saw in the courtyard when I arrived. Like a wolf in sheep's clothing, you snuck in under the guise of ponies we could trust."

The many clones laughed as they turned back into clouds, and their laughter combined into a single voice as Nightmare Moon reformed herself into a single alicorn mare. “Yes, it was a brilliant disguise, wasn’t it?”

“Yes,” Celestia begrudgingly admitted, “and it would seem you are just as powerful as you were a thousand years ago, even though you lack the strength Luna currently possesses.”

“You can thank Spell Nexus for that. Whatever power Luna retained after the Elements of Harmony purified her was replaced by power drawn from the Everfree Forest. He really is very talented at crafting spells.”

“And what of my guards and servants?” Celestia pressed. “I can only imagine you went through them to get to me.”

“Don’t worry your pretty little head, Celestia. Your guards are now catching up on the sleep they deprived themselves of by protecting you. As to your servants, they are unaware of what occurs, except for Silver Platter. He sleeps in the hallway just outside this room.”

Celestia’s stern exterior cracked and confusion filled her eyes. “You... didn’t hurt anypony?”

“I had no need to, so why would I waste my time?” Nightmare Moon asked with a short, confident chuckle.

“You had no need to bring lightning down on the ponies at the Summer Sun Celebration, and yet you had no qualms doing so then,” Celestia said. She rose from her throne and started to walk towards Nightmare Moon. “Now you are showing mercy and restraint. Perhaps, despite your appearance, you are not quite the same mare I once knew.”

A chilling laugh escaped Nightmare Moon’s lips. “You are *just* as delusional as Twilight Sparkle.”

“And where is my student, Nightmare Moon?” Celestia asked. “I can only imagine you’re the reason no pony has seen her in days.”

“She’s in my dungeon,” Nightmare Moon answered. She kept a safe distance from Celestia, moving towards the far side of the throne room as Celestia reached the bottom

of her very large and extravagant throne. The pair of alicorns then began to circle each other, Celestia wearing a stern frown while Nightmare Moon wore a smug smile.

“And how did she end up there?” Celestia asked cautiously, on guard for any sudden movements.

“She came to me, if you would believe it,” Nightmare Moon answered. “I would have thought you’d taught her better than to go running to the very ponies that would want to capture her, but that’s what she did. She wanted to sell me some sob story about how sorry she was for what happened. It was *truly* pathetic.”

Celestia ruffled her wings as she focused more intently on Nightmare Moon. “You let her live, even though, as long as she is alive, the Elements of Harmony are a threat to you.”

“I will tell you what I told Spell Nexus. I will deal with Twilight Sparkle in my own way and in my own time,” Nightmare Moon snipped, horn beginning to glow. “Besides, you have more important things to be worried about, Celestia.”

Nightmare Moon’s magic surged, and in the air beside her a magical blade took shape. It was forged of what looked like black metal that shined and flashed like calm water beneath the night sky. While alicorns were very powerful, they were not truly immortal. Their strength came from the amount of magic they held, and the best tool to counter that magic was a weapon of pure, compressed mystic energy, much like the sword Nightmare Moon now wielded.

“An odd level of decorum, Nightmare Moon,” Celestia commented. She formed her own magical sword, a pristine white blade, which she held in a defensive position while she and Nightmare Moon continued to circle one another. “When the changeling queen assaulted Canterlot, she and I traded our most powerful spells. Why would you desire to cross swords instead of assaulting me head on?”

Nightmare Moon laughed and twirled her sword once in the air. “Because I know of the defensive spells that still linger on this castle, Celestia. Some of your veteran guards were very informative. Were we to clash spells as you and this ‘changeling queen’ did, the castle would light up like a beacon and draw Luna back.

“That, and I know one other thing.” Nightmare Moon lifted the blade to her nose, admiring its glint before flicking her gaze back to Celestia. “A little tidbit Nexus told me about immortal alicorns like you and I. Magic is our strength, but it is our weakness as

well. Where normal swords hold no threat, a blade formed of magic can wound, can injure, and can kill with greater ease than any random blast of magic.”

“And so that’s your intent,” Celestia whispered. The pair still circled one another, each waiting for the other to make the first move. “You came here to kill me.”

“Did you expect any less?”

“No... I suppose not, but what do you intend to do with Twilight? What are your plans for her friends, the others who wield the Elements of Harmony?” Celestia asked.

“While they pose no danger as long as I have Twilight,” Nightmare Moon noted confidently, “they will get their just reward. I’ve ordered my guard to capture them unharmed, so that I will be able to decide their fate.”

Celestia arched an eyebrow and allowed her sword to lower just an inch. “Unharmed? Why would you care about their well-being? Why not let your minions bring them in bruised and battered?”

Nightmare Moon snorted in contempt. “I will *not* let Spell Nexus, or anypony else, take the vengeance I *deserve* for what those ponies did to me. While you would not know it, being torn off another pony like a cheap costume by the Elements of Harmony is an excruciating experience, and they will endure double the pain they caused me that day.”

“Then what do you intend to do with them?” Celestia questioned.

“Whatever *I* see fit!” snarled Nightmare Moon. “Their fate is in my hooves and nopony, neither you nor Nexus, has any right to question my decisions. I am *above* reproach.”

“Yet you speak as if Nexus has been questioning your actions.”

Nightmare Moon laughed, though she made sure to keep her sword raised. “He is a foal who believes he knows my every desire, but I am not so easily understood by such common ponies. He knows of my desire to seize Equestria, and he acts to support that, as he should. It *was* his hooves, however, that hurt Twilight, and it was his belief that I desired to have her hung or beheaded.”

“And isn’t that your desire?” Celestia asked, pressing the issue. “Would it not be simpler for you to let him do as he wishes with Twilight? Why not let him save you the trouble?”

Nightmare Moon launched herself at Celestia while swinging her sword in a wide arc. “*No pony hurts Twilight except me!*”

Celestia just barely managed to block the blow, the clang of metal striking metal echoing across the throne room walls. Nightmare Moon then attempted a thrust, making Celestia spread her wings. With a single powerful flap, she threw herself back, dodging the blade and putting more distance between herself and Nightmare Moon.

“I do not wish to fight you,” Celestia said, but Nightmare Moon did not falter in her attack. Celestia was just barely able to raise her sword to block a downward swing from Nightmare Moon, and the two magical swords clashed with a resounding clang.

Nightmare Moon pressed her blade against Celestia’s in an attempt to break through the defense with sheer force. “Then surrender yourself!”

Celestia buckled momentarily under the weight of Nightmare Moon’s attack, but she would not be so easily defeated. A careful turn of her blade sent Nightmare Moon’s sword down into the throne room floor. Celestia then proceeded to bring the pommel of her sword around to strike Nightmare Moon in the throat.

The sudden thrust of the sword’s blunt hilt into her neck caused Nightmare Moon to stumble back, coughing and wheezing from the blow. Celestia, however, did not press her offensive. She instead stayed on the far side of the throne room, lowering her sword as her voice echoed across the marble hall. “You have told me what your minions did to Twilight Sparkle, but what have *you* done to her, Nightmare Moon?”

“N-nothing,” Nightmare Moon choked out. “She has been recovering from the injuries given to her by Nexus, under the care of my castle’s doctor.”

An expression of surprise etched itself across Celestia’s face. “You are caring for her?”

“I *told* you, no pony else will have *my* vengeance. I am having her injuries treated simply so that she can properly appreciate the pain I will induce when I make her pay for what she’s done to me!”

Nightmare Moon’s shout hung in the air, words that echoed not with rage but with pain. Celestia remained silent until the echoes had faded, and then spoke with an odd, almost concerned tone in her voice. “And what has she done to you, Nightmare Moon?”

The question struck Nightmare Moon’s heart and set her fury ablaze. “Don’t you *dare* speak as if you don’t know!” she yelled, her words dripping with loathing as she

recovered from Celestia's blow. "It was her and her friends that set the Elements of Harmony upon me. That, and I have not forgotten her most recent crimes. Twilight Sparkle betrayed, lied to, and above all else, *abandoned me!*"

"Listen to me, Nightmare—" Celestia paused, taking a step forward as her tone became more pleading. "No, listen to me, Nyx. I'm sorry. I did not want to take you away from Twilight forcibly, and I had every intention of returning you to her the next morning."

Nightmare Moon gritted her teeth. "Those are nothing but lies. You and Twilight conspired against me that night. Twilight knew what you were going to do, and she did nothing to stop it. She *wanted* you to take me away."

"Nyx, that is *not* true," Celestia said firmly. "Twilight tried to convince me you weren't a danger. She didn't want to let you go."

Nightmare Moon drew in a deep breath, her cold composure returning. "But she did let me go, and I will *never* forgive her for it."

"But—"

"And don't think I'll ever forgive you, either!" seethed Nightmare Moon. She pointed the tip of her sword at Celestia. "It's all your fault! Everything is *your* fault! *You* allowed the ponies of the past to ignore the night sky, turning Luna into me! *You* sent your student to Ponyville where she and her friends murdered me with the Elements of Harmony! *You* took me away from Ponyville, from my simple, ignorant life!"

Nightmare Moon sucked in a breath, held it, and fixed her accusing gaze on Celestia. "All that I have lost, all that I have become, all that I can ever claim to be is a shadow of your actions. Tonight, you shall pay for *your* sins, Celestia!"

With those words Nightmare Moon lashed out, springing into the air and soaring across the room while yelling in a furious rage. She brought her sword beneath her and swiped at Celestia as she flew by. Celestia dodged to the left and spun herself around just in time to see Nightmare Moon land and resume her ground attack. Sparks soared into the air as their blades clashed again and again.

The pair was evenly matched for a time, but then Celestia saw an opening. Nightmare Moon swung too wide, overextended her attack, and Celestia seized the opportunity. As quickly as her hooves would allow, she spun around and bucked. She hit Nightmare Moon in the side, and the force of the blow sent her flying across the room. She would have likely crashed into a wall, but with a flutter of her wings, Nightmare Moon was able

to right herself. She pressed her hooves into the floor, skidded to a stop, and glared across the room at Celestia with murderous intent.

“Nyx, *please*, I implore you to listen to reason. End this senseless fight. I promise—”

Nightmare Moon ignored Celestia and charged back into battle. Both their blades clashed once more. Nightmare Moon was putting all of her strength behind her attack, and it was just enough to force Celestia’s blade to the side.

Knowing her defenses had been broken through, Celestia bent her legs and tried to jump away, but she could not escape without harm. Nightmare Moon struck out again and the tip of her sword nicked Celestia’s cheek, leaving a small cut that began to weep blood.

Celestia landed a few feet back and released a surge of magic from her body. The wave of energy pushed Nightmare Moon back and gave Celestia the moment of rest she needed. She could feel herself bleeding, but she remained focused on her opponent. “Nyx, please—”

Nightmare Moon winced, her voice dripping with her hatred of Celestia. “Stop calling me Nyx! I am not Nyx! I can *never* be Nyx because of you! Because of you, I am and will forever be Nightmare Moon! Now silence your tongue before I cut it out, and quit holding back! Fight me, coward!”

“I am *not* a coward,” Celestia retorted firmly as she wiped the blood away with her right forehoof, “and I am *not* the only one holding back. You strike only to injure me, Nyx, and that is not the only time you have shown mercy. You put my guards to sleep, where in the past you wouldn’t have batted an eye at seeing them injured or even dead. You speak of Twilight’s betrayal, and yet you have not taken your vengeance against her. If you are truly Nightmare Moon, then why do you show mercy?”

“I... I...” Nightmare Moon struggled with her words, her mind locking up as she was faced with Celestia’s questions. Why was she holding back? Why wasn’t she giving it her all? She had practiced using a sword with the guards during training. She knew how to fight, so why wasn’t she going for the killing blows?

“Nyx,” Celestia began, lowering her sword as the fight slipped into a lull. “I know you’ve been hurt. I know you have a right to be angry at me, and I know I do not deserve forgiveness for the part I played in turning you into this. Yet, if this is what you truly wanted, you would have killed me with that last blow. Please, end this farce and let us put our swords away. It is not too late.”

“Too late?” Nightmare Moon echoed, an inferno of rage flashing to life behind her eyes. “Too late?!”

“It *was* always **TOO LATE FOR ME!**” Nightmare Moon yelled, her voice growing until she was shouting at the top of her lungs. At the same time her mane began to surge and swirl, reflecting the storm of anger that raged within.

With a screech, Nightmare Moon launched herself at Celestia, this time accompanying her charge with a volley of lightning. Celestia managed to block a few of the arcane bolts with her sword, but she was struck by others. The bolts did little damage themselves, but they caused Celestia to wince, which made it all the more difficult for her to block Nightmare Moon’s coming sword.

The rage and magic behind Nightmare Moon’s blade would soon prove to be too much. Their weapons clashed with a thunderous crack, and, before Celestia could retreat, her sword began to fracture. It burst apart, shattering like glass as its magic failed beneath the force of Nightmare Moon’s blow.

The magic released from her broken blade knocked Celestia off her hooves. She rolled and bounced across the throne room floor, eventually coming to a stop at the base of her throne. Shards of the shattered blade had speckled her with small cuts, and her breathing was labored as the pain of the magical knock-back pulsed throughout her body.

Celestia took a few deep, gasping breaths to try and recover more quickly, but it was already too late. When she looked up, she saw Nightmare Moon standing over her and felt Nightmare Moon’s black, magical blade press against her neck.

“It’s over, Celestia,” Nightmare Moon said coldly, and Celestia knew it was true. Yet, instead of closing her eyes and waiting for the bitter end, she locked her gaze on Nightmare Moon. The pair stared at each other for a long time, both still as stone. All it would take for Nightmare Moon to end Celestia’s life was a twitch of her sword, yet she just stood there.

“You’re still holding back,” Celestia said.

Nightmare Moon pressed her sword into Celestia’s neck. “SHUT UP! I could end this *right now*. I could kill you. Just a quick slash of my sword and your life would be forfeit.”

“Yes, you have defeated me,” Celestia admitted, “but I implore you to stop, Nyx, and listen.”

Nightmare Moon put more pressure on her sword, the blade breaking the surface of Celestia's skin and drawing blood. "Why? Why should I stop now? Give me one good reason why I shouldn't slash your throat!"

"Because, though you deny it, your actions and words tell me that you care about Twilight," Celestia calmly explained. "So I ask you to stop, Nyx, and realize where you stand. This is your point of no return. If you finish me here, you will secure Equestria as your own, but across this kingdom, even in Twilight's eyes, you shall never be seen as anything but my murderer and a monster."

Nightmare Moon's eyes pulsed at the mention of Twilight Sparkle, and she lowered her sword a few inches. Celestia dared to hope that Nightmare Moon had finally listened to reason, but a few moments later the sword was back against her neck. Yet, the murderous intent that once filled Nightmare Moon's eyes had faded, and her sword was trembling.

Then, with a slow breath, Nightmare Moon lowered her blade. She spoke with a broken, hollow voice as her mane began to wrap around Celestia. "Your time will come, but before then you will know the pain I've suffered. For a thousand years you shall be banished to the sun, held amongst its magic, just as I was held by the moon. Only then, once you've known the full extent of my suffering, shall you know death."

With those final few words and a flash of light from within her mane, Nightmare Moon made good on her word. She completed her spell and banished Celestia to the sun.

Yet, even after Celestia was gone, Nightmare Moon remained where she was. She stared at the spot where Celestia had been, and then she looked up to Celestia's now empty throne. With little warning, Nightmare Moon sucked in a deep breath, cried out in a rage, and threw her sword. It pierced the air like an arrow, and, with a resounding "thunk" of metal against wood, it sank into the back of Celestia's throne.

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Luna banked to one side, looking over Canterlot. It was nearly dawn, and she was returning to the castle so that Celestia could fly out, meet the army, and continue the search for Nightmare Moon. The search over the evening had been fruitless. Both exhaustion and disappointment made Luna yearn for the comfort of her bed.

Yet, as Luna drew closer to the castle, she began to notice how still and quiet it was. She saw no guards moving along the battlements, saw nopony at all. Some servants should have at least been out tending to the early morning chores, but there was nopony around.

Shining Armor's barrier was also nowhere to be seen.

Luna felt the air catch in her chest, and, with a few furious flaps of her wings, she surged towards the castle. She dove into the courtyard but did not land nor slow down. Instead, she threw open the castle doors with her magic and soared through the hallways. It was something Celestia was unable to do because of her size, but Luna was still small enough that her wingspan fit inside the corridors.

The castle was deserted, utterly empty, and it did nothing to improve Luna's nerves. She flew with even greater speed, fearing the worst as she raced amongst the halls. Luna first went to Celestia's bedroom, but, when her sister wasn't there, Luna went to the next likely place: the throne room. When she couldn't sleep, Celestia always liked to go there.

"Sister? Sister, are you in here?" Luna called out, landing in the doorway. She looked first to the throne, desperately hoping to see Celestia there. Her sister, however, was nowhere to be seen. In her place, standing just in front of the throne, was an all-black alicorn with a swirling, magical mane and tail.

Luna felt herself tense when she saw Nightmare Moon, a figure she had only ever seen reflected back in a mirror. Was this really what she used to look like? She could now see why so many ponies told scary stories about her. A pitch-black mare with a magical mane and tail of the night and piercing dragon eyes. It was the kind of thing nightmares were made of.

Eyes glaring, Luna quietly began to move across the room. Though she was walking on the regal, red rug that ran from the door to Celestia's throne, Luna's hoofsteps were still audible.

"You're back earlier than I expected, or perhaps it is later in the morning than I realized," Nightmare Moon remarked quietly. She turned to face Luna, revealing her tired eyes.

"Where is Celestia?" Luna asked firmly.

"Your precious sister is getting a taste of her own medicine. She has been banished to the sun," Nightmare Moon replied, forcing firmness into her voice. "Do not take this as a sign of mercy. I merely wish for Celestia to know the torture of the imprisonment that I endured for a thousand years. Once she has known that, her life is forfeit."

"Imprisonment 'we' endured," Luna corrected, "or have you forgotten where you came from?"

“I have not forgotten. All the memories I have are either my own or the memories from when you were the one called Nightmare Moon. It is from those memories that I know my desires and destiny. It’s a destiny you were too weak to seize for your own, but a destiny that will be mine.”

“But is it a destiny you want?” asked Luna.

“I cannot recall any time when I did not want the eternal night and the defeat of Equestria’s royalty... which now includes you,” Nightmare Moon answered. She manifested her magical sword and began to walk towards Luna. “Defend yourself.”

Luna formed two smaller, shorter blades which floated on either side of her. “Is that truly all you can remember? Do you not recall the time you spent with Twilight Sparkle, Nyx?”

“Do *not* call me that. I am Nightmare Moon.”

“But do you remember the time you spent with Twilight?” Luna pressed.

Nightmare Moon snorted in contempt. “Of course I do. I would not forget something so recent so easily.”

“Then you have memories beyond being Nightmare Moon, beyond the memories you had to inherit from me.”

“What is your point? Those memories are a few short months compared to the hundreds of years of memories I have from the time when we were one and the same.”

“But I *know* those memories are a thousand times happier than the memories we share. I came to know you briefly, Nyx, at the dinner after the Spring Festival. You talked of friends, of school, of Twilight... you were happy. Why are you throwing that away to pursue old desires that were never yours?”

“They *are* my desires,” Nightmare Moon spat. “I want vengeance. I want Equestria. I want ponies to look upon the beauty of my night.”

“But it *isn’t* your night. It’s *mine*,” Luna stressed. “I’m the one that raises and lowers the moon. I’m the one who got jealous of Celestia. I’m the one that felt unappreciated and grew to loathe the ponies who slept through my night, but that’s because I’m the one that crafted and made the night my own, not you.”

Nightmare Moon stomped a hoof. “It will *be* my night soon enough. When you’re gone, I shall inherit your status as ruler of the nighttime sky, just as I have inherited your memories. I will make the sky more beautiful than you ever could. Ponies will look upon it and be in such awe that they will love the night, love me, and forget all about the sun and you royal sisters.”

“Nyx, you don’t have to be what I was,” Luna said sternly, as if she was explaining a difficult concept to a child throwing a tantrum. “Being Nightmare Moon is a choice, not a curse of blood you have to inherit.”

Nightmare Moon hung her head and lowered her sword. “No, you are wrong... for I have inherited much more from you than just your memories. The loathing, the fear, and the hatred Equestria had for you have become mine to bear. The Elements of Harmony left you to live a happy life again while I became your scapegoat, the monster in the dark that you were saved from.”

“But Nyx—”

“I told you not to call me that! I. Am. Nightmare Moon!” she seethed as her eyes flashed with determination. She raised her sword and pointed its tip at Luna. “Now defend yourself.”

“Very well, I shall never refer to you as Nyx again,” Luna said as she raised her own blades. “You have made your choice. You have chosen to threaten me, my kingdom, and my sister. You have refused to see reason, have chosen to be as blind as I once was, and have forced my hoof. I will not stand down nor surrender, Nightmare Moon. If you wish to have Equestria, you must take it from me.”

Luna lifted her swords, her voice carrying the final echoes of a warning. “But know this, Nightmare Moon; once our swords clash, from now until eternity, it won’t be my past that haunts you, but your own.”

Nightmare Moon laughed as she began to stride towards Luna like a storm cloud rolling over Equestria. “I will not be dissuaded, and no matter how valiantly you fight, you will fall. You will share Celestia’s fate, because this is *my* kingdom now.”

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Whispers and hushed voices filled the Ponyville square. Everypony in town had gathered outside the town hall. The sun was supposed to have risen several hours ago, but, instead, the moon still lingered in the center of the sky, filling the world with its pale glow. What

was worse was that several craters had appeared on the moon. They darkened the moon's surface, returning to it the rough silhouette of the Mare in the Moon that had adorned it for a thousand years.

Beneath that moon, the Mayor of Ponyville, Ivory Scroll, moved up to the podium set on the veranda of the town hall. It looked like she had been crying, but the mayor wiped her eyes and cleared her throat, forcing herself to be strong.

"Fillies and Gentlecolts, as Mayor of Ponyville it is my duty... my *solemn* duty to announce that Princess Luna and Princess Celestia have—" She choked on her words, but, after licking her lips, she managed to continue. "They have been defeated."

A hushed gasp cascaded through the crowd. Ponies looked at each other with disbelief, none daring to speak as they hung on every word that left Ivory's mouth.

"I received word just after sun... when the sunrise was due to occur. During the night, Nightmare Moon seized Canterlot Castle. She defeated Princess Celestia and then laid in wait until Princess Luna returned to the castle a few hours ago. Both princesses are now imprisoned in the sun and the moon respectively."

Ivory Scroll coughed again, trying to keep the strength in her voice from failing. "Nightmare Moon has hereby decreed herself Queen of Equestria, and the Children of Nightmare, the ponies responsible for her return, are already taking control of the government. Their forces have secured the capital, due in part to a swelling of their ranks following the coup."

Ivory's voice began to tremble as she forced out the final words. "The Children of Nightmare have warned that... that any open rebellion against the new crown will be met harshly and... and that... A-and that we h-have seen the last of the s-sun. This night... will last f-f-for... forever."

Another gasp cut through the crowd, and a few ponies even fainted. However, before the harsh truth could even properly sink into the residents of Ponyville, another voice rang out through the now everlasting night. "Oh Miss Mayor, you speak as if this is some great tragedy."

Every head in the crowd spun around, looking back to see Nightmare Moon striding towards them. She was flanked on either side by two of her own royal guard. They were clad in armor that matched hers in color, and their eyes, like hers, seemed to glow in the night with turquoise irises.

The crowd quickly parted to make a path, much like they did the day Nightmare Moon first returned. Some even bowed as she passed, a sight that made Nightmare Moon smile. She couldn't expect them *all* to be so eager to bow right away. It was a start, though, and she could be patient. After all, she had all the time in the world.

Once she had reached the veranda of the town hall, Nightmare Moon used her magic to move the podium Ivory Scroll had been speaking from off to one side. She then looked to Ivory Scroll and saw that the mayor had retreated back several steps and was trembling like a leaf. Still, Ivory managed to bow to her new queen.

Satisfied with the level of respect the mayor had shown her, Nightmare Moon turned to face the crowd and let her voice reach a commanding volume. "Citizens of Ponyville, it is hard to believe that merely a week ago I stood amongst you, freshly reborn, and now I am already your queen. One must truly wonder how sturdy your monarchy was, considering how easily it was conquered.

"I now stand as your one true queen. Under me, Equestria shall flourish under the eternal night. You need not fear for your crops or your homes, for, while the night can be cold, those most loyal to me have already begun the act of making this kingdom a place that can thrive beneath the moonlight. They have long been prepared for the night eternal.

"And there is *further* reason to rejoice!" Nightmare Moon told them. "For, as I promised on the day of my return, I have *not* forgotten the kindness you all showed me when I was but a scared little filly. For this, I have decided to give Ponyville a great honor, to bestow upon it a gift no other town or city in Equestria will share."

The ground shook, a distant rumbling reaching the ear of everypony as Nightmare Moon's eyes glowed. All heads turned to the distant rock quarries in the hills just beyond Ponyville, where the rumbling seemed to be emanating from. For a moment, none of them were able to see anything. Yet, as the rumbling continued, a single pointed spire began to rise up against the horizon.

The rumbling then rose to a terrifying cacophony, as if the world was splitting in two. At the same time, the first spire continued to rise higher and was soon joined by others. Eventually, a whole castle had risen up into view, casting a harsh shadow and looking down upon Ponyville like a giant ready to strike.

When the fortress had fully risen, and the rumbling had stopped, Nightmare Moon looked down and savored the shock and horror on her subjects' faces. "Yes, ponies of

Ponyville, your eyes do not deceive you. For the time being, Canterlot shall remain the administrative capitol of Equestria, but Ponyville shall be the *true* heart of this kingdom. It is here, in your town, that both I and my castle find a home, and Ponyville will know prosperity unmatched as it slowly becomes the beating heart of Equestria.”

Nightmare Moon finished her speech with a triumphant smile and a flare of her wings. The crowd, however, did not share in her enthusiasm. The only pony that dared to speak was Ivory Scroll. She shakily took a few steps towards Nightmare Moon and bowed to her new queen. “You... y-you *honor* us, Your Highness. We... w-we will gladly serve as your home.”

Nightmare Moon smiled. “Well-chosen words, Mayor. If you keep that attitude up, I may just let you keep your position.”

“Well, some of us ain’t goin’ down without a fight!”

Nightmare Moon and the crowd as a whole turned their heads and saw six ponies standing in a nearby, empty street. Nightmare Moon recognized five of the ponies. Applejack, Rarity, Pinkie Pie, Rainbow Dash, and Fluttershy were all together, wearing their Elements of Harmony necklaces. They were standing strong, except for Fluttershy, who was hiding behind Rarity. Still, all five of them were there and together.

The sixth pony, however, was one Nightmare Moon did not recognize. She appeared to be a simple earth pony. Her coat was blue, and her mane was a mixture of white and silver. She was, for some reason, wearing a purple pointed hat that was decorated with silver and gold stars. She also had on a cape that matched the hat and stood with her head held aloft. It was a posture that reminded Nightmare Moon of Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon.

She hated the blue-colored pony already.

“Well, well, well, I was wondering when you five would show up. Who’s the new mare?” Nightmare Moon asked.

“Her name is—” Applejack began, only for the blue pony to interrupt her.

“I believe that *I* can speak for myself, thank you very much,” the new pony snipped. She then turned and gave Nightmare Moon a confident grin, as if she was looking down at some pony far beneath her. “Remember this face well, Nightmare Moon, for it will be the face of your *doom!*” the blue pony exclaimed as she pointed a hoof at the self-appointed

queen. “For on this day, it will be I, the Great and Powerful Trixie, who will single-hoofedly vanquish you and bring peace and order back to Equestria!”

An eruption of magical fireworks and firecrackers erupted from behind Trixie, as if in fanfare for her words. The display, however, only made Nightmare Moon arch her eyebrows skeptically and look towards Applejack. “You’re kidding. You’re kidding, right?”

“I assure you, Nightmare Moon, this is no jest,” Trixie crowed. A light purple glow encased the mare’s hat, causing it to rise up and shift back on the pony’s head. The adjustment revealed that she was, in fact, a unicorn. “I, the Great and Powerful Trixie, shall defeat you.”

“Okay, this *has* to be a joke,” Nightmare Moon scoffed. “This was your idea, Pinkie Pie, wasn’t it? You five got together and decided to get on my good side by playing a prank. Very smart, but I think you may want to tell your friend there to tone it down. You wouldn’t want me to actually believe you came here to defeat me, now do you?”

“That is exactly what the Great and Powerful Trixie intends to do,” she exclaimed.

The smile faded from Nightmare Moon’s face and a threatening coldness filled her voice. “Do you not understand who you challenge?”

Trixie lifted a hoof anxiously at Nightmare Moon’s statement, as if she was going to take a step back, but instead she planted her hoof back down defiantly. “I am fully aware of *your* power, but I wield a far greater one. A power that I shall use to send you back to the dark pit you crawled out of. For you see, I am not merely a unicorn. I am *the* most magical unicorn in all of Equestria!”

Nightmare Moon couldn’t help but gape. This... this fool was either completely clueless or had a death wish. Who was crazy enough to be so boastful? The only time Nightmare Moon had ever heard of a pony with such an ego was when—

Nightmare Moon’s eyes flickered, and she was struck with a realization. She knew this mare. Not personally, but she had heard of her. Twilight had told her a story about a blue unicorn that had come into town, boasting she had defeated an Ursa Major. But when an Ursa Minor came into town, the unicorn was unable to do anything, leaving Twilight to save the day.

It was a tale that had become one of her favorite bedtime stories, and that memory caused Nightmare Moon to smirk. “Oh... oh yes, of course,” she spoke with a deceptively gentle tone. “I’ve heard of you before, Great and Powerful Trixie”

“Y-you have? I mean, of *course* you have! Far and wide have ponies heard the tales of the miraculous feats of the Great and Powerful Trixie!” she exclaimed before releasing more firework magic in the air.

A chuckle escaped Nightmare Moon’s lips. “Yes, I know who you are. You’re the egomaniac with a tacky hat that almost destroyed Ponyville with her boasting.”

Nightmare Moon’s words sucked the air out of Trixie’s lungs, made her mouth hang open, and caused her pupils to narrow to tiny dots.

“At least,” Nightmare Moon continued, smiling devilishly, “that’s how Rarity put it. When Twilight told me about the last time you were here, she was more... polite, though she basically said the same thing.”

Trixie turned and glared at Rarity as she hissed in a whisper, “*You know her, and you told her that?!?*”

“*Hey, don’t get mad at her! She’s not the one boasting that she’s going to save the day all by herself!*” Rainbow Dash argued in Rarity’s defense.

“*And I shouldn’t need to remind you that you’re worth a rotten apple without the rest of us,*” Applejack added, pointing an accusing hoof at Trixie.

Trixie met the harsh tone in Applejack’s voice with a snarl. “*Hey, you’re the ones who convinced me to come back here! You’re the ones that came to me, and the only reason I agreed is because defeating Nightmare Moon would salvage my career. I wouldn’t even be here if it weren’t for you, so you better not mess this up!*”

“As amusing as it is to meet the overconfident showpony from one of Twilight’s stories,” Nightmare Moon interrupted, if only to keep the six ponies from squabbling amongst themselves, “I am curious. What makes you think you actually stand a chance against me? Just how do you plan to defeat me, an immortal alicorn, when you are nothing more than a mere unicorn?”

“I, the Great and Powerful Trixie, intend to use the most powerful magic known to ponykind, for I am the new bearer of the Element of Magic!” Trixie exclaimed. She lifted her hat again and revealed that she was wearing a familiar tiara. She then quickly

swapped the two things around, setting her hat back on her head and placing the tiara on top of the hat. It allowed her to proudly wear both at the same time.

And, for the first time since her transformation, Nightmare Moon felt real fear. “Where did you get those?!” she hissed as she drew a hoof back in fear. “Nexus assured me he would secure them from Canterlot Tower!”

“You can thank Princess Cadance for that,” Rainbow Dash said with a confident smile. “She got the Elements out of Canterlot and to us before Twilight disappeared, because Princess Celestia knew you’d try to take them from Canterlot when you attacked.”

Nightmare Moon had made a miscalculation. She had come so far, but now her destruction was staring her down. She and Spell Nexus had not thought Princess Celestia would preemptively remove the Elements of Harmony from Canterlot Tower. They believed that Celestia would simply try to protect the elements, especially with Twilight missing in action.

The elements, however, must have been sent to Ponyville within hours of her reappearance, before Twilight had even begun her search for the once underground castle.

And to Nightmare Moon’s horror, Trixie was proving herself a capable replacement. The Elements of Harmony began to come to life. They glowed and began to lift the six wielders into the air. Nightmare Moon instinctively worked herself into a defensive position. She had been torn apart by the magical rainbow once. She would not let it happen again. She’d jump out of the way, try to escape, but she would *not* go down a second time so easily.

The spell continued to grow in power, and the six ponies were engulfed in light. The crowd below began to cheer, and they looked on with eager eyes. The Elements of Harmony then launched their fabled rainbow, and the moment Nightmare Moon saw it she was filled with an overpowering desire... to laugh.

The rainbow spat out by the Elements of Harmony was the size of a candy bar and its colors were sickly and mismatched. It drifted on the wind like a leaf, and when it finally reached Nightmare Moon, the rainbow did not burn or hurt. All it was able to do was make a small patch of her body feel warmer before it faded. If Nightmare Moon was to be honest, it was a rather pleasant sensation, like a warm blanket.

As Nightmare Moon tried to contain the laughter caused by the pitiful display, she was struck by inspiration. It was a mischievous, almost childish, idea, but it was too good to resist. She took in a deep breath and howled with fake agony. She then let her body burst into indigo smoke like she was a balloon that had been popped.

It was a sight that made the crowd gasp. They watched the smoky remnants of Nightmare Moon fade into the night air and then turned to look at their supposed saviors, who were sprawled out on the ground.

When the group was led by Twilight Sparkle, the magic of the elements left them feeling refreshed and rejuvenated. This time, however, they were covered with scuffs and scratches. It was like the ancient magic had worked against them, not with them. Trixie herself hastily shoved the tiara off her head and into the dirt before proceeding to rub the sides of her skull. Her head was pounding with the worst headache she had ever felt in her life.

The first to recover was Rarity, who forced herself to her hooves and looked around for any sign of Nightmare Moon. “Is... is it over?”

“I reckon it is,” Applejack answered. A small smile formed on her face. “To tell y’all the truth, I didn’t think it’d be that easy a second time, or that Trixie would actually be able to pull this off.”

Trixie huffed, her large ego unaffected by her splitting headache. “You doubted that I could be the new bearer of the Element of Magic? Don’t you know? You can *always* count on the Great and Powerful Trixie.”

Applejack rolled her eyes, but the gesture went unnoticed as the residents of Ponyville began to encircle them. The crowd was cheering their heroes and the defeat of Nightmare Moon. Soon the princess would grace the town with their presence. The moon would be lowered and the sun would rise and everything would be normal. And, as sure as the sun would rise, Trixie stood up and began to bask in the adulation, soaking it all in.

“Yes! Yes, *celebrate* ponies of Ponyville! For I, The Great and Powerful Trixie, have saved Equestria all by myself! I truly am the greatest equine who has ever lived!”

Very quickly the cheers from the crowd began to die as Ponyville’s residents began to remember why they didn’t particularly *like* the “Great and Powerful” Trixie. Still, they

wouldn't let Trixie's gloating ruin their happiness. Nightmare Moon had been defeated. It was a day to celebrate.

However, the celebration ended before it even began. From amongst the crowd's hooves, several trails of indigo smoke swirled up into the air and towards the bearers of the Elements of Harmony. The smoke formed into a swirling tornado, which sucked up the six mares despite their panicked shouts. The tornado spun the mares round and round, tossing and spinning them as it moved towards the town hall.

Then, as quickly as it had picked them up, the tornado dropped the six mares at the foot of the town hall steps, leaving them in a crumpled heap. Pinkie Pie was the only one among them able to raise her head, and her eyes were spinning as she asked, "Did anypony see the carriage that hit us?"

Pinkie Pie's question drew a haughty laugh from the swirling indigo tornado. It had moved to the top of the town hall's steps and materialized into Nightmare Moon. Once more the crowd gasped, for not only was Nightmare Moon still alive, but she now held all six of the Elements of Harmony in her mane.

After glaring down at the six mares for a time, Nightmare Moon let a smile creep onto her lips as she descended the steps. She focused her attention on Trixie, the mare who believed herself a match for Equestria's new queen. She stood over Trixie, watched, and waited as she recovered from her ride in the tornado.

Trixie sat up, rubbed her head, and when she finally opened her eyes, her nose was but a few inches from Nightmare Moon's tall, slender legs. She tilted her head up slowly and saw Nightmare Moon smiling down at her with a wide, triumphant grin.

"Gotcha."

That one word from Nightmare Moon made Trixie yelp. She jumped, turned, and tried to run away. She, however, got no more than two steps before Nightmare Moon whipped out her magic and caught one of Trixie's legs. This caused her to stumble, trip, and crash to the ground with a painful thud. Yet, despite the pain from her rough landing, Trixie quickly turned over onto her back. She stared with wide fearful eyes as Nightmare Moon closed in on her like a wolf would tower over an injured rabbit.

"What a disappointing rebellion," Nightmare Moon commented. "Then again, I shouldn't have expected more from a mare so second-rate compared to Twilight Sparkle. Now, what am I to do with you? Perhaps I should take a memento so I can fondly

remember your pathetic attempt to overthrow me. Yes, I do believe I need a trophy to hang on my wall.”

At that Nightmare Moon’s mane arched back and struck out, diving towards Trixie with murderous intent. Trixie flinched and screamed at the sight, yet she never felt the pain of death. Instead, she felt something being taken off of her. Nightmare Moon had done nothing more but take her hat and cape.

“What? Were you afraid that I would take your pretty little head?” Nightmare Moon sardonically asked. “Don’t worry, if I want that, I’ll come back for it. Now, if I remember Twilight’s story correctly, this is the part where you realize what a fool you’ve made of yourself and you run away.”

“M-mark my words, you haven’t seen the last of me!” Trixie vowed weakly, trying to save face even though she knew Nightmare Moon was sparing her. “For while you may have won the battle, the war is far from over! The Great and Powerful Trixie never runs away! She only makes tactical retreats!”

At that, Trixie used her magic to summon a smoke screen. She then turned and bolted, running as fast as her hooves would carry her. It was the same kind of retreat she had made after the Ursa Minor incident, and the display left most of Ponyville’s residents groaning.

While the crowd was disappointed with Trixie, Nightmare Moon reveled in her most recent success. The one thing left that could possibly defeat her, the Elements of Harmony, were now in her possession. She could now make sure they were never used again. So thrilled was she at her absolute victory, Nightmare Moon couldn’t keep herself from having a little more fun.

Looking over the crowd of ponies that hung on her every word out of fear, Nightmare Moon once again turned into an indigo cloud. Her body swirled and condensed quickly before she rematerialized, but not as a regal alicorn. Instead, Nightmare Moon had taken on Trixie’s appearance and was wearing the cape and hat she plucked from the real Trixie but a few moments ago.

“Behold, Ponyville!” the shape-shifted Nightmare Moon shouted out in Trixie’s own voice. “I am the Weak and Cowardly Trixie! Thrill as I attempt to pretend that sparklers and flashes of light are worthy of admiration! Be dazzled as I bore you with speeches about my unfounded belief in my own abilities! Gasp as I turn tail and run at the first sign of danger!”

The Not-Trixie began to laugh haughtily, finding amusement at her own joke. Her performance, however, was met with utter silence. No pony in the crowd gave so much as a chortle or giggle.

The silence made the Not-Trixie's face contort, first into an expression of disappointment then into one of annoyance. "Hmph. Plebeians. You would think they would appreciate a mare that can shape-shift at will," Nightmare Moon grumbled to herself. She changed back into her normal appearance and Trixie's hat and cape joined the Elements of Harmony in the embrace of her magical mane.

With her impromptu attempt at celebrity roasting failing to earn a single laugh, Nightmare Moon redirected her focus on the five remaining mares that dared to oppose her. She expected them to be shocked, filled with fear, to be trembling in her shadow, but they were, in fact, arguing among themselves.

"I *told* you we shouldn't have used her," Rainbow Dash barked at Applejack.

"Oh hush up," Applejack snapped back. "She was the only unicorn we could find who had a special talent for magic, and even that was a long shot."

"So, my little ponies," Nightmare Moon began, ending the disagreement and forcing the five mares to take notice of her, "what am I going to do with you?"

"Do whatever you want, you can't make us talk!" Dash shouted defiantly.

"Yeah!" Pinkie Pie agreed, only to look quizzically at Rainbow Dash a moment later. "Wait, what *would* we talk to her about?"

"Pinkie Pie, shhhh."

Nightmare Moon chuckled. "Your bickering *alone* is very amusing to me. How would you five like to be my personal court jesters? I'll even let you have visitation rights with Twilight Sparkle."

"Your Majesty, the law dictates that there is only one punishment for those who dare to attack you."

Nightmare Moon turned her attention to the voice, seeing it was one of her body guards. She was surprised they had actually lingered nearby after her faked defeat. She would have expected them to bolt for the castle to inform Spell Nexus of what had happened. Still, they had remained and were now bowing down to her respectfully.

Heaving a heavy sigh, Nightmare Moon turned her attention away from the guards that were interrupting her fun. “Let me guess, this is one of Nexus’s laws.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” one of her guards confirmed.

“And what does this law say?”

“That any pony that attacks your royal grace is to meet the gallows,” the other guard answered.

“Did... did he just say... gallows?” Rarity asked in a hushed, disbelieving whisper.

Applejack nodded. “He... he did, sugarcube.”

“B-b-but what about the animals at my cottage?” Fluttershy asked as she started to tear up in panic. “There are some that need their medicine. I have to go take care of them. There is a little ferret that needs his bandages changed a-and there are song birds that are just about ready to take their first flight. What will happen if I’m not there to catch them if they fall?”

“You be strong, sugarcube. I promise all those little animals will get along just fine,” Applejack tried to reassure her. “Just... just like how Big Mac, Apple Bloom and Granny Smith will get along. It will be hard, ‘specially when the next Applebucking Season comes. I-I don’t think Big Macintosh will be able to handle all them trees himself, but Apple Bloom’s gettin’ big. She’ll be buckin’ apples any year now. She’ll be able to help.”

“But... but I can’t go to the gallows!” Rarity wailed in a panic. “I just can’t! I can’t leave my family behind like that!”

“And who will throw the parties when I’m gone?” Pinkie Pie asked, her usually curly hair starting to deflate and fall straight. “Who’s going to make the cake when I’m gone? The Cakes will have their anniversary party soon, and there is a wedding party that we have to cater, and then there is a birthday party for Lyra, and—”

“What’s *wrong* with all of you!?” Rainbow Dash bellowed at her friends. She got to her hooves and flared her wings. “We can’t give up! We can take her without the elements!”

Rainbow Dash leapt at Nightmare Moon. She arched her hoof back, making it very clear she intended to punch Nightmare Moon square in the jaw. Nightmare Moon, however, made no effort to dodge or duck Rainbow Dash’s attack, for she didn’t have to.

Before Rainbow could lay a hoof on Nightmare Moon, the two royal guards rushed forward and tackled her. They pinned Rainbow Dash against the ground, and even though she struggled to try and free herself, the stallions were too strong. She had no hope to escape, and finally the reality of the situation started to settle in. “We... we’ve lost.”

Applejack sniffled and rubbed her hoof across her nose. She was doing her best not to cry, to be the strong one for her friends, but she was losing that fight. “I’m sorry, Rainbow, but that’s what it looks like.”

“But this isn’t fair,” Dash complained. She began to struggle against the guards again as tears formed in her eyes. “I was going to go to the Wonderbolt tryouts this summer. I was going to be a Wonderbolt, and I promised Scootaloo that I would teach her how to fly like I do when her wings were stronger. I *promised* her that I would, and... and who’s going to clear the weather in Ponyville if I’m not around?”

Rainbow Dash’s questions were the final straw. Applejack, who had been struggling to be strong, broke like a thin twig. She began to cry with her friends, and Nightmare Moon watched as all five mares crumbled under the cost their attempted rebellion would incur. And, as she watched them, Nightmare Moon knew she should have been happy. She should have been enjoying the sight of their suffering.

Instead her chest felt tight, as if something had reached inside her and was now squeezing her heart.

“My queen, shall we place them under arrest?” One of the guards asked.

Nightmare Moon opened her mouth to reply, but she could not bring herself to say “yes”. The words were too heavy on her tongue. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t force herself to do it. She could not doom them, Twilight’s friends, to a death at the gallows.

Thus, Nightmare Moon said the only thing she could. “No, you are to let them go.”

“WHAT!?”

The shouted question of disbelief had come from not just the guards, but from everypony who heard Nightmare Moon’s order. Mouths were hanging open in shock, eyes were wide in disbelief. None could believe what they had just heard, but Nightmare Moon confirmed what she said was true.

“Yes, let them go. I am officially pardoning them as my first act as Queen of Equestria.”

“B-b-but, my Queen, the law says—” one of the guards tried to protest.

“Am I, or am I not, your queen?!” Nightmare Moon snapped. “Now, return to the castle and inform Nexus that I want him to take me through *all* the new laws he’s enacted, every single one of them.”

“But my Queen, we aren’t supposed to leave your side for any—”

“**NOW!**” Nightmare Moon bellowed, her angry shout punctuated by a lightning bolt directed at the hooves of the guards. The guards didn’t waste a moment after that. They took off and flew towards the now above ground castle as fast as their wings would carry them.

Nightmare Moon kept her eyes on the pegasi for a few more moments before turning her gaze down on the five mares who were staring back at her. They, along with the rest of the crowd, didn’t dare to say a word, fearful that a single utterance might change her mind.

It was Rarity who finally dared to break the silence. “You’re... you’re letting us go?”

“It is a repayment of a debt and nothing more,” Nightmare Moon answered coldly as she spread her wings. “For the kindness you showed me when I was but a cowardly filly, I am now sparing your lives. Do not expect the same mercy should you try and rebel against me again.”

With those final words, Nightmare Moon took flight. She circled once over Ponyville, looking down at the crowd and seeing their fear-filled eyes. She then turned in the direction of her freshly-risen castle and flew towards it with the Elements of Harmony, along with Trixie’s hat and cape, floating in her magical mane.

• • •

With a flutter of wings, Nightmare Moon landed on her bedroom balcony and stepped inside. She floated the Elements of Harmony to a nearby dresser and tucked them away along with her armor. She removed her helmet last and hung it from a stud on the wall. Then she simply tossed Trixie’s hat and cape onto a table, intending to deal with them later.

The now armorless Nightmare Moon laid down on her bed, breathing out slowly as she sank into the softness of her blanket. She wanted nothing more than to simply sleep. Yet, as she tried to rest, she found sleep would not come easily.

Her mind began to turn. It went over her actions of the past few hours, and it was struggling to understand her recent choices.

First, she didn't attack the guards. She could have easily sent the Children of Nightmare to the castle and seized it by force. In fact, that was what the royal guard expected her to do, to be a direct threat to them. Instead, she had gone a more subversive route. She had impersonated soldiers and infiltrated the castle, all so that she could get to Celestia without hurting anypony else.

Second, she didn't kill Celestia or Luna. In her anger, she came close to finishing Celestia. All it would have taken was a flick of her sword, but then the princess said those words. Celestia made her think of Twilight and how she would react to the news that her mentor had been slain. Then, even during the fight with Luna, Celestia's words rang out in her mind, and in the end she banished Luna to the moon just as she had banished Celestia to the sun.

Third, she had spared Twilight's friends. In fact, she had let them go completely unpunished. Yes, she had the Elements of Harmony now, but would those mares ever truly accept her rule? Would they not attempt to free Twilight and retake the Elements? It would have made more sense to take them out... *permanently*.

Yet, like Luna and Celestia, she had spared them... just as she had spared Twilight. She should have struck Twilight Sparkle down the moment Nexus brought her to the throne room. In fact, she should have done it the night she was fully resurrected, when she found Twilight in the crowd. Yet, whenever her thoughts turned to such dark actions, such as taking the lives of those ponies, she couldn't bring herself to do it.

Nightmare Moon violently shook her head. What was wrong with her? She was no longer that scared, crybaby Nyx. She was Nightmare Moon: Queen of Equestria and Bringer of the Night Eternal! She was the sole immortal alicorn left in the world, the most powerful pony that ever lived and ever *would* live!

She had won. In all aspects her victory was absolute. She had everything she ever wanted. Celestia and Luna were gone. She now held the Elements of Harmony, the one force that could defeat her. She was the one true Queen of Equestria, and she would reign for

millennia to come. Even if she was unwilling to kill, she didn't need to. No pony in Equestria or the world would be able to defy her.

She had won, and that was all that mattered.

KNOCK... KNOCK... KNOCK...

Cheerilee looked up from her book. She was curled up with a blanket and a fire roared in the fireplace. Nightmare Moon had taken over Equestria one week prior, and, without the sun's warmth, the kingdom had been slowly getting colder and colder. At the moment, the air outside was still mildly bearable. Cheerilee doubted that would last for much longer.

KNOCK... KNOCK... KNOCK...

The second set of knocks drew Cheerilee out of the warm spot she had made for herself on the couch. She moved to the door and looked through the peephole. She never used to worry about which ponies were on her doorstep, but she didn't feel as safe as she used to. However, the ponies outside her door weren't royal guards, Nightmare Moon, or anypony that looked dangerous. They were three familiar fillies, who Cheerilee willingly opened the door for. "Girls, what are you doing out here in the dark?"

"It's always dark," Scootaloo pointed out. She was standing between Sweetie Belle and Apple Bloom on Cheerilee's front step.

"I guess that's true." Cheerilee forced a weak smile. "Still, what can I do for you three?"

"Cheerilee, can we ask you some questions?" Sweetie Belle asked. "I've been trying to get Rarity and my parents to tell me what's going on, but I don't think they're telling me the truth."

"Applejack and Big Macintosh won't tell me anything," added Apple Bloom.

"And my parents won't even let me talk about what's going on," Scootaloo finished.

Cheerilee's smile weakened. "Girls, I don't think it's my place, especially if your families don't—"

"Please, Cheerilee," the three Crusaders begged in unison.

Cheerilee stepped back and motioned with a hoof. "All right. Why don't you come inside? Can't have you three standing outside in the cold, now can I?"

The Crusaders happily accepted their teacher's offer. They moved inside, and, once they were clear of the door, Cheerilee pulled it shut and rubbed her forelegs together to drive away the chill. It was still getting colder outside; she would need her winter clothes soon.

After guiding the three fillies into her living room, Cheerilee let them jump up onto her couch. She climbed up onto a smaller chair and wrapped herself in a blanket. Only then, once she had finished making herself comfortable, did she turn her attention back to her guests. "So, girls, what did you want to ask me?"

"We want to know what happened to Nyx," Apple Bloom explained as the three fillies shared the blanket Cheerilee had left behind on the couch.

"Girls, I really don't think I—" Cheerilee began, only to be cut off.

"Please," Sweetie Belle pleaded. "Scootaloo says that Nyx is Nightmare Moon, but Rarity keeps telling me that Nyx just went back to live with her family, since she was Twilight's cousin."

Cheerilee pulled at her blanket, tightening its grasp around her body, and focused on Scootaloo. "Why do you think Nyx is Nightmare Moon?"

"Because of everything Nightmare Moon did when she showed up in the center of town with those weird ponies in cloaks."

"You were there?"

Scootaloo nodded. "Yes, and I heard her say she used to be a filly. Then she went after Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon, saying that it was their prank that let her become Nightmare Moon. Not only that, but Nightmare Moon didn't have a cutie mark, just like Nyx."

"Are you sure Nightmare—" Cheerilee tried to interrupt, only for Scootaloo to continue without pause.

"Then, when she was close to me, I shouted at her. I called her Nyx, and she turned to look at me. She recognized me, I know she did!" Scootaloo's ears flattened. "But then she said we... we weren't her friends anymore."

The heads of all three fillies sank at those words, and Cheerilee felt her stomach twist as a frown formed on her lips. It was obvious to her that their families were trying to shield them from the truth either by not telling them or lying. Despite that, she knew she

wouldn't be able to keep the truth from the three fillies; they were worried, and, if anypony deserved to know the whole story, it was them.

"All right, girls, from what I've heard, Nyx is Nightmare Moon... and she was Nightmare Moon all along."

Apple Bloom's eyes widened. "The whole time?"

Cheerilee answered with a nod.

"No way!" protested Scootaloo. "Nyx wasn't like Nightmare Moon at all the last time we saw her. Those weird ponies did something to her."

"And, even if Nyx is Nightmare Moon, why would she make it dark?" Sweetie Belle asked, glancing out a window at the night-locked sky. "She never really liked it when it was dark out, so why would she make it like this all the time?"

Cheerilee sighed, pausing to think very carefully on how to phrase her reply. Apple Bloom, Scootaloo, and Sweetie Belle deserved the truth, but it would be a bitter pill to swallow. She tried to open her mouth, to tell them the straight truth, but the words died in her throat. She had to soften the blow, sugar-coat it... mix in some of the faint, if unrealistic, hope she herself was clinging to.

"I think Nyx is just... confused," Cheerilee finally told them, hoping the three fillies would accept her explanation.

"Why would she be confused?" Sweetie Belle asked.

"You see, girls, Nyx didn't remember being Nightmare Moon when she was in class with us, but, because of what happened, now she does. She remembers everything, and I think she's just confused now. She doesn't really know which pony she is supposed to be: the Nightmare Moon everypony fears or the Nyx that was your friend. And right now, unfortunately, she's decided to be Nightmare Moon."

"But, if she's just confused, that means she could be Nyx again, right? Maybe she doesn't *like* being Nightmare Moon," Scootaloo pointed out, a hopeful smile forming on her face.

"Yeah! I mean, if she was *really* Nightmare Moon, she wouldn't have let my big sis and her friends go," Apple Bloom said confidently. "That *proves* she is still Nyx!"

With some difficulty, Cheerilee forced a smile. "I hope you're right, girls. Still, why don't you run along and try to take your minds off of it?" Cheerilee suggested. She shifted in her seat, sinking deeper into the warm embrace of her chair and blanket. "And please make sure the door is locked when you leave."

The three fillies nodded before jumping down from Cheerilee's couch, thanking her, and slipping out her front door. They trotted to the sidewalk and began to walk side by side down the street.

"I feel bad for Nyx," Scootaloo said, glancing at her two friends. "I can't imagine what it would be like to be confused about who you are."

Sweetie Belle nodded. "Yeah, it's probably like having a different cutie mark on each of your flanks. You wouldn't know if your special talent was supposed to be one or the other."

"Too bad we can't do anything to help her," Scootaloo said as her ears drooped.

"Yeah, too bad," Sweetie Belle agreed. She and Scootaloo continued to walk, but, after several steps, they realized that Apple Bloom wasn't following them. Looking back, they saw she had stopped dead in her tracks. Her head was bent down, and her eyes were focused down at the ground.

"Hey, Apple Bloom, you okay?" asked Scootaloo.

Apple Bloom was quiet for a few moments more before snapping her head up. "Crusaders, we have a friend who doesn't know who she is," she announced like a general speaking to her troops. "She's up in that big nasty castle, lost and confused, and do you know what she needs?"

"Um... no," Sweetie Belle replied, not understanding why Apple Bloom was acting or speaking the way she was.

"Well, I do!" Apple Bloom snapped, marching back and forth in front of her friends. "She needs somepony to remind her who she is. To remind her that she has friends, friends that want to play with her in the sunshine again. And we're just the ponies to do it!"

Scootaloo smiled confidently and pumped her hoof in the air. "Yeah! Let's go show Nyx that Cutie Mark Crusaders stick together no matter what!"

“Um, girls?” Sweetie Belle interrupted. “You *do* realize Nyx is in that *big* castle, the one guarded by all those *big* scary ponies in armor, *right?*”

“So? We’ll just sneak past the guards,” Apple Bloom said confidently.

“Yeah, we could be Cutie Mark Crusader...” Scootaloo began, only to fall silent and look over at her friends. “Uh, what’s a pony called when they sneak into places like castles?”

“Boogie Mare?” suggested Apple Bloom.

“No.”

“Infiltrator?” Sweetie Belle offered.

“Close, but no...”

Sweetie Belle and Apple Bloom looked at each other for a moment, trying to think. Sweetie Belle’s eyes then lit up as she thought of the perfect word. “Spy?”

“That’s it!” Scootaloo said with a bounce. “We’ll be Cutie Mark Crusader Spies!”

Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle smiled, and the three friends high-hoofed before quickly galloping down the street to make their plans.

• • •

Nightmare Moon descended a spiraling stone staircase, thankful to have a few minutes to herself. The past week had been all about transferring the power over Equestria from the Royal Pony Sisters to her. Members of the Children of Nightmare were put into important positions of power, if they weren’t already in such positions, and the government was once again functioning.

There was some resistance. Despite the news that her husband had joined the Children of Nightmare, Princess Cadance, along with some of the other minor princes and princesses of Equestria, had gone into hiding. The consensus between Spell Nexus and other important ponies was that they were building a rebellion, but Nightmare Moon wasn’t worried. Cadance was the only alicorn among the rebels, and she was only of partial alicorn blood. She was a mortal, and, just as she had no hope of moving the sun in the sky, she had no hope of defeating her, Equestria’s Queen.

Truthfully, Nightmare Moon wanted to forget about it all until the next day. It was past six. She had put in a full day's work, like much of the castle staff that was leaving at this hour, but she still hadn't earned a respite from her royal duties. Nexus expected her in the dining hall soon. He had arranged for her to meet with several minor princes and princesses over dinner. They were those of royal blood who had sided with her new regime, and they all shared her turquoise eyes.

It was a sign that Nexus was spreading her "blessing" around quite freely.

Truthfully, Nightmare Moon was starting to get a little sick of seeing everypony around her with the same color eyes. She decided that, as soon as she was done here, she was going to tell Spell Nexus that she wasn't going to attend dinner, that she just wasn't in the mood. She was the queen of Equestria; what was *he* going to do?

Reaching the bottom of the staircase, Nightmare Moon pushed the thoughts from her mind and strode down the dimly lit hallway. She was down in her castle dungeons, and she passed by many empty cells until she reached the one at the very end, the only occupied cell.

Twilight Sparkle sat up from her cot, having wrapped herself tightly in a blanket. She was unharmed but still bore one sign of her imprisonment. The metal collar that was secured to her neck blocked her magic, ensuring she could not escape through teleportation or even by levitating a key.

Nightmare Moon looked in on Twilight for a time, staring at her through the bars, before finally speaking. "I trust the guards have been treating you as I ordered."

"They bring me my meals and nothing else," Twilight replied softly.

"Good. That's... good.... Are your injuries healing well?"

Twilight looked down at her front right leg, shifting it gingerly. "My ankle is still a little tender, but I'm fine." She paused for a moment before looking back to Nightmare Moon. "H-how are you doing?"

"I am perfectly fine. I am the queen of Equestria. Everypony is enjoying the beauty of an eternal night, the Children of Nightmare are settling into control of the government, and Equestria is mine to rule. I couldn't be happier."

"You don't *sound* happy," Twilight pointed out.

Nightmare Moon's eyes pulsed, and her distant gaze turned into an irritated glare. "What would *you* know about how I sound when I'm happy?"

"Because I've *seen* you happy, Nyx. I've heard you laugh and seen you smile. You may say you're happy, but I can tell you're not."

"You don't know what you're talking about," Nightmare Moon snipped. "And what would you have me do if I wasn't happy, Twilight? Would you have me give up the crown, or perhaps you want me to release Celestia and Luna?"

"Yes!" Twilight answered eagerly. She moved out from underneath her blanket and to the cell door, getting as close as she could to Nightmare Moon.

"Then you would have me sign away my own freedom. The moment Celestia and Luna are free, they will work together to make sure that I take their place." Nightmare Moon gritted her teeth and lowered her head down so she was at eye level with Twilight. "I will *not* spend another thousand years banished to the moon. You and Celestia have made it perfectly clear that no matter what I do, no matter how well I behave, I am, and forever will be, an enemy to Equestria. It is too late to go back now, Twilight, even if I wanted to."

"But... do you want to?" Twilight asked hopefully.

Nightmare Moon offered no reply. She turned with a huff and strode back towards the staircase. Twilight watched her for as long as she could. She pressed her face up against the bars and strained her ears. She stayed there until she couldn't hear hoofsteps anymore, and only then did she climb back into her cot.

She wrapped herself back up in her blanket and laid her head down on her pillow. She lifted a hoof to try and dry her eyes, but it was a fruitless effort. No matter how much she tried, she couldn't keep herself from crying.

• • •

"Halt! Who goes there?" a guard snapped from the top of the castle gatehouse.

"Apple delivery," Big Macintosh called up to the guards in his deep, calm drawl. He was hooked to a wagon filled with several baskets of ripe, red apples. "Y'all ordered them yesterday."

The guards on the top of the gatehouse flipped through some paperwork before poking their heads over the edge again. “Proceed. Unload the wagon just inside the gate and then leave. You got that?”

“Eeyup,” was all Big Macintosh said in reply as the castle gates opened in front of him. The moment he could, he pulled his cart inside. Then, as he had been instructed, Big Macintosh unloaded the baskets of apples and left soon after. The castle gates swung shut behind his cart, and, once the courtyard was secured, servants from the castle’s kitchen appeared. They fetched the baskets of apples, carried them inside, and placed them in the pantry for storage.

Once all the apples were moved, the kitchen servants pulled the pantry door shut and went about their other duties. And, for a time after that, the inside of the pantry was pitch black and utterly quiet, but soon a rustling began to fill the air. The noise was followed by another: the sound of apples hitting the floor.

“The coast is clear.”

After some straining and grunting, a light flared to life in the room. The light sat at the very tip of a little, white unicorn horn. Sweetie Belle poked her head out from a basket of apples and looked around the room. Apple Bloom was already out of her own basket and was pulling at her Cutie Mark Crusader cape, which had gotten caught. At the same time, some apples fell from a third basket as Scootaloo popped into view.

“This was an awesome plan, Apple Bloom,” Scootaloo praised as she clambered out of her basket.

“Thanks,” Apple Bloom replied. “It’s a good thing I overheard Applejack and Big Mac talkin’ about the delivery to the castle. I don’t know how we would have gotten in otherwise.”

“But what do we do now that we’re here?” Sweetie Belle asked Apple Bloom.

“Simple. If Nyx is in the castle, she has to eat sometime, right? Well, that’s the best part about us bein’ in the kitchen and it bein’ so close to dinner time. We’ll just wait until somepony makes her dinner—”

“And then we’ll use our super spy skills to follow that pony, and she will lead us right to Nyx!” Scootaloo interrupted before striking a dramatic, kung-fu pose.

“But we aren’t even in the kitchen. We’re in a pantry, and we don’t have super spy skills,” Sweetie Belle pointed out.

“Well... it’s still a solid plan,” Scootaloo weakly defended.

“Hey, get some of those apples,” a fourth voice spoke from outside the door.

The three fillies jumped. They ducked into a corner of the pantry, behind some bags of potatoes, just as the door opened. One of the kitchen workers stepped inside, lingering just long enough to grab one of the baskets. He then turned to leave, letting the door swing shut under its own weight.

The door was about to snap shut again when Scootaloo bolted out of the hiding place and put her hoof in the way. She winced as the heavy door hit her hoof, but she had succeeded in keeping the door propped open. She waved at her friends, and, soon, all three fillies were peeking out the crack in the door.

There seemed to be two sides to the kitchen. On one side, a team of chefs were making a bunch of very plain-looking meals that were probably for the ponies that worked in the castle. On the other side of the kitchen, however, one chef worked diligently on a few smaller plates, stacking them with food that looked much more appetizing.

“I bet that’s Nyx’s dinner,” Scootaloo whispered, pointing at the chef working away from all the others.

“What makes you think that?” asked Apple Bloom.

“Well, she’s supposed to be queen or something. I’ve never seen food like that before, so it must be something really fancy, and queens eat fancy food.”

“Makes sense to me,” Sweetie Belle said.

Apple Bloom pursed her face up in contemplation. “How are we gonna follow him to where Nyx is?”

“Look,” Scootaloo said as she pointed with her hoof. “He’s putting some of the plates onto that cart. We’ll just take one of those big silver lids he’s using to cover the plates with and hide on the bottom of the cart.”

“But how are we gonna get that lid?” Apple Bloom asked. The answer, this time, came from Sweetie Belle. She grunted and shut her eyes tight as her horn began to glow.

Shakily, one of the largest silver plate covers began to float up, moving lazily along the ceiling towards where the crusaders were hiding. It dipped and bobbed a number of times as Sweetie Belle struggled, but it remained aloft.

Scootaloo smiled and eagerly watched as the lid floated through the air. “That’s it, just a little closer.”

“I... I can’t... do it,” Sweetie Belle whimpered as she began to sweat.

“Come on, Sweetie Belle,” Apple Bloom said, trying to encourage her, “just a little farther.”

“I just... can’t,” Sweetie Belle answered, her magical grasp on the silver lid breaking. The lid dropped, landing on the floor with a clatter. The abrupt noise caused many of the cooks in the kitchen to jump, and all eyes fell on the cover.

The nearest unicorn, the one who had been preparing the fancy food, trotted over to the silver lid. He picked it up magically and looked at the floor beneath it. He expected to find some ruined food, but there was nothing there. Confused, the cook raised his gaze and noticed the pantry door was open.

Curiosity getting the best of him, the chef used his magic to open the pantry door while keeping the serving dish lid in the air beside him. He looked all around the pantry, but, when he saw nothing out of place, he looked back at the other chefs and shrugged. With no apparent explanation for where the lid had come from, the chefs went back to their tasks, writing off the event as a mystery.

The chef that currently held the mysterious plate cover went back to work as well. He picked up a particularly large plate, which was laden with a number of sugary desserts, and, after wiping the bottom rim of the lid with a cloth, he placed it over the top of the desserts. The chef then gently set the now covered plate on the bottom of the serving cart before returning to his cooking.

“Whew... nice move, Scootaloo,” Apple Bloom whispered.

At last possible moment, Scootaloo had grabbed her two friends and dove out of the pantry. The serving lid had come down right on top of the trio, and, before the chef could investigate, the three fillies had pressed their legs against the lid’s interior. By doing that, they managed to keep themselves inside the lid even as it was lifted off the ground.

Now the three fillies found themselves on the way to Nyx, and they carefully dropped down from the interior of the lid. They stepped gingerly around the desserts on the serving tray while Sweetie Belle lit her horn, giving them some light. The tray itself seemed unnecessarily big for the number of desserts it held. The Crusaders, however, were more focused on the treats themselves.

Scotaloo licked her lips as she looked over the treats with wide eyes. “Wow, these sure do look good.” She picked up a dessert with a hoof. “You... you think Nyx would mind if we had some?”

“She always liked to share the treats she brought to school with us,” Apple Bloom remarked. Both she and Sweetie Belle were looking at the desserts just as eagerly as Scotaloo was, even as they felt the cart begin to slowly move.

• • •

“Your dinner, Your Majesty,” the waiter Horte Cuisine announced. He pushed the dinner cart into Nightmare Moon’s bedroom and gave his queen a respectful bow. “The royal chef also prepared a selection of desserts for you. They are in the platter on the bottom of the cart.”

“Thank you, you can leave it there,” Nightmare Moon replied. She had only just returned to her room herself and was in the process of removing her shoes. Horte Cuisine gave a nod and backed out of the room with a final bow before he pulled the door shut. Nightmare Moon only sighed; she had already grown tired of the constant pomp and circumstance the castle staff went through whenever she was around.

Having cleaned off her eyeshadow, the now all-natural Nightmare Moon moved over to the food cart. She lifted the lid off her dinner and leaned in to inspect it. The royal chef had, of course, taken her very simple request and turned it into some artful, overly fanciful display. The sandwich was cut into weird shapes and stacked like some kind of sculpture. Her side salad had also suffered. The green leaves were garnished with garishly colorful flowers.

The only thing that looked simple was the soup; then again, it’s hard to mess up soup.

Leaving the sandwich and salad alone, Nightmare Moon levitated the soup over to the bed. She lay down and kept the bowl suspended nearby as she levitated a book up to her face. That was the one benefit she had come to enjoy as Equestria’s new queen: access to the royal library. Some of the books she had been able to read were amazing, despite the

few times she had tripped over books that reminded her of the Golden Oaks Library, Spike, or Twilight Sparkle.

Holding the soup with her magic, Nightmare Moon drew out a spoonful and drank it gently. In spite of all that had happened, Rarity's etiquette lessons lingered with her. She did not slurp or spill; she ate the soup like a proper mare before turning open her book and continuing to read.

AAChoo!

Caught off guard, Nightmare Moon jumped. The soup slipped from her grip, and it took a desperate surge of magic to keep the contents of the bowl from splashing across her bedspread. By a small stroke of luck, she saved most of the soup, but the portion she couldn't save spilled onto her bed.

It was an irritating mess, and Nightmare Moon cursed the soup and all the ingredients that comprised it. Her rage, however, quickly cooled. She used a bit of magic to draw up the soup from the fabric and levitated it to the garbage. She then set the bowl down on her bedside table and turned her eyes to the source of the sneeze.

The sneeze had come from the dinner cart, specifically the dessert tray at the bottom. Climbing out of bed, Nightmare Moon strode over to the cart and lowered her head. She brought her ear close to the silver lid that covered what was supposedly a plate of desserts and listened. Through the thin metal, she was able to hear tiny voices whispering.

Eyebrows furrowing, Nightmare Moon grabbed the tray and carried it to the bed. The voices that had been whispering began to panic, but she didn't care. Somepony had dared to sneak into her castle, into her bedroom, and she was going to confront them.

In preparation for facing the intruders, Nightmare Moon set the tray down on her bed. She spread her wings, flared her mane, and ensured her lips formed a menacing frown. Only then, when she was ready to scare the intruder into submission, did she lift the lid off the tray with a single, swift yank.

The sudden motion caused the ponies hiding beneath the lid to snap their heads in her direction. The three fillies that Nightmare Moon found were covered in crumbs from long-eaten desserts, and, at first, they looked upon her with fear. Their expressions, however, quickly shifted to ones of joy. The cape-wearing Crusaders smiled, jumped up from the tray, and moved to the edge of the bed closest to Nightmare Moon.

"See? I told you we'd find her," Scootaloo said. "My plan was just that awesome."

“It sure was!” Apple Bloom cheered. “And boy, Nyx, Scootaloo wasn’t kidding. You got big! You’re as tall as Princess Celestia!”

Sweetie Belle’s smile faltered as she sat back on her haunches and tapped her forehooves together. “Um, we’re sorry if we ate your food. We... kind of missed dinner.”

Scootaloo rubbed the back of her neck. “Yeah, sorry about that. You aren’t too mad, are you?”

Mad? Nightmare Moon was honestly unable to process anything at the moment. She was as still as a statue, mind and body locked up like a machine with a wrench thrown into its gears. Her jaw hung open, and her eyes widened at the sight of the fillies that had managed to find their way to her bedroom.

“Whoa, Nyx, is this your room?” Apple Bloom asked, looking around in awe. “It’s so big.”

“And beautiful,” Sweetie Belle added.

“Well, Nyx isn’t exactly as small as us anymore,” Scootaloo pointed out, “she kind of needs a bigger room. Hey, Sweetie Belle, look over there. She has a vaddy mirror like your sister.”

“It’s called a *vanity* mirror,” Sweetie Belle corrected. The three fillies jumped down from the bed, scampered over to the mirror, which had been replaced just that morning, and leapt up onto the small table that was attached to it before looking at their reflections.

“Hey, I’ve got crumbs in my tail!” Sweetie Belle said with a giggle as she used a hoof to bat at her hair.

“Well, that’s what you get for sittin’ in one of the desserts,” Apple Bloom said flatly.

“It wasn’t my fault! The cart shook. At least I didn’t eat it, like Scootaloo did.”

“What? It was still good. It was just a little smushed,” Scootaloo defended as she opened a makeup box that was on the top of the vanity, taking notice of the large amount of purple eyeshadow inside. “Wow, that’s a lot of makeup. Didn’t know you were into—”

Scootaloo didn’t get to finish her sentence as the makeup box was snapped shut by Nightmare Moon’s mane. The queen had rushed over to where the three little fillies were and was looking down at them with panicked eyes.

“I-I’m not! It’s just that Spell Nexus says that I need to—”

Nightmare Moon caught herself and gave her head a firm shake. There was no reason for her to be justifying herself to her friends... to her old friends. There was no reason she needed to justify herself to anypony.

“What are you three *doing* here?” she asked with a voice that was firm but not harsh.

“We wanted to help you so you weren’t so confused,” Apple Bloom said as she and the other Crusaders turned away from the mirror and looked at Nightmare Moon. Nightmare Moon still had a significant height advantage, even though the fillies were standing on top of the vanity table, but they either didn’t care or didn’t notice.

Nightmare Moon cocked an eyebrow. “Who said I was confused?”

“Cheerilee did,” answered Sweetie Belle. “She said that you were confused about who you were, so you were trying to be the pony other ponies expected you to be.”

“And that’s why you made it so that the sun doesn’t come up. Because you’re confused,” Apple Bloom added. “So we decided to come here to help you remember who you are. After all, Cutie Mark Crusaders stick together.”

“We even brought you a cape!” Sweetie Belle chirped. She stuck her head beneath her own cape and brought out a fourth little red cape which bore the blue Cutie Mark Crusader emblem and an interior made with golden fabric.

Sweetie Belle held it up with a smile. “We wanted to bring your old one, but we couldn’t find it. So, I decided to make you a new one.” Her smile faded as she glanced between the cape and Nightmare Moon. “Though, now that I think about it, I probably should have made it bigger.”

“Oh yeah, a *whole* lot bigger,” Scootaloo agreed with a nod.

Nightmare Moon was once again struck speechless. She gingerly took the cape from Sweetie Belle and held it to her eyes. She focused on the haphazardly sewn blue shield emblem with a rearing, smiling, cape-wearing, yellow filly in the center.

• • •

“Why are we going to the clubhouse again? I thought we were going to try being Cutie Mark Crusader Couch Salesponies with Mr. Davenport,” Nyx asked. She was following

Apple Bloom to Sweet Apple Acres where, in a more secluded, private part of the farm, a simple treehouse stood. It was a hoof-me-down from Applejack and the current headquarters of the Cutie Mark Crusaders.

“We are, but we need to pick up something first,” Apple Bloom replied before she climbed up the steps and nosed open the door of the treehouse. She then stepped back, letting Nyx walk in first. She didn’t think much of it until she noticed Scootaloo and Sweetie Belle were standing in front of her with big smiles on their faces.

“Oh hi,” Nyx greeted. “I thought you were going to meet us at Sofas and Quills.”

Scootaloo was grinning ear to ear. “We were, but we’ve got a surprise for you.”

“Really? What is it?” Nyx asked excitedly.

“First, you gotta close your eyes, and keep them closed,” Sweetie Belle told her.

Nyx closed her eyes as fast as she could and kept them sealed tight even as she felt something fall on her back. She stood there, biting her lower lip in anticipation, but she wouldn’t let herself peek.

“May I look yet?” Nyx asked when her curiosity was too much to bear.

“Yes!” Sweetie Belle chirped, and, in a single motion, Nyx opened her eyes and looked behind her. There, on top of her usual vest, was the signature red cape of the Cutie Mark Crusaders.

“Consider yourself an official Cutie Mark Crusader,” Apple Bloom announced happily.

Nyx looked over at the cape, a smile spreading across her face. That smile was soon joined by a few tears. “Th-thank you... thank y-you so much,” she sputtered out.

“Told ya she would cry,” Scootaloo teased with a grin on her face.

“Scootaloo! That’s mean!” Sweetie Belle chided, though she was surprised to hear Nyx giggling a bit.

“It’s okay, Sweetie Belle,” Nyx assured her friend while she admired the cape.

• • •

Nightmare Moon shook her head, reclaiming her thoughts from the memory that had forced itself to the front of her mind. The three small Crusaders were still looking up at her, smiling as they waited for her response. For a moment longer, Nightmare Moon looked at the little cape, and then gently set it down on the side of the vanity.

Nightmare Moon spoke neither as a friend nor as a queen, but as an adult speaking seriously to children. She stepped away from the vanity and motioned with a hoof for the fillies to follow her. “We need to talk.”

Apple Bloom, Sweetie Belle, and Scootaloo did as they were asked and followed Nightmare Moon as she led them to her bed. The three fillies jumped up and sat on the edge while Nightmare Moon lay down on her stomach, which at least brought her eye level closer to the fillies she once called her friends.

“First of all, you shouldn’t have come here,” Nightmare Moon began firmly. “What you did was very dangerous. If one of my guards had found you, you would have been arrested and put in my dungeons. I can’t imagine how worried everypony is, since I *know* you didn’t tell anypony where you were going.”

A frown formed on Apple Bloom’s face. “Well, if we had, they would have stopped us, and—”

“For good reason,” Nightmare Moon scolded, causing the three fillies to flatten their ears.

“W-we just,” Sweetie Belle mumbled out, “just wanted to help. We were worried about you.”

Nightmare Moon’s voice softened. “I know, and I appreciate your concern. But I don’t need help. I’m the queen of Equestria now.”

“What about Princess Celestia and Princess Luna?” asked Scootaloo. “What happened to them?”

“Hasn’t anypony told you?” Nightmare Moon asked.

The three fillies hesitated, but they eventually shook their heads.

“No pony told us, but... sometimes we hear them whisperin’,” Apple Bloom admitted. “They said you locked the princesses up in the sun and moon, and you were the one makin’ it dark all the time. That isn’t true, is it?”

“It is,” Nightmare Moon admitted with a pang of regret in her voice. “I won’t lie to you, I am the one that did all that.”

“But why?”

“It’s... it’s complicated, Apple Bloom,” Nightmare Moon replied as she continued her attempts to defend herself against the fillies’ questions. “I... I-I have a lot of expectations that I have to live up to. It’s just... confusing.”

“But that’s why we’re here,” Scootaloo added. “To remind you who you *really* are, so you don’t have to be confused anymore.”

Nightmare Moon felt the air catch in her throat, but she forced the strength into her voice. “And... who am I to you three, now that I’m like this?”

“Well, you *did* look scary the other night,” Scootaloo said.

Nightmare Moon winced as those words dug deep. Scary... she closed her eyes and lowered her head at that word. She should have been expecting that. Of course her friends wouldn’t—

“But now that we’re all here, you don’t seem that scary.”

Nightmare Moon lifted her head back up, unable to believe what she was hearing. “I don’t?”

“Nope! I think you’re just confused, and, if that’s true, then you’re still our friend, Nyx. A pony who is really awesome at magic,” Scootaloo said confidently.

Apple Bloom nodded. “And a pony who’s also really good at school, even if she asks too many questions in class.”

“And who is always really nice and fun to play with,” Sweetie Belle concluded.

Nightmare Moon was finding it difficult to breathe. She couldn’t shake away the tightness that was forming in her chest no matter how hard she tried to banish it. “But... you do know who I am, don’t you? You know that I’m Nightmare Moon, right?”

“Cheerilee said that you were always Nightmare Moon, but... we’ve never really met Nightmare Moon. We’ve only ever known you as Nyx,” Apple Bloom explained. “Sure,

I'll admit, you look like Nightmare Moon now, but that doesn't mean you have to act any differently."

"Yeah, it doesn't matter what a pony looks like on the outside," said Sweetie Belle, reciting something Cheerilee had said in class. "It's who that pony is on the inside that counts."

"That, and getting a cutie mark," Scootaloo added. "Hey! I bet you've got your cutie mark now! Oh, what is it? What is it!?"

"I... don't have a cutie mark yet," Nightmare Moon replied, looking back at her painfully blank flank.

"Don't worry about it, Nyx. Everypony finds their special talent sooner or later. You'll just have to keep crusading with us until you find it. After all, that's what the Cutie Mark Crusaders are all about," Apple Bloom reassured.

"I... I think... I think I would like that," Nightmare Moon replied, letting herself smile. It was weak and tiny, but it was the first honest smile to grace her lips in several days. It was also destined to be short lived. It was wiped away when the door to her bed chambers opened.

"I do apologize for this, my Queen, but there is something that you should be aware of. There are reports that the monsters in the Everfree Forest have started to get restless. It may be in our best interests to—" Nexus began, only to freeze up when he glanced away from the clipboard he was levitating in front of his nose and saw the three small fillies who were sitting on Nightmare Moon's bed.

• • •

"They need to be made an example of," Nexus grumbled as he paced anxiously. Before Nightmare Moon could stop him, he had called for the guards. Apple Bloom, Scootaloo, and Sweetie Belle were now out in the hallway, being held in custody by soldiers.

"They're fillies, Nexus, ones who were my friends, and who do not fully understand the situation," Nightmare Moon stated calmly. "They meant no harm."

"It is not the *intent* that matters, but the action taken. They snuck into your castle and reached your bed chambers without detection. That kind of trespassing cannot be allowed," Nexus stressed. "If we do nothing, how long will it be before assassins begin roaming these very halls? They need to be made an example of!"

“So what would you have me do?” Nightmare Moon snipped. “Let them hang from the gallows?”

“If that’s what it takes to ensure your rule as queen is unquestioned, then yes.”

Nightmare Moon’s face tightened to an angry scowl. “I will *not* execute fillies, Nexus.”

Nexus stopped on the spot, caught off guard by Nightmare Moon’s defense of the fillies. He then frowned and turned to face her. “My Queen, if I may speak frankly, you have already shown far too much mercy. You’ve allowed the mares who wield the Elements of Harmony to go free when they should be rotting in the dungeon with Twilight Sparkle at the *very* least. Now, because of that, these three fillies believed they could just waltz up to you like you are a regular pony, and such disrespect cannot be condoned.”

“Is it not I who decides what can be condoned?” Nightmare Moon asked. “Am I not your queen?”

“You are,” Nexus said with a respectful bow of his head, “but I ask for you to listen to your own words, my Queen. You are not acting like yourself.”

“How so?”

Nexus moved a step closer, his voice becoming gentle yet confident. “My Queen, you are the most glorious alicorn to ever grace Equestria. You are mightier than Celestia, and the night glistens with greater beauty than it ever did when it was under Luna’s care. Your form is far more magnificent than theirs. You are the one true queen of Equestria, whereas the sisters were only princesses treating this kingdom like a pet that needed to be coddled.

“Think of what you’ve done in the past,” Nexus continued as he raised a hoof dramatically. “You struck down royal guards at the Summer Sun Celebration with lightning for simply drawing too close to you. You’ve held Celestia at the tip of your sword and then banished her to the sun so that she would know the same suffering you had endured for a thousand years. You are Nightmare Moon. Your name strikes fear into the hearts of ponies all across Equestria whenever it is spoken. A holiday was created solely so ponies learned to fear you.”

“These are all things I already *know*, Nexus. Get to the point,” Nightmare Moon snapped.

“The point, my Queen, is that you should think about what you’re doing. Do not view those fillies as friends you had in ignorance. View them as they are: trespassers in your castle who have insulted you, who have approached you as if you were some common mare. These are indignities you should not have suffered, and thus they need to be punished. They need to be taught a lesson, and, through their punishment, all of Equestria will learn that you are not to be trifled with.”

Nightmare Moon scowled and turned her attention to her closed bedroom door. She was silent for a long time, but then she sighed. “You are right, Nexus. I, as Nightmare Moon, cannot consider those three my friends any more. They are fillies who have trespassed in my castle, and—” Nightmare Moon’s voice caught in her throat. She needed to take a fresh breath to force out the last few words. “And they need to be punished.”

A pleased smile grew onto Nexus’s lips, and he moved towards the door. “Then I’ll make the arrangements. The fillies will hang in the wind before dinner tomorrow.”

“No!” Nightmare Moon said firmly, “They are *not* to be hanged, Spell Nexus.”

“But your Majesty, don’t you think—” Nexus began, only to fall silent under Nightmare Moon’s cold, hard gaze.

“You will lock them in the dungeon. That should teach them a lesson.”

Nexus puckered his lips, thinking about Nightmare Moon’s proposed punishment before his smile returned. “Of course, my Queen. They shall learn their lesson and then be able to spread it to the general public. They’ll tell their friends and neighbors of their time in our dungeons. I’ll even have them placed in individual cells, give them a taste of the solitude you endured when on the moon.”

“No, I want them all placed in Twilight Sparkle’s cell.”

Again, Nexus looked at his queen with a dumbfounded expression, but, as before, his devilish grin returned. “Of course, the dungeons will likely start to get very crowded as time goes by. We might as well start saving as much space as we can.”

With that, Nexus turned and left the room, pulling the door shut behind him. Nightmare Moon waited for a few moments, ensuring Nexus would not return, before she locked the door with a flick of her horn. She then stood from her bed and moved over to her writing desk. There, she drew out a scroll, a feather pen, and an ink bottle before beginning to write.

Twilight,

This evening, Apple Bloom, Scootaloo, and Sweetie Belle snuck into the castle and managed to make it to my bed chamber. They are currently being taken down to the dungeons and will be placed in your cell momentarily.

Please believe I take no joy in this, but there is a lesson they must learn. I am not their friend anymore. I also do this for their own protection. Spell Nexus would have them executed for their intrusion. He would use them to send a message to Equestria, but I do not want to see them get hurt. They were once my closest friends. If anypony deserves mercy from me, it is them.

So they will remain in the dungeons until Spell Nexus is satisfied with their punishment. I will try to free them in a few weeks, but, until then, I must ask that you try and keep them safe. Make sure the guards do not hurt them, and make sure they believe they will, in time, be free.

I know I have no right to ask favors of you at this point, but if you will not do this for me, then please do it for them. Also, dispose of this note before Spell Nexus can see it.

Nightmare Moon

The queen rolled the letter and took hold of it with her mane. She then let her whole body turn into an inky, indigo cloud and surged out her bedroom window. She raced around the exterior of the castle as quickly as she could in hopes of beating Spell Nexus and the guards to the dungeon.

It was, thankfully, an easy feat. She was able to arrive well before her advisor, and, after slipping through a barred window, she made her way to Twilight's cell. There, Nightmare Moon tossed out the letter she had just written.

The piece of parchment's sudden appearance startled Twilight, and she looked around for its source, but Nightmare Moon had hidden against the ceiling of the dungeon hallway. Despite being unaware of the scroll's origins, Twilight moved over to it, opened it with a hoof, and began to read.

Twilight was just able to finish the letter when the door to the dungeon opened. In a panic to dispose of it, Twilight stuffed the note in her mouth, chewed, and forcibly swallowed. She gagged from the dry taste but did not have time to be disgusted. She

rushed to her cot, lay down, covered herself with a blanket, and pretended to sleep as the group of ponies stepped into view of her cell.

Spell Nexus scrunched up his nose at the sight of Twilight, and, behind him, a pair of guards kept close watch on the Cutie Mark Crusaders. The three fillies were clinging together and trembling. Sweetie Belle had already been fitted with an anti-magic collar very similar to the neck shackle that Twilight was wearing.

With a flare of magic, Spell Nexus opened the cell door and let the guards shove the three fillies inside. He then slammed the door shut, causing a loud metallic clang to echo throughout the dungeon's corridors. Apple Bloom, Sweetie Belle, and Scootaloo all moved up against the cell door, their faces reflecting the fact that they were just coming to terms with the reality of their confinement.

"How long do we have to be in here?" Sweetie Belle asked.

"Well, that depends on the queen," Nexus told them, "but I wouldn't get your hopes up. After all, I'd leave you in here for a few years, just to be sure you've learned your lesson."

The mention of "years" stole the strength from the Crusaders' legs. They crumpled into a pile on the floor right where they had been standing. The sorrow on their faces tore at Nightmare Moon's heart but seemed to have no effect on Nexus. He just chuckled under his breath and led the guards away.

Sweetie Belle began to cry, and she covered her face with her hooves while Apple Bloom and Scootaloo looked off into the distance. They looked as if they wanted to cry too, but, somehow, they kept their eyes dry, if only for their friend.

Only once she was certain Nexus was gone did Twilight come out from beneath her blanket and move towards the three fillies. "Girls?"

The Crusaders sat up and spun their heads around. Their eyes lit up with a flicker of hope, and, in an instant, Apple Bloom threw herself at Twilight.

"We were just tryin' to help!" Apple Bloom whined. Tears formed in her eyes, and she buried her muzzle in Twilight's mane. "Why did Nyx lock us up?"

"Shhhhh," Twilight said, trying to calm Apple Bloom down. "It will be okay."

"But he said years, Twilight!" Sweetie Belle wailed. She moved up and joined in Apple Bloom and Twilight's embrace. "I don't want to be in jail!"

“Don’t worry, I’m sure somepony will come and rescue us soon,” Twilight whispered. She held both Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle tight before looking up at Scootaloo. Scootaloo had started crying, trembling, and kept looking back over her shoulder at Twilight. She acted like she was rooted to the floor. She wouldn’t allow herself to share in the embrace happening less than a foot away.

Twilight, however, knew what Scootaloo needed. She reached out with a hoof, placed it gently on Scootaloo’s shoulder, and pulled her close. Scootaloo did try to resist, for a moment, but she too fell into the hug. The three fillies cried, and all Twilight could do was hug them back and tell them over and over again, “Everything will be okay.”

Nightmare Moon watched all of this from her hiding place as a cloud against the ceiling, and it dug at her chest like a rusty dagger. She was only able to watch for a few moments before she had to leave. She was unable to stand the sight of her friends crying like that.

• • •

After floating lazily outside the castle as a cloud for a few minutes, if only to feel the night’s breeze flowing through her, Nightmare Moon returned to her bedchambers. Despite her hopes, the wind had provided no comfort. She collapsed onto her bed and sought any distraction from the knowledge her friends were now prisoners. Her eyes glanced about the room, and, eventually, she found herself focusing on her reflection in the recently replaced vanity mirror.

A full grown mare... she was a full grown mare, yet her flank was as blank as a starless night sky. That thought alone stung at her brain like a swarm of angry bees. It was a thought she had tried to ignore, but the presence of her old friends in the castle made it impossible. That, and sitting on her dresser, right where she left it, was the new Cutie Mark Crusader cape Sweetie Belle had brought.

A cutie mark is supposed to appear when a pony finds that one thing that makes them special, their special talent. Nexus had assured Nightmare Moon that, after she defeated the princesses and took over Equestria, her cutie mark would appear. He promised that her special talent and destiny was to be the queen of Equestria... but if that were the truth, then why was she still a blank flank?

What did it mean? What was her special talent supposed to be? She had always wanted Equestria; she had always wanted the eternal night. This was what she had always

wanted. Nexus had promised that once she had achieved her goals her cutie mark was sure to appear.

Yet even that wasn't true. Luna's words echoed in Nightmare Moon's mind from when the two had fought in Canterlot Castle. It was Luna's desire to rule Equestria and bring about the night eternal. It was Luna's jealous rage that had once been the sole defining feature of their mutual existence. It was Luna's thoughts that had once filled her mind. But now she was her own mare. Now she wasn't just Luna's twisted reflection, something had changed. But what? What was different? What was her special talent, her cutie mark, supposed to be?

Nightmare Moon looked into the eyes of her reflection, as if expecting it to offer answers to the questions buzzing around in her mind. The mare in the mirror, however, offered no such advice. It simply looked back at her with the same questioning gaze.

“I am a full-grown mare, Nexus; explain how this is even possible!” Nightmare Moon bellowed, finishing what had been an exhausting half hour rant. It was the morning after she had been forced to imprison her old friends in the dungeon, and a near sleepless night had worn her patience thin.

“Y-your Highness, I’m certain there is an explanation for why you don’t have your cutie mark,” Spell Nexus assured her in an attempt to assuage his queen’s rage. “Perhaps you have simply not struck on your talent for ruling.”

“Is being queen not enough!?”

“It should be, and, if I had the magic, I’d force your cutie mark to appear,” Spell Nexus said. “Please understand, you have been preoccupied with more important tasks than the responsibilities of ruling a kingdom. Perhaps, now that your rule is assured and there are no challengers to your throne, you can discover your talent for truly ruling Equestria.”

Nightmare Moon leaned back in her throne, not convinced. “Perhaps. What would you suggest, Nexus?”

“There are many things, Your Highness,” he eagerly answered. “If I may be so bold as to speak of your predecessor, Princess Celestia would often oversee the enactment of laws and make public appearances. She would entertain dignitaries and regularly held open court, where petitioners would make requests of the throne.”

Nightmare Moon twitched her wings in irritation. She had little interest in laws, giving speeches, or speaking with dignitaries who were too eager to please her. Only the idea of holding court held any appeal, and that was only because it was the simplest of the tasks.

Holding court was something she could at least see herself doing, but it felt strange to even consider it. A ruler held court so that her subjects could petition for things they wanted, things to make themselves happy. In all her memories she had never been concerned with the happiness of Equestria, just her own. Perhaps Spell Nexus was onto something. She had never held court before, thus if she had a talent for it, she would be unaware of said skill.

“Do you believe my mark would appear if I were to hold court?” Nightmare Moon asked.

“Most certainly, Your Highness,” Spell Nexus assured her.

Nightmare Moon gave a firm nod. “Then announce that I shall be holding court every day, from when the castle opens in the morning to when it closes at night. Let it be known that it *will be* this way until I deem otherwise or until my cutie mark appears.”

• • •

Nightmare Moon nestled herself into her throne just before open court was due to begin. Messenger pegasi had flown out the day before, carrying her proclamation to every corner of the kingdom, and the response had been greater than she could have anticipated. Ponies, wrapped in winter clothes to fend off the cold, had formed a line outside the castle gates that stretched all the way to Ponyville. They had come from every corner of the kingdom to see her, and, for a moment, she allowed herself to smile.

The sound of hooves and voices beyond the throne room door alerted Nightmare Moon that her court was about to begin. Hastily, she adjusted her armor, preened her wings for out of place feathers, and made whatever last-minute preparations she could think of.

Clocks around the castle rung out the hour, and, with the final chime, the throne room doors opened. Nightmare Moon watched as her servants quickly guided the front of the line into the room, looking over the many visiting ponies as they slowly filed in. Those brave enough to meet her gaze looked on with wide eyes, and everypony else kept their heads bent down towards the floor.

At the prompting of the servants, the first pony in line stepped forward and approached her throne. He was a farmer that Nightmare Moon found vaguely familiar. His cutie mark was of several carrots lying on their side. He had come in wearing a large brimmed hat, but he quickly removed it once he reached the foot of her throne.

“It is an honor to be in your presence, Your Majesty,” the farmer pony managed to choke out. “I am Danver, and my family runs a carrot farm just outside of Ponyville.”

“Danver... yes,” Nightmare Moon mused pleasantly. “You are neighbors to the Apple family, correct?”

“Yes, your... uh,” Danver glanced around anxiously, stumbling on his words. A few servants eyed him, and one guard began to approach before he hurriedly forced out, “Your Glorious Majesty.”

Nightmare Moon arched an eyebrow but made no other move. “And what request do you bring to this court?”

“I-I-I,” Danver stuttered under Nightmare Moon’s constant, expecting gaze. “Would you please raise the sun, Your Highness?”

Nightmare Moon’s eyebrows furrowed, and she spoke with such resentment that her words seemed dipped in poison. “*The sun?*”

Danver winced and took a step back. “M-my crops are wilting, Your Highness. Your servants have come to help me replant, b-but we can’t just r-replant this late into summer. The carrots won’t be ready in time for the harvest, a-and I can only imagine how much colder it will get when winter sets in. W-we just need a few more months of s-s-sunshine to grow enough food for w-winter.”

Nightmare Moon stomped the floor with a hoof. “Like my rule over this kingdom, the night shall be *eternal!* Your request is denied!”

Danver did not argue nor protest. He instead turned tail and sprinted out of the throne room, as if lingering a moment more would be suicidal. His quick departure made many of the ponies in line shift uneasily. They all stayed, though many looked much more afraid than they had moments before.

After giving her temper a moment to cool, Nightmare Moon motioned for the next pony in line to come forward. The stallion appeared to be a businesspony and was dressed with a tie, collar, and cuffs. He bowed and introduced himself in almost the exact same way the carrot farmer had. Nightmare Moon could only guess her servants were instructing the petitioners on how to speak to her.

And just as his introduction was similar, so was his request. He asked for the sun to be raised. His reasons were far different from the farmer’s, but his request still made Nightmare Moon grit her teeth in anger. She denied the stallion’s request and quickly called for the next pony in line.

Pony after pony came to her, and time after time Nightmare Moon heard the same request. They wanted the sun, they wanted their day, and, while none dared speak it, she could tell that they wanted more. They wanted the Royal Sisters back. They wanted Equestria to go back to the way it was, but they would be disappointed. She was queen now, and she would not simply give up the throne.

• • •

After spending hours listening to ponies requesting the sun’s return, Nightmare Moon had heard enough. She stood up from her throne and spread out her wings. “Let it be

known that the next petitioner who asks for the sun to be raised will be locked in the dungeon! I will *never* raise the sun! I have decreed that Equestria shall live in a night eternal, and that decree will stand! Now, all those who have a request for the sun to be raised should *leave... now!*”

Every pony in line turned and bolted, many screaming in panic as they ran from the throne room. This just seemed to fuel the anger burning in Nightmare Moon’s chest, but she did not pursue the petitioners. She was glad they were gone, glad to be rid of their sun-loving faces.

On top of it all, she could tell that her special talent was not in holding court. No cutie mark would come of this, and the frustrating indignity of being an adult blank flank, coupled with the disrespect of the ponies, had Nightmare Moon seething. She turned her head down, glaring at the floor around her throne as she debated which part of it she would smash with her hoof.

Just as Nightmare Moon had picked the part of the floor that was going to be the victim of her aggravation, she heard a pair of hoofsteps echoing from the exterior hallway. Were there still petitioners who had a request *not* related to the sun, or were they just too stupid to take a hint?

Preparing herself to make good on her threat, Nightmare Moon sat up in her throne and watched two ponies step through her throne room door. It was a pair of unicorns, a mare and a stallion. Both had fairly common builds, at least for ponies their age. The stallion had a white coat, brown mane, and a prominent, almost distracting, mustache. The mare had a pink coat and wore her purple mane up in a beehive style that easily added another half a foot to her standing height. The mare, unlike the stallion, was also wearing clothes. A reddish-orange shirt with a frilled collar and white pants.

The pants alone made Nightmare Moon cock an eyebrow as the pair approached her throne and bowed. She couldn’t fight a nagging feeling that she recognized these ponies. She could not recall from where or when, but she knew them from someplace.

“It’s an honor ta be in your presence, Your Majesty,” the stallion said. He rolled his vowels like he had a small ball in his mouth, and once more Nightmare Moon felt the nagging sensation that she knew these ponies from someplace. She, however, did her best to push that annoying thought aside. She flattened her expression and looked down at the pair.

“And what do you want?”

“Well, Your Highness, if ya wouldn’t mind, we’d like ta know...” The stallion choked on his words as if the air in his lungs was being sucked away by Nightmare Moon’s gaze. Still, he soldiered on and asked, “we’d like ta know if our daughter could come home.”

The shout Nightmare Moon had been preparing in response to another request for the sun died, and her voice became hollow, almost shaky. “Your daughter?”

“Our lil’ cupcake, Sweetie Belle, Your Highness.”

Nightmare Moon felt her heart seize up in her chest. She now realized why the pair was familiar; they were Sweetie Belle and Rarity’s parents. She had seen them only in passing, when she and the other Crusaders went by their house. She also began to see the resemblances. Rarity had inherited, at least in part, her mother’s purple mane, and both Rarity and Sweetie Belle had a white coat like their father. Yes, his fur was a slightly different tone of white in comparison to Rarity’s or Sweetie Belle’s, but the resemblance was still there.

After hearing their request, Nightmare Moon almost wished they had come to ask for the sun to be raised like everypony else. It took all of her strength to keep herself from looking away when she answered, “I am afraid she cannot.”

Sweetie Belle’s mother stumbled forward, her once solemn and respectful gaze shattered and replaced by the panicked, pleading eyes of a mother. “Please, Your Highness, my lil’ cupcake doesn’t belong in a dungeon! Whatevah she did wrong, I’m sure she didn’t mean anything by it. Please, Your Highness, she’s just a lil’ filly. She needs ta be with her family!”

Nightmare Moon closed her eyes and shook her head once. “I cannot release her.”

Those words were enough to break what little control Sweetie Belle’s mother had over herself. She wailed and collapsed into a heap on the floor. She began to beg, to plead, saying a thousand different things as fast as she could to try and convince Nightmare Moon that Sweetie Belle should be allowed to return home. Sweetie Belle’s father placed a hoof on his wife’s shoulder, trying to calm her, but she batted it away and continued to wail out her pleas.

During this, Nightmare Moon was making every effort to shut out the cries. The guilt they were causing clawed at her insides, and, when she couldn’t shut out the wails, she did the only other thing she could think of. First, without a word, she motioned for her

guards to leave. Then, once they were gone, the throne room was sealed once more, leaving Nightmare Moon alone with Sweetie Belle's parents.

With no prying eyes to see what she was about to do, Nightmare Moon stood up from her throne and closed the distance between her and Sweetie Belle's parents. Both of them looked up at her in fear, undoubtedly terrified they had asked too much of their new queen and were about to suffer the consequences. Nightmare Moon, however, didn't raise her voice nor did she lift a hoof to harm the pair. She instead lowered herself down, putting herself at eye level with them.

"I am sorry. I would like nothing more than to let Sweetie Belle go home with you, but she must face the consequences of her actions," Nightmare Moon told them with an apologetic tone. "She, Apple Bloom, and Scootaloo trespassed into my castle and were extremely lucky they found me before the guards found them. I promise I will let them go soon. I just... can't do it right now."

"But when? When can she come home?" Sweetie Belle's mother pressed.

Nightmare Moon sighed, turned her back on the parents, and began walking back to her throne. "Request an audience with me again in a few weeks. My advisor should be satisfied with the punishment by that time. I will then be able to release not only Sweetie Belle, but Scootaloo and Apple Bloom as well."

Nightmare Moon retook her seat in her throne and looked down at Sweetie Belle's parents. "Despite what you may think of me, know that I take no joy in punishing my old friends. Still, they must learn that I am Nightmare Moon, and that I can no longer be the friend they once knew."

Sweetie Belle's parents nodded and, unlike all the petitioners before them, bowed to Nightmare Moon a second time. "Thank you, Your Highness, and we'll be sure ta come back innah few weeks. We'll also tell Apple Bloom and Scootaloo's families da news," Sweetie Belle's father assured Nightmare Moon before looking back to his wife. "Come on, honey."

Sweetie Belle's mother nodded, and, though tears were still streaming down her face, she managed a small smile, hopeful that she would see her daughter again soon. Together, the pair left the throne room. At the same time, the servants and guards moved back in to find Nightmare Moon sitting in her throne with her eyes shut and a frown on her face.

"Are there any other petitioners?" Nightmare Moon asked.

“No,” one of the servants replied.

Nightmare Moon offered a weak nod. “Then I am ending court today. Notify the guards at the gate and let the ponies of Equestria know that they must come asking for an audience if they wish to speak to me. Let it be known that I shall no longer be holding open court.”

“Understood, Your Majesty.”

• • •

Despite the failure of holding court, Spell Nexus continued to offer royal tasks to Nightmare Moon. She tried every aspect of ruling the kingdom, from making speeches to helping form laws. Nightmare Moon even sat through an utterly boring tax meeting, but, despite Spell Nexus’s continued promises, her flank remained blank.

When a week of trying different royal duties failed, Spell Nexus began proposing talents related to the nighttime sky. He suggested turning the night into her tapestry. He told her that she should “fill it with such beauty that all of Equestria would *want* the night to last forever, if only so they would never have to be parted from her skybound art.”

Yet, when Nightmare Moon tried her hoof at moving the stars, she quickly regretted it. Her mind flashed with memories of art projects in Cheerilee’s class. Some of her classmates were talented in such endeavors, but her pictures always turned out foalish. The only way she knew how to draw a pony was as a stick figure. The only pony less skilled with art in the class was Sweetie Belle, and that was only because she kept forgetting to wash out her brush between colors when they were painting.

Thus any change Nightmare Moon made to the sky was no improvement. She tried to make constellations, but there was a subtlety to Luna’s artwork that she just couldn’t match. The constellations had vague resemblances to the creatures they were supposed to be, but were also up for interpretation. All the while, they remained hidden within the grander picture of the sky. They only came to the surface when one actively searched for them.

This was a stark contrast to anything Nightmare Moon attempted. The constellations she made stood out like rough and haphazard brushstrokes. Despite trying dozens of times to make the sky her own, the only thing that Nightmare Moon succeeded in doing over the course of the night was to build up her frustration. Her cutie mark had once been a moon against the darkest night. She was supposed to have a special talent for this, for

tending the night sky. But, if anything, her actions were equivalent to those of a foal who was defacing a masterpiece with hoofpaints.

A nearby clock chimed the morning hour, and Nightmare Moon finally admitted defeat. With a stomp of her hoof, she used her magic to wipe away her latest failure at painting the sky. She then willed her body to become smoke and, like an angry snake, zipped back through the air to her bedroom balcony. Once there, she rematerialized and stomped through the open door.

Nightmare Moon moved straight to her bedroom mirror and stared at the reflection of her still very blank flank. She glared at it, trying to force her cutie mark to appear through sheer will alone. When that didn't work, Nightmare Moon shut her eyes tight and fought the urge to smash her mirror again.

What was different? Why wasn't her talent what it used to be when she and Luna were one and the same? Was there *anything* that made her unique beyond being a queen that everypony feared, despised, and wished was banished back to the moon?

Opening her eyes again, she let her angry glare turn from her blank flank to her armor. At the moment, it was just as much of a mockery as her absent cutie mark. She wasn't a war pony or a terror who would strike down those who stood in her way. Armor was something worn by a killer or a soldier, and she was neither. Without even a thought, Nightmare Moon magically removed her armor and tossed it all into a corner with a loud clatter.

Her eyeshadow was next to go, another thing that Nightmare Moon had grown tired of applying. She had worn it to meet the expectations of Nexus and the Children of Nightmare, but she was weary of it. A wet cloth removed every trace of the makeup, and once again Nightmare Moon looked upon herself as simply a black mare.

How befitting was her black coat. She was once nothing but a shade, a poison, an infection of thought and jealousy that had taken captive the true guardian of the nighttime sky. Even the cutie mark she had once possessed was just a twisted shadow of Luna's. It had been *Luna's* talent for the sky, *Luna's* jealousy and hatred, and *Luna's* desire that had formed and given purpose to Nightmare Moon.

Now that she was separated from Luna, made a mare of her own, what did that leave? The desires that Nightmare Moon remembered, that once burned within her like fire, had gone ice-cold and lingered only in memory. It felt like she had no desires or wishes

of her own, like she was hollow. She was beginning to fear she didn't even *have* a special talent or a cutie mark.

Unable to stare at her reflection in the mirror anymore, Nightmare Moon moved back to her bedroom balcony and looked across Equestria with tired eyes. For two weeks the night had lasted, and the effects were noticeable. Plants were wilting all across the kingdom; even the staunch and sturdy Everfree Forest was looking sickly. The few ponies out so early in the day were bundled up like it was the dead of winter, when it was in fact supposed to be summer.

Nightmare Moon saw Sweet Apple Acres on the far side of the town and thought of Apple Bloom's family. The orchards looked weak; how much longer would the trees be able to survive? What would happen to the Apple family and to Ponyville when the harvest failed? Would the town survive winter without the orchard's usually bountiful harvest?

Nightmare Moon violently shook her head. Why did she care about this? The Nightmare Moon she used to be would have just laughed at the hardship and reveled in the suffering. She never used to care about the ponies of Equestria. All that used to matter was that the ponies saw her, or rather Luna's, night sky and appreciated its beauty.

Nightmare Moon glanced upward at the sky. She sought comfort in the beauty it was supposed to hold, but, after staring at it all night, it only disgusted her. She was tired of the moon and stars. She was tired of the night's cold and darkness. She was just... tired of it all and wanted to see something else. She wanted something other than night.

There was, however, only one other thing.

Furrowing her brow, Nightmare Moon looked to the horizon. She stared at it as her thoughts snowballed together. The thoughts became a desire, a desire that she shouldn't have felt. That desire, however, only grew stronger, and soon Nightmare Moon began to do the one thing she had sworn she would never do.

With her mane swirling and her eyes glowing white, Nightmare Moon stretched her magic to the heavens. Without a warning to anypony watching below, the moon began to race across the sky. Within five minutes it had reached the west and began to set beyond the distant horizon, but Nightmare Moon did not watch her moon set. Instead, her gaze remained focused eastward.

A bit of red started to mix with the dark blue and black of the night. It was just a shimmer at first, but it grew. The red fringes were pushed farther into the sky by an orange core, and the orange pushed higher as a bright yellow sphere began to peak over the horizon.

This went against everything she was supposed to stand for, everything she was supposed to want. Despite this, Nightmare Moon couldn't help but smile. She could already feel a few of the sun's golden rays striking her coat and filling her with warmth. Her eyes moved to the sky, and she watched it shift from inky black to a bright, cheerful blue white, at the same time, the stars slowly faded from view.

For the first time in two weeks, the sun had risen over Equestria.

Leaving her armor behind, Nightmare Moon made her way to the royal throne room, curious as to just how long it would take before somepony came running in, looking for her in a panic.

• • •

"My Queen, I have dire news!" Spell Nexus yelled as he burst into the throne room. A number of soldiers followed in his wake, yet his panic was met by a cool pair of eyes and a small smirk from Nightmare Moon, who was sitting in her throne calmly.

"Only ten minutes? I was sure it would have taken you longer than that," Nightmare Moon mused.

Nexus and the soldiers came to a stop at the foot of the throne, confusion painted across their faces. "My Queen?"

"It is nothing. Now, what pressing business do you have that makes you feel you can burst in here and make such a spectacle of yourself?"

"Your Majesty, the moon has set and the sun is beginning to rise. Celestia has obviously escaped her imprisonment, and it is only a matter of time before she joins with Princess Cadance's rebellion and comes to strike you down. Now, I have already alerted the guard here and sent a message to Shining Armor to do the same with our Canterlot Guard. Both castles are preparing to defend themselves, and within the hour we will be ready to—"

"That will not be necessary," Nightmare Moon interrupted. "There is nothing to fear."

“Your confidence is refreshing, my Queen, but now Celestia has the advantage of surprise. We do not know when or how she will attack. She could be plotting even as we speak.”

Nightmare Moon nodded her head before she let another smirk escape. “Yes, that would be true *if* Celestia had escaped the sun, but, I assure you, she is still trapped.”

“But... but then why...why is the sun rising? Surely it is not you—”

“Yes Spell Nexus, I *am* the one that lowered the moon, and it *is* by my will and power the sun climbs into the sky.”

Nexus could only look at Nightmare Moon in shock, mouth agape. “B-b-but... but Your Highness, *why* would you end your own night? Is it not your deepest desire to have Equestria forever bathed in the glory of the moon and the stars?”

“Don’t be foolish!” Nightmare Moon barked. “Have you even *felt* how cold it is outside the castle? Have you even *seen* the plants beginning to wilt? It is a miracle Equestria has survived two weeks of constant night, but to expect this kingdom to survive an eternity is ludicrous!”

Nexus shakily took a few steps towards Nightmare Moon with pleading eyes. “My Queen, if this is about our progress transforming Equestria, then I assure you—”

“That your renovations would come too late. Your progress in replanting is pitiful at best, and the warming lamps that you promised would keep the populated parts of Equestria warm haven’t been installed in most towns. Half of Equestria would starve and the rest would freeze to death by the time you finished.

“Speaking of the night, there is no longer any reason to make it last forever. Things are *not* as they were a thousand years ago, Nexus. There are now ponies who live and work during the night. There are ponies who appreciate its beauty, but there is beauty to be found in the day and sunlight as well.

“Beauty that *I* have decided to rule over,” Nightmare Moon continued. “I have decided that as long as I am the sole ruler of Equestria, I will tend to the sun and moon myself. I will do just as Celestia did for a thousand years, and I shall be her *better*. I shall hold dominion over both heavenly orbs and be the purveyor of their beauty not merely for a thousand years, but for all eternity. I shall be the eternal queen of both night and day.”

Nexus opened his mouth to continue his protest, but Nightmare Moon kept him silent with a single hard glare. Eventually, he bowed, as did the rest of the soldiers. “As you wish, my Queen. Is there anything else you would like me to know?”

“Yes. I will be taking leave of the castle today,” Nightmare Moon told Nexus as she rose from her throne.

“Of course, Your Majesty. I shall have somepony fetch your armor and—”

“No, I shall be going out as I am.”

Nexus stared at Nightmare Moon as if she had gone mad. “But your Highness, I really think—”

“I’ll decide what I will and will not wear!” Nightmare Moon bellowed. “Now away with you!”

Nexus did not linger a moment longer. He and the guards bolted from the room as fast as their hooves could carry them. Nightmare Moon waited until they were all out of earshot before letting an irritated sigh escape her nostrils. She departed the throne room and, within minutes, reached one of the castle’s many balconies. She looked upon the sun and rich blue sky with a smile, as if she was greeting a friend she had long missed.

A gust of wind carried with it the sounds of cheers and what Nightmare Moon believed was music. Turning her eyes towards the source, she looked down at Ponyville. Ponies all about the town were rushing out into the streets, many gathering in the town square.

Her subjects, her “unblessed” subjects, were as happy to see the sun as she was. They were rejoicing in its light and warmth. For a rare moment, Nightmare Moon felt happy. She did not try to explain or wonder why. She just took to her wings and flew towards Ponyville as her feathers and coat absorbed the sun’s warmth.

• • •

Never had Ponyville been overtaken by celebration so quickly. Pinkie Pie was working with several pegasi, including the lightning-quick Rainbow Dash, to hurriedly put up decorations for a party that had arguably already started.

A local DJ was already spinning vinyl records and filling the air with music as ponies shouted their joy to the heavens. Warmth was already filling the air, driving away

the long, lingering chill of the extended night. Ponies who had been bundled up were now tossing off boots, winter jackets, and scarves to bask in the sunshine.

The ponies were so enthralled with their celebration that they didn't notice the indigo cloud lingering in the shadows of the nearby trees. Nightmare Moon watched them and would have been grinning ear to ear if she wasn't currently a floating mass of magical energy.

Now *this* felt good and right. Ponies laughing and playing in the sun, overflowing with joy without a care in the world... this was what Equestria was meant to be like. This was the Equestria Nightmare Moon had seen through young, innocent eyes, and it was *not* an Equestria locked in an eternal night.

Spell Nexus could go eat moldy hay. This was how Nightmare Moon was going to rule, and this was what made her happy. She would move the sun and moon just like Celestia did and let the ponies of Equestria have both their day and their night.

As the celebration nearby continued to grow, Nightmare Moon's mind began to get away from her. The ponies were so happy, so overjoyed to see their sun, maybe now they would not look on her in fear. Maybe they would even thank her for bringing back the sun. Yes, she'd appear before them, and, instead of cowering in fear, they would look upon her just as they used to look upon Celestia.

She could already picture it. She would reveal herself to them and smile. She would do as Celestia did and affectionately call them "my little ponies." She would speak in the sweetest, softest voice she could manage. She would show them they never had to fear another eternal night, and they would praise her just as they praised her predecessors.

Nightmare Moon was drawn from her daydream by nearby cheers. A few mares and stallions had moved over beside her hiding place and were carrying with them a table laden with a bowl of punch and empty cups. As soon as they set the table on the ground each one took up a cup. One of the stallions then laughed and lifted his glass. "I propose a toast, to the sun."

"To the day!" another in the group added.

"To Equestria's true royalty!"

"To Celestia and Luna!"

Nightmare Moon's heart dropped in her chest like a stone in the ocean. The ponies... they were celebrating her defeat. They thought the sunrise meant that Equestria was once again ruled by the Royal Pony Sisters.

In an instant, Nightmare Moon felt the urge to bring back the night. She began reaching her magic to the sky with every intention of stealing the sun away until the ponies could appreciate it, could appreciate her. Yet, before Nightmare Moon could send the sun from the sky, her determination faltered. It had been two long weeks of night, and these ponies would be heartbroken enough when they learned that their beloved princesses had not returned.

Sinking to the ground, the cloud that was Nightmare Moon snuck between the hooves of the ponies and away from the party. She would let them have their day, let them have their celebration, but she would not stand to stay there and watch.

• • •

On the far outskirts of Ponyville, where the party and its music were nothing more than haunting tones on the wind, Nightmare Moon laid down on the grass. She found refuge in one of the town's many exterior parks in the shade of a weeping willow. The long, hanging branches hid her from any ponies that might walk past on the path, ensuring she had the privacy she sought.

Her heart ached. The happiness that had flickered to life when she raised the sun had been slain in cold blood by the celebrating ponies. The worst part was that she had tasted that happiness. It was like giving a sip of water to a pony lost in a desert. It had been a brief moment of refreshment that, once passed, only left the soul craving more.

But why, why had she only been happy then? Cutie mark or not, she had everything else she had ever wanted. She was queen. She banished Celestia and Luna to the sun and moon. There was no pony to challenge her rule. So why had she only been happy when she raised the sun, when she thought the ponies of Ponyville didn't fear her anymore?

What had made her happy in the past? She knew it hadn't always been like this, and, thinking back, memories Nightmare Moon had tried to bury began to bubble to the surface. She knew what had made her happy in the past, and it was *not* power or a crown. It was not an object or a trinket.

It was ponies.

It was ponies like Twilight Sparkle, Cheerilee, and Twist. It was ponies like Apple Bloom, Sweetie Belle, and Scootaloo. It was all the residents of Ponyville who had once looked upon her with smiles and happy faces, as just another citizen of their humble little town.

Nightmare Moon groaned as she laid her head on the ground and covered her eyes. With determination she began to sort through her thoughts. She was tired of the uncertainty, tired of the unknown. She would know why those short months she spent as a filly were more important to her than all the rest of her memories. She would not be tormented by this a second more.

Focusing, Nightmare Moon thought back to her oldest memory, the first she shared with Princess Luna. It was just a wisp, but, as she grasped at it, the memory began to take shape. The faded memory was from when she and Luna had been one and the same. She did not remember the event or the date, but the important details of the memory held true.

Celestia had been surrounded by happy ponies, each praising her for a beautiful day. She and Luna had watched this, and, in the pit of their stomach, jealousy had twisted and turned. Why did Celestia receive all the praise? She only raised the sun. She did not fill the sky with a tapestry of stars while also tending to the moon. Celestia only put forth half the work, at best, and yet the ponies loved her ten times more.

In that ancient memory, Luna had wanted that admiration, and she, Nightmare Moon, had shared in that desire. That thirst, that hunger, had been the fuel of their existence until the Elements of Harmony split them apart. It was at the core of everything she had once wanted. Her desire for the eternal night, her desire to be queen, it all stemmed from that one thing.

That one desire, that one wish, to be... to be...

Loved.

Love? Was that it? Was *that* all she really wanted? Nightmare Moon shook her head in disbelief, trying to deny it, but she couldn't. Even after she had been stripped away from Luna by the Elements of Harmony, that one core truth had lingered. It had been a simple thought, so ingrained in their shared existence that not even the most powerful magic in existence could wash it away.

And she *had* been loved as Nyx. Back then, Twilight had loved her, and her friend had cared for her as well. She had been happy, but then she ruined everything. She had

thrown it all away to chase old memories and desires that had never been her own. She had let Spell Nexus and the Children of Nightmare convince her to be a monster and a tyrant. She had imprisoned her friends and... the mare she had called Mother.

It was infuriating, but Nightmare Moon did not shout out in rage. Instead she, the Queen of Equestria, cried. She didn't wail, didn't bawl, but, in the protective shade of the willow tree, she could not hold back the tears streaming down her face.

• • •

For the longest time, that was all Nightmare Moon did. She just let herself cry, ignoring the entire world around her. She didn't know or care how long she had hidden beneath the shade of the tree, but her crying was abruptly interrupted by a tiny voice.

“Are you okay?”

Nightmare Moon snapped her head up in shock and hurriedly dried her eyes. Who would even *dare to* approach the queen when she was obviously in a bad mood? Who would even... care?

It took Nightmare Moon a moment to locate the source of the voice. Its owner had retreated outside the sagging branches of the weeping willow. Yet, after a few moments, the pony dared to push her head through the hanging boughs once more.

It was a filly roughly the same age as the Cutie Mark Crusaders. She had a cream-white coat, curly red hair, admittedly dorky purple glasses, and a cutie mark of two candy canes crossed in the shape of a heart. It was a pony Nightmare Moon knew all too well, having spent time with her at school.

“I... I'm sorry, Your Highness,” Twist apologized in her nasally lisp. “I just heard somepony crying while I was going back to my house to get some peppermint sticks. I'll... I'll leave you alone if you—”

“No,” Nightmare Moon said before she could even really think about what she was doing. “Please, it's been a long time, Twist. You don't have to go if you don't want to.”

“How do you know my name?” Twist asked with wide, disbelieving eyes.

Nightmare Moon lifted a hoof to her chest and pointed to herself. “I-it's me, Twist. It's Nyx.”

With her jaw hanging slack, Twist took a few steps closer. “Nyx? My mom said you had gone bad and that you were the one that made it dark all the time. I told her that wasn’t true, but... I guess she was right.”

The truth in those words hurt, but Nightmare Moon did not allow herself to snap at Twist, nor did she try to defend herself. “I’m sorry I did that, Twist, but I promise I’m never going to do it again.”

“It was actually kind of fun at first. I’ve never been able to play outside after dark before. I played some really fun games of hide and seek.” Twist’s face lit up and she took a few steps away. “Hey, you should come to the party in town! Everypony is outside, dancing and playing.”

Nightmare Moon winced at the invitation before shaking her head. “I... would like to, Twist, I really would, but I don’t think I can. I’m very busy,” she lied.

The smile that had blossomed on Twist’s face faded. “That’s what Apple Bloom always said before she went to visit her family.”

Visit her family? A white lie Nightmare Moon could only guess was told to Twist so she wouldn’t know that Apple Bloom and the other crusaders were locked in the castle dungeon. Still, Nightmare Moon did not focus on that. She did not want to give Twist a reason to hate her... not now.

“Why does Apple Bloom always say that?” Nightmare Moon asked, hoping to drive the conversation in another direction.

“Because she’s always being a Cutie Mark Crusader,” Twist replied. She kicked at the dirt with a forehoof. “I’m happy I got my cutie mark, but, ever since I did, Apple Bloom only ever wants to play with Scootaloo and Sweetie Belle. Whenever I try to play with her, she’s always too busy.”

Twist kicked at the dirt again. “I almost wish my cutie mark hadn’t appeared.”

“Now don’t say that, Twist,” Nightmare Moon said, trying to comfort her. A small smile then spread across her lips. “Hey, can you wait here for a minute? I need to run and get something, but I promise I’ll be right back.”

“Sure, just don’t take too long. I need to get back to the party,” Twist replied.

Nightmare Moon nodded, and, in a swirl of indigo clouds, she disappeared. This left Twist to sit and wait in the shade of the willow, but she didn't have to wait long. Within a minute, Nightmare Moon reappeared from the swirling vortex of her smoky mane and laid back down on the grass.

"Okay, I want you to close your eyes. I've got a surprise for you," Nightmare Moon said with a warm smile.

Twist bounced on her hooves. "Really?!"

"Yes, but you have to close your eyes, and no peeking," Nightmare Moon told her, and Twist was more than eager to oblige. She squeezed her eyes shut and, in the process, scrunched her face into a silly expression.

Nightmare Moon had to stifle a small laugh at the sight, but she went about her work all the same. She took something out of her magical mane, and, with a delicate touch, she used her horn's magic to carefully drape it over Twist's back. Only when she was sure the item wasn't going to fall off did Nightmare Moon pull her magic away. "Okay, you can look now."

Twist snapped her eyes open and a smile exploded onto her face when she saw that a red cape with a familiar blue and yellow emblem was now hanging across her back.

"As the Queen of Equestria and a member of the Cutie Mark Crusaders, I hereby declare you an official Crusader. Now you can play with Apple Bloom, Scootaloo, and Sweetie Belle all you want," Nightmare Moon told her.

"Really?" Twist asked in disbelief. "Even though I already have my cutie mark?"

"Being a Crusader isn't just about finding your own cutie mark," Nightmare Moon told her. "It's about helping a friend find their special talent, and who better to help a friend get their cutie mark than a pony who already has hers?"

Twist bounced in excitement. "Oh, I can't wait until Apple Bloom comes back! I bet I could show her, Scootaloo, and Sweetie Belle how I make candy, and then maybe they could have a cutie mark like mine."

"I'm sure Apple Bloom will be back sooner than you think," Nightmare Moon said, still unable to admit the truth to Twist.

“Thanks, Nyx. This is so sweet! I can’t wait to show it to everypony,” Twist exclaimed before an expression of realization flashed onto her face. “Oh, I forgot, I was bringing back some of my peppermint sticks to the party.”

Nightmare Moon lifted a hoof and used it to gently nudge Twist. “Well then, you’d better run along.”

Despite Nightmare Moon’s encouragement, Twist turned back to look at her. “Are you sure you don’t want to come to the party?”

“I’m sorry, Twist, but I really don’t think I should go.”

“Okay,” Twist replied, but not before reaching into her saddlebags and drawing out one of the peppermint sticks. It was wrapped in colorful tissue paper and a big red bow. “Here, you should at least have one of my peppermint sticks. I just made them this morning.”

Nightmare Moon’s eyes softened at the sight of the small gift. “Oh Twist, no, I couldn’t.”

“It’ll make you smile,” Twist assured her in a sing-song voice after setting the peppermint stick down on the ground.

It was too much for Nightmare Moon to bear. She picked up the candy with her mane as if it was fragile glass and smiled a little as she turned it over in front of her eyes. “Thank you, Twist.”

“Okay, I’d better get going... but, Nyx?”

Nightmare Moon turned her gaze back to Twist. “Yes?”

“Is the sun going to rise tomorrow? Or is it going to be dark again?”

“I’ll make you a deal,” Nightmare Moon said as she leaned in closer to Twist. “If you promise not to tell anypony that you saw me or that I was the one that raised the sun today, I’ll make the sun rise again every day.”

“Does it have to be a Pinkie Pie Promise?” Twist nervously asked.

Nightmare Moon chuckled, remembering the day they had encountered Pinkie Pie after Diamond Tiara’s prank had gone bad. “No, it doesn’t.”

“Okay, I promise, Nyx,” Twist replied with a smile, “but I hope you change your mind. The party’s going to be a lot of fun. Still, if you don’t, I’ll see you later, okay?”

Nightmare Moon nodded and watched as Twist slipped out from underneath the canopy of the weeping willow. She then used a touch of her magic to push back some of the hanging branches, so that she could watch Twist bounce towards town. Once Twist had disappeared from sight, she turned her attention back to the peppermint stick. She removed it from its tissue paper wrapping and placed it in her mouth. It was sweet, minty, and, in that moment, every way delicious.

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Nightmare Moon remained where she was until the end of the day when the celebrations had died down and the sun was nearing the far horizon. She made the sun set and the moon rise from her hiding place beneath the tree, and she lingered there a bit longer before daring to leave.

She moved through Ponyville as a mystical shadow, making her way to her destination: the Golden Oaks Library. While Nightmare Moon was happy to give Twist the new Crusader cape she had received from Sweetie Belle, she soon after found herself almost regretting what she had done. She realized too late she wanted the cape for her own, to have as a memento, but, at the same time, she knew that she couldn’t take it back from Twist.

That left Nightmare Moon wanting until she remembered there *was* one more crusader cape in the world. There was one she could have and keep for herself, which in truth already belonged to her. It was her first cape, the one she had received during the school year, and she knew exactly where to find it.

Back when she was known simply as Nyx, a pony returned a library book damaged. A number of pages had been torn out and many of the others stained with water. The book was simply ruined, and Twilight was forced to throw it out. At the same time, however, Nyx had been reading a story where the main character hid things inside of a hollowed-out book.

After fishing the book out of the garbage, Nyx made it into her best hiding spot, something even Twilight didn’t know about. She hollowed it out and then hid it under her bed with other storybooks. It was a hiding spot she had been so proud of. To find a single, small book under a filly’s bed in a library would be like finding a needle in a haystack... unless one knew where to look.

The cloud that was Nightmare Moon drew close to the library at this point, and she was struck with a bit of *déjà vu* as she approached one of the windows. In the past, she had snuck up to the same window and peeked in on Twilight Sparkle and the other five ponies that would wield the Elements of Harmony against her that fateful night, back when she and Luna were one and the same.

And, just like that night, Nightmare Moon peeked through the library window, only to find a very different scene than she remembered.

“Are you sure you’ll be okay here by yourself, Spike? You are more than welcome to keep staying with me,” Rarity offered. She was standing in the center of the room, watching Spike as he rushed about cleaning. Owloysius was helping as well, using his wings to feather dust the higher shelves. Peewee was sitting in his nest on the windowsill, but the baby phoenix was joined in his nest by another of his kind. Princess Celestia’s own pet phoenix, Philomena, had come to the library seeking refuge when the Children of Nightmare had tried to capture her as a prize for Nightmare Moon.

“No way! I need to be here and make sure the library is in tip-top shape for when Twilight comes back. I mean, you saw it! The sun came up. That means Princess Celestia’s back, and if she’s back, it won’t be long before she beats Nightmare Moon. Then she’ll free Twilight, and I don’t want her to come back to a dirty library.”

“You really are her number one assistant, aren’t you?” Rarity praised with a smile.

Spike paused from his cleaning and puffed out his chest in pride. “You bet I am.”

“Well then, I won’t keep you, but, if you get hungry, I want you to come over to the boutique. While I can’t promise you gemstones, you are *always* welcome to share dinner with me. Oh, and don’t stay up too late,” Rarity finished before she turned to leave. “You wouldn’t want to be tired when Twilight comes back, now would you?”

Nightmare Moon shrunk back, hiding her cloud-like body in a nearby bush as Rarity exited the library. She waved a final goodbye to Spike before departing, and only when she had disappeared around a distant street corner did Nightmare Moon dare to peek through the window again.

Spike had finished dusting the last of the library shelves and had moved on to Twilight’s writing desk. He began to clean it just as he had cleaned everything else, but he soon paused to pick up a nearby picture frame.

It was a picture of him and Twilight. The two were posing for the picture, undoubtedly a shot for a school yearbook or something back when Twilight was attending Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns. Both she and Spike looked younger in the image, back at a time when he was just starting to act more like Twilight's assistant. It was a picture that brought a smile to Spike's face, and he took a moment to hug it to his chest.

"Come home soon, Twilight."

Until Spike had said those words, Nightmare Moon had every intention of waiting until he had fallen asleep before sneaking upstairs to retrieve her treasure book. Now, however, she slunk away from the window and let her cloud-like form begin to make its way back to the palace.

Spike would stay up all night for Twilight, and, with each passing hour, his hope that she would be freed by Celestia would diminish. He would soon come to realize, like everypony else in Ponyville, that it was Nightmare Moon that had raised the sun.

And Nightmare Moon had no interest waiting by the window if it meant she'd have to watch as Spike's hopes of Twilight's return died in his chest.

• • •

The waiting was excruciating. Nightmare Moon had returned to the castle and ordered her guards to fetch her treasure book the moment Spike left the library unattended. She had stayed in her throne since then, not wanting to move an inch and risk missing the guards' return.

She had made the book sound like something far worse than it was. She wove a tale of how the book held her grand plans for Equestria, and Nexus was more than eager to believe her. He even volunteered to go take the book from the library with his own hooves to ensure it was never opened.

It was an offer Nightmare Moon didn't refuse, though she insisted that Spike had to be out of the library. When Nexus asked why, she gave him the simple explanation that no pony or dragon in Ponyville was to know that the book even existed, and that seemed to thrill Nexus even more. He would have probably waited years for Spike to leave the library before securing the book.

Thankfully, it had only taken hours. A short time after the sunrise the following day, Nightmare Moon heard the doors to her throne room open. Nexus poked his head in the moment the crack was wide enough, and he wore a broad smile.

“Were you successful?” Nightmare Moon asked, though she could already see he had been. As she rose from her throne and crossed the room to meet Nexus halfway, he walked towards her with the book levitating beside his head.

“Of course, my Queen. The book was just where you said it would be, and the baby dragon was out fetching breakfast for himself at the time. We also ensured the phoenixes and owl were asleep upstairs. Noone saw us enter or leave, and noone has even cracked the cover of your book. It has remained tightly closed since it was removed from its hiding spot, as per your request.”

“Excellent,” Nightmare Moon said gleefully as she took the book in her own magic. “You have done well, Nexus.”

“You honor me, Your Highness. Though, if I may be so bold, what exactly *does* this book contain? You have spoken of it as if it holds something of unfathomable importance, but I find myself wondering how such a simple-looking book could contain something so—”

“Do you *question* my word, Nexus?!” Nightmare Moon hissed out, leaning in close and glaring coldly at him.

Nexus swallowed nervously, trying to force down the knot that had formed in his throat. “No... Never, my Queen! Perish the thought!”

“Then you will trust in my word. This book is important, but its contents are for my eyes only. Now, I am retiring to my bedchambers for the morning. It is of the utmost importance that I am not disturbed.”

“Yes, my Queen,” Nexus replied. He bowed once more as Nightmare Moon strode past him, and he waited until she had left the throne room before shouting her orders to the guards.

• • •

Back in her bedchambers, with her armor and make-up removed, Nightmare Moon laid on her bed with the book held gently in her magic. It had taken every ounce of her will to keep herself from opening the book before she had reached her bed. Yet now she was there, now she had privacy, and, after licking her lips, she cracked open the top cover.

Inside the book a rectangular hole had been cut into the water stained pages, and within the gap was a hoof-full of items that made the air catch in Nightmare Moon’s lungs.

Lying right on top, and taking up the largest part of the book's interior, was her original Cutie Mark Crusader cape. It was frayed on a few edges and had a stain on one corner, but the red color was still strong and vibrant. Even the rearing pony emblem it bore was just as Nightmare Moon remembered it.

Carefully, she removed the cape and draped it across the cover of the book as she looked at the other items inside. She found her blue ribbon from the Learn and Play Day and other little trinkets that she had gathered from her many attempts to find a cutie mark. Marbles, old coins... the book was filled with things that had no significant monetary value, but, to her, they were utterly priceless.

Before she could stop herself, Nightmare Moon found her magic reaching out to one of the items: her kazoo. She withdrew the cheap, little thing she had won along with the blue ribbon from the Learn and Play Day's tug-of-war match, and, before she could stop herself, she placed the toy against her lips.

It felt so much smaller now, as if she could break it just by biting down. Still, Nightmare Moon held the kazoo with care, and she breathed out. The kazoo gave up its note, which sounded against the walls of her bedchamber.

The single note that Nightmare Moon hoped would bring back even a fraction of the happiness she once knew only left the bitter taste of plastic in her mouth. As quickly as her magic would allow, she put all the treasures back into the book and hid it in the drawer of a dresser. She then flopped down on her bed, once more finding herself staring at her reflection in her vanity mirror.

As Nightmare Moon glared at her reflection, Luna's words rose and burned at her mind like angry phantoms. *"It won't be my past that haunts you, but your own."*

Luna had been right. She had been Nyx, and she could have stayed Nyx. The Royal Sisters had offered her a chance to stop, but she had been a fool lost in the past. She had listened to Spell Nexus, the Children of Nightmare, and her own memories. She had focused on being the mare she once was, and in the process she had destroyed everything she once had.

Yes, she was Nightmare Moon, she had made herself into Nightmare Moon, but now she didn't want to be that. She didn't want to be the monster colts and fillies feared haunted the shadows. She did not want to be the tyrant queen, but she couldn't go back now. She had gone too far. No amount of apologies would cleanse her of what she had done. If she

freed Celestia and Luna, they would seal her in the moon for a thousand years, if not longer.

She was... stuck— simply stuck. She could not go back, but she could not make herself go forward. She was, in every way, her reflection in the mirror. She could not be Nightmare Moon anymore, clad in armor as she struck fear into the hearts of ponies. She could not go back to being the small, innocent filly Nyx either. She was the blank-flanked, adult mare who was stuck in the middle, and she could not stand her own reflection any longer!

With an aggravated huff, Nightmare Moon flopped over on her bed. She put her back to the mirror and searched the other side of her room for something to distract her. She looked to her writing desk and the papers on the surface, but then her gaze was drawn by a familiar purple.

The purple belonged to an item that was lodged beneath her writing desk in the same place she had thrown it in a fit of rage weeks before. It was a thing she reached out to with her magical mane and drew back into the light.

Nightmare Moon once more looked upon the training dummy of Twilight Sparkle she had destroyed the day she first arrived at the castle. It now had a small layer of dust covering its features, and it had lost more of its stuffing while it had lain forgotten. Still, the resemblance the dummy shared with Twilight Sparkle was just as striking as when Nightmare Moon first saw it.

It was so much like Twilight that Nightmare Moon couldn't stop herself from drawing the dummy close and letting her magic flow through it. The rips and tears began to fix themselves, and soon the training dummy was as good as new. She, however, didn't stop there. Nightmare Moon continued to use her magic on the dummy, and she changed the rough burlap into something soft and plush.

Under the influence of Nightmare Moon's magic, the training dummy became in form and appearance a doll, and the freshly transformed Twilight Sparkle doll soon found a place against Nightmare Moon's chest. She hugged the doll to her body with her legs, and, for a moment, she dared to pretend the doll was the real Twilight.

“What do I do now, Twilight?” Nightmare Moon asked, praying that the doll might actually provide an answer.

“What do I do now?”

For a full week, Nightmare Moon dutifully raised and lowered the sun, making the days pass as they did before her rule. She did little else, choosing to sequester herself in her chambers. She kept tabs on how the kingdom was being ruled and made sure Spell Nexus didn't overstep certain boundaries. Beyond that, Nightmare Moon could hardly bring herself to rise from her bed.

News had been spread that it was she who raised the sun, that it was by her choice that the eternal night ended. It had been some of the most startling news to ever hit Equestria, falling just short of Nightmare Moon's very quick rise to power.

The reactions to the news were mixed.

The Children of Nightmare sulked, Nexus in particular, seeing her decision as a sign of weakness that needed to end. They would not dare to say such a thing to their queen's face, but she could hear whispers just as well as any regular pony.

The populace at large seemed uneasy, as if Nightmare Moon was only teasing them with a few sunny days. They believed she would bring back the eternal night without warning, that she was only playing some sick game, or that she had something far worse planned for Equestria.

And if there were some who truly appreciated her returning the sun to the sky each day, Nightmare Moon didn't hear about them. Their voices were quiet whispers in a thunderous chorus of shouts from ponies who feared she would return the night eternal or demanded that she did.

It was a surrounding storm which only aggravated the one that billowed in Nightmare Moon's mind. She kept trying to understand why she felt the way she did. Her mind was filled with an endless merry-go-round of thoughts and questions, ones she could neither silence nor answer. It all led to sleepless nights and her desire to do nothing more than hide in her bedchamber, lock the door, and pretend the world outside didn't exist.

But at times, the world will not be ignored.

STOO-ONGK!

"Hey, I said you can't enter!"

"Grab her!"

TRISH! CLANG! CLONK!

“Halt... I said HALT!”

“Watch it, she’s making a run at the door!”

“Somepony get some pegasi and unicorns to help catch her!”

“Watch out!”

TRISH! THRONG! STREECHK! TISH!

“That... that’s it! We got her! We’ve got her surrounded.”

“Nopony makes a fool out of us! You’re under arrest for trespassing on castle grounds! Everypony, rush her on three... two... one...”

“Rrrraaahh!”

KKKRRRAASSH-TRISSH

Nightmare Moon bolted from her bed, tired eyes narrowing into thin slits of anger. She moved to her balcony door and burst outside. She turned her gaze down on the castle courtyard below and took in the deepest breath she could manage. She then bellowed at the top of her lungs, not caring how early it was. The sheer volume of her voice undoubtedly scared awake some ponies in Ponyville.

“WHAT IS GOING ON OUT HERE!?”

All that answered was moaning and groaning. A large portion of the earth pony castle guards were piled on top of each other in the center of the main courtyard. Giggling and bouncing around them playfully, as if it was all a game, was Pinkie Pie.

“You ponies are silly! That isn’t how you play tag.”

Nightmare Moon didn’t know whether to be shocked at what she was seeing, to be enraged that her guards had been so easily defeated, or to drop on the ground and laugh her head off. A single hyper, pink pony had just bested her soldiers without meaning to. The world could probably be on the verge of ending, and Pinkie Pie would still be Pinkie Pie.

“HALT!” Several fresh voices shouted. The unicorns of the castle’s garrison rushed forward into the courtyard, horns already glowing as pegasi began to circle in the sky above. Nightmare Moon had little doubt they were preparing to either grab Pinkie Pie or use far more dangerous tactics to stop the bouncing intruder.

Pinkie Pie, however, didn’t seem to register the danger she was in, her smile growing larger. “Oh, do you guys want to play tag too? Okay, but remember that I’m ‘it’ and you have to run away from me. These ponies just didn’t get it; they kept running *towards* me.”

“This is no game; you are trespassing in the royal castle of Queen Nightmare Moon. Surrender now!”

“Guards, at ease.”

Nightmare Moon glided down and landed in the courtyard. The unicorns quickly ended the spells they were about to cast, and the pegasi who had been circling above landed. They all bowed to their queen as one guard spoke. “Your Highness, this pony has trespassed in your royal castle!”

“Yes, I can see that,” Nightmare Moon replied, looking down at Pinkie Pie. “What are you doing here?”

“Well, I came here to see you, but when I asked the guards, they told me—” Pinkie Pie puffed out her chest and began speaking with a gruff voice. “No, any petitioners that want an audience with the glorious Nightmare Moon must make an appointment that must then be approved by Spell Nexus.”

“But then,” Pinkie Pie continued with her normal, energetic tone. “I told them that I wasn’t a medical practitioner and that, if I wanted to be part of an audience, I’d go watch a fun play, or maybe listen to a band. All I wanted was to talk to you, but they told me to go away.

“But I *really* need to talk to you, so I didn’t leave,” Pinkie Pie continued to babble. “Then they opened the gates to make me leave, and I decided that, if they were silly enough to leave the castle gates open, then they probably didn’t mind if I came inside. And then all these silly guards started chasing me, and before I knew it, we were having a great game of tag.”

Nightmare Moon lifted a hoof to her mouth, trying her very best not to laugh in front of her guards. She didn’t know what it was that she found so funny, but she could not deny

it was a struggle to keep her giggles under control. With a forced cough, she regained her serious expression and looked down at Pinkie Pie. “Why do you want to see me?”

“To give you this,” Pinkie Pie replied. She reach into her curly tail, rummaged around, and pulled out an envelope. She held it gingerly in her teeth, presenting it to Nightmare Moon. All the guards turned and watched their queen, who stared dumbfounded. An envelope was one of the last things she would have expected Pinkie Pie to give her, but, then again, being unpredictable was Pinkie Pie’s nature.

Knowing Pinkie would not depart until the letter was read, Nightmare Moon called on her magic and levitated the envelope to her face. She lifted the flap, which had been held down with a happy face sticker, and removed the contents. It was a bright pink piece of paper decorated with laughing balloons, flowers, and brightly smiling colts and fillies. It was... an invitation to Twist’s birthday party.

In a flash, the mild humor Nightmare Moon found in the situation was replaced with seething anger. She threw the invitation onto the ground and stomped on it with a hoof. “What cruel joke is this?!”

“Joke? What joke? Did somepony tell a joke?” Pinkie Pie asked before she gasped and smiled. “Ooooooo, was it a knock knock joke? I love knock knock jokes! My absolute favorite goes like this. The first pony says ‘knock knock’, and the other pony says ‘who’s there’, and then the first pony says—”

“PINKIE PIE!” Nightmare Moon snapped, causing most of her guards, as well as Pinkie Pie, to jump. “I’m *talking* about the *invitation*.”

Pinkie Pie giggled. “Oh, that’s not a joke, silly.”

“Do you think I am so foalish?! Why would I want to attend some filly’s birthday party? Why would Twist even want me there? What makes you think I’d believe her parents would even allow her to send an invitation to me? I should lock you in the dungeon for this cruel prank!”

Pinkie Pie’s smile, which she had worn since Nightmare Moon’s arrival, faded. “But... this *isn’t* a prank.”

“Then tell me the truth!”

Pinkie Pie looked skyward, as if she was going to pluck something from the clouds. “Okay. Let me see... uh... you asked a lot of questions, but I’ll try to answer them

all. No, I don't think you're foalish. You're too big to be a filly, let alone a foal. Why would you want to attend a party? Well it's a party, and everypony likes parties. Why did Twist want to invite you? She said it's because she never saw you at the block party we had when the sun came up again.

"As for Twist's parents," Pinkie Pie continued, "they *kind* of don't know she sent you an invitation. The party's going to be at Sugarcube Corner, so I was handing out all the invitations, and Twist asked if I had an extra one. I told her I did, and she asked if I would bring it to you.

"And, honestly, I wasn't sure at first. I mean, parties are always more fun when there are more ponies, but even I didn't think it was a good idea to invite you. But then Twist told me that you weren't really as mean as everypony thinks you are, and that she still wanted you at her party. So I smiled, and I told her, 'Silly filly, I always have ten extra invitations just in case'. So after delivering all the other invitations, I bounced right over here to bring you yours!

"So, are you going to come? It's today, and it's going to be a lot of fun."

Nightmare Moon stared at Pinkie Pie's expectant smile, glanced to see that the eyes of the guards were on her, and then looked down to the smashed invitation. She carefully picked it up and worked to straighten it with her magic. The laughing balloons, the smiling flowers, and the swirling letters that adorned the page were now marred with dirt and creases, but the promises of games, cake, and happiness remained.

It was a truly inviting invitation, the happiest Nightmare Moon had ever seen. Still, that didn't stop her from folding the paper and holding it out to Pinkie Pie. "I am not going," she flatly announced.

Pinkie Pie's face fell into a disappointed frown. "Aw, why not? Twist was really hoping you would come. She promised to make lots of peppermint sticks. She said you liked them."

"Tell Twist thank you for the invitation, but I cannot attend," Nightmare Moon reiterated.

"Well... okay," Pinkie Pie replied. She took the invitation and slipped it back into the curly hair of her tail. "It's still a party, even if all the guests can't come. Still, there's always room for more ponies at a party. So, if you want to come, the party's going to be

today at noon. Feel free to just drop by if you want. I know Twist will be super happy if she thinks you're not coming, and then you *do* come. It will be like a surprise!

"Well, I've got to get back to Sugarcube Corner," Pinkie Pie chirped, spinning on her hooves. "See you later, Queen Nyxie." With that, she started bouncing away, heading out the castle's front gates and down the road to Ponyville.

"Your Majesty, would you like us to pursue and arrest her?" one of the unicorn guards asked.

"That depends. Do you think you can actually *catch* her?" Nightmare Moon asked, looking at the pile of soldiers that were just starting to get back on their hooves. "And do you want to risk looking like foals if you can't?"

The guards glanced at each other and decided quietly to go back to their normal patrols. Soon, the humorous distraction Pinkie Pie had caused was washed away by the return of the castle's normal staunchness... and, for a moment, Nightmare Moon wished that Pinkie Pie had stayed for just a little longer.

• • •

Nightmare Moon returned to her bed chamber, intending to resume her depressed wallowing. She laid down on her bed, shut her eyes, and relinquished herself to her thoughts. Thoughts that, before Pinkie Pie's interruption, had been an endless stream of questions to which Nightmare Moon had no answers.

Yet those thoughts, those torturous thoughts, were now being pushed back. Like a brave hero facing a pack of wolves, something in her mind was fighting against the dark, clinging emotions that had been weighing her down.

Twist *wanted* Nightmare Moon to come to her birthday party. She had never been to a birthday party before, and she couldn't deny that some part of her was finding the invitation strangely tempting. For a moment, the full grown alicorn was a filly again, letting herself fantasize about what the party would be like. What kind of cake would be there? Would there be games?

Of *course* there would be games! If Pinkie Pie was involved then there would, at the very *least*, be Pin the Tail on the Pony. She might have even hung up a piñata!

The fantasies of the party died as Nightmare Moon looked at herself in her bedroom mirror and was forced to remember she wasn't Nyx anymore. She wasn't a filly; she was

the Queen of Equestria. She was Nightmare Moon, the bringer of the eternal night, the monster who banished Celestia and Luna to the sun and moon. According to Nexus, the Children of Nightmare, and most of Equestria, she was supposed to be an evil tyrant. Heartless, cold, and—

Nightmare Moon looked away from the mirror in aggravation. She was tired of this, tired of being pulled in two very different directions. She was tired of... of having to keep her friends and mother imprisoned in the dungeons. Apple Bloom, Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo deserved to go to that party more than she did.

Nightmare Moon paused on that thought and began to smile. She could not go to the party. She'd never hear the end of it from Spell Nexus, but... perhaps there was something else she could do for Twist to make the day extra special.

• • •

KNOCK... KNOCK...

Pinkie Pie bounced over to the front door of Sugarcube Corner, opening it with a bright smile. Twist's birthday party was in full swing, the only unaccounted-for guest being Nightmare Moon. Twist was having a good time though, and the music and happiness within the bakery flowed out into the street as Pinkie Pie held the door open.

"Hi, what can I do for you stallions?"

A pair of Nightmare Moon's royal guards remained stone-faced, stepping to the side to reveal a large birthday present, wrapped in purple wrapping paper and blue ribbons with a few holes in the top.

"We were ordered to deliver this present to a filly named Twist and see to it that she opened it immediately."

"A surprise present! Oh, that's so fun! Just a second," Pinkie Pie replied. She galloped back into the party, and, in moments, she had found the guest of honor. With little warning, Pinkie whisked Twist away from the conversation she was having and brought her to the large present that sat on the front step.

"Whoa, is that for me?" Twist asked when she saw the present, which was larger than she was.

Pinkie Pie motioned towards the guards. “That’s what they said, and they also said you had to open it right away. Sooooo... open it, open it!”

Twist nodded, just as eager as Pinkie Pie to see what was inside. She took hold of one of the loose bits of ribbon with her teeth and pulled until the bow on top came untied. Then, without warning, the top of the box exploded, shooting confetti everywhere as three figures popped up, smiling ear to ear.

“Happy Birthday!” Apple Bloom, Sweetie Belle, and Scootaloo cheered in unison as they held their front legs over their heads with excited fanfare.

“OH MY GOSH!” Twist shouted, practically leaping at the three fillies. “I thought you girls were all out of town!”

“Well, we were, but... let’s just say Nyx helped us get back home early,” Apple Bloom lied.

“This is so awesome!” Twist exclaimed. “The only way it could be better was if Nyx was able to come.”

“Sorry, Twist, but she can’t,” Sweetie Belle said as she and the other Crusaders got out of the large present. “But Nyx wanted us to tell you she really wanted to come.”

“Yeah, and she also sent you a present... well, a present besides us. It’s in the bottom of the box.”

“Oh, I’ll get it,” Pinkie Pie chirped. She bounded into the air before diving into the larger box. A moment later, she resurfaced holding a much more reasonably sized present in her teeth. She set it down in front of Twist, and the birthday filly eagerly began to open her gift. She removed the wrapping, pulled open the folds of the box, and dipped her head inside to see what was hidden within.

“What is it? What is it?” Apple Bloom asked.

Twist brought her head back out of the box, licking some chocolate off her lips. “It’s fudge, and it’s really good.”

“Can I have some?” Scootaloo asked, quickly zipping over to the side of the present.

“Sure,” Twist replied, letting each of the Crusaders and Pinkie Pie dig into the present and take one of the carefully cut squares. Soon, all their eyes lit up, having never tasted such amazing fudge before.

• • •

A strong frown hung on Nexus's face as he descended a spiraling stone staircase in the castle. He was not accompanied by his personal guards and had adjusted the castle's patrols. He needed to have a private conversation with a particular mare, and he did not want to be interrupted.

Reaching the bottom of the stairs, Nexus strode along the empty cells of the castle dungeon until he reached the one at the very end. Twilight Sparkle was sitting up in her cot when he stepped in front of the bars, and he met her gaze with a cold, hateful glare.

"This is all *your* fault," Nexus seethed.

"Well *that's* wonderfully specific," Twilight sassed. "And just what is 'all my fault?'"

"Do you *realize* what Nightmare Moon did today?"

Twilight shook her head. "No. All I know is that she came to take Apple Bloom, Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo away. She didn't tell me what she was going to do with them."

"Well, I'll *tell* you what she did," Nexus forced out through gritted teeth before he leaned in and pressed his nose through the bars. "She. Let. Them. GO!"

A smile blossomed on Twilight's face as she stood from her cot. "She did?"

"Yes, but it wasn't just that," Nexus growled, pacing in front of the cell. "No, she wrapped those fillies up in a present and then *wasted* the time of two of her soldiers by having them deliver the present to a birthday party. She also sent another gift: fudge made by the royal chef."

The smile on Twilight's face turned to a wide grin, and she gave one of her forelegs a triumphant swing. "That's my girl."

"**NO!**" Nexus snapped. His voice filled the dungeon, and it echoed with his rage. "The queen is in no way your daughter, no matter what *lies* you filled her head with! If anything, you have *ruined* her."

"It is *you* who softened her heart and filled her mind with notions of compassion and laughter. It is *you* who taught her to love the sun, who allowed her to have friends. Friends only bring *weakness*. A true queen must think only of the kingdom and her own

wishes, but, now, Nightmare Moon is so soft-hearted she is sending birthday presents to a little filly!”

Twilight snorted at Nexus dismissively. “Say what you want, Spell Nexus, but I’m *proud* of her. She’s not listening to her old memories or *your* insane suggestions. She’s choosing to listen to her conscience and do what she knows is right. At this rate it won’t be long until Nyx will—”

“SHE IS NOT NYX!” Nexus interrupted with a bellow. “She is Nightmare Moon! She is meant to bring the eternal night to Equestria, and she is to make the ponies of this kingdom suffer for how they scorned her in the past! She is meant to make you and your friends pay for defeating her with the Elements of Harmony. *That* is what Nightmare Moon should be doing.”

“*That is* what Nightmare Moon would do, but the pony you call queen is not her anymore. She is her own mare, and she can choose for herself who she wants to be,” Twilight smiled, leaning into the bars as she looked Nexus dead in the eye. “And right now Nyx is choosing to be the pony *she* wants to be, not the monster *you’ve* been trying to make her.”

Nexus shut his eyes and gritted his teeth, biting back a scream of rage. He stomped his hooves, tossed his head, and fought against the urge to strangle Twilight Sparkle where she sat. He even began to reach out towards her with his magic, but, after a few tense moments, Nexus calmed himself down. He was still angry, but now the anger was back under control, allowing him to refocus his glare.

“I do not know why I am so surprised. You were a student of Celestia, the bleeding heart who used to sit upon Equestria’s throne. The one who sought peace above all else, who did not see that, under proper leadership, Equestria could rise to control so much more, to *be* so much more.

“And, as the teacher passed the lessons onto the student, so too did the student pass on the poisoned knowledge of kindness to the filly in her care. Even after my queen was reborn, even when Nightmare Moon returned as the mare she was meant to be, you *did not stop*. You came to the castle speaking apologies and sweet words. It was *you* who refreshed the poison of kindness in Nightmare Moon’s veins.”

“And what does that say about you, Headmaster Spell Nexus?” Twilight rebutted. “You were once Princess Celestia’s student just like I am now! She taught you, mentored you, and made you the headmaster of her school. How could you betray the princesses?”

“Mine was not the first betrayal!” Spell Nexus raged. He slammed a hoof against the bars, causing Twilight to flinch and flatten her ears. “Celestia betrayed me! She knew full well what the shreds of Nightmare Moon contained. She sent me to explore that magic, but I was to be nothing more than a sacrificial lamb sent to slaughter. It was Nightmare Moon who spared me, who showed me mercy, who showed me the error of my ways.” He breathed heavily through his mouth. His exertion had caused some ragged bits of his mane to fall into his face, giving him a deranged appearance as he glared at Twilight.

But perhaps you are right.” He raised a hoof to his head, brushing back some of the loose strands of his mane. “Perhaps I too have been *kind* to our queen. Perhaps I too am still afflicted by Celestia’s poison. I have followed my queen, bowed to her, and given her what she’s wanted. However, what Nightmare Moon wants is not what she needs. She needs to be the queen she can be. She needs to be cured of the kindness that possesses her.

“And I know just the remedy,” Nexus said. His horn glowed as he clicked open the lock on the cell. Twilight quickly retreated, pressing herself against the back wall of the cell as Nexus moved slowly towards her. His dark shadow fell upon her, and his turquoise eyes flashed menacingly.

“If... if you hurt me, Nyx will—”

“Oh, you misunderstand, Twilight Sparkle. I have no intention of hurting you. In fact, quite the opposite. After all, there is no better cure for a soft heart than to be betrayed by one you hold dear.”

• • •

“And she wouldn’t say why she wanted to see me?”

“No,” Nexus replied. He walked alongside Nightmare Moon as the pair descended into the dungeon. “The guards only reported that she started screaming, *demanding* to see you. I would not have brought it to your attention, but she has refused to eat.”

“I thank you for alerting me to this, Nexus,” Nightmare Moon replied, “but I would have you wait at the bottom of the stairwell. I will speak with Twilight Sparkle alone.”

“Of course, your Majesty,” Nexus agreed as the two reached the dungeon. As he was asked, Nexus remained at the base of the steps while Nightmare Moon walked to the far end of the hall. She turned to look into the last cell and saw Twilight was lying on her cot. Her body was almost completely covered by her blanket, and she was facing the wall.

“You wanted to see me?” Nightmare Moon spoke softly, wishing to keep Nexus from overhearing the conversation.

Twilight groaned weakly before she began speaking. “Yes... please, the... the guards... they...”

Nightmare Moon felt her heart skip a beat. She opened the cell door without hesitation and rushed in. “Did they hurt you?”

Twilight mumbled something, but Nightmare Moon didn’t hear. She bent close, bringing her head next to Twilight’s.

“Did the guards do something to you?” Nightmare Moon asked, still speaking softly, but with a firm undertone.

“I’m sorry... I’m sorry...”

Nightmare Moon nuzzled Twilight’s neck reassuringly. “Twilight, no, whatever they did to you, it wasn’t your fault.”

“I’m sorry... *that I ever found you in the forest.*”

In but a single breath, Nightmare Moon felt the atmosphere in the cell change. The panic and fear she felt for Twilight was replaced with dread, and, within moments of that last whispered word escaping Twilight’s lips, Nightmare Moon felt a searing pain in her right shoulder.

She jumped back, stumbled, and fell onto the floor of the cell. She looked back at her shoulder where a large gash was now visible. It was painful, one of the few times Nightmare Moon had felt physical pain since her resurrection.

Looking back at Twilight, Nightmare Moon saw her getting up from her cot slowly. The anti-magic collar that was supposed to be around her neck was lying on her pillow, and, in the air beside her head, Twilight held a thin magical dagger. It was a much smaller version of the spell Nightmare Moon used to form a sword to fight Celestia, but that didn’t make it any less dangerous.

“What are you doing?” Nightmare Moon asked. She scrambled to try and get to her hooves, but the small space of the cell was making it difficult for her to maneuver.

Twilight took a step towards Nightmare Moon as she kept the dagger held aloft. “Fixing my mistake.”

“M-m-mistake?”

“Yes,” Twilight replied as she continued her slow approach. “You’re a monster, you’re a tyrant, and I should have *never* saved you from the forest.”

“Twilight... Twilight, what’s wrong? Why— why are you...” Nightmare Moon stuttered out. Her voice grew weak as she began to hyperventilate. “It’s... i-it’s me... it’s Nyx... d-don’t you remember—”

“I remember *perfectly* what you’ve done. You took over Equestria. You banished my mentor to the sun and brought eternal night. You locked up three innocent fillies and made me promise them everything would be all right before you took them away.”

Nightmare Moon continued to panic, struggling to get to her hooves. She pushed herself against a wall of the cell. “I took them away to let them go. *I let them go*, Twilight. You have to believe me. You... y-you always believed me.”

Twilight stood over Nightmare Moon, and Equestria’s queen saw nothing of the care and compassion she once knew. Instead, Twilight’s purple eyes were filled with nothing but hatred and murderous intent. “That’s what being in this dungeon has helped me realize, that I never should have believed or trusted you. That you were, you are... and you always *will* be a monster, and I’m ashamed that I ever called you my daughter.”

“N-n-n-no... n-n-n-no,” Nightmare Moon began to weep. “Twilight... Twilight don’t say that! Please, please don’t say that! I-I-I’m sorry I did all this! Just, please! Don’t say that! I’m sorry!”

“There is no forgiveness,” Twilight said coldly. She began to raise the dagger. “I can never forgive myself for believing you were anything but a monster... and now, I’m going to fix my mistake. I’m going to fix. It. *All*.”

“NOOOO!” Nightmare Moon cried out. Her voice echoed the pain of her heart, which threatened to shatter. Twilight, however, did not falter nor slow. She held the dagger high and aimed for Nightmare Moon’s neck. Yet, before Twilight could strike, Spell Nexus appeared at the cell door. Drawn to his queen’s side by her cry, Nexus wrapped his magic around Twilight and pinned her against the wall.

“GUARDS! The Queen has been injured!” Nexus shouted out. Within moments, a patrol of soldiers arrived. The guards escorted Nightmare Moon from the cell while Nexus re-secured the anti-magic brace to Twilight’s neck. Then, he slammed the door shut, and turned to follow the royal guards as they carried Nightmare Moon away.

Nexus, however, didn’t follow too closely. After all, he didn’t want the guards, or his queen, noticing his grin.

• • •

Nightmare Moon lay on her bed, head resting on her tear-soaked pillow as she hugged her Twilight Sparkle doll to her chest. She had not moved for hours. Her world, in a single brief moment, had been shattered. The one solid, constant foundation she had been able to rely on through the chaos of becoming queen had crumbled.

Twilight had attacked her. Twilight had called her a monster. Twilight... was ashamed of her.

Those thoughts hurt more than the wound in Nightmare Moon’s shoulder, which had been bandaged and cared for. It was a pain in her chest, like somepony had stabbed her in the heart with a dagger and was now twisting it. Twilight, the one who always believed she was still Nyx, the one who *raised* her as Nyx, had turned her back on her.

She really was a monster; who was she trying to fool by pretending otherwise? She was Nightmare Moon, the Queen of Equestria, one of the most wicked beings that Equestria had ever known. Any hopes or desires to the contrary were nothing but lies and falsehoods she was creating for herself. If Twilight... if even Twilight was unable to see her as anything else, then she had no hope.

She was Nightmare Moon and there was no escaping it.

Shuddering as a fresh wave of tears fell from her eyes, Nightmare Moon turned over on her bed, trying to find a dry patch on her pillow to rest her head on. Her eyes flicked to the clock, allowing her to see she had spent the whole afternoon just lying there. It honestly had felt much longer than that.

The clock showed it was almost time for the sunset. Nightmare Moon was tempted to just blow it off, to leave the world in the amber glow of early evening, but she had a responsibility to Equestria. Even if Twilight hated her, even if everypony thought she was a monster, she wouldn’t let them down. She’d guide the sun and moon through their cycle.

It was the one thing she seemed to be able to do that didn't make somepony hate her even more.

Taking in a deep breath, Nightmare Moon had to draw upon every ounce of energy she had left to haul herself up from the bed and walk slowly to her balcony. The afternoon in bed had been anything but restful. She was exhausted. As soon as she was on her hooves, she wanted to lay back down.

Yet she found the strength to reach her bedroom's balcony and step into the cool evening air. She turned her gaze to the west, where the sun was waiting to be tucked below the horizon. The sky was already starting to glow with the warm, golden colors of sunset.

Thankfully, Nightmare Moon only needed to nudge the sun with her magic. The golden orb seemed all too willing to sink below the horizon, and the moon was just as compliant. The pair exchanged dominance of the sky, and, for a moment, Nightmare Moon lingered to watch the sunset. It was a beautiful sight, one she enjoyed for a few minutes before she turned away.

She had every intention of going back to her bed and hugging her Twilight Sparkle doll to her chest once more. Yet, just as Nightmare Moon turned, she noticed something out of the ordinary. There was a huge crowd of ponies outside the castle gates, and, on top of the gatehouse, Spell Nexus was standing with a large contingent of soldiers. The gatehouse itself had also been modified. Jutting out from the top of the battlements was a platform, a simple structure of wood timbers, and a rope.

A hanging noose and gallows had been built over the edge of the castle gates, and there was a pony about to be executed. She stood on the very edge of the platform with the noose around her neck. She was mere moments from being shoved, moments from falling to her death, and yet the mare was looking back over her shoulder.

She was staring straight at Nightmare Moon.

• • •

Spell Nexus made every attempt to remain stoic and serious, to be professional, but he could not contain his giddiness. This was it, this was what he needed and hoped for. It had all worked beautifully. He was going to be rid of Twilight Sparkle, the mare that was injecting the poison of kindness into his queen, once and for all.

Nexus moved to the edge of the castle's gatehouse, looking over the beautiful set of gallows that had been constructed over the course of the afternoon. A single long, thin

wooden platform extended from the top of the gatehouse outwards over the waiting crowd of ponies below. Above the platform were a number of thick timbers, constructed and laid out to support a single, hanging rope.

The rope itself was long, and its free end had been tied into a noose. Nexus had measured the rope himself. Once a pony was pushed off the platform, they would fall almost all the way to the ground. Then, just before their hooves would reach the ground, the rope would snap taut. The victim would be dead almost instantly, but, more importantly, they would hang in clear view of the ponies watching below.

It was a thing of beauty.

Oh, if only he could have brought the Canterlot Royal Guard down to Ponyville for this. After he had showed them the light, they had been a powerful force. They, under Shining Armor's leadership, had kept Canterlot under control. Princess Cadance's own rebel forces had been stopped numerous times by her husband's keen military experience.

That, unfortunately, was also the reason the Canterlot Royal Guard needed to stay in the capitol, but it didn't stop Spell Nexus from imagining what it would be like if they were there. They would stand across the walls, looking down upon the citizens below. They would be dressed in the armor of their queen, and their old uniforms would be decaying in a junk heap. The residents of Ponyville would lose all hope if they saw the ponies who once defended the princesses now stood with Nightmare Moon.

The sound of marching hooves drew Spell Nexus from his daydream and focused his attention on a quarter of the guards. They were just reaching the top of the stairs that connected the castle battlement's to the courtyard below, and standing between them was a particular purple unicorn.

Spell Nexus smiled as he looked over Twilight Sparkle. Her ankles were shackled in heavy irons, and she had an anti-magic collar around her neck. While he knew she wouldn't resist, the heavy restraints sent a message. It sent a message that would reverberate across Equestria.

The ponies would look upon his queen and the Children of Nightmare with the fear and respect they deserved. They would inspire fear and loyalty even if her highness continued to raise the sun. That small act of kindness could possibly turn into a very convincing bit of leverage. After all, the threat of an eternal night still lingered. Should the ponies try to stand up or revolt, Nightmare Moon would be able to bring back the eternal night until their spirits and wills were broken.

Yet all of that was just frosting on the cake. Nightmare Moon would once again act like the queen she was meant to be. Twilight's betrayal would harden Nightmare Moon's soft heart. Yes, it had pained Nexus to let Twilight cause his queen harm, but it had to be done.

As Nexus contemplated all this, Twilight had been guided out to the edge of the platform. There she stood, eyes shut as she faced the crowd who looked on in disbelief and worry. Some even began to call out in protest, but a few quick passes by the castle's pegasus guards silenced those that would speak out against the execution.

Twilight was going to fall with the last traces of the sun, and, with the sun halfway set, it was time for Nexus to begin his speech. He moved to the edge of the castle battlements and cast a spell to magically amplify his voice. He then spoke, letting his words flow out across the crowd.

"Twilight Sparkle, you are accused of attempting to assassinate her royal majesty, the regent of the sun and moon, our beloved Nightmare Moon. Do you deny these charges as I have read them?"

"No," Twilight answered, her voice hollow and flat.

"Then, for your crimes against the crown and kingdom, you are hereby sentenced to execution by hanging immediately." Horn glowing, Nexus secured the noose around Twilight's neck. "Do you have any final words?"

For the first time since she had been guided to the gallows, Twilight turned and opened her eyes. She looked at Nexus. She stared at him as if she was truly trying to say something. Yet, her mouth never opened, and, eventually, she shook her head once.

Nexus smiled and nodded approvingly before stepping back. He prepared a wave of magic that would shove Twilight Sparkle from the edge of the platform. At the same time, Twilight turned to look forward again. Yet, as she turned, her eyes drifted. She caught sight of Nightmare Moon watching from a distant castle balcony. Their eyes locked, and Nightmare Moon visibly bristled.

It was in that moment, as Nightmare Moon began to spread her wings, that their eye contact was broken. It was in that moment, with his smile cracking into a malicious grin, that Spell Nexus shoved Twilight off the platform. It was in that moment that Twilight Sparkle began to fall.

Gasps cascaded from everypony watching as Twilight flew limply through the air. The slack on the long rope began to disappear, beginning its own silent countdown before it would snap taut. Some ponies below hid their eyes, unable to watch what was about to occur. Others were unable to look away no matter how hard they tried.

Further and further Twilight fell as the rope ate up its slack. Nexus moved to the edge of the gatehouse and watched as his moment of triumph drew closer. His eager eyes betrayed the fact that he was enjoying the execution, that he was drinking in every moment.

The rope was about to snap taut; the air was about to be filled with the sickening crack of a breaking neck. Nexus held his breath, bit his lip. No one, neither the guards on the walls nor the ponies below, dared to blink.

And then... it didn't happen.

For a moment, the crowd, guards, and Nexus had to stare at the rope when what they expected to happen didn't occur. There was no snap of the rope or crack of a neck. The rope just swung lazily back and forth. The unicorn and noose that had once been at the end it had vanished, gone so fast that no pony had been able to see what had happened.

Nexus was the first to speak, his angry bellow echoing across the castle grounds.

“WHERE DID SHE GO!?”

• • •

Nightmare Moon had never moved so fast or put so much magic into becoming a cloud of energy. She had never managed to create a doppelganger—a fake Nightmare Moon she left in her bedroom in case Nexus came looking for her—so quickly. She had never done so much so quickly, and it had been a painful strain on her magic.

But she had done it. She had saved Twilight.

She was currently carrying Twilight away from Ponyville; the indigo cloud that was her body flying off into the Everfree Forest. Almost instinctively, she found her way to the Ancient Castle of the Royal Pony Sisters. It was someplace forgotten. There would be no ponies around, and Nexus wouldn't send soldiers so deep into the forest. Nightmare Moon had little doubt that he was already sending out troops to find the pony that was supposed to be hanging from the other end of his rope.

Moving to the most intact part of the castle, Nightmare Moon entered the old throne room. It had been the place of her greatest defeat, but, at the moment, she didn't care. She very carefully deposited Twilight on the floor before letting her body re-solidify.

Once her hooves were on solid ground again, Nightmare Moon rushed over to Twilight. She removed the shackles and anti-magic brace and tossed the hunks of metal away. Next, she gingerly lifted the noose from Twilight's neck and tossed it away as well. She did not want to even look at the horrible piece of rope for a moment longer than she needed to.

With that, Twilight was free, but Nightmare Moon held her breath. What would the mare do? Would she try to attack again? Nightmare Moon wasn't sure she could bear being attacked by Twilight a second time, verbally or physically. Still, she had to be sure Twilight was safe. She just had to be sure.

After a few moments, Twilight began to recover from being whisked away so abruptly from her own execution. Nightmare Moon was thankful for the sign of life, but, when Twilight opened her eyes, Nightmare Moon saw Twilight's irises were not purple, but, instead, were a familiar turquoise.

Twilight had turquoise eyes. Nexus had blessed her, and, like any loyal member of the Children of Nightmare, the first thing Twilight did when she got back to her hooves was bow to her queen.

Nightmare Moon's mind buzzed. Was that why Twilight had attacked? Was Nexus behind it? She had wondered what being blessed did. Spell Nexus always said it opened a pony's mind to the wisdom of her rule. She had wondered if the blessing did more than that. Unfortunately, whenever she asked about it, Nexus always assured her otherwise.

A flutter of hope came to life in Nightmare Moon's chest. If Twilight was blessed, there was a chance that she really didn't mean what she had said. Maybe there was also a chance she could fix things; maybe she could undo what Nexus had done.

Twilight was still bowing respectfully, and, after taking a moment to steady herself, Nightmare Moon sat down in front of her and cleared her throat. "Please... rise," she said, and Twilight did. She stood up, her turquoise eyes once again locked with the gaze of Nightmare Moon.

"Why did you attack me?"

“Spell Nexus instructed me on how to form a magical dagger. He told me to attack you, so you would remember the mare you are meant to be, so that I could no longer poison you with kindness,” Twilight answered flatly, as a peasant would speak to royalty. “He told me what to say, and I said it so that you would be able to become the queen you were meant to be.”

“And your eyes, why were they were purple in the cell?”

“All of the Children of Nightmare can hide their blessed eyes, and Spell Nexus instructed me to keep my eyes disguised while you were in my cell. Once the deed was done, he gave me permission to return my eyes to this color. He said that I had done well and that he would allow me the honor of dying as a member of the revered Children of Nightmare,” Twilight answered.

“And did Nexus do something to you before that?” Nightmare Moon asked, a small tremor entering her voice.

Twilight nodded. “He came to my cell in the dungeon and offered me the blessing of your magic. I then saw that you truly are meant to be Equestria’s one and only queen. That is your destiny, and I had no right keeping you from it.”

“No... no, you had *every* right,” Nightmare Moon whispered. She wanted to cry, but she forced herself to stay strong. She couldn’t be weak, not now... not when Twilight needed her. She steeled herself and continued to question the blessed Twilight.

“How did Spell Nexus bless you? Nexus has never let me see the blessing ritual, so tell me how it is done.”

“Nexus opened his mouth, and a small black cloud slipped out. He then bit down, cutting off a piece of that cloud. The vapor then entered my mouth, and, after a few moments, I saw the truth.”

“Your mouth,” Nightmare Moon echoed, licking her lips as she shifted anxiously. “Twilight, I’m going to try something... and, if it works, you should be your old self again... but... it may not work. Do you trust me?”

“Of course, my Queen.”

Nightmare Moon felt her chest tighten. She had been given permission, but not by the real Twilight. The blessing was in control. The blessing was making her just another obedient member of the Children of Nightmare, and it made Nightmare Moon that

much more anxious. She didn't know a thing about the blessing. She could do more harm than good. For all she knew, the real Twilight was gone forever. Still, seeing Twilight bowed before her, Nightmare Moon knew one thing.

She had to at least try.

Slowly, Nightmare Moon reached out and surrounded Twilight with her magical mane, cradling her as gently as possible. As the magical aura engulfed Twilight, she took in a deep breath. The truth was that Nightmare Moon no longer had any real hair. Her tail and mane were nothing more than pure magic, a manifestation of the incredible power at her disposal. Her mystical "hair" flowed, ebbed, and was able to phase through solid matter. It was why her mane flowed through her helmet, always visible no matter what she chose to wear.

Now Nightmare Moon was going to try to phase her mane through Twilight's body. She believed it would work, but she could not be totally sure. A living body was different from the metal of her helmet, and the magical mane could easily do more harm than good. Still, as she gently lifted Twilight off the ground, Nightmare Moon felt she had no other choice.

Taking one more breath to calm her nerves, Nightmare Moon began to phase her magical mane through Twilight's torso, near her heart. At the same time, she used her tail to hold her adoptive mother aloft.

Despite Nightmare Moon's hopes, her magic passed through Twilight's torso without obstruction. She could not sense anything and was unable to find any manifestation of the blessing Nexus had put in her. There was nothing there, and Nightmare Moon's heart sunk in her chest. What if the blessing was permanent? What if she had lost her mother forever?

Nyx would have broken down at such thoughts, but Nightmare Moon shook her head and shoved the fears away. No, Twilight wasn't beyond rescue. She would not let her mother be taken away. She could bring the real Twilight Sparkle back. Magic like this had to have a manifestation. It had to be hiding someplace. She just had to find it.

The search continued, and Nightmare Moon phased her mane through the rest of Twilight's body. Fetlocks, haunches, ankles, back legs, thighs, hooves, chest, torso, forelegs, elbows; Nightmare Moon checked every muscle, bone, and fiber of Twilight's being. She checked and double-checked everywhere she could think of, yet was still

unable to find the blessing. Running out of places to look, Nightmare Moon swept her magic up towards Twilight's head.

That's when Nightmare Moon felt it. A mass, a haze of magic shaped like a choking vine, was clinging to the back of Twilight's skull. It was interwoven with the muscles and bones that were already inhabiting the space, but, more importantly, it was foreign magic, not at all like the magic that naturally occurred in Twilight's body.

Nightmare Moon reached out to grasp the magical mass with her mane, slowly feeling out the extent of its presence. While there was a center core to the mass, there were also long tendrils, like roots, spreading out in all directions. Some of the roots even reached out to Twilight's eyes.

There was no doubt in Nightmare Moon's mind. The thing she had just found was the blessing, and, without a moment's hesitation, she began to drag out the cancer like mass of magic with her mane.

The tumor of magic fought back; it tried to repel her attack, but it was no match. Nightmare Moon carefully pulled away the roots of the infection, drawing it out of Twilight's head. The infection became a dark black spot in her otherwise indigo mane, one that Nightmare Moon watched intently while she carefully set Twilight down on the ruined castle's stone floor.

The infection pulsed and squirmed in her magic. It was trying to move up her mane, trying to reach her head. It did not get very far, however. With the same cold, merciless expression she once used to look down upon the ponies of Equestria, Nightmare Moon called on her magic. With glowing eyes, she drove her mane to attack the infection she had removed from Twilight. She burned it away without a shred of remorse.

Nightmare Moon did not take her eyes off the infection until every last piece had been destroyed, and it was only then she allowed her expression to soften. She glanced back at Twilight, who had become unresponsive during the procedure. For a moment Nightmare Moon feared she had done harm to her mother.

Yet Twilight began to recover. She began to shift, and, after a few tense minutes, she sat up straight. A groan escaped her lips as she lifted a hoof to rub her forehead. She opened her eyes.

Nightmare Moon felt a wave of relief wash over her, and a smile blossom onto her face. Twilight's eyes were once again purple; the blessing had been removed. She had done it!

“*Urgh*, my head is *killing* me,” Twilight complained. She lowered a hoof and began to look around. “What happened? Where am—”

Twilight didn’t get to finish her last question as she suddenly felt herself get taken up in an embrace, her face buried in black fur. Without a word, Nightmare Moon had moved closer to Twilight, drawing in and hugging her mother tightly to her chest as her great black wings encircled Twilight, joining in the embrace.

“Oh... oh thank you. Thank you for being okay,” Nightmare Moon whispered, bending down and nuzzling Twilight’s neck.

“Nyx... what... what’s going on?” Twilight asked. She managed to pull her head out from Nightmare Moon’s chest, so she could look into her eyes.

“Don’t worry, you’re someplace safe. You’re safe, and I won’t let Nexus ever hurt you again.”

Twilight looked up at Nightmare Moon in confusion. “Nexus... wait, did he do something?”

“Don’t you remember?”

“I... I think... maybe.” Twilight scrunched up her nose, winced, and moved a hoof to hold her head.

“It’s a bit hazy, but it’s getting clearer. Nexus came to my cell, he was blaming me for how you’ve been acting. Then... then he moved *into* the cell. I tried to escape... tried to run out and find the guards, but he pinned me and then... something black came out of his mouth and... *urgh*, my head.”

“It’s okay, you don’t have to try to remember everything right now,” Nightmare Moon reassured her. “Just take your time.”

Twilight nodded, smiling a little as she let herself settle into Nightmare Moon’s embrace. “The next thing I remember after that is hearing your voice. I was lying on my cot... I... I said something, and then you came into my cell. And then...”

Twilight gasped. She pulled herself away and shoved one of Nightmare Moon’s wings out of the way to reveal the bandages underneath.

“It’s not your fault, Twilight,” Nightmare Moon said in an attempt to console her.

“But... but I stabbed you! *W-why* w-would I stab you? *H-how* did I stab you? I... I don’t even know how to cast that spell!” Twilight began to panic, and her breathing quickened.

Nightmare Moon drew Twilight back into the embrace of her wings. She hugged her as tightly as possible, as if fearing Twilight would be ripped away once more. “You... were being controlled.”

“Controlled? How?”

“Anypony that joins the Children of Nightmare receives a blessing from Nexus. It’s supposed to be a blessing of my magic, something Nexus received when he first dealt with the shreds that were left after you and your friends defeated me with the Elements of Harmony.

“It’s the reason why all the Children of Nightmare have turquoise eyes. Nexus said that the blessing of magic *opened* ponies’ eyes to what good I could bring as Queen of Equestria. That it was the blessing that opened his eyes, inspiring him to form the Children of Nightmare and try to resurrect me.”

Nightmare Moon gritted her teeth and shook her head. “And Spell Nexus has been spreading the blessing around like Nightmare Night candy. Every member of the Children of Nightmare... every soldier in the Canterlot Royal Guard... everypony that willingly supports me has been blessed, has had their minds twisted.

“And you... I know now he blessed you too,” Nightmare Moon concluded. “He used the blessing to make you attack me, so he could use you to make me into the queen he thinks I should be.”

Twilight leaned in, wrapped her hooves around Nightmare Moon’s chest, and hugged her tightly. “I... I would never... *never* in a million years want to hurt you, Nyx.”

Nightmare Moon nodded, a few tears escaping her eyes and running down her cheek. “I know... I know, Twilight... and I’m sorry... I’m so sorry.”

“For what?”

“I thought you hated me... and because of that... they almost... they were almost able to...”

“To what?” Twilight pressed.

Nightmare Moon shook her head, trying to keep her voice from trembling. “I... I didn’t know they were going to do it. You *have* to believe I didn’t know. I would have never let them... I wouldn’t want to lose you like that.”

Twilight looked at Nightmare Moon with a deep frown. “Nyx, what are you talking about?”

“I... I almost wasn’t able to save you. If I hadn’t gone out onto the balcony then... if I hadn’t turned to look... then... then you could have... could have...”

“Could have what?” Twilight asked fearfully, her memories still not completely returned. “W-what almost happened?”

Nightmare Moon couldn’t bring herself to say it, so, instead, she pulled her head away from Twilight’s and folded her wings. She motioned with her hoof, and Twilight looked in that direction to see the noose Nightmare Moon had removed moments before.

Twilight lifted a hoof to her neck, her breathing once again panicked, as she came to terms with the fact that she had almost been hanged. Yet, instead of trying to embrace and comfort Twilight, Nightmare Moon got to her hooves.

“Twilight, I want you to go to Zecora’s hut,” she instructed while she kept her back turned to Twilight. “I want you to go there and hide. My royal guard is undoubtedly looking for you, and I need to know you’re someplace safe.”

“What... why? Nyx, what are you going to do?” Twilight asked, not liking the serious tone of Nightmare Moon’s voice.

Nightmare Moon spread her wings, preparing to take off. “I’m going to have a few words with Spell Nexus, and Twilight... stop calling me Nyx.”

“But—”

“Nyx would have never let Nexus get so close to taking you away. Nyx... would have known something was wrong when you started shouting like that. I’m... I’m not your daughter anymore. I don’t deserve to be called Nyx, and I don’t deserve a mother as wonderful as you. There is no forgiveness for Nightmare Moon.

“But, while there is no redemption for me, Spell Nexus will face *retribution* for what he has done!”

With that, and before Twilight could shout a word in protest, Nightmare Moon had taken flight. She circled the ruined castle only once, glanced down at Twilight one final time, and then banked in the direction of Ponyville and her castle.

“SHE DID NOT JUST VANISH INTO THIN AIR!” Nexus slammed his hoof down on his desk and glared at the pair of guards that had entered his office.

“We’re sorry, sir, but we can’t find any trace of the prisoner,” reported one of the guards.

“Did you search the town?”

“Yes sir.”

“WELL SEARCH AGAIN! SHE DID NOT JUST VANISH!”

The two guards saluted and quickly left the room. Nexus glared at them as they left before flopping down onto the cushion behind his desk. He rubbed his temples, but, before he could gather himself, another guard came into the room.

“What do you want?” Nexus asked, not even looking at the guard as he continued to try and massage away his growing headache.

“Queen Nightmare Moon wishes to speak with you. She’s waiting in the throne room.”

Nexus’s aggravation cooled to a simmer and he eyed the guard. “Did she say why?”

“She wanted to speak with you about Twilight Sparkle’s escape.”

Instead of growing worried, Nexus allowed himself to smile a little. The queen was concerned that Twilight had escaped. It was a sign his efforts had born fruit. This was the Equestrian queen he had been expecting. She would undoubtedly be furious about Twilight’s escape and demand she be captured. He was going to receive a brutal verbal lashing for letting her escape, but he’d accept it graciously if it meant the queen was finally acting like the way she was supposed to.

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Spell Nexus found the entrance to the throne room shut when he arrived with no guards standing watch. It was ominous, and it sent a pleasant shiver down his spine. The silence, the cold, the ever present sensation of danger; this was how the castle should have felt since day one. This was the castle of Nightmare Moon.

Not wishing to keep his queen waiting a moment longer, Nexus knocked on the door. The chamber beyond echoed with the sound. After the reverberations had faded, a familiar voice called out to him. "Come in, Spell Nexus."

The doors to the throne room swung open of their own accord, nudged by magic that left no visible trail. This caused another shiver to crawl down Nexus's spine, but this time he was unable to enjoy it. He felt like an ant stepping into the presence of a god, and was beginning to fear what fate awaited him.

Still, Nexus forced himself to enter the room, and he quickly crossed the hall and bowed at the base of the throne. Behind him, the doors swung shut, and he could sense a surge of magic. The room had been sealed. No pony would be able to enter or exit the room until the spell was lifted, and no pony would be able to hear what occurred inside. It was just him and his queen, and that fact fueled the growing fear in Nexus's chest.

Nightmare Moon was sitting in her throne, and her royal seat had been turned to face the towering stained glass windows. The windows depicted her flying through the sky, basking in the light of a full moon while ponies below cowered and fled in fear. They were, in his opinion, the perfect decoration for the queen's throne room.

Unable to stand the silence pervading the room, Spell Nexus forced down the tight knot in his throat. "You summoned me, Your Highness?"

• • •

It had taken every ounce of willpower, but Nightmare Moon kept herself from attacking Spell Nexus outright. On the flight back, her anger had come to a boil. She was ready to do her worst to him, punish him for what almost happened to Twilight. She had every intention of making him pay, but, as she imagined and planned what she would do to Nexus, other nagging thoughts entered her mind.

The first was what Twilight would think. Nexus deserved to be punished severely, maybe even made to face his *own* noose, but what would Twilight think if she did that to Nexus? How disappointed would Twilight be to see her take another pony's life in rage?

From that first thought of mercy sprung others, and they choked Nightmare Moon's anger like a weed. It also brought on a single, chilling realization: a realization that cooled her rage just enough. When she arrived at the castle, she did not seek out and attack Nexus as she had originally intended. Instead, she had waited in her throne room for him to arrive, to provide the answers she sought.

As she waited, Nightmare Moon sat on her throne and stared at the stained glass windows. The image they depicted of her soaring over Equestria and inspiring fear was exactly how she was depicted in old legends, exactly how most ponies thought of her.

It was an image Nightmare Moon had grown to despise. She hated those windows. She hated all the windows, murals, and statues that decorated her castle. The only purpose they served was to be constant reminders of *what* and *who* she was supposed to be.

She heard the knock at the door, and beckoned Nexus in. She heard him walk across the hall and listened to every hoof-fall. She then waited, waited for him to be the first to speak, if only to allow herself a few more moments to ensure that, when she turned around and saw Spell Nexus, she would not attack.

“You summoned me, Your Highness?” Nexus asked with a bow.

“Yes, Spell Nexus, I did,” Nightmare Moon said coldly. “I wanted to ask you a few questions.”

“Of course, Your Majesty. Anything you want to know I will gladly answer for you,” Nexus said with the utmost respect.

“Have you found Twilight Sparkle?”

“No,” Nexus answered with a shake of his head. “She’s eluded our search for the time being, but she will be found.”

Nightmare Moon shifted in her throne and glanced over her shoulder. “Did you order her execution because she attacked me?”

“Yes, Your Highness. Such a crime cannot go unpunished.”

Nightmare Moon slowly rose from her throne and stepped around the regal seat so she could look directly at Nexus. “You mentioned once before that Celestia asked you to study the shreds of my body... and it was while interacting with those shreds that your eyes were opened to the truth, to the good I could do for Equestria.”

Nexus smiled and slowly rose, standing up straight in front of his queen. “Yes, my Liege; it was the greatest day of my life.”

Nightmare Moon moved forward and came to a stop in front of Nexus. Her tall stature dwarfed his, just as a mountain dwarfed a hill. “Would you have, before that day, ever considered going against Celestia?”

Nexus blinked a few times as an expression of confusion formed on his face. “I don’t see how that matters. I—”

“*Answer the question, Nexus,*” Nightmare Moon hissed, her words dripping with hostility.

“I-I suppose I wouldn’t have,” Nexus admitted, struggling to control the tremor in his voice.

Nightmare Moon continued glaring at Nexus, casting her shadow down upon him. “Did you have any affection for Celestia before you were blessed?”

“I-I might have,” Nexus said as he took an anxious step back, “in my foalishness.”

Nightmare Moon did not allow Nexus to move away. For each step he took in retreat, she advanced a step of her own. “What was your exact relationship with Celestia?”

Nexus struggled to force down the knot that formed in his throat. “I was the headmaster of her school, and, at times, I served as an advisor.”

“Anything else?”

“I-I was once... a l-long time ago, her—” Nexus had to pause, and struggled with his words. “I was her private student. She took me on as her personal pupil shortly after I had earned my cutie mark when I had created my very first spell.”

Nightmare Moon stood silent for a moment. Her eyes were narrow slits, and her icy glare threatened to bore a hole straight into Nexus’s soul. “One final question. How close were you to Celestia when you were her student?”

“I... I was just a foalish child, Your Highness,” Nexus tried to protest, his voice cracking from fear. “I didn’t know any better or that she—”

“How close *were you* to *Celestia*?” Nightmare Moon repeated, bending her head down so her demanding, piercing eyes were even with Nexus’s terrified gaze.

“I... I once thought of her as... as... as a second mother.”

Nexus shut his eyes tight and winced as if admitting such a thing was not only painful, but also an invitation for him to be punished physically. Nightmare Moon, however, turned her back on him and looked back to the stained glass window. She said nothing, though a deep frown formed on her lips as she squeezed her eyes shut.

“My queen, please forgive me,” Nexus begged. He bowed as low as he could and practically kissed the floor as he spoke. “I was ignorant and foolish before, but this is why I am so blessed! Your blessing allowed me to see what an utter and weak fool Celestia was. Your gift opened my eyes to the truth.”

“Or blinded you,” Nightmare Moon whispered so quietly Nexus was unable to properly understand what she said. Before Nexus could ask what she had muttered, Nightmare Moon turned to face him once more, this time wearing a kinder expression. “Spell Nexus, would you like to receive a greater blessing from me? Would you be willing to receive a gift more precious than any you have ever received from me before?”

“O-of course, my Queen,” Nexus answered, looking as if he was on the verge of tears. “It... it would be my eternal honor to receive any gift from you, no matter how small.”

Nightmare Moon’s mane flared, and she stood tall before Nexus. “Then prepare yourself.”

Nexus nodded, took a seat before his queen, and puffed out his chest in pride. He waited eagerly for the blessing he was about to receive, and he closed his eyes to try and hide the joyful tears streaming down his face. All the while, Nightmare Moon’s mane slowly encircled him like the cool embrace of a morning fog.

Yet, before Nexus realized what was going on, Nightmare Moon had put him to sleep just as she had subdued the guards of Canterlot palace. She laid him down on the floor gently and spoke just above a whisper. “I shall now grant the greatest gift I could possibly give you. I will return to you your freedom.”

With those whispered words, Nightmare Moon let her mane flow into Spell Nexus’s body and phase through his flesh. She began to search for what she knew was already there, a parasitic “blessing” of magic. It was... the only explanation that made sense to her after hearing how much Spell Nexus once cared about Princess Celestia.

The enchantment Nightmare Moon found was more advanced than she could have ever imagined.

Every fiber of Nexus's being was choked with the so-called blessing. The foreign magic was everywhere, like a thick network of roots in fertile soil, and the magic was pulsing with a steady, reliable rhythm... like a heartbeat. Just like with Twilight, Nightmare Moon found the core of the infection in Nexus's head. Though she quickly discovered that the infection's core had overtaken Nexus's entire brain, where in Twilight it was more like a cancerous growth on the back of her skull.

Despite being more advanced, the infection felt the same to Nightmare Moon, so she tried to do as she did before. She used her magical mane to try and pull at the roots to remove the blessing from Nexus's body. Yet, when her mane made contact with the infection, it attacked. It shocked her like it was zapping her with lightning, and, for a moment, it filled her mind with strange thoughts.

The suddenness of the attack made Nightmare Moon pull her mane back, and she quickly distanced herself from Nexus in fear he had been the one that attacked her. Yet, even as he began to sit up, Nexus's movements were sluggish and sloppy, as if he was sleepwalking.

Nightmare Moon watched as Spell Nexus sat up straight. He rolled his head back and allowed his mouth to open in a silent scream. For a moment it looked as if Nexus wasn't breathing, but then he coughed and something began to spill out of his mouth. It was a ghastly black smoke that looked both sickly and poisonous. With each breath Nexus took, more of the smoke escaped his mouth, and the vapors began to circle and wrap around him while a larger cloud formed above his head.

The cloud continued to grow and drift towards Nightmare Moon. Given a few more seconds, the cloud would have likely reached her. Yet, before it could draw too close, Nexus choked, as if something had suddenly grabbed hold of his throat. At the same time, the spirals in his horn began to glow with a weak but steady white light. That light spread from his horn to the rest of his body, covering almost every inch of his coat.

When it had dissipated, Nexus's body was painted with glowing eldritch swirls which seemed to originate from his cutie mark. Chains of magic then appeared from the glowing designs. They lunged out, somehow grabbing hold of the black cloud. They wrapped around it and dug in, binding the smoke before snapping taut and pulling the cloud back into the air above Nexus's head.

Nightmare Moon anxiously fluttered her wings in an effort to relieve the uneasy feeling that was gripping her. There was something about the cloud that made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up, yet, at the same time, she felt drawn to it.

Taking an anxious step, Nightmare Moon walked around Nexus, keeping her distance until she stood just to his left side. She focused on the white, eldritch patterns that had appeared across his body. It was a spell of some sort, there was no doubting that, but it was not a spell she had seen before.

Nightmare Moon began tracing the arcane lines with her eyes, trying to see if there was any rhyme or reason to the way they were laid out. She had come across a few books in the library about geometric magic; ones she had searched for when she had heard her resurrection spell had relied heavily on the ancient form of sorcery.

Yet focusing solely on the white lines proved to be a mistake. As Nightmare Moon tried to find meaning in the spell that had appeared across Nexus's coat, the cloud was inching its way closer to her. It approached her slowly from the side, the mystic chains still pulled taut.

When Nightmare Moon finally noticed how close the cloud had come, it was already too late. Striking with the speed of a snake, the cloud lashed out, surging through a hole in the chains. Nightmare Moon wasn't able to jump away fast enough, and the cloud pressed against the side of her body.

From that one moment of contact, Nightmare Moon felt as if a sea of emotions was pouring into her. Hatred, loathing, a thirst for revenge and power; these and many others began to fill her chest. It felt like she was being overwhelmed, washed away, and drowned, like she had fallen into a raging river.

In that moment, however, the white swirls on Nexus's coat pulsed, and the chains wrapped around the cloud rattled. The spell holding the cloud began to pull, and, slowly but surely, it dragged the vaporous mass away from Nightmare Moon, breaking the connection that had formed between the two.

The instant the connection was broken, Nightmare Moon found she was able to move and breathe again, and, within moments, her mind was in a panic. She stumbled back to put as much distance between her and the cloud as possible and panted heavily as she tried to comprehend the overwhelming emotions that were already dying in her chest.

It was just as Nightmare Moon had feared. Rifling through her memories, she thought back to the conversations she had shared with Spell Nexus, remembering details he had offered. He had been chosen by Celestia to study the shreds that were left behind when she, or rather she and Luna, were defeated by the Elements of Harmony.

Nexus said it was while he was working with those shreds that he received the very first blessing, that his eyes were opened to her wisdom and glory. But, if anything, he had been blinded. He had been twisted and turned into a tool by a will that wasn't his own, much like how Nexus had used the poisonous magic to turn Twilight against her.

Spell Nexus was the mastermind behind the Children of Nightmare, but it was not his will that drove him forward. He was just another victim, the *first* victim, and the *true* evil behind the Children of Nightmare, behind all that had happened in Equestria...

It was none other than Nightmare Moon herself.

The black cloud... Nightmare Moon could only guess that it was once a shred left behind by the Elements of Harmony. It was part of her, arguably the *worst* part: her unmatched loathing of the Royal Sisters, her arrogant sense of superiority, and her thirst for vengeance. The echoes of her most powerful emotions, the emotions that had once made Nightmare Moon seek the eternal night, had attacked, entered, and corrupted Spell Nexus.

It was those emotions that drove Nexus to turn against Celestia, to form the Children of Nightmare, and to attempt the resurrection spell. If that was the case, why hadn't that poisoned magic tried to rejoin with the rest of the shreds when the spell was being cast? Why hadn't it left Nexus and merged with her?

That was when Nightmare Moon realized the purpose of the white geometric designs that crisscrossed Nexus's body. It was a binding spell, meant to hold a majority of the tainted magic.

Nexus was the headmaster of Celestia's school and a previous student of the princess. He wasn't an idiot, and he must have known that dealing with the shreds would be dangerous. Nightmare Moon could only guess that he prepared a binding spell either before he began working with the shreds or after he realized he had been attacked.

Nexus, the real Spell Nexus, had turned his body into a living prison, even if it meant that the corrupting magic was free to twist his mind. Yet, the binding spell was not perfect. He was able to spread his "blessing" by releasing small pieces of the corruption inside him.

It was a bitter truth, and Nightmare Moon still wished to punish the pony who had almost killed Twilight. She, however, could not deny Nexus's innocence. He was just another victim. He was just another pony she had hurt.

And she had to try to set things right.

Lightning crackled around Nightmare Moon's horn, and the energy quickly spread to her mane. She would attack this poisonous magic outright and destroy it. She would rid the world of it. She would destroy the thing that had dared to threaten the ponies she cared about.

She would destroy the worst part of herself.

That thought, that one thought, echoed in Nightmare Moon's mind like a haunting call, and it stirred something deep inside. She hesitated and just stood idly while the black cloud continued to reach out to her, even as the binding spell on Nexus's body kept pulling it back.

The cloud was a part of her, the *worst* part, but... it was still a part of her.

Without even thinking, Nightmare Moon took an anxious step forward, now understanding why she was drawn to the cloud. It was her vengeance, pride, and loathing. It was the thing that would let her become the merciless ruler that everypony expected; it would let her become a whole mare again. It was the part of her that would actually *enjoy* being Equestria's tyrant queen.

The cloud was just inches away now, and Nightmare Moon came to a stop when she saw it try to close the minuscule distance that kept the two separated. She shut her eyes and tried to fight the temptation building in her mind. If she joined with this, she would be able to forget about it all. Forget about her friends, about Twilight. She could simply forget about the time she had spent as a filly.

Nightmare Moon opened her eyes, and a predatory smile spread onto her lips.

Yes... she would be able to forget, and then she would be able to take her revenge. She would make the bearers of the Elements of Harmony pay for what they had done. She would smash the ancient power as she had before and lead those who had wielded it against her to their just reward, a tight-fitting rope and a long fall from the gallows. She would watch them plummet until the noose tightened about their thin little necks. She would watch them all fall. She would watch Twilight fall, twist in the wind, and receive her due punishment for abandoning Equestria's true queen.

She would do it all, and then she would—

Fresh glowing chains lashed out from Nexus's body, digging deep into the cloud. The binding spell was struggling to pull back the smoke as it spread out across Nightmare Moon's body. It began to blend with her coat and merge with her flesh, until one of the mystical chains grazed Nightmare Moon's chest.

The magic burnt like a hot stove, and the pain snapped Nightmare Moon back to reality. She realized what she was thinking and jumped back to separate herself from the black cloud. She panted heavily and fought the urge to vomit.

She had just wanted to hurt the ponies of Equestria. She had wanted to bring back the eternal night, to deprive the ponies of their sun. She had wanted to destroy the Elements of Harmony, and she had wanted... wanted to see Twilight hang from the gallows.

A flutter of movement in the periphery of her vision drew Nightmare Moon's attention, and she saw the cloud inching towards her once again. This time, however, she retreated from its reach while her eyes and mane flared.

"NO!" she snapped at the cloud. "I don't want you! I don't care if you're some missing piece of me, I don't—"

Nightmare Moon's words died on her lips as she was hit with a cold realization like somepony had thrown a brick in her face. Her breathing became slow, and tears formed in her eyes. She began to laugh and cry at the same time. Laughing at how stupid she had been, and crying because of what she had lost.

"The part I've been missing..." Nightmare Moon echoed, half-heartily stomping the ground, venting frustration from her own idiocy. "Without you, I'm not the same mare I used to be. Without you, I could have gone on being ignorant, continued being a silly, scared filly. I could have just stayed Nyx."

That thought sparked something inside Nightmare Moon like a match being tossed into a powder keg. It ignited a rage, a rage like none she had ever felt before. Her gaze quickly hardened, focusing on the black cloud with an unmatched hatred.

"And you... **YOU TOOK THAT AWAY FROM ME!**" Nightmare Moon bellowed. "You couldn't be satisfied. You couldn't take defeat. You had to corrupt innocent ponies and finish the resurrection spell. You had to make me remember *everything* I've done and convince me to do things I can *never* be forgiven for! And, because of that, now... **THEY ALL HATE ME! I CAN NEVER BE HAPPY AGAIN BECAUSE OF YOU!**"

The surge of anger in Nightmare Moon's voice seemed to give strength to the cloud. The dark magic swirled into a frenzy and strained against the chains that bound it to Nexus. As Nightmare Moon calmed herself from the outburst, so did the cloud, yet it continued to reach out to her.

"But no more," Nightmare Moon seethed as her eyes hardened with cold determination and tears streamed down her face. In that moment, the cloud of smoke changed. It no longer reached for Nightmare Moon. Instead, it was trying to distance itself from her. It was trying to flee despite the fact that it was still being restrained by the binding spell.

Nightmare Moon spread her stance, and her eyes began to glow white with her magical power. The gentle waving of her mane grew more violent and the magical field of stars rose upward like a roaring fire. Her mane stretched out and began to pool against the ceiling like the night when she first came back to Equestria, when her mane filled the air inside the Ponyville town hall.

"I won't be the mare you want me to be," Nightmare Moon spoke, punctuating her sentence with a crack of lightning. It arched down and struck the black cloud, causing part of it to vaporize and burn away. The cloud surged and swirled in a panic, struggling with greater force against the binding spell like a caged animal.

"I won't let you hurt the ponies I care about any more! *I won't* let you hurt Rarity! Or Rainbow Dash! Or Applejack! Or Fluttershy! Or Pinkie Pie! Or Cheerilee!"

With each name, Nightmare Moon brought down a crack of arcane lightning from the dreadful storm her mane and tail had formed in the air of the throne room. With each strike, part of the black cloud was eradicated. The dark vapor scrambled and roiled, like it could feel the pain of being struck by the focused magical energy.

"I won't let you hurt Apple Bloom! Or Scootaloo! Or Sweetie Belle! Or Twist! *I won't* let you hurt my friends *ever AGAIN!*"

The next bolt Nightmare Moon called down was stronger than the ones before, her rage giving strength to her spell. It blew a significantly larger hole in the cloud, but, unlike the bolts before, Nightmare Moon also felt the lightning striking her as well. It was like she had been stabbed in the chest with a dagger, and the searing pain made her grit her teeth.

Despite the fact that it was trapped inside Spell Nexus, Nightmare Moon still shared a link with the cloud. It was a part of her, and her base instincts of self-preservation were

screaming for her to stop. A fresh wave of nausea passed through her, and her body felt like it was on the verge of giving out.

Her own body was rebelling, trying to keep her from further destroying the cloud, but Nightmare Moon would not stop. Keeping herself on her hooves through sheer willpower, she continued.

“I *won't* let you hurt anypony ever again!”

This time, when Nightmare Moon shocked the cloud, it audibly hissed in pain, its form writhing in the air like a bag of wounded snakes. It was hurting, but it was a pain she did not hear or see, but felt herself. Her eyes were shut tight, and her ears rang with the sound of her own screaming.

It felt as if she had attacked herself. A burning, searing, stabbing pain shot deep into her body. She was forced to drop to one knee, if only to keep herself from falling over completely. She panted, and the glow in her eyes faded as she tried to recover.

It was a moment the cloud, which was half as large as it had been, tried to seize. It squirmed and strained against the chains of the binding spell in a desperate attempt to escape, and it was beginning to succeed. The lines on Nexus's body were fading; the binding spell was losing power.

Freedom, however, would come too late for the cloud. Rising back off her front knee, Nightmare Moon steadied herself as the glow in her eyes returned brighter than ever. The thunderous storm formed by her mane began to crackle with energy and became saturated to the point where it couldn't hold any more magic even if it tried. Nightmare Moon focused that energy, and, with a single, final stomp, she screamed her final words to the poisonous magic.

“I WON'T LET YOU HURT TWILIGHT... *EVER... AGAIN!*”

The surge of lightning that was released at that moment was like none other seen in Equestria. The thunder blew out the throne room's stained glass windows and cascaded across the land. The sound felt like an earthquake in Ponyville and was clearly audible even in distant Appleloosa.

The bolt of arcane energy itself was as thick as a tree trunk and shone like a miniature sun. The throne room was completely bathed in light, and anypony who happened to be looking at the throne room's windows was blinded for a few seconds by the bright glare.

The thunderous sound of the spell drowned out Nightmare Moon's scream. Even though she couldn't hear herself, she knew that the sound coming out of her mouth was blood curdling. The pain... it was like nothing she had ever experienced before. It was worse than when she had been attacked by the Elements of Harmony. It felt like she was being burned and stabbed to death from the inside out.

To Nightmare Moon, it felt like the pain and the spell went on for an eternity. It was, however, only a few seconds before the spell was spent. The arcane lightning slimmed and faded before completely disappearing, leaving only a few lingering arcs of energy to cascade across the room.

With the spell ended, Nightmare Moon collapsed into a trembling, panting mass on the floor. Her body tried to recover from the pain and her vision swam. She didn't know how long she lay there, but, as soon as she had the strength, Nightmare Moon raised herself up off the floor and looked across the throne room.

Spell Nexus had been blown clear by the thunderous explosion and was now lying unconscious against a far wall. The glowing white lines on his body looked broken and jagged and were now starting to fade away. The binding spell had been broken, but it had served its purpose.

The dark cloud was gone, but Nightmare Moon could see something remained of the poisonous magic. It was a pathetic little blob of black gunk that oozed and gurgled. It was no larger than a field mouse, and it rolled like a sickly, sticky ball of tar. It was inching its way towards the throne room door, still trying to flee.

Sneering and grunting, Nightmare Moon forced herself back up onto her hooves. Her legs were shaking, but she kept her balance enough to begin walking forward. It took only a few steps to catch up with the little ball of black ooze, and she stomped her hoof down on it once she was close enough.

Then, without a single word of mercy or regret, Nightmare Moon's eyes flashed white once more. A final jolt of energy surged down her leg, and the ooze burned and hissed beneath her hoof. She winced at the slight pain in her chest, but Nightmare Moon did not relent until the ooze was nothing but an ashy smudge on the floor.

And with that, Nightmare Moon took in a single deep breath, held it, and then let it slip out slowly. She stood there for several long moments, taking in everything she had just done... and she was happy. Equestria, her friends, Twilight... they were all safe. She had destroyed the thing that had tried to hurt those she cared about.

But what else had she just done?

She had destroyed a piece of herself, the part that would have made everything she had done, everything she had accomplished, have meaning and purpose. Now, she truly and forever was stuck between two lives. She could never be Nyx again, and she had just burnt away the part of her that could have found happiness living the life of the true tyrant queen Nightmare Moon.

Still... the fleeting moment of happiness in her chest lingered. She had... done something right, and, even if Equestria as a whole hated her for the rest of eternity for what she had done, she had at least done this much right.

And it wasn't going to be the last thing she did right either.

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CREEEEEAAAAAAK... CREAK... CREEEEEEAAAAAAK... CREAK

At a larger home on the outskirts of Ponyville, a single filly sat on a swing in the front yard. The hinges of the swing set creaked and squeaked. The filly wasn't really swinging. She was just rocking a few inches back and forth, driven more by the occasional gust of wind than her own power. She sat with all four hooves on the swing, and her eyes were focused on the ground.

Her dad always used to push her on the swing. He got busy sometimes, had to work late, but he *always* made time to push her on the swing. The swing had been her favorite birthday present, even more than her tiara. It was the only thing her dad was always willing to do with her. He was always willing to give her a short push, even if he was heading out to work or going someplace.

That was before Nightmare Moon came back.

The past few weeks had been the worst of the filly's life. Almost every pony in town was mad at her. Some outright blamed her for everything that had happened, but the worst part was what had happened with her father.

When Nightmare Moon came back, her father left home to go work and live in the castle. Her mother had said that he was working for the queen, that they should be happy. Her mother had said that her father was now a powerful stallion in the government, and that's why he had left. He was important to Nightmare Moon, and that they should be happy.

Yet Diamond Tiara wasn't happy at all. She continued to stare at the ground, not even caring that her tiara had fallen off and was now sitting in the dirt underneath her swing. She didn't care about that stupid thing, didn't care if daddy was important or powerful. The only thing she wanted was to have him back. He'd make all the mean ponies stop teasing her. Ponies never made fun of her when he was around. That... and she missed him.

Diamond Tiara sniffled, using a front leg to wipe her nose. She didn't cry, not because she wasn't sad. No, her tears were held back by her anger. She wanted to make Nightmare Moon give her daddy back, but she was scared. It was stupid to think she was scared of Nyx... but... but Nightmare Moon was scary.

Why did Nightmare Moon need him anyway? She had so many other ponies working for her; why did she need to take her daddy?

Diamond Tiara grumbled, pouted, and did her best to keep herself from crying as she continued to think about her father. She had been moping around inside the house, but her mother had encouraged her to play on her swing. She had gone outside and sat down on the swing set just to be left alone.

Still, she didn't swing. What she wanted the most was to be pushed. She wanted to get a push from her daddy, but he didn't come home anymore. She didn't see him in town either. He was just gone, stolen away.

And, if her father wasn't there to give her a swing, Diamond Tiara didn't want to swing at all. She just wanted to sit there and wait until her father finally came home to give her a push.

Amidst the creaking and whining of the swing's hinges, Diamond Tiara heard another creak. The house was surrounded by a white picket fence, and the new sound she heard was the creaking of the front gate's hinges. Diamond Tiara first thought it was Silver Spoon, and she lifted her head to tell her friend she wasn't in the mood to play. Yet, when she looked up, her gaze met a pair of azure eyes.

She stared at those eyes for a long time, and they stared back. The pony who owned those eyes took a tentative step forward, and then broke into a gallop. Diamond Tiara just as quickly jumped off the swing and ran to meet the other pony, leaping into his embrace. She hugged the stallion tightly around the neck, and he held her in his front hooves just as tightly.

Diamond Tiara's mother poked her head out the front door. "Diamond Tiara, sweetie, it's time for dinn—" she began, only to fall silent. She looked at the stallion her daughter was hugging, and her own eyes began tearing up.

"Rich... Rich, is that you?"

Filthy Rich looked up, smiling through the tears streaming down his face. In an instant, Diamond Tiara's mother was outside, joining the warm embrace the family was sharing.

"Daddy, does this mean you're not working for the queen anymore?" Diamond Tiara asked.

"Yes... yes it does," Rich said with a nod, not even bothering to wipe away the tears on his face. "She released me."

"Released? But honey, I thought—"

"Not now, darlin'," Rich said, quickly sneaking a kiss from his wife. "I... I promise I'll explain later. So... I heard dinner is ready?"

"Yes... yes it is."

"Good. Diamond Tiara and I will be right in, but first... I want to push my daughter on her swing."

The mare nodded, and Diamond Tiara laughed as she quickly galloped over to the swing, Mr. Rich following behind her. Soon, Diamond Tiara was giggling and laughing, calling out to be pushed higher while her father smiled, tears of joy pouring from his eyes.

All across Equestria, similar homecomings occurred. Stallions and mares who had once served Nightmare Moon were returning to the families and friends they had all but abandoned. As each was greeted with warm embraces and tear-filled eyes, those who had once served Equestria's queen spoke of how they had not been fired from their jobs, but released... given back the freedom they never knew they had lost.

• • •

Zecora nosed open the door to her hut, returning to her home after gathering herbs and roots she would need for her latest brew. She smiled as she stepped inside and sniffed at the aroma that hung in the air. It smelled just as it needed to. She took in the scent a few

moments longer before turning to look at her bubbling cauldron. Sitting beside it, Twilight Sparkle was using her magic to carefully stir the contents.

“In herbalism, Twilight, you have shown great potential. In a few days, your growth has been exponential,” Zecora praised.

Twilight smiled and looked up from her work. “Thanks, but I’m just a quick study. That, and you have some really amazing books on herbs and their properties.”

“In stewing herbs and roots, zebras are unmatched, and to our books the same compliment can be attached. Still, I offer thanks for your aid with my work. You could have easily just hung around my home like a lazy jerk.”

Twilight laughed a little and went back to stirring the cauldron. “Well, I’ve never been that good at just sitting around, especially when I’ve got a lot on my mind. It helps if I can find something to distract myself with.”

“Heavy thoughts rest upon your soul,” Zecora said knowingly as she began to unpack her ingredient-laden saddlebags. “Undoubtedly about an alicorn who was once a foal.”

“Filly,” Twilight corrected. “But... yes, I am thinking about Nyx. How can I not? The last time I saw her, she was going to confront Nexus about what he did to me. I know she’s an alicorn... but it’s been three days. What if something happened?”

“To your concern I can relate; you worry about Nightmare Moon and her fate. But you must understand you are a wanted mare, and—”

KNOCK... KNOCK...

“—You must hide yourself with care,” Zecora finished hurriedly as she glanced over her shoulder.

Twilight nodded and slipped into Zecora’s bedroom while the zebra moved to the front door. After giving Twilight a few more moments to hide and hearing the pony on the far side knock once more, Zecora cracked open the door and looked to see who was outside.

“Hey there, Zecora.”

A relieved smile formed on Zecora’s lips. She opened the door as a particular orange farm pony walked inside with a baby dragon riding on her back. “Applejack and Spike, it is good to see you. I hope you have not come seeking a healing brew.”

“Naw, we ain’t here for anything like that. Though, I gotta say, the critters here in the Everfree Forest sure seem more riled-up than usual. I swear I saw somethin’ that looked like a wolf on my way here, and not a timberwolf either. It was somethin’ bigger.”

“A lupus minor is what you saw, I have no doubt. I too have noticed them lingering about. They claim a distant mountain as their home, but recently in this land they have begun to roam. For days they have stirred the forest, put it at unease. In truth, there are far too many monsters amongst these trees.”

Applejack glanced outside as if she would see one of those monsters looking in on them through one of the hut’s windows. “If there are so many monsters, maybe you should come stay in Ponyville for a spell, just to be safe.”

“Your concern is touching, but you need not worry. If it becomes too much, I will leave this place in a hurry. Still, what is it that brings you here, out into Everfree’s wild frontier?” Zecora asked before moving to the cauldron and resuming the stirring Twilight had been forced to abandon.

“Don’t bother barking up that tree, Zecora,” Spike said as he jumped off Applejack’s back. “I’ve been trying to get her to tell me the whole way here.”

“Well, I told ya it was a surprise, and, now that we’re actually here, I’ll tell ya,” Applejack said before looking back at Zecora. “We’re here to see Twilight.”

Spike’s eyes widened, and he quickly looked around. Twilight, having heard her name, stepped out from her hiding place in Zecora’s bedroom. The second Spike saw Twilight, he tackled her and hugged her neck while laughing and crying at the same time.

“Twilight! Oh Twilight, I’ve missed you so much, and when I heard you were going to be executed, I... I...”

“I’ve missed you too, Spike,” Twilight said. She lifted a hoof and returned Spike’s hug. “I’m sorry I couldn’t tell you I was okay, but I couldn’t risk the royal guards finding me.”

“Well, sugarcube, I reckon you don’t have to worry about that anymore,” Applejack responded, “and, by the way, it’s good to see you’re okay.”

“Thanks, Applejack, it’s good to see you too,” Twilight replied, “but why shouldn’t I worry anymore? How did you two even find me, and what’s going on in Ponyville?”

“A whole lotta crazy,” Applejack answered. “A few days ago, Nightmare Moon called all the ponies she had workin’ for her, every single one, to the castle and she kept them all in there until sometime this mornin’. Then, she called the mayor up there. We were all worried, but an hour after that the castle gates opened and all them ponies started comin’ out.

“But here’s the strange thing,” Applejack continued. “All the ponies that went in had turquoise eyes, but, when I saw them comin’ out, not *one* of them had that eye color.

“They didn’t?”

Applejack shook her head at Twilight’s question. “No, and that ain’t the end of it either. After all them ponies left the castle, the mayor came back out. She rounded up all the ponies in Ponyville and read us a message from Nightmare Moon. It was all about how her crazy cult was disbanded and how she was sendin’ all the ponies who worked for her back to their families.”

“She... she sent them *all* home?” Twilight asked in disbelief.

“Yeah, it was so crazy,” Spike said as he finished hugging Twilight. “I think I even saw Spell Nexus walking by the library along with some other ponies from Celestia’s School for Gifted Unicorns. I would have never thought he had anything to do with this.”

“Oh, trust me, he had *something* to do with it alright,” Twilight grumbled. Her memory of being attacked by Nexus caused a small twinge of pain in her neck.

“Well, maybe not, sugarcube. From the way it sounded, none of them ponies workin’ for Nightmare Moon were doin’ it on purpose. Supposedly, they were brainwashed, but, when she found out, Nightmare Moon unscrambled their brains. She freed all the ponies, and let them choose whether or not they wanted to stay and work for her or go home. And, from what I hear, they all chose to leave.”

“This is very peculiar and strange; what has caused Nightmare Moon to change?” Zecora asked.

Applejack shrugged. “Don’t rightly know, sugarcube. But that *still* ain’t the strangest part.”

“What could be stranger than what has been said?” Zecora asked. “Has Nightmare Moon grown a second head?”

“No, I reckon even *that* wouldn’t be as strange as what she has done. Nightmare Moon went and stepped down as the Queen of Equestria.”

“She... she stepped down?” Twilight whispered in disbelief.

“I find this all too much to swallow. I believe your words are quite hollow.”

It took a moment for Applejack to parse what Zecora had said before she furrowed her eyebrows. “You callin’ me a liar?”

Zecora nodded firmly. “Nightmare Moon relinquishing her crown and control, it goes against her plans and her greatest goal.”

“Well, if you don’t believe me, then why don’t you take a gander at this?” Applejack replied. She reached into her saddlebags, and, after a moment of digging, pulled out a scroll. Twilight took the scroll in her magic, unrolled it, and saw it was something of a royal proclamation, though it was written more like a common letter. It did, however, have a royal seal.

Zecora leaned in behind Twilight, reading the message alongside her.

To the citizens of Equestria,

Today I, Nightmare Moon, have disbanded the Children of Nightmare, the cult of ponies who were responsible for my resurrection. They, along with any other ponies that joined the castle staff in the past few weeks, have been released from their service and are allowed to return to their homes, families, friends, and lives.

Please hold no ill will against these ponies. Their actions were not their own. All that they did was done under the influence of my magic. It tainted and corrupted these ponies. They, like all of Equestria, were victims and nothing more.

If you must blame anypony, blame only me.

Finally, I, Nightmare Moon, hereby step down as Queen of Equestria. All power and control of the government is hereby returned to the regents and officials appointed by Celestia and Luna, those who are entrusted to rule in the absence of the Royal Sisters.

Should anypony need to speak with me, they can find me in my castle. Otherwise, I would ask that you all simply pretend that I don’t even exist.

Nightmare Moon

“I guess what you say is true; forgive me for ever doubting you.”

Applejack smiled and gently punched Zecora in the shoulder. “Aw, don’t you worry about it. I probably wouldn’t believe it myself if I hadn’t seen all them ponies leavin’ the castle un-brainwashed.”

“It kind of makes sense, actually,” Spike remarked. “Can you think of *anypony* you know that would have worked for Nightmare Moon willingly? I mean, back me up on this Twi... Twilight, are you crying?”

Twilight looked up from the message and quickly used a front hoof to rub away the tears that were starting to slide down her cheeks. “Sorry... I’m just... so happy.”

“I’ll admit, sugarcube, this here is some good news,” Applejack said, “but not exactly *that* good.”

“But don’t you see what this means?” Twilight asked with a wide grin on her face.

“I reckon I don’t. What *does* it mean?”

“She’s not trying to be Nightmare Moon anymore,” Twilight said, rubbing her eyes again to try and keep back the tears. “I think... I think my Nyx... is coming back.”

The castle, which once bustled with ponies going about their work, now stood silently in the gem quarries outside Ponyville. Wind whistled through the empty halls, flitted through the windows, and, at times, made it sound like the old castle was singing some sad, lonesome, wordless chorus in an attempt to draw back the ponies who had once given it purpose.

Only one soul remained within the stone walls, a single resident who continued to haunt the halls like a restless spirit. At the moment, Nightmare Moon sat still in her throne like a statue, looking out across her empty throne room.

It had been one week of silence and solitude. One week since she had freed the Children of Nightmare and removed the cursed blessing that Nexus had infected them with. One week where she had barely tended to her own needs. She had eaten and slept, but had done little else. Her coat needed washing, her eyeshadow had faded and needed to be reapplied, and her armor had grown dull without its usual polish.

A chiming clock in a distant hall alerted Nightmare Moon to the hour, and, without moving a hoof or feather, she called on her magic. Her horn glowed, and the sky began to mark the age old progression from night to day. The moon set, the sky lightened, the stars faded, and the sun began its flight into the heavens.

The sun's light filtered through the broken windows to fall on Nightmare Moon's coat, and its warmth filled the throne room. A beautiful day was dawning over Equestria, but Nightmare Moon took little notice of it. She was numb to the world, trapped in her own mind.

Shutting her eyes, Nightmare Moon thought back to that moment when the deed had been done. She had gathered all the Children of Nightmare in her castle courtyard, even Spell Nexus. While the worst of his infection had been destroyed, enough still lingered to make him like any other cultist: blindly obedient and loving. Still, his continued loyalty served a purpose. She had him gather all the others, and, when she was sure every cultist and blessed pony was accounted for, she acted to remove the blessing.

She spoke to them, told them that they were going to receive a blessing like they had never felt, and, once they closed their eyes, she let her mane engulf them. She put them to sleep just as she had done to Spell Nexus. Then, once they were no longer conscious, she let her mane phase through their bodies to attack their infections. It had taken time, but

she removed every blessing. Some infections were worse than others, and some infections fought back. In the end, however, she freed every pony.

Afterwards, she undid the spell that had been keeping them asleep, and, for a time thereafter, they all just lay there as if dead.

Then some began to rise, to open their eyes and look around. Nightmare Moon had smiled at the first signs of movement. The ocean of turquoise that had looked at her before was now a rainbow of colors. Browns, yellows, pinks, blues, greens, grays, ambers, magentas... but no other eyes matched hers. She alone had the turquoise irises.

The Children of Nightmare were bewildered. Some didn't know where they were or how they had gotten there, but their memories began to flow back. One by one they remembered, and soon they were all staring at her, fear and resentment dancing in their eyes.

Nightmare Moon met those gazes for a time, but then turned her back to the crowd and offered a few words with a voice that was strong but not threatening. "I have returned to you ponies your freedom. Those who wish to stay may stay, and those who wish to leave may leave. I will hold no ill will against those who want to go back to their friends and family."

After making her proclamation, Nightmare Moon used her magic to open the castle gates. She then just sat there and listened. She began to hear hooves moving against the ground and wings flapping in the air. She heard the sounds of ponies leaving, not just a few at a time but in droves. She sat and listened until all was silent again, and only then did Nightmare Moon dare look to see who had remained.

As she had expected, there was no pony left. Not a soul had remained... but what sensible pony would want to stay to serve a tyrant and a monster?

It all ended with Nightmare Moon turning to the one pony who had remained, the one pony she had called to be a witness to what she had done. She had summoned the Mayor of Ponyville to the castle, and, now that she had freed the Children of Nightmare, she gave the mayor a written message and instructions on what was to be done with it. After that, Nightmare Moon slipped into her now empty castle and shut the doors behind her.

It was just another painful memory to join Nightmare Moon's growing collection. She felt a single tear stream down her cheek as she cracked open her eyes, looking across the room with a half-open gaze.

She had been such a fool.

Even if she would forever be remembered as Nightmare Moon, she was done. She would no longer be queen and would only serve Equestria as the one who raised and lowered the sun and moon. She knew it would be better if she just released the Royal Sisters and resigned herself to their judgment. Equestria would be better off with the sisters back and her gone.

For all she had done, Nightmare Moon knew what she deserved. She deserved to be sent to the moon, perhaps never to be free again. On more than one occasion she had begun to undo the spells that held Celestia and Luna captive. She had tried to free them. She had tried to find the courage to accept the consequences for what she had done. She had tried to fix her last remaining mistake.

She couldn't do it.

She had been trapped within the moon for a thousand years, trapped in cold loneliness. When the sisters were freed, she would be banished to the moon once more, but this time it would be so much worse. She would not have her hatred to distract her, and the chill of solitude would sting far worse. Her happy memories, which carried with them warmth and laughter, would burn like salt in an open wound. They would taunt her with the life she had so foolishly thrown away.

The worst part was that, if she was ever able to return from the moon, she would return to a world where she knew nopony except the Royal Sisters. She would never be able to see her friends again, never again be able to embrace Twilight. She would be alone, and she would still be hated. Maybe... that was what she deserved.

But she didn't want to go back to the moon.

Nightmare Moon ruminated on her own weakness, only to be drawn out of the vicious cycle of emotions and thoughts. Her keen hearing picked up on distant hoofsteps, a single echoing sound amid the castle's painful silence. They were drawing closer, and, from the sound of the hoofsteps, it sounded like the pony was running.

Nightmare Moon did not linger to meet the pony. Instead, she became a cloud and drifted up to the ceiling. She hid amongst the glinting gems that elegantly depicted the nighttime sky and waited for the pony she expected to see.

Every morning since the Children of Nightmare had been freed, Twilight Sparkle had come to the castle. She would call out for Nyx and wander the halls for hours. She would

only give up in the early afternoon when her empty stomach forced her to retreat back to Ponyville.

Nightmare Moon yearned to answer Twilight's calls, but her guilt was too great. She could not face Twilight, not when it was her magic keeping Celestia and Luna trapped in the sun and moon. It was better if Twilight just forgot about her, and that was why Nightmare Moon hid. Twilight was searching for Nyx, but Nightmare Moon knew there was no Nyx to be found.

The hinges of the throne room doors creaked as they opened, and the sound of hoofsteps echoed across the interior of the throne room. Nightmare Moon expected it to be like the previous mornings. Twilight would arrive and start calling out to her. Yet when the owner of the hoofsteps called out, it wasn't Twilight's voice Nightmare Moon heard. It was far different, a smoother voice that spoke in rhyme. When Nightmare Moon dared to look, she saw it was no pony who had come looking for her, but instead a zebra.

"Where in these halls do you hide, Nightmare Moon?" Zecora shouted. "I must speak to you about impending doom."

Nightmare Moon debated answering Zecora's call for a moment. Twilight might have become sneakier and sent another pony in her place. Zecora, however, seemed honestly worried. So Nightmare Moon called on a little spell that would make it seem her voice was coming from everywhere in the room at the same time. That way, Zecora wouldn't know where she was hiding.

"What is it?"

"Restlessness grows in the forest Everfree, the monsters are moving amongst its trees. Their hungry bellies groan and grumble. They march this way, making the ground rumble. I was forced to flee their advance, but I fear Ponyville has no chance."

"The monsters are leaving the Everfree Forest?" Nightmare Moon echoed, making sure she had understood Zecora's rhymes.

"That is what I said, it is the utter truth; the beasts come to sate their pony sweet tooth."

Realizing that Zecora was dead serious about the threat, Nightmare Moon rematerialized her normal body right where she was in the air. She dropped down, landing with a thud against the throne room floor. Zecora jumped, but recovered quickly from Nightmare Moon's sudden appearance.

“Why would they leave the Everfree Forest now?” Nightmare Moon asked.

“The monsters remained amongst the trees in fear, hidden from the princess of day’s celestial sphere. But now Celestia has been away far too long, the lingering scent of her magic is no longer strong. The monsters see their chance now that she is gone. They seek to rampage with their hunger and brawn.”

Nightmare Moon lowered her gaze, cursing to herself quietly. Just another thing she had done to cause pain to the ponies. Equestria would have been better off if she had never been resurrected. It would be safe, and she wouldn’t have to deal with the painful guilt that twisted in her chest.

“I’m sorry; this is my fault.”

“I did not come to watch you wallow, Nightmare Moon, nor to pour verbal salt in your still fresh wound,” Zecora said firmly. “I came here to speak and persuade, to ask our once dark queen for her aid.”

Nightmare Moon turned away from Zecora and began to walk back to her throne. “What do you expect me to do? I am Nightmare Moon. I don’t fight against monsters; I am one.”

Zecora ran around to Nightmare Moon’s side. Despite the difference in stature, Zecora stood firm and spoke with a scolding tone. “You are a crying child, and that is putting it mild.”

Nightmare Moon arched her head back like she had just been slapped in the face. Did Zecora just call her a crybaby? Nightmare Moon wasn’t sure, but she furrowed her eyebrows all the same. “Do I look like a filly to you?”

“You can say ‘neigh’ all day and can protest what I say. But you act like a filly who wet the bed. You have done everything to hide your head. You brought back the sun and freed your cult, but that does not make you an adult. You keep the Royal Sisters locked away, to avoid the punishment for stealing the day. Celestia and Luna you should have released before Ponyville was beset a horde of beasts.”

“Have you ever been sealed in the moon?!” Nightmare Moon asked, her voice rising to a shout. “All you can do is watch the world spin in cold solitude. You are taunted by the glow of cities where ponies have light, warm beds, and the company of others. You are trapped, and, if you are ever to return, any ponies you cared about are dead and buried. I won’t go back!”

“If you will not be dissuaded from this,” Zecora said, pointing a hoof at Nightmare Moon. “Then *you* must save us from death’s kiss.”

“I... I can’t. I’m just—”

“You are not hurt, and you are not ill. You suffer from neither fever nor chill. You are an alicorn and have immortal power. In your presence it should be the beasts who flee and cower. You are the dreaded Nightmare Moon. With rage alone you beat back a monsoon. You usurped the throne for your own. Now you must defend your home.

“For if you don’t, Ponyville will have a grim fate. Even Twilight will be food upon an earthen plate.”

The mention of Twilight being in danger lit a fire of rage in Nightmare Moon’s chest. These monsters believed that, with Celestia gone, they could turn Equestria into a buffet. Was *she* not also somepony to be equally as feared, if not *more* so? Had *she* not been the one to defeat Celestia?

And these monsters, they threatened the ponies she cared about. They threatened her friends. They threatened Twilight, and she wouldn’t let anything, be it monster or pony, hurt those she cared about... not again.

“How close are they?” Nightmare Moon asked. She strode towards the throne room door, forcing Zecora to gallop to keep up.

“Do not doubt that they draw near. We may already be too late, I fear.”

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GRRRAAAAAAAAAWWRRRRRRR!

GRRRRRRRAAAAAWWRRRR!

GRAAAAAAAAAWWWWRRRR!

GGRRRAAAAAWWRRRRRRR!

“It’s a hydra!”

“Everypony run for your lives!”

“My daughter! Where’s my daughter?!”

“Hurry! Hurry! Don’t let it catch you!”

TTTHHHOOOOMMM-CCCCRRRACCK-SCCCRRAACCKKK-TTTRRRACCK!

Nightmare Moon took flight from the castle with Zecora holding tight to her back as she soared skywards. From the high vantage point, she was able to assess the situation. A hydra had reached the edge of town and was starting to rampage. It snapped at the ponies who were currently panicking in the streets and crushed anything that stood in its path.

No other beasts from Everfree had reached Ponyville yet, but Nightmare Moon could see at least two more hydras moving through the trees towards the town. The multi-headed monstrosities were infamous for enjoying the taste of ponies.

Having seen all she needed to see, Nightmare Moon folded her wings and dropped out of the sky like an attacking hawk. She plummeted, waiting until the last moment before spreading her wings again. She slowed her descent enough that she landed with a firm thud against the stone of Ponyville’s streets, though she remained on her hooves and unhurt.

“Get as many ponies as you can to the castle. It’s the safest place right now,” Nightmare Moon told Zecora as she kept her eyes focused on the hydra in the distance.

“I will direct all I can and ask them to pass the word; to the castle all of Ponyville will be spurred,” Zecora replied. She jumped down from Nightmare Moon’s back before starting to shout at any pony who would listen. In but a few moments, the flow of the panicked crowd was redirected. The populace of the town raced to the protective embrace of Nightmare Moon’s castle.

As Zecora began the rough evacuation, Nightmare Moon took flight again. She surged towards the hydra. Three of the monstrosity’s four heads were snapping at ponies running through the streets. One head, however, had some ponies cornered in an alleyway: a gray pegasus and a purplish filly unicorn, both with straw-blond manes. Ditzzy Doo was doing her best to shield her daughter, Dinky, from the huge hydra head that was licking its lips mere feet in front of them.

Ditzzy Doo would have normally flown away and carried her daughter to safety, but one of her wings was ruffled, a sign she had injured it. The injury was not bad enough that

she couldn't fly, but flying quickly was out of the question. She wouldn't be able to pick up Dinky and get away before the monster snapped its jaws down on them.

The hydra head moved in a little closer, grinning at its first pony meal of the day. Ditzzy Doo took an anxious step back but otherwise held her ground. She had her wings spread and her body lowered. She was trying to look as strong as possible, a natural defensive instinct, even though she had no chance of scaring the monster away.

Licking its lips one final time, the hydra decided it had waited long enough. It brought its head back, the muscles in its neck coiling and tensing as it opened its jaw wide. It was mere seconds from striking out, from enjoying the taste of a pony for the first time ever. Yet, before it could attack, something dropped down on the hydra's head, smashing its jaw into the ground.

The thing that had landed on top of the hydra was Nightmare Moon. She had dropped out of the sky like an anvil, using her own weight and momentum to smash the hydra's jaw into the ground. It was, at best, a small diversion, but that's all she needed.

With a single fluid motion, Nightmare Moon took flight again as her mane stretched out to pick up Ditzzy and Dinky. With the mare and filly safely in the embrace of her magic, Nightmare Moon soared skyward and, when at a relatively safe distance, set the two down on her back.

"Are you two okay?" Nightmare Moon asked as she glanced over her shoulder and leveled off.

"Yes... yes, we're fine," Ditzzy replied through the tears in her misaligned eyes while she smiled and hugged Dinky tightly.

"Can you fly and carry her?"

Ditzzy Doo nodded. "Yes."

"Then go with everypony else and fly to the castle. It's the safest place right now."

After quickly picking Dinky Doo up in her legs, Ditzzy took off from Nightmare Moon's back. The pair flew a bit before Ditzzy turned to look back and offer a "thank you" to Nightmare Moon. She, however, looked back just in time to see the hydra below stretching out one of its heads.

In a single, swift motion, it snapped its jaw down around Nightmare Moon, swallowing her whole.

Ditzy froze in midair, not wanting to believe what she had just seen. The hydra head that had eaten Nightmare Moon was smiling stupidly, licking and smacking its lips as it enjoyed the lingering taste in its mouth. The other heads glared at the first with fiery jealousy, obviously wishing they had gotten to enjoy the rare delicacy.

Yet, after a few moments, all four heads of the hydra stood up straight. Nauseated expressions formed on their faces, and each head let out a short burp. With each belch, a cloud of indigo, star-speckled smoke appeared. The four clouds, once free of the hydra's mouths, quickly flew away, swirled together, and rematerialized into Nightmare Moon.

Nightmare Moon looked down at the hydra with a cold, merciless glare, and her voice seethed with anger. "Did you just try... to *eat me?!?*"

The hydra backed up nervously and whined, its four heads looking at one another, debating a hasty retreat. Nightmare Moon, however, didn't give it a chance to escape unscathed. Her eyes flashed to life, and, from her mane, small bolts of lightning surged out in rapid succession. They struck the ground around the hydra's feet, and the monster quickly began to jump around, trying to keep its toes from being shocked.

This lasted for a few seconds before the hydra turned and fled in the direction of the Everfree Forest. Still, Nightmare Moon was not satisfied until she sent one final bolt of lightning shooting through the air to strike the hydra on the base of its tail, causing it to yelp.

Ditzy Doo almost didn't dare to approach Nightmare Moon after that. The display of power made her want to just turn tail and flee with her daughter. Despite this, she dared to fly closer and ask, "Y-your Highness?"

"You don't have to call me that," Nightmare Moon said as she turned to face Ditzy Doo. "I'm not your queen anymore. Now, are you okay?"

"We're fine," Ditzy said, though she couldn't help but hold her daughter tighter. "What about you? That hydra ate you like you were a bite-sized muffin!"

"I'm fine," Nightmare Moon assured her. "Now, you need to get to the castle. It's the only safe place right now."

Not wanting to argue, Ditzzy Doo bowed respectfully and turned to leave. Dinky Doo also offered a thank you. She twisted around in her mother's legs so she could smile and wave. The small gesture brought a smile to Nightmare Moon's face, and she couldn't help but wave back.

It was a short-lived moment; the sound of crashing trees and wood drew Nightmare Moon's attention back to the task at hoof. In the time Nightmare Moon spent fighting the first hydra, the rest of the creatures that were coming out of the Everfree Forest had reached Ponyville. There were hydras, cerberi, scorpions... but the worst that Nightmare Moon could see were the lupus minors racing through the streets of Ponyville.

"Horse-feathers, there are too many to fight one at a time," Nightmare Moon cursed to herself. She flapped her wings and began to circle above Ponyville while assessing the situation. She could easily handle any of the monsters one-on-one with the full extent of her magic, but, while she was fighting one, the other monsters would have free reign to attack, injure, and eat other ponies.

If she was going to save as many ponies as possible, she needed to fight all the monsters at once. She'd need to draw their attention away, so the residents of Ponyville could flee. But she couldn't be in that many places at once.

Or could she?

For a moment, Nightmare Moon remembered how she had infiltrated Celestia's castle, how she had become a whole group of soldiers. She could divide herself, divide her magic, and face down every monster at the same time. It would let her protect the most ponies.

Yet there was a danger to it. The more Nightmare Moon divided herself, the more vulnerable she would be. Her strength, resilience, and immortality were caused by the sheer amount of magic she, as a full-blood alicorn, could contain. It meant she had more than enough magic to divide herself, but, the more she divided herself, the weaker and more vulnerable each piece would be.

It would not only put her at a great disadvantage against the monsters, but, if her clones got too badly hurt... or if too many of them fell... she could easily get herself...

For a moment, Nightmare Moon hesitated. She wondered if it was really smart to make herself that vulnerable. Her ears continued to pick up on the panicked screams and sounds of destruction. The ponies... they needed her help. She made up her mind.

Shutting her eyes, Nightmare Moon called on her magic, drawing it to its peak. She then began the quick but delicate process of subdividing her magic, and thus, herself.

• • •

“Come on, this way!” Rainbow Dash called out. She waved a hoof as she led a group of panicked ponies through Ponyville. The group followed the directions to a T, rounding a corner and continuing their panicked gallop into the center of town. A few more directions from Rainbow Dash, and the group of ponies was running up the road to the castle.

Dash watched the group for a few moments to make sure there weren’t going to be any stragglers before she looped around and flew to the town hall.

Soon after Zecora had been dropped off by Nightmare Moon, she had met up with Twilight, who immediately took it upon herself to organize the evacuation of Ponyville. Twilight called on her friends for help as she saw them. The six ponies and one zebra were now doing everything they could to ensure everypony got out safely.

Rainbow Dash landed beside Twilight, who was currently looking over a table. On it was a map of Ponyville along with several lists. Twilight was holding one of the lists magically and using a pencil to check something off as Rainbow Dash said, “Okay, I found everypony on Horseshoe Street and got them out. What’s next?”

“I need a fresh scouting report,” Twilight said without looking up from her work, much like a field general commanding her troops. “Fly up and see where all the monsters are, so we know what streets we need to clear next.”

Rainbow Dash snapped her hoof up into a momentary salute before zipping skywards. With her trademark speed, she was soon high above the town and looking across the panic-stricken Ponyville. She began taking quick mental notes of where the monsters were.

It was a bad situation. The two hydras still hadn’t gotten too deep into the town, but the other monsters were starting to spread into areas that hadn’t been evacuated. Rainbow Dash saw one cerberus getting close to the clinic where Applejack and Rarity were working to help evacuate the patients. The three-headed, black-furred, red-eyed, size-of-an-elephant dog lumbered through the streets, sniffing at the ground, following the thick scent of ponies.

That cerberus wasn't alone. There were other three-headed dogs on the prowl around town, and they were spreading quickly. Not only that, there were scorpions too. Like the Ursa Minor, the scorpions were constellation beasts, magical in nature, and obscenely huge. The key difference was, while the Ursa Minor was bear-like, the scorpions were like scorpions, and they had a preference for having ponies for breakfast. The scorpions were crawling across the Ponyville buildings, using their claws and tails to try and strike at the ponies who still lingered in the streets while smashing anything in their way.

However, the most frightening things attacking the town were the lupus minors, constellation wolves. They weren't big monsters; a lupus minor was about the size of an average pony. What they lacked in size, however, they made up for in ferocity and speed. While the average pony was able to outrun or outmaneuver the larger monsters, the lupus minors had the speed and skill to chase down their prey.

That was what one lupus minor was about to do. Rainbow Dash saw two little fillies galloping as fast as their hooves could take them away from a pursuing lupus minor. The fillies had about a two-block lead on it, but, due to their small size and short legs, the constellation wolf was catching up quickly.

Dash didn't hesitate for a moment. She flew down to intercept the monster. It was a deadly race, but one Dash was sure she would win. Just as the lupus minor managed to catch up with the fillies, she soared in, tackled the beast, and sent it bouncing down the street while she rolled once and jumped back on her hooves. She skidded to a stop, finishing off a move that would have made the Wonderbolts proud.

As the wolf reeled from the sudden sky attack, Rainbow Dash chanced a glance over her shoulder, looking at the two fillies. It was a familiar pair: Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon. "You two need to get out of here! Now!" Dash snapped before turning her gaze forward again, so she could keep an eye on the lupus minor as it recovered.

"Come *on*, Silver Spoon, we've got to go!" Diamond Tiara stressed. She was trying to pull her friend off the ground. Silver Spoon, however, wouldn't budge; she was too scared. She had dropped down onto her stomach, covered her eyes with her hooves, and started to cry for her mother.

"Seriously, you two have to GO!" Dash yelled, taking a few anxious steps back. The lupus minor was back on its paws and creeping slowly towards the three ponies. It licked its lips and kept its eyes focused on them. Dash lowered herself and spread her wings, meeting the beast's hungry stare while placing herself between it and the fillies. The beast growled as it prepared to pounce.

Rainbow snorted and pawed at the ground defiantly, like a bull ready to charge. The pair glared each other down for a time, each waiting for the other to make a move before Rainbow Dash finally shouted, “Are you all bark and no bite or what?”

The beast took Dash’s taunt and pounced with claws and teeth bared. The constellation wolf, however, soon found itself the victim of another sky-bound attack. A figure plowed into the wolf’s side, and both it and the wolf zipped across the street before crashing into a nearby market cart like a wrecking ball.

Rainbow Dash, Silver Spoon, and Diamond Tiara watched anxiously to see what had just saved them, only for the wolf to climb out of the wreckage first. It shook itself, tossing off a few shreds of wood that lingered in its coat before turning its focus back on them. That proved to be a mistake. While the wolf’s attention was on them, a smoky, star sparkled mane reached out from the wrecked market cart and grabbed the lupus by the hind leg.

The lupus minor was then promptly flung down the street, its starry body crashing into a cart full of hay. At the same time, another figure pulled itself out of the wrecked market cart near Rainbow Dash.

Nightmare Moon winced a bit as she folded her wings. She moved to the center of the street and positioned herself in front of Rainbow Dash. “Get them out of here,” she ordered while keeping her eyes focused on the far end of the street. The lupus minor was crawling out of the hay wagon, and, after growling, it began charging down the street again.

“NOW!” Nightmare Moon snapped as she unfurled her wings and stood to meet the constellation wolf’s charge.

Dash’s bewilderment ended with Nightmare Moon’s shout. She scooped up the fillies, carrying Silver Spoon on her back and holding Diamond Tiara in her front hooves as she flew skyward. She kept flying until she was sure she was at a safe distance, and, only then, did Rainbow Dash look back.

What Dash saw almost made her drop Diamond Tiara. There had to be dozens of Nightmare Moons all across town! The copies fought and distracted the many different monsters as the town’s residents fled in the direction of the castle. Rainbow Dash would have likely stayed there, if only to count all the Nightmare Moons she saw, but the crying and fussing fillies she was carrying reminded her what she had to do.

She would take Silver Spoon and Diamond Tiara to safety, but only after she told Twilight what was going on.

• • •

“Hurry, Rarity, we’ve got to get all these here patients out of the clinic!”

“I am *doing* my best to hurry, Applejack,” Rarity replied, “but we can’t forget the medicine they need!”

Much like the unplanned sleepover the pair had at Twilight’s, Applejack’s and Rarity’s conflicting personalities were surfacing. Initially, the two had worked together flawlessly. Applejack had gotten straight to the important task of helping Nurse Redheart load the patients into a wagon that she was going to pull with the help of Big Macintosh, who was already hitched to the front. Rarity, on the other hoof, had used her eye for detail to gather any and all medical supplies they would need to make sure the patients didn’t get any worse once they reached the castle. Each had been able to focus on their own, equally important, tasks.

Now, however, with time running short, tensions were beginning to flare.

“Girl, get that flank of yours in gear!” Applejack shouted. She had just helped the last patient, a pony with a busted up leg, into the wagon and was now waiting for Rarity to finish getting the last of the medical supplies. “We don’t know how long before them monsters—”

THHRRACCK!

Applejack turned her head to the side abruptly, the loud crashing noise drawing her attention. For a moment, it seemed like the sound hadn’t come from anywhere, but, as Applejack listened, another crash reached her ears. That second crash was followed a few moments later by something bursting through the wall of a nearby shop, charging across the empty street, and slamming into the buildings on the other side.

“Horse-apples!” Applejack cursed, seeing that the thing that had just busted through a wall was a cerberus. “Big Mac, start pullin’ the cart!”

“Eeyup!” was all her older brother said back before he put his weight into the hitch. The cart budged and began to roll down the street, but it moved painfully slow. Rarity came galloping out of the hospital just in the nick of time, and she jumped into the cart just as it began to roll away.

“I thought you were going to wait!” Rarity half-whined. She set down the medical supplies she had been fetching and looked over the edge of the cart so she could glare at Applejack, who was trotting alongside.

“We were, but that was before that cerberus came barrelin’ through the side of a building!”

“A cerberus!?” Rarity gasped, looking back to see the three-headed dog, only for another gasp to escape her throat.

“What, what is it? Did we forget somepony?” Applejack asked, turning to look at the cerberus. That was when she noticed that the cerberus hadn’t just barreled through the side of a building because it felt like it. The beast had been fighting with something and had tackled it through the building before slamming it with bone-shattering force against a wall on the far side of the street. It was this same something that now lay limply on the ground, and it looked awfully familiar.

“What in the hay is *Nightmare Moon* doin’ here!?”

Rarity moved to the edge of the wagon, preparing to jump down. “I don’t know, Applejack, but we have to help her!”

“*Help* her?! Why exactly should we help *her*?!” Applejack half shouted as she skidded to a stop.

Rarity jumped from the cart, and, after a graceful landing, she trotted over beside Applejack. “Because,” she began as she used her magic to gather some banners from a nearby business, “she needs our help. Or, perhaps you would like to tell Twilight that we let Nyx get eaten?” Rarity’s sentence became punctuated with a small, magical pop as she transfigured the banners into a strong, sturdy length of rope.

Applejack opened her mouth to protest, but, after a few moments, she cursed and stomped her hoof. “Ah... ah shoot, yer right. Still, I’ll be the one doin’ the helpin’. You go with Nurse Redheart and make sure them injured and sick ponies get to the castle safely. I’ll do my best to help out here.”

“And you promise you’ll be okay?” Rarity asked.

“Take it from the Element of Honesty; no overgrown mutt’s gonna get the better of this rodeo pony. Besides, they need you more than I do.”

Rarity nodded and set the rope on the ground beside Applejack. “All right, but do be careful.”

“I will,” Applejack replied. She watched Rarity run to catch up with the cart before looking back down the street at the cerberus. She lifted a hoof to her head and gave her hat a gentle tap to make sure it was secure before she tied the rope Rarity had made around her tail.

Once she was ready, Applejack took a moment to focus herself. She took a single, deep breath and released it before galloping down the street. As she ran, she began working and spinning her tail, forming her lasso into a perfect circle in the air above her.

Nightmare Moon was lying limply on the ground next to the wall she had been smashed against, and the cerberus was just about to dig into the first pony meal it had ever gotten a chance to enjoy. Its center head reached out, fangs dripping with saliva.

Applejack didn't let the monster get a taste of her. She tossed her lasso, and the loop of the rope soared around the center head's muzzle. Applejack then stopped, took the rope in her teeth, and pulled, causing the lasso's loop to shrink. The rope forced the cerberus's mouth shut, and, before the beast could properly react, Applejack pulled hard on the rope, turning the beast away from Nightmare Moon.

With she and the cerberus now facing one another, Applejack resumed her galloping charge while keeping her rope in her teeth. The cerberus also charged, its attention now fully focused on the pony who dared to attack it. The center head of the beast still had its jaw shut tight by the lasso, but the creature's other two heads were more than willing to bite down on Applejack if given the chance.

Applejack wasn't about to give the monster that opportunity. When the cerberus was close enough, Applejack leapt up into the air. The timing of the jump allowed her to put her momentum to good use. She landed on top of the cerberus's center muzzle and jumped off it like it was a spring board.

The second jump allowed her to land on the creature's back, where Applejack proceeded to spin around and bite down hard on her rope. She then pulled back, drawing the rope taut and using it to keep herself on the monster.

“Come on, little doggie, let's see how ya do against a rodeo mare!” Applejack grunted out around the rope in her teeth, and the cerberus was more than willing to put her to the

test. It began to buck like a rodeo bull, trying its best to dislodge the pony who was standing on its back.

It was a fight the cerberus was destined to win. While it bucked and tossed for several seconds, the cerberus's center head struggled against the rope around its muzzle. The rope held for a time, but, eventually, the strain proved too much and it snapped.

With the lasso broken, Applejack lost the one thing she had to keep herself anchored to the monster. The next time it bucked, she was thrown several feet upward. She tumbled head over hoof through the air like a rag doll, catching glimpses of the sky and the ground below. She flailed her legs, and, with enough effort, was able to right herself just as she began to fall back towards ground. She looked down to plan her landing, only for a fresh panic to rise in her chest.

The cerberus appeared to be smiling as it positioned itself beneath Applejack. It opened its jaws and began waiting patiently for the meal that was about to be dropped right onto its waiting tongue. However, in fighting Applejack, the cerberus had forgotten about the opponent it had been contending with earlier.

Nightmare Moon charged down the street and threw herself into the cerberus's gut like a hoofball linebacker. The three-headed beast stumbled, whining from being hit in the stomach and having the air knocked from its lungs. Nightmare Moon, however, didn't continue her assault. Instead she looked up, and, with careful positioning, she caught Applejack on her back.

"Are you okay?" Nightmare Moon asked.

"I... I reckon I am," she replied as she tried to stand up on Nightmare Moon's back. Applejack, however, put her hoof down on a tender spot, causing Nightmare Moon to wince and grit her teeth.

"But it looks like you aren't," Applejack added. She jumped down to the ground, so she wouldn't hurt Nightmare Moon anymore.

"It's nothing, just a bruised rib."

"Bruised rib?! Now wait an apple pickin' minute! I thought you were like the princesses, and aren't they immortal?"

“We’re immortal because of the amount of magic inside us. But, right now, I’ve split myself and my magic amongst a number of copies. Each is still fairly powerful, but, with my magic divided as it is, I’m more vulnerable.”

“I guess that makes about as much sense as anything else. How many copies of yourself have you made?”

“A few dozen, enough to distract and fight most of these monsters and buy some time for everypony to escape,” Nightmare Moon replied. She watched as the cerberus recovered from being tackled in the gut. “I’ve gotten a few of the monsters to flee back to the Everfree Forest, but there are still so many of them left.”

“How do we get rid of them?”

“They’re here because they’ve realized Celestia’s gone, and they thought they could make an easy meal out of the ponies here in Ponyville. We need to show them otherwise.”

“I get ya. We put up too much of a fight, they start figurin’ we ain’t worth the trouble,” Applejack said, tapping the top of her hat to make sure it was secured. “Well, how much more punishment you think this here cerberus can take before it turns tail?”

“Not much, but this bruised rib is making it hard for me to breathe,” Nightmare Moon admitted. “These cerberi aren’t anything like their mother, the guardian of Tartarus. Still, even if they are pups, they put up a good fight.”

Applejack smiled, gathered up what remained of her rope and tied it into a fresh lasso. “Well, don’t you worry none. The two of us together will whip this dog back to the hills.”

• • •

One of the Nightmare Moon clones banked, staying aloft as she looked over the monster-ravaged Ponyville. The evacuation was continuing slowly. A lot of ponies had gotten out and to the castle, but there were still a lot who needed help. The monsters had spread all across town, leaving pockets of ponies trapped or fleeing for their lives.

So far, no pony had been hurt. Twilight and her friends were managing to lead the pockets of ponies to safety, but only while the small army of Nightmare Moons kept fighting the monsters, sending them back to the Everfree Forest or distracting the beasts long enough for the ponies in danger to escape.

The Nightmare Moon in the sky had taken up the duty of scouting, keeping a constant eye on what was happening. The clones didn't share a consistent mental link, but, by using a bit of magic, the scout in the sky could shout messages to the Nightmare Moons on the ground, telling them of ponies in imminent danger.

Banking again, Nightmare Moon searched the streets for any brightly-colored spots. The natural coloring of ponies was very easy to spot against the simple streets of the town. One splotch of color drew her attention. It was bright pink and standing in the very center of an intersection with a lupus minor creeping up on it from behind.

It was Pinkie Pie, and she hadn't noticed that she was about to be attacked.

With no time to alert any other of the clones, the Nightmare Moon in the sky tucked her wings in and went into a dive, rushing to save Pinkie Pie herself. The constellation wolf, however, was very close, and, even as Nightmare Moon dropped out of the sky like a stone, the wolf jumped, launching itself at Pinkie Pie.

It bit down, and Nightmare Moon expected to hear Pinkie Pie's screams of pain. Instead, Pinkie Pie burst apart in an explosion of confetti and streamers. The first explosion was then followed by a second, which filled the intersection with a green cloud of smoke.

Spreading her wings wide, Nightmare Moon managed to slow her quick descent and land just outside the cloud. Then, after planting her hooves firmly on the ground, she beat her wings. The bursts of air she produced carried the cloud away, allowing her to see what remained of the strange double explosion.

The lupus minor was passed out on the ground, fast asleep. What Nightmare Moon had believed was Pinkie Pie was actually one of the training dummies from the castle's guard room. Stepping forward, Nightmare Moon gently nudged what remained of the fake fabric pony. It was during her investigation of the strange doppelganger that she felt the street beneath her hooves shift. She stepped to the side and was surprised to see part of the street standing up.

It was Pinkie Pie, the real one this time. She had been hiding in a low hole while wearing some fake dirt and stones. It was a perfect disguise, so perfect, in fact, that Nightmare Moon hadn't even realized she was standing on top of a pony.

"Aww, only got one that time," Pinkie Pie said like a fishermare complaining about the size of her catch.

Nightmare Moon blinked a few times, her brain having some difficulty understanding what was going on. “Pinkie Pie?”

“Yeperooni!” she replied happily.

“What... is this?”

“A distraction,” Pinkie Pie answered proudly. “When Twilight was giving everypony something to do, I asked what I could do, and she wasn’t sure at first. But then she thought of something and told me about all these training dummies she saw in your castle. So she said I should make some surprises for the monsters because I have a special talent for being a distraction and making distractions.

“But isn’t that *silly*?” Pinkie Pie continued with a giggle. “I mean, my special talent is throwing amazing parties, not being a distraction! Still, these meanie mean monsters don’t deserve a party, so I decided to try what Twilight suggested. I ran and got some of these fake ponies and filled them with my patented confetti and streamer surprise. Then Rainbow Dash said I should make the fake ponies a prank and fill them with some sleeping powder from the joke shop.”

Pinkie Pie began picking up pieces of the dummy. “And I was like ‘Whoa, that is such a GREAT idea!’, so I did it. I’ve been leaving my special surprise ponies all over town to distract the monsters, and, whenever any of those nasty monsters bite down on one of my surprise ponies, they get confetti, streamers, and sleeping gas!”

“Do... you need any help?” Nightmare Moon hesitantly asked.

“Nope, I got this. But, just so you know, you can tell my fake ponies from the real ones by their flanks. None of my surprise ponies have cutie marks. That, and they’re made of fabric, but that’s kind of hard to see from a distance. These dummies are really life-like!”

Nightmare Moon couldn’t keep herself from laughing a little. “Well, keep up the good work then.”

“You too, Queen Nyxie,” Pinkie Pie chirped before running down the street with the remains of the exploded dummy. It was a sight that made Nightmare Moon just shake her head and smile. She took flight and, once she was back in the air, spread the word to the other clones, telling them about Pinkie Pie’s decoys. After that, whenever any of the clones saw a cloud of green smoke and confetti shoot up from Ponyville’s streets, they would crack a smile.

Yes, the world could be ending, but Pinkie Pie would still be Pinkie Pie.

• • •

Cheerilee's muscles and lungs were burning as she started to reach the end of her endurance. When the monster attacks started, she had come across a scorpio entering a park. While her first instinct had been to turn tail and run in the opposite direction, she soon noticed the monster had seen some of her students. The fillies and colts were playing in the park and were unaware of the looming danger.

Thus, her love of children rose to full force, and Cheerilee galloped to the park and jumped right into the path of the scorpio. She hopped around, waved her hooves, and probably made herself look partially demented, but it had done the trick. She distracted the orange-colored constellation monster, drawing its attention away from the children and to her. Cheerilee then ran and, for a while, had managed to stay ahead of her hungry pursuer.

Panting heavily, Cheerilee rounded a corner and chanced a glance back. It was, however, a poor time for her to look over her shoulder. On the street ahead, a vegetable cart had been overturned, and its contents were spread across the street. Cheerilee's hoof landed on top of a carrot, and, with a yelp, she rolled her ankle and toppled forward.

Cheerilee hit the ground hard, and the impact knocked the wind from her lungs and made her vision swim. Knowing what was pursuing her, she forced herself back onto her hooves and attempted to continue fleeing. She, however, winced the moment she put weight down on her front right leg. She had sprained her ankle badly, and, despite the adrenaline in her system, it hurt too much to put any real weight on the injured joint.

Looking back, Cheerilee saw the scorpio round the corner. The arachnid constellation beast snapped one of its pony-sized claws threateningly. It advanced down the street, approaching Cheerilee as the school teacher backed up, limping each time she was forced to put weight on her sprained ankle.

Unable to escape, she could only watch as the scorpio drew closer, looming over her as it opened one of its terrible pincers. Cheerilee could only shut her eyes, swallowing nervously as she muttered a small prayer, hoping that, if she was going to die for protecting the children, it would at least be over quickly.

“AAAUUGGGHHHHHH!”

Cheerilee's eyes snapped open, and her vision was filled with black, swirling indigo and stars. She backed up a few steps, and an audible gasp escaped her throat when she realized that Nightmare Moon was being held in the scorpio's pincer, a pincer that should have been squeezing down on her own body.

Nightmare Moon grunted, kicked her legs, and flapped her wings as she struggled to free herself. The scorpio was bewildered for a moment to find such a large pony in its grip, but then its mouth began to clatter eagerly. It drew Nightmare Moon close, preparing to take its first bite from her.

Not eager to be eaten twice in one day, Nightmare Moon called on her magic. With a sharp snap, a small bolt of lightning struck the creature where its pincer joined its arm. The joint sizzled and turned black under the strike, and the scorpio dropped Nightmare Moon with a pain-filled hiss before retreating back a few steps.

Nightmare Moon managed to twist herself in the air enough to land on her hooves, and, with her horn glowing, she grabbed hold of the scorpio's tail. She lifted the insect constellation beast into the air and began to swing it around in a circle. Round and round she swung the scorpio, building up momentum before releasing her hold on the beast. It flew through the air in a high arc like a well-thrown Olympic hammer. It flew clear of Ponyville and eventually crashed down back inside the distant Everfree Forest, scaring a number of birds from the trees.

"Don't you *ever* try to lay a claw on my teacher ever again!" Nightmare Moon barked at the beast, even though it was far out of earshot. She then fell to her knees, panting heavily as a few tremors ran through her body, signs that she was becoming acquainted with her latest injuries.

Cheerilee moved up beside Nightmare Moon the moment she dropped to her knees. She opened her mouth to ask if Nightmare Moon was all right, only to be interrupted by a similar question.

"Are... are you okay, Miss Cheerilee?" Nightmare Moon asked.

"Yes, I am. Thank you," she replied, though her voice was shaky, not from facing Nightmare Moon but from how she was acting. The queen Cheerilee knew was a monster; that's what all the old stories said. But... a monster wouldn't have saved her from a scorpio like that... or asked if she was okay while ignoring her own injuries.

“Good, I’m glad I got here in time,” Nightmare Moon said before taking in a deep breath. She then grunted, gritted her teeth, and forced herself back onto her hooves. She stumbled a few times and would have fallen over if Cheerilee hadn’t rushed to her side and lent what little support she could.

“Nigh— I mean, Nyx, you’re hurt,” Cheerilee said. “We need to get you to Nurse Redheart, and—”

“Th-there’s no time,” Nightmare Moon replied just as she was finally managing to stand on her own four hooves. “There... there are other monsters that I have to take care of, but, first, I need to make sure I get you to the castle.”

“But—”

“I’ll be okay, Miss Cheerilee, I promise. Almost everypony has made it to my castle, and the monsters have started to flee back to the Everfree Forest, at least the ones that I haven’t tossed back out myself,” Nightmare Moon reassured her. “It will be okay, but I can’t rest yet. Now, you can’t run anywhere on that ankle. I’ll fly you to the castle, but then I have to go back out to help clear out the rest of the monsters.”

With that, Nightmare Moon’s horn glowed, and she lifted Cheerilee up onto her back. While Cheerilee obviously didn’t like the thought of Nightmare Moon doing anything in her injured condition, she didn’t protest. She instead just gave a thankful smile and a nod and did her best to stay balanced on Nightmare Moon’s back as she spread her wings and took flight.

• • •

Nightmare Moon leaned against a nearby building, closing her eyes as she took a moment to rest. The fight for Ponyville was still being waged, and, while the other clones of her continued to fight, this one copy needed a moment to rest. She had just beaten a cerberus back to the Everfree Forest, but the fight hadn’t been one sided. It had taken a lot to force back that one cerberus, and, if not for the building she was leaning on, Nightmare Moon would have been too weak to even stand on her own hooves.

And, if a predator is good at anything, it’s sensing when its prey is weak.

A low growl caused Nightmare Moon to open her eyes, and she saw that she was surrounded by a trio of lupus minors. Nightmare Moon strained, trying to find the strength to face these new enemies... but she couldn’t. She was too tired. She needed more time to rest, though it was time the lupus minors were not going to allow her.

Shutting her eyes again, Nightmare Moon hung her head. She had learned, during her time impersonating a troop of soldiers, that by cloning herself she made herself weaker, but she had also learned that injuries the clones received didn't just go away. Each wound would have an effect on her real body when she made herself whole again, though the effects would be dulled. Major injuries on a clone would become minor injuries for her real body, but, if a clone died... Nightmare Moon feared what that would do when she made herself whole again.

She would be the first clone to fall, but that was okay. She *guessed* she, as a whole, could survive if a few clones were lost, though it would put her in pretty bad shape when she became a single mare again. Still, if losing those clones meant she protected more ponies, then it was worth it in the end. Yes... losing one clone would be all right. She could stand losing one.

The lupus minors seemed to sense Nightmare Moon's surrender. One licked its chops while the others sneered and inched closer. Their muscles began to tense; they were preparing to pounce on their injured prey.

“DON'T YOU DARE!”

Nightmare Moon's eyes snapped open, turning her head to the source of the voice. It was a voice that was strong, firm, and commanding, but it was one she knew. It was a voice that was normally soft and gentle, and it belonged to the most compassionate and gentle pony in Equestria.

It was Fluttershy's voice. She was standing between the lupus minors and Nightmare Moon... and she was furious. “I don't care *how* many of you there are! I don't care *how* big your fangs are or *how* sharp your claws are! You will not, I repeat: will. Not! Hurt! Her! You got THAT?!”

The lupus minors took an anxious step back, glancing between each other. One of the three wolves, however, found courage to face Fluttershy. It started to inch towards her, and it growled. Fluttershy, however, was unfazed. She turned her gaze upon the wolf, and opened her eyes wide. The orbs became as hard and cold as steel. The wolf froze up almost immediately, rigid as stone.

It was “The Stare”, and Fluttershy wasn't holding back.

“Now,” Fluttershy began as she stepped towards the wolf that had dared to approach her until barely an inch separated her nose from its own, “you are going to take your two

friends here, go back to the Everfree Forest, and I NEVER want to see you in Ponyville again.”

The lupus minor wilted, whimpered, and glanced over at the other two constellation wolves, who offered no support.

“Well, what are you waiting for!?! SHOO!”

With that simple word, the three constellation wolves bolted and ran back towards the Everfree Forest with their tails between their legs. Fluttershy kept her hardened gaze fixed on the wolves until they were several blocks away before she softened and allowed herself to return to her usual, caring nature.

“You... didn’t have to do that,” Nightmare Moon grunted out as Fluttershy turned around.

“And you didn’t have to help us fight back the monsters,” Fluttershy replied with a gentle smile. She took flight and hovered in the air near Nightmare Moon’s head. “But you did, and, because of you, a lot of ponies are safe. I’m really proud of you, Nyx.”

Nightmare Moon looked away from Fluttershy, instead focusing on the ground. “Hasn’t Twilight told you? I don’t like being called Nyx.”

“Really?” Fluttershy asked. “She calls you that all the time.”

Nightmare Moon refused to meet Fluttershy’s gaze for a time, but eventually she couldn’t stop herself from looking up. “She does? Even after everything I’ve done and how I treated her... Twilight still calls me Nyx?”

Fluttershy nodded. “She still thinks of you as her Nyx. She thinks that, deep down, you’re not a bad pony... and I’m starting to agree with her. You’re not a bad pony, Nyx. You’ve just made some bad decisions.”

“Bad decisions... now *that’s* the understatement of the millennium,” Nightmare Moon grunted. She groaned and struggled to ease her weight off of the wall she had been leaning against. Her first try failed, but on the second Nightmare Moon managed to stand without aid. Only then did she look back to Fluttershy. “Answer me this: How many bad decisions can a pony make before she is a bad pony?”

“It doesn’t matter how many. If a pony is willing to apologize and do what’s right to fix her mistakes, then she’s never a bad pony. You’re a good pony, Nyx, and do you want to know why?”

“Why?”

“Because only a good pony would have come out here and faced down an army of monsters to protect the ponies she cares about.”

“You are kind as always, Fluttershy, the kindest pony in Equestria. This time, however, you are being *too* kind, but I appreciate your words nonetheless,” Nightmare Moon said before sucking in a deep breath and spreading her wings. “Now, I cannot ask you to keep the monsters away as I rest. I will retreat to the town square for now, and, when my strength has returned, I will fly out again.”

“There aren’t many monsters left, Nyx. You should just rest and let us handle it.”

“I cannot, and I will not let you put yourselves in danger fixing my mistake. This monster attack is my fault, and I will do whatever I must to set it right... once I’ve caught my breath.” Nightmare Moon took flight with those final words, and Fluttershy watched her join a few other clones before heading towards the center of town. Fluttershy let out a sigh and shook her head.

“Oh Nyx...”

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The monster attack was finally drawing to a close as noon rolled around. All the ponies in Ponyville had been evacuated; the last few stragglers had been cleared out an hour before. The only ponies who remained were Twilight and her friends, who were staying behind to help the many Nightmare Moons fight off the remaining monsters.

And at ten minutes past noon, the last hydra was chased out of town. The four-headed monstrosity was running back into the forest like a crying baby, leaving in its wake a trio of Nightmare Moons who hovered in the air alongside Rainbow Dash.

“Yeah, you *better* run!” Dash called out before she snickered to herself and looked back at the three copies of Nightmare Moon, who all looked significantly worse for the wear than her. “Come on, let’s go meet up with all the other yous back at the town hall.”

The Nightmare Moons nodded and banked to follow behind Rainbow Dash on the flight back to the center of town. There, just outside of town hall, the small army of Nightmare Moons had gathered. The three clones flew to join the crowd while Rainbow Dash landed by her friends, who were on the veranda just outside the front door of town hall.

“Last hydra sent packing,” Dash proclaimed proudly.

“Good,” Twilight stated with a nod before placing a check mark on a piece of paper. “That should be all the monsters. Still, Rainbow Dash, I want you and Fluttershy to sweep through town and make sure everything is clear. I don’t want to bring any ponies back here until we’re sure that all these things are gone.”

“What about us, sugarcube?” Applejack asked.

“You take Rarity, Zecora, and Pinkie Pie and head up to the castle. Tell everypony there that we think all the monsters are gone and that it should be safe to come back fairly soon.”

“And what about you?”

“I’ll stay here until Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash have finished sweeping the town, and then I’ll meet you at the castle with them and Nyx,” Twilight assured as she stepped away from the table which had been her command center throughout the long morning.

All her friends nodded, and each quickly headed off to their assigned tasks while Twilight moved towards the crowd of Nightmare Moon clones. “Are there any monsters left?” the closest of the clones asked.

“No, I think we got them all. You can pull yourself back together now.”

All the Nightmare Moons nodded, and each turned into an indigo cloud before all the clouds gathered together into a single mass just a few feet in front of Twilight. It only took a moment for that single cloud to materialize into Nightmare Moon, and, a moment later, she collapsed to the ground with a painful whinny.

“Nyx!” Twilight yelped before quickly rushing over to her side. “Are you okay?”

Nightmare Moon coughed and struggled to pull herself off the ground. “I’m... fine... it’s just... when my copies... came back together... all the injuries... my clones received... are now affecting me.”

“All the injuries?!” Twilight exclaimed, and Nightmare Moon just nodded before pulling herself off the ground. Now, every injury she had endured was clearly visible to Twilight, and it made her lift a hoof to her mouth in shock. Nightmare Moon’s body was littered with cuts, she wasn’t able to put weight on her front right leg, and one of her wings hung limply at her side. On top of it all, Nightmare Moon’s breathing was labored, as if every breath caused pain to shoot through her body.

“We’ve got to get you to Nurse Redheart right away,” Twilight said firmly.

Nightmare Moon took a few gingerly limped steps away from Twilight. “No... I’ll be fine. You’ll need... need me here in case... there are more monsters.”

“No, I’m sure we got all of them. You should get to the castle and lie down before you—”

“TWILIGHT!”

The shout drew Twilight’s attention skyward, and she saw Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy flying towards her in a rush. “What is it?” she called up to them.

“There’s one left, a lupus, but it’s *way* bigger than the others!” Rainbow Dash shouted while waving her hooves above her head.

“Where is it?”

“It’s coming this way!” Fluttershy answered while pointing a hoof. Twilight turned her head in the direction Fluttershy was pointing and felt the blood in her veins turn to ice. Charging down the street towards her and Nightmare Moon was a lupus, but it was not a lupus minor. No, this was a full grown lupus major, a constellation wolf as large as Nightmare Moon and four times as ferocious as the smaller, younger lupus minors that had been terrorizing Ponyville.

The beast barreled towards them like a runaway locomotive, closing several blocks’ distance at a speed that rivaled even Rainbow Dash’s. The two pegasi in the air were shouting for Twilight and Nightmare Moon to get out of the way, and Twilight couldn’t deny her first instinct was to run.

Then Twilight glanced over at Nightmare Moon. She was barely able to stand and probably couldn’t fly. There was no way she could get away, and Twilight wasn’t going to leave Nightmare Moon alone with the wolf. She wasn’t going to abandon her again.

Unwilling to flee, Twilight furrowed her eyebrows and put herself directly in front of Nightmare Moon. She lowered herself down and began to call on her magic in preparation for a fight. She was, after all, a unicorn that had handled an Ursa Minor, and the lupus major, while more vicious, was a lot smaller.

The lupus major was almost upon her, but Twilight was ready. She'd wait for the creature to leap up, and then she'd catch it in her levitation magic and throw it back down the street. It wasn't easy to levitate things so big, but she knew she could do it. She wouldn't let an overgrown wolf lay a paw on her daughter.

Twilight gritted her teeth as the lupus got close enough to pounce, and the constellation wolf threw itself into the air in a grand, arcing lunge. It was baring its fangs, and its claws were extended, ready to grab hold of Twilight and tear into her flesh. Twilight was just about to unleash her spell when a cloud of indigo shot past her, snapped at the wolf like a whip, and knocked it back several feet.

"Get out of here!" Nightmare Moon ordered Twilight, "I'll handle this."

"No! I'm not—"

"THIS ISN'T A DISCUSSION!" Nightmare Moon bellowed as her mane flared. Before Twilight could shout another protest, the mane had lashed out and encased Twilight as well as Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy. Nightmare Moon's eyes glowed white, and three bright flashes emanated from inside her mane.

She had sent the three mares away to safety; they were gone, and, as Nightmare Moon panted from the exertion of magic, she turned her attention to the lupus major. It was slowly walking towards her with a murderous intent in its eyes, and she met its glare with her own.

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Twilight blinked, shook her head, and tried to grasp what had just happened. One moment she saw Nightmare Moon getting attacked, but then her vision had been blocked with Nightmare Moon's mane. The next moment, Twilight was looking out over Ponyville.

"Where... w-what?!" Twilight stammered as she looked around. She, Rainbow Dash, and Fluttershy were at Nightmare Moon's castle, standing on top of the gatehouse. The gallows that Twilight had almost been hung from had been removed, torn straight from the wall, giving Twilight a clear view of Ponyville below.

Dash recovered from the teleportation spell and jumped into a hover. “How the hay did we get here?”

“Argh! It was Nyx! She must have teleported us away from the fight!” Twilight shouted. She lifted her forehooves and placed them on the gatehouse’s battlements, so she could balance on her back legs and look into Ponyville.

“But, Twilight, does that mean she’s still—”

Fluttershy’s question was interrupted by a loud crash that drew the mares’ attention and made them look in the direction of town. From their position on top of the gatehouse, they could see glimpses of Nightmare Moon as she fought with the lupus major in the center of Ponyville. She was standing away from the wolf and was on her hooves, but her movements made it apparent she was injured, tired, and at a major disadvantage.

“What is she *thinking*?! She’s going to get herself killed!” Twilight shouted. “We have to get down there and help her!”

“Twilight, if you go down there, you’ll just get yourself killed,” Rainbow Dash told her. “Nightmare Moon can handle it.”

“She’s hurt, Rainbow, badly! If we don’t help—” Twilight’s protest was silenced as she felt a wave of magic wash over her. She looked to Ponyville and could not see Nightmare Moon or the lupus major anywhere. There was, however, something Twilight could see. From between a few buildings, Nightmare Moon’s swirling mane began to rise up into the air above the town. It went several stories up before it formed into a threatening cloud, a cloud that soon began to crackle with energy.

The energy and magic built up quickly, and then its power was unleashed. A single, thick burst of lightning arced down, cut through the air, and caused a thunderclap that could not only be heard, but also felt by all the ponies hiding in the castle.

The lightning strike threw up a dark cloud of smoke where it struck, obscuring much of Ponyville. Twilight strained her eyes to see what was happening, but it was impossible. She wanted to race down there to make sure Nightmare Moon was alright, but fear had rooted her hooves in place. What if she was attacked by the lupus major; what if she found Nightmare Moon dead?

For several minutes, Twilight could only watch Ponyville with Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy by her side. The dust that had been thrown up began to drift on the wind, and the dark cloud that was Nightmare Moon’s mane fizzled and disappeared as well.

The first sign of life came from the lupus major. Twilight only saw glimpses of it at first, but she was able to see that it was running *away* from Ponyville. It was also limping, but the beast still managed an impressive pace despite its injury. It raced all the way to the edge of the Everfree Forest, and there it paused. It looked back at Ponyville and kicked some dirt in the town's direction before disappearing back into the forest.

The next sign of life came a few minutes later, which felt like a torturous amount of time for Twilight. It was Dash who saw it first, and she quickly called out and drew Twilight's attention to another part of town. There, a black figure had just rounded a corner and was now slowly limping up the road to the castle. She moved agonizingly slowly and looked to be in a lot of pain, but she was there. She was alive.

Twilight didn't waste a single moment and broke into a gallop. She ran down the steps that connected the top of the gatehouse to the courtyard below, and she began pushing through the tightly packed crowd of ponies who had hidden in the castle's safe embrace during the attack. It took a few minutes for Twilight to push her way through, but, after passing through a few final groups, she was free of the crowd and running through the castle gates. However, just as she got outside, she slid to a stop as her eyes grew wide.

Nightmare Moon was just a few yards away and was still continuing her slow limp towards the castle gates. To Twilight, it looked like Nightmare Moon was on the verge of collapse. She winced with each step, each breath was labored, and her injured wing dragged on the ground beside her. The lupus major had left her with several fresh wounds, though they were almost lost amongst her prior injuries.

The armor Nightmare Moon wore was torn to shreds. There were deep claw marks in several places, including one across the eye of her helmet. Her makeup was also gone, sweated and rubbed off thanks to the strain of battle. Even Nightmare Moon's mane seemed injured. The usually full, flowing, star-speckled mass of indigo was pale, sickly, and came off of Nightmare Moon, not like a consistent cloud, but in thin trails and wisps.

"What did you do?"

For a moment, Nightmare Moon chose to ignore Twilight and just continued to limp towards the castle. It wasn't out of rudeness, but from the fact that she was finding it difficult to breathe. Once she had gotten a little closer, Nightmare Moon stopped, gasped a few times, and then was able to find her voice.

“I... I couldn’t let you... attack the lupus... it might have hurt you. I was... fighting it... but it pinned me... to the ground... I couldn’t make... the lupus let go. So... I shocked us both... with a bolt of lightning.”

“But why would you *do* that? Why did you teleport me away? I told you I could handle it!”

“Because... I didn’t want to see you... I didn’t want to see anypony... get hurt. I... I can bear the pain. It’s... better for me to be hurt... if it means... I can protect... the ponies I care about.”

Nightmare Moon grunted as she brought herself through the castle gates. She limped into the courtyard where the entire town populace was watching. The ponies made a wide path for her, much like they did when she had passed amongst them before. This time, only some stepped aside because of fear. The rest stepped back in respect.

With her slow steps, Nightmare Moon finally reached the center of the castle’s front courtyard. There, she stopped to rest and catch her breath. She wavered and tilted like she was about to fall, but then she took in a deep breath and looked across the surrounding sea of ponies.

Everypony... they were all safe. She had managed to protect them, and... she almost thought they were looking at her with concern, instead of fear and loathing... but, then again, she was feeling rather light-headed. Still, that didn’t matter. She had done it; she had kept them safe.

“The... the creatures of the Everfree Forest... have been driven back. Ponyville is safe, and you may return... to your homes,” Nightmare Moon called out, trying to give her voice strength. She then took another step with the intention of going back into the castle. She, however, did not make it five more feet before her hoof caught on an uneven stone.

Nightmare Moon fell and hit the ground hard. Audible gasps cascaded across the courtyard at the sight of the once greatly feared alicorn falling over and lying motionlessly on the ground. Still, none of them moved to help her. All they could do was glance anxiously amongst each other, unsure whether to help or not.

The only one that did not hold back was Twilight. She was at Nightmare Moon’s side almost instantly, looking over her in a panic.

“Nyx... NYX! Wake up!” Twilight shouted. She put her head down beside Nightmare Moon’s mouth. She was unconscious, and she was still breathing... but her breathing was

weak. Twilight began to hyperventilate, nudging Nightmare Moon's head. Nightmare Moon, however, didn't rise, and her breathing was only growing weaker.

Twilight stepped back quickly and began calling on her magic. "Don't... don't you worry, Nyx. I'll get you inside and get you patched up. Yeah, I'll carry you inside and get you bandaged. It will be just like when I found you in the forest, and you'll be okay, just like you were then."

Twilight found concentrating difficult. The exhaustion of a long day and the stress of her own emotions were making it hard to focus on her magic. Still, she managed to lift Nightmare Moon and hold her a few feet above the ground in a levitation spell. Twilight then turned to the crowd watching her, noticing that some of them were frozen in shock.

"Quick, somepony find a first aid kit or something! She needs help!"

Despite Twilight's call for help, nopony moved. They just stood there, watching with mixed emotions. Some of them couldn't bear to look Twilight in the eyes. Others were confused and surprised. Some even looked on in anger and disbelief, as if she was doing something wrong. All this drew angry tears to Twilight's eyes, and she glared at the crowd of ponies.

"What are you doing?!" Twilight screamed at the crowd, making a number of them step back anxiously. "She needs help! She's hurt, and she got hurt protecting us! I know... I know you're scared of her... but she needs help!"

Twilight grew hysterical, and desperation entered her voice. "Please... please... we can't let her... please, I need help! I can't... I can't help her by myself. I'm not a doctor, I'm not even a nurse... I need help... she needs help! PLEASE!"

Twilight was crying openly at this point. Her begging eyes searched for somepony, anypony, that was willing to help her. Those nearby, however, chose to turn away, unwilling or unable to meet her gaze, the gaze of a mother who was terrified she was about to lose her daughter.

"You... YOU MONSTERS! SHE JUST SAVED YOU! SAVED YOUR CHILDREN! WHY WON'T YOU HELP?!"

Before Twilight could snap or break down, she felt a hoof on her shoulder.

"Don't worry, Twilight, we're here."

Twilight snapped her head around and smiled through the panicked tears on her face. Floating in the air beside her was Fluttershy, and she was offering a very gentle and reassuring smile. Behind her were other ponies willing to help; they had been behind her the entire time, always willing to help. Rainbow Dash, Rarity, Applejack, Pinkie Pie, Zecora, and other ponies had stepped out from the crowd.

Nurse Redheart stood with saddlebags laden with medical supplies, and Cheerilee was beside the others carrying a first aid kit she had been using to tend to ponies with very minor injuries. It took her longer, because she wanted to speak with her daughter first, but Ditzzy Doo also came up, ignoring her own injured wing. To top it all off, even Dr. Stable stepped forward from the crowd to offer his expertise.

These were only the first. Other ponies started to step out from the crowd. Some Twilight recognized, others she didn't, but that didn't matter at the moment. They were there, willing to help her... to help Nightmare Moon.

“We need to get her inside and start tending her wounds,” Dr. Stable told the growing group of ponies. “Twilight, continue to levitate her as gently as you can, and try to keep her as still and level as possible. Rainbow Dash, I need you to go back to the clinic in town. Find your way to the surgery room and open the big, blue cabinet. Inside will be a large black bag. I need you to get that for me as quickly as possible.”

“You got it,” Rainbow Dash said before quickly zipping off towards Ponyville.

Dr. Stable nodded and looked to everypony else. “The rest of you, help clear a path. We need to get her inside, now!”

The ponies nodded and went to work quickly. Most ran ahead and cleared a path to the castle doors. Others began doing anything and everything Dr. Stable needed. All the while, Twilight waited for her cue to move Nightmare Moon inside, and, as she waited, she drew Nightmare Moon close. Twilight then leaned in and gently nuzzled Nightmare Moon's cheek.

“You're going to be all right,” Twilight assured her, “I promise, you're going to be all right.”

Ponyville had survived the monster attack from the Everfree Forest, but not unscathed. The town had been ravaged. Yet, through it all, the most important part of Ponyville, its residents, had survived. Some had been hurt, the worst of the injuries being broken bones, but it was nothing that wouldn't mend with time.

For the first couple of hours, most ponies chose to remain in the safe embrace of Nightmare Moon's castle. Very few were able to find the courage to venture beyond the protective walls, and none got very far before their nerves and fears drove them running back to the stone fortress.

Despite their fears, the ponies of Ponyville knew they couldn't stay sheltered in the castle forever. After giving everypony time to rest and recover, Ponyville's mayor, Ivory Scroll, called on every willing and able pegasus. The fastest of the pegasi were tasked to fly out to the rest of Equestria, warning the kingdom that the monsters were now a much greater threat as well as seeking aid for Ponyville. The rest were tasked with taking an account of the damage the town had suffered.

It wasn't long after the pegasi flew out that news of which buildings were destroyed and damaged began to stream into the castle, and the news was grim. Many homes and business had been utterly crushed. Some families lost everything except their lives and loved ones. Other buildings were on the verge of collapse and would require extensive repair to be made habitable again. It was news that left many ponies sobbing, but, through the tears, they clung tightly to their friends and families, thankful that they had somepony to embrace.

Despite the dark reality, glimmers of hope shone through. While she could not compare with Twilight, the Mayor began organizing the town's populace. Under her guidance, fresh life was breathed into Nightmare Moon's castle. Halls, which had been hollow and lifeless that morning, once again bustled with ponies coming and going in every direction. By the time the sun was nearing the western horizon, the castle had undergone a transformation.

To those who were without a roof over their heads, the castle became a refuge. The guard barracks, guest bedrooms, and larger hallways became a temporary home for ponies who had lost everything or were too scared to leave the castle. Cots and sleeping bags filled every available inch of space, but some ponies were happy to lay down on the floor with just a blanket and pillow. The beds in the castle were reserved for the sick and injured, but no pony complained.

For those who were hungry, the castle became a place to find a filling meal. Ponies who were willing to share their stores of food gave purpose to the castle's kitchen. Simple, warm, and much-appreciated meals were quickly prepared and passed out to the hungry. They ate in the castle's dining room, which, for the first time, was filled well past capacity.

To the ponies who were injured both before and during the attack, the castle's medical chambers once again became a place of healing. Dr. Stable, Nurse Tenderheart, and other volunteers tended to the needs of the sick and injured. It also became a place of reunion, where ponies were given the good news that their friends and family members had survived and were on the road to recovery.

Overall, the castle, which had once been a place of fear and dread, had become a safe haven in a terrible storm. It was a place where a pony could find rest, food, medical aid, and, most importantly, some peace of mind. The castle's thick outer walls, which were being dutifully patrolled by volunteers, provided a sense of security to those who feared the monsters would return in the night.

Yet amongst the hustle and bustle that now filled most of the fortress, there was one hallway and room many purposefully avoided, even if it meant going along a much longer route through the corridors. A hallway where, on one side, there was a large pair of doors emblazoned with a royal seal of a crescent moon.

It was the hallway that connected to the throne room of Nightmare Moon.

It was in this hallway that Twilight Sparkle waited. She sat on the floor, her back and head resting against the wall's cold stone as she stared at the ceiling. Inside the throne room, Nurse Redheart and Fluttershy were tending to Nightmare Moon while her friends and the other ponies that had helped get her into the palace had moved on to other tasks.

Twilight was the only one not doing anything, and it was a fact that nipped and chewed at the back of her mind. She felt she should have been doing something, *anything*. She could have been helping the mayor organize the relief efforts, or she could have been using her magic to help lift and move things in town. She, however, just couldn't bring herself to step more than five feet away from the throne room doors.

Twilight wanted to be inside the throne room, if only to be there for Nightmare Moon. Nurse Redheart, however, had insisted she stay outside, turning the hallway into an impromptu waiting room. Twilight had protested, but Redheart wouldn't budge. She

explained in no uncertain terms that, while she sympathized with Twilight, she couldn't have her in the room in case something went wrong.

Shifting her gaze away from the ceiling, Twilight looked through one of the nearby windows. The sky was starting to shift from a pristine blue to a warm, welcoming orange; it was a picturesque sunset that at least distracted Twilight from her concerns. She took in the spectrum of colors and stared until the creaking of hinges drew her attention to the opening throne room doors.

Nurse Redheart was the first to step out. She was carrying not only her medical saddlebags but also the doctoral bag Dr. Stable had Rainbow Dash fetch from the clinic. Fluttershy was following close behind, and she carefully closed the door behind her once both she and Redheart were in the hallway.

"How... how is she?" Twilight asked, afraid of what the answer would be.

"She was gravely injured, Twilight. We did what we could to tend to the wounds. She's stable for the moment, but the next few hours are going to be critical. We've done all we can. Now, all we can do is wait and see."

"Can... can I go see her?"

"Yes, but don't take too long," Nurse Redheart advised, "She needs rest more than anything else. Now, you'll have to excuse me. I have to go check on the other ponies at the clinic, but Fluttershy will be right outside the door if you need anything."

Twilight nodded and watched Nurse Redheart leave in the direction of the castle's medical wing. At the same time, Fluttershy landed beside the door, placed a hoof on it, and nudged it open before turning her eyes to Twilight. "Are you ready to go in?"

Twilight was afraid of what condition she would find Nightmare Moon in and, for a moment, wondered if it would be better if she just stayed outside. Still, Fluttershy's reassuring smile gave her some courage, and, after taking a deep breath, she slipped through the open door into the throne room.

The stained glass windows were still broken, although they'd been covered with banners from another part of the castle to keep the cool evening breeze out. Gentle white light came from the gemstones embedded around the walls, though many of them had been covered with fabric, creating a comfortable dimness in the room.

Near the center of the space, a makeshift bed had been assembled. Blankets, pillows, and soft cushions had been scavenged from all around the castle. The only bed big enough for an alicorn was up in Nightmare Moon's private chambers, and Dr. Stable had made it clear Nightmare Moon needed medical treatment immediately, not after a team of ponies had gone upstairs, disassembled her bed, brought it to the throne room, and reassembled it.

The temporary bed served its purpose though. It provided a soft place for a wounded pony to rest, and, as Twilight drew closer, it looked like Nightmare Moon was asleep. Her eyes were closed and her breathing, while weak, was consistent. Her mane was beginning to look a little more like it used to, and, most importantly, all of her injuries had been treated. It wasn't exactly top quality medical work, but Nurse Redheart and Fluttershy had done amazingly well considering the lack of supplies. They had considered putting her in the medical chambers with the others injured during the attack, where Dr. Stable and Nurse Tenderheart would be able to help with her treatment. However, not only was there not enough room in the medical wing for Nightmare Moon, but Redheart believed it would be best to treat her someplace private.

That all led to Nightmare Moon being placed in the throne room, where she slept soundly as Twilight walked closer. She didn't wake Nightmare Moon; she knew that she needed to let her rest. Still, Twilight wanted to be someplace close. She wanted to be there when Nightmare Moon finally did open her eyes.

Thankfully, the bed that had been assembled was far bigger than it needed to be. While Nightmare Moon took up the center, there was plenty of space on the edges for a pony to lie down, and that's just what Twilight did. She drew herself up onto a corner near Nightmare Moon's head, laid herself down, rested her head on top of her forelegs, and just watched Nightmare Moon sleep.

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Twilight wasn't sure when she had fallen asleep, but she awoke to the sensation of somepony tapping on her shoulder. She sat up, yawned, and, after giving her eyes a moment to focus and adjust, she looked to see who was there. "Mayor?" she muttered groggily while rubbing one of her eyes.

Ivory Scroll nodded her head. "I'm sorry to wake you, Twilight, but can I talk with you outside?"

“Of course,” Twilight replied as she carefully got up from the bed. She looked back to see Nightmare Moon was still sleeping off her injuries, and she smiled a little when she saw Nightmare Moon’s mane looked thicker than it did when she had fallen asleep. It brought a little bit of relief to Twilight’s mind and let her believe that Nightmare Moon was, in fact, recovering.

A small cough from Ivory Scroll reminded Twilight why she had been woken up, and she quickly fell in line behind the mayor. They slipped out of the room and into the adjoining hallway quietly.

“I do apologize for disturbing you. I know you’re worried about her,” the mayor said once the throne room doors were closed.

“It’s okay,” Twilight reassured her. “She’s getting better, and that’s all that matters. Now, what did you want to talk about?”

“There are a few things, actually,” Ivory began. She led Twilight over to a window and pointed outside with a hoof. “First, I wanted you to see that.”

Twilight followed the mayor’s pointing hoof, trying to see what was so important, but Ivory Scroll seemed to be pointing at nothing. The window in question offered a fairly beautiful view of the castle courtyard, where a few ponies were walking back and forth. She could see part of the castle’s outer walls, and, beyond that, the sun hung just above the far horizon, setting the sky ablaze with the warm colors of late afternoon.

“Um... what am I supposed to be looking at?”

“The sunset.”

“What about it?”

“Twilight, it’s a little past ten. In the evening,” Ivory explained flatly. “The sun should have gone down over an hour ago. Ponies are starting to worry.”

Twilight stared at the mayor in disbelief, and she realized that she had slept longer than she’d thought. “Yeah... I guess that’s the problem when there is only one immortal alicorn in Equestria. I’m sorry, but I doubt Nyx is going to be strong enough to handle moving the sun and moon for at least a few days.”

“That’s why I wanted to talk to you. I’ve been asked to inquire as to whether the Elements of Harmony can be used to free the princesses. We believe that since Nightmare Moon imprisoned them, if she wer—”

Twilight, bristling, interrupted her. “You want me to use the Elements of Harmony on Nyx?!”

“No, I don’t mean it like that,” Ivory quickly corrected. “What I meant to say was: Is it possible for the Elements to undo her banishment spell?”

Twilight’s anger cooled as quickly as it had ignited, and the gears in her mind turned as she looked out at the sunset. “I don’t know... maybe. I’d need to ask Nyx how the banishment spell works. Maybe then my friends and I can use the Elements of Harmony to bypass it, but I can’t ask Nyx anything until she wakes up.”

“I understand,” the mayor said gently. “When I realized the sun wasn’t going to set, I sent out several messengers to tell the rest of Equestria what’s going on. The pegasi weren’t happy since they had only just returned from taking my last set of letters. Thankfully, Rainbow Dash pep-talked them into flying out again, and the messages will, hopefully, keep most ponies from panicking.”

“Hopefully,” Twilight echoed before she turned away from the distant, perpetual sunset. “So, was that everything?”

“For the moment, though Applejack caught me on my way here. She was taking a break from the kitchen and wanted me to try and get you to eat something. From what she says, you haven’t had a bite all day.”

“Thank you, but—” Twilight began, trying to politely refuse the mayor’s offer, but her grumbling stomach betrayed her. With a weak laugh and a hoof placed over her stomach to quiet its protests, Twilight gave her head a nod. “Okay, maybe a sandwich.”

• • •

It didn’t take long for the pair to reach the castle’s dining room, and, despite the late hour, there were still several ponies loitering about. Twilight could only guess that some of them, like her, had lost track of time at some point thanks to the halted sunset.

“It looks like Applejack really did a great job keeping the kitchen busy,” Twilight remarked as she and Ivory Scroll crossed the room. She took notice of the number of

ponies still eating at the dining table. “It was a good idea to ask her to lead the kitchen crew.”

The mayor nodded as she and Twilight got in the line for food. “Yes, it was, and the ponies helping her have really been going all-out. The food itself is pretty simple and bland, but it’s filling, and the kitchen crew is working quickly enough to keep most ponies fed.”

It didn’t take long for the pair to get their food, mostly because there weren’t too many ponies trying to get something to eat so late at night. Twilight used her magic to carry both her plate and the mayor’s, and, after the pair had found a place to sit at the room’s massive dining table, Twilight licked her lips and sniffed eagerly at the food. “Mmmmm... this smells so good.”

“Yes, it does,” the mayor agreed with a little laugh before taking a bite from her meal. Twilight was about to do the same, only to feel a tap on her shoulder. When she turned, she saw a particular mulberry pony standing beside her with a pair of saddlebags resting on her back.

“I hope I’m not interrupting you, Twilight,” Cheerilee said as Twilight turned to face her.

“Don’t worry about it. How are you doing?”

“I think I’m going to have nightmares for a few weeks thanks to that scorpio, but I’m fine otherwise. I just wanted to give you something.” At that, Cheerilee bent her head back, reached into her saddlebags, and pulled out a small stack of papers.

“What are these?” Twilight asked as the papers were set on the table beside her.

“Well, after what happened, I thought some of the fillies and colts around the castle needed something to do, something to keep them from thinking about what happened. Now, I don’t know *how*, but your friend Pinkie Pie managed to find a bunch of arts and crafts supplies. The little ponies spent part of the afternoon drawing... and I thought you’d like to have a few of the pictures they made.”

Twilight glanced at the stack of papers that had been set down beside her and used her magic to pick them up. She looked at the first one, a rather crude crayon drawing. It depicted a small, blue, stick-figure pony standing with two larger ponies, with squiggles of grass beneath and a big, happy sun in the corner. It was just the kind of image one would see hanging on a school bulletin board.

But what made Twilight stare was what had been written on the picture. Above the drawing were the words ‘To Nightmare Moon,’ while at the bottom the young artist had written “Thank you for protecting my family.”

Twilight flipped to the next picture in the pile. It was a better drawing, and she could actually recognize the ponies in the picture. She saw Applejack and Nightmare Moon standing on top of a defeated cerberus, which had little swirls for all six of its eyes. The text below the image read: “Thanks for keeping my sister safe. Get well soon Nyx. From: Apple Bloom.”

There were only a hoofful of drawings in the stack, but they all shared a similar theme. They were warm wishes and “thank you’s” for Nightmare Moon. It left Twilight gawking in disbelief. She looked at each picture, went through the whole pile, and only then did she look back to Cheerilee.

“Did you...”

“Tell them to do this? No,” Cheerilee answered with a shake of her head. “It was Apple Bloom, actually. She started doing her picture, and, when the other little ponies asked what she was drawing, some of them wanted to do it too. I didn’t have a thing to do with it.

“Though, if you don’t mind,” Cheerilee paused and reached into her bag a second time. She removed from it a folded piece of paper which she set on the table where the stack of drawings had been a few moments before. “Would you give this to Nyx, please? That... that one’s from me.”

Twilight smiled, taking the folded piece of paper and adding it to the stack of crayon drawings. “Of course. And... thank you, Cheerilee, for bringing these to me.”

“It’s the least I can do, Twilight. Now, I’m going to go and try to get some sleep, but, if you need my help with anything, just ask, okay?”

“Okay,” Twilight replied before she watched Cheerilee walk off. She turned back to the stack of papers she was holding in her magic. She set them down delicately, as if they would turn to dust if she was too rough with them, and then quickly went back to her meal. She ate as fast as she could without being rude to the mayor or other ponies around. Then, once she was done with her meal, she took up the stack of drawings again and galloped from the room, so that she and the papers would be there when Nightmare Moon woke up.

• • •

Nightmare Moon groaned. She didn't know how long she had been asleep, but that really didn't matter to her at the moment. She was stiff all over, and any attempt to stretch and relieve that stiffness only made her realize how sore she was. She was lying on something soft but uneven, which was only moderately comfortable at best.

For a few minutes, Nightmare Moon was content with just rubbing the side of her head against whatever she was lying on, trying to relieve a small itch. Yet, as she became properly acquainted with how horrible she felt, the thing that pressed itself at the front of her mind was how dry her mouth was. Without even thinking, she licked her lips, hoping for a glass of water.

As if by magic, she felt something near her mouth and heard a familiar, gentle voice speaking softly to her. "Here, Nurse Redheart said I should get you to drink this when you woke up."

The thing that was near her mouth was a straw, and, after fumbling with it for a moment, Nightmare Moon got her lips around it. She took a sip and shivered a little as the cool, crisp freshness of the water slipped over her tongue. Water had never tasted so good. She greedily drank it, not only to wet her mouth, but also to sedate her thirst. She sucked the glass of water dry in a matter of seconds.

When the cup was empty and the straw was moved away from her mouth, Nightmare Moon attempted to lift her head. She winced as the joints in her neck popped and cracked, but she forced her head up all the same before opening her eyes. She saw she was in the throne room, and she took notice of the bed she was lying in. Nightmare Moon also noted that she was practically covered from head-to-hoof in bandages and that her wing was held against her side in a simple sling.

"How are you feeling?"

Nightmare Moon turned and looked in the area near where her head had been lying. There, looking back with an honest and relieved smile, was Twilight.

"Sore..." Nightmare Moon replied as she laid her head back down.

Twilight leaned her head to one side as she stood up. "Well, you *did* get hurt pretty badly." Then, with some careful maneuvering, Twilight climbed up onto the bed and put herself right beside Nightmare Moon's head. She bent her head down and gently nuzzled at Nightmare Moon's cheek. "I'm so glad to see you're awake. You had me worried."

“How long have I been asleep?”

“Don’t worry about that right now,” Twilight instructed as she stood up straight. She called on her magic, and, from nearby, a pitcher of water floated into view. She refilled the empty glass before holding the straw up to Nightmare Moon’s mouth a second time.

Nightmare Moon drank every drop, though she did not drain the glass as quickly as she had the first time. Her mouth was no longer feeling dry, and, as Twilight took the empty glass away, Nightmare Moon whispered a quiet, “thank you.”

“Do you want some more?”

“No,” Nightmare Moon replied with a weak shake of her head.

With a nod, Twilight set the empty glass over by the pitcher and turned her attention back to Nightmare Moon. “Are you hungry? I could go get you something from the castle’s kitchen.”

“I doubt there is much in there that hasn’t spoiled since the Children of Nightmare left.”

“Actually, the mayor and a bunch of other ponies have been using the castle as a kind of refugee camp. A lot of homes got damaged or destroyed during the monster attack, so they’ve been staying here. I hope that’s okay.”

Nightmare Moon let a thin smile creep onto her face. “I don’t mind, and... it’s nice to hear this castle can be used for something good.”

Twilight nodded her head in agreement. “It is. Still, do you want me to get you something?”

“No, I’m not hungry at the moment. How is everypony?”

“They’re fine,” Twilight answered softly, “Thanks to you.”

“I only bought time. It was you and your friends that got everypony out safely.”

“Something we couldn’t have done without you to hold back the monsters. You helped save lives, Nyx... you made me so proud.”

“Proud? How can you honestly be *proud* of me?” Nightmare Moon asked. She shifted her gaze to the far side of the room, unwilling and unable to look at Twilight. “After everything I’ve done, you should hate me, like they all do.”

Twilight lifted a hoof and ran it once through Nightmare Moon’s mane. The magical hair flowed around her leg like water, and it felt as cool as an evening breeze. “You’ve made mistakes, Nyx, but they’re mistakes you’ve tried to fix.”

“Nothing that I would have needed to do if I hadn’t been such a fool,” Nightmare Moon snapped, more at herself than at Twilight. “You were right all along, and I finally understand what you were trying to tell me. I may be Nightmare Moon, but that doesn’t mean I have to act like I did before. I didn’t have to listen to Spell Nexus or be the mare Celestia feared. No pony could have forced me to do anything once I was fully resurrected.

“But... but I was so angry. I was angry at Celestia and... at you.” Nightmare Moon’s voice began to tremble as she fought back tears. “You *let* Celestia take me... you *abandoned* me and lied to me... and I *hated* you for it. I *hated* you so *much*.”

“All I had left were my memories... all those memories of hating Equestria, of wanting the eternal night. My memories of being sealed in the moon.” Nightmare Moon’s voice dropped to a whisper, and she paused a moment. Twilight opened her mouth to offer her some comfort, but Nightmare Moon continued speaking before she could utter a single word.

“So I played the part. Like a stupid little filly in a stupid school play, I played the part of the monster. I played the role because it’s the only thing that felt true. It’s what Spell Nexus was telling me, it’s what Celestia feared, and it’s what my own memories told me was true.

“But I can’t be the way I was... and I don’t want to be like that ever again. That, however, doesn’t change what I’ve done. You and all of Equestria should just hate me... hate and despise me just like when Luna was Nightmare Moon... because that’s all I deserve.”

“No,” Twilight interrupted firmly. “No, that’s not all you deserve. You deserve more than that, and I don’t hate you.”

“You’re lying... just like you were lying to me before. You *have* to hate me. I’ve been the worst daughter in the world... you should hate me.”

“But I don’t, Nyx.”

Nightmare Moon gritted her teeth as her anger flared. “Don’t you get it?! No matter what you call me, no matter how I behave, I’m still the mare that locked up your mentor, that tried to kill you and your friends. I’m still the mare that usurped Equestria’s throne, locked you in a dungeon, and almost let Nexus kill you! I am, and forever will be, Nightmare Moon! So tell me, how can you not despise me?!”

“Because, Nyx, I’m your mother, and a mother will always love her daughter, no matter what.”

Nightmare Moon shut her eyes tight. She was trying to hold it back, trying to keep strong and resist, but it was all for naught. Twilight had broken down the emotional dam that had built up inside her. All of the pain, guilt, and confusion she had been bottling up was released, and it flooded her mind.

And so she wept. Nightmare Moon wept openly while attempting to blubber out apology after apology. Not since she had been a filly had she let her tears flow so freely. She cried and apologized for everything she had done, for everypony she had hurt, and for all the things she had put Twilight through.

She cried, and Twilight took it all in while trying her best to comfort the mare she called her daughter. She got as close as she could and nuzzled the side of Nightmare Moon’s head. It had been easier for Twilight to comfort her when she was still a little filly... but Twilight did her best. She did everything she, as a mother, could do to soothe her daughter. She even cried right alongside Nightmare Moon.

The tears that spilled from the pair’s eyes, however, were not just tears of sorrow. Some were tears of shared pain for the things they had both done wrong. Others were tears of joy, the pair sharing in an embrace they had been denied for so long.

After several long weeks, Twilight knew, without a doubt, that she had her daughter back.

• • •

Nightmare Moon cried for a long time, but, with Twilight’s presence, she eventually calmed down. She had cried herself dry of both her tears and the emotions she had bottled up inside. Overall, she felt better because of it. Still, as Nightmare Moon’s eyes dried, a single haunting question bubbled to the top of her mind... a question that she couldn’t ignore.

“Twilight... who am I?”

“What do you mean?” Twilight asked gently.

“I... I don’t know who I am anymore. I’m Nightmare Moon in mind and body. I was her in the past, but... I don’t want to be like that anymore. I want to be Nyx again, but... I can’t. I can’t go back to being the filly you found in the forest, yet I can’t go forward as the terror I once was. I’m stuck, somewhere in the middle... so, who am I?”

Twilight was silent for a time, needing to not only process the question, but also carefully choose her response. Her eyes wandered and looked across Nightmare Moon’s bruised, beaten, and bandaged body. She sighed and shook her head apologetically. “I’m sorry, Nyx, but I honestly can’t say. Everypony needs to decide for herself the kind of pony she is going to be, and you have to figure that out on your own. The only thing I could tell you is what I see.”

“Then what do you see, Twilight? I want the honest truth.”

“I suppose... I see a mare who is neither Nyx nor Nightmare Moon... or, actually, I see a mare that is a bit of both, if that makes sense,” Twilight began as she struggled to find the words to express herself. Thankfully, Nightmare Moon was patient and didn’t rush Twilight. She simply waited for her to compose her thoughts.

“Let me put it another way. Back when you were Nyx, you were... a little sensitive.”

“I was a coward and a crybaby,” Nightmare Moon corrected flatly.

“Okay, yes, but that wasn’t entirely your fault. You *were* young and you had been through a lot, even before I found you in the forest. I doubt any filly could go through what you did and not be a *little* traumatized.

“But you’re not like that anymore,” Twilight continued, smiling a little. “The Nyx I knew... she would never have been able to fight off the monsters like you did. Only a mare like Nightmare Moon would have been able to do what you did.”

“So even you finally admit I’m Nightmare Moon.”

“No,” Twilight corrected, “let me *finish*.”

“Sorry,” Nightmare Moon apologized.

“It’s okay, but you’re not like the old Nightmare Moon either, not anymore. If you were, you would have had the courage to face the monsters, but no reason to. When Luna was

Nightmare Moon, she cared about herself first and everypony else second, if at all. If you were really that same pony, then you wouldn't have cared about what happened to Ponyville.

"But the Nyx I know *does care*," Twilight said as she gave Nightmare Moon a gentle reassuring touch. "She cares about other ponies, even putting them before herself. She cared about her friends enough that she performed in the Spring Festival Play, despite the fact I told her 'no.' You were there for them, and it's because of that compassion that you were willing to fly out and throw yourself in harm's way to protect Ponyville.

"So," Twilight continued, "I guess you are a bit of both, perhaps even the best of both. But, as I said before, that is only what I see. It's up to you to decide what kind of pony you want to be.

"And, by the way, I'm not the only one that thinks you're not the same mare any more," Twilight said as her horn began to glow. She turned her head and picked up a stack of papers that was lying nearby. She presented the pile, revealing to Nightmare Moon that the page on the top of the stack was the crayon drawing Apple Bloom had done.

"What... what are these?"

"Well, I think it's best to call them thank you cards," Twilight answered. Nightmare Moon took the drawings into her own magic and began flipping through them. Along with the picture from Apple Bloom, there were drawings from Sweetie Belle, Scootaloo, and Twist. There were even a few from other ponies in her class, acquaintances who never really liked nor hated her. One such picture was from Dinky Doo, a crayon drawing of the alicorn zapping a hydra on the flank.

"There's this as well," Twilight said while holding out a carefully tri-folded piece of paper. "It's a letter from Cheerilee."

Nightmare Moon shifted her gaze and set down the crayon drawings before she gingerly suspended the letter in her magic. She unfolded it, and, after noticing the words were in fact written in Cheerilee's hoof-writing, she looked to the top of the page and began attentively reading each line.

Dear Nyx,

Earlier today, when some of the fillies and colts I was watching started making get-well cards for you, I felt that I needed to offer a few words of my own. The first of those words are thank you. Thank you for saving my life. When that scorpio was about to grab me with

its pincer, I had given up hope. I doubted I'd get out of that alive, but you flew in and saved me. I thank you for that.

I also wanted to say I'm sorry. I still remember what you said to me that night, when I let you play Nightmare Moon in the school play. I never meant it as an insult. I called the original Nightmare Moon 'wicked and dastardly,' but those words were never meant for you, a filly I called my student.

Your friends came to me at one time, back when you were making the night last forever. They asked me about you, asked why you were doing what you were doing. Their families weren't telling them the whole truth, and I could tell they were worried. I told them the truth that I believed at the time: that you were confused about who you were, that you just needed some time, and that you would eventually do the right thing.

Thank you for proving me right, and, though you may now be an adult, I will always treasure the time you were in my class. While some of the students didn't appreciate your curiosity, I found it refreshing. I hope that you never lose that drive to learn.

So, again, thank you.

*Your Former Teacher,
Cheerilee*

"It's hard, sometimes, changing who you are, changing what everypony sees," Twilight explained as Nightmare Moon stared at the letter and pictures. "Before I came to Ponyville, I was a bookworm with almost no real friends. But I changed. I started studying friendship, and I helped my friends just as much as they helped me. We've all grown because of the friendship we share. And you taught me what it takes to be a mother, to care for somepony like a daughter.

"It may seem impossible, but you can do it," Twilight said confidently. "You've already started. These fillies and colts, they don't see you as a monster anymore. They see you as the pony who saved their friends and families. You can be the mare you want to be."

"Can it... can it really be that simple?" Nightmare Moon asked. She lowered the papers and looked at Twilight. "Do I just decide who I want to be?"

"No, it will be a lot of work and it may take a long time to be the mare you want to be. The first step, however, is answering that question: What kind of pony do you want to be?"

Nightmare Moon shifted her gaze down to her bruised and beaten body. She began to speak slowly, voicing her thoughts as they formed. "I... I want... what I *don't* want is to be queen. I don't want to be a mare that ponies are afraid of. I want to be a pony with friends, real friends, not servants or subjects. I want to be a mare that makes you proud and to be your daughter.

"And... and I don't want to care or worry about my past anymore. I know I'm Nightmare Moon, but I don't want to be called that anymore. I don't want that to be my name. I... I want my name to be Nyx."

Twilight smiled and rested her head against Nyx's cheek. "Well, to me, it sounds like you want to be a pretty amazing mare."

"Of course you'd say that," Nyx replied with a small chuckle, "you're my mother."

"Yes, but that doesn't make it any less true." Twilight said as one last laugh escaped her throat. She then glanced up at the throne room's covered windows, and her smile withered on her face.

"Nyx?"

"Hmmm?"

"You remember earlier, when you asked how long you were asleep?"

"Yes," Nyx replied with a nod.

"The honest answer is that it's been a little over half a day."

Nyx tensed and tried to sit up from her bed and get to her hooves. Twilight, however, used her magic to force Nyx back down while a stern tone entered her voice. "Nyx, you're in no condition to be moving around."

"But what about the sunset? I need to lower the sun and raise the moon. Horse-feathers, if it has been half a day since I passed out, that would make it almost five in the morning."

"It's... actually closer to ten," Twilight admitted.

"Ten?! It's supposed to be light by now! I missed the entire night!" Nyx panicked, again trying to sit up while Twilight continued to hold her down.

“That doesn’t change the fact that you’re not strong enough right now to even consider handling the sun and moon,” Twilight snapped sternly before letting her voice soften. “Honestly, I doubt you’ll be strong enough for a while.”

“But what about Equestria?” Nyx asked. “It needs the sun and moon to move.”

Twilight sighed and nodded her head. “You’re right, Nyx, and that’s something I wanted to talk to you about. Nyx... can you release Princess Celestia and Princess Luna?”

Nyx stopped struggling to get up from under Twilight’s magic and, all too quickly, snapped, “No!”

“Nyx, they are the only ones—”

“Do you know what you’re asking me to do? If I let them go, I’ll take their place. They’ll banish me to the moon for what I’ve done! They each offered me mercy, a chance to stop, and I attacked them anyway. If I let them go now, they’ll show no mercy.”

Twilight gently shushed Nyx, nuzzling the side of her head. “I understand why you’re scared, but Equestria needs them back. What if the monsters attack again while you’re like this? What if it takes you weeks, or months, to get strong enough to move the sun and moon again?”

“I know,” Nyx begrudgingly admitted. “I know I need to let them go, but I don’t want to be banished again. It was hard enough the first time. The only thing that kept Luna and I, us... me sane was our anger and hatred. We spent those centuries plotting and scheming how we would get back at Celestia.”

Nyx trembled and drew her legs in close to her body. “But, if I go back now, I won’t have any of that. All I’ll have are my memories in Ponyville, and they’ll only make me long for freedom more.” She tossed her head and felt herself starting to cry again. “And, by the time Celestia and Luna let me go, or by the time I’m able to free myself, you’d be gone. You and everypony else would be gone. I’d never see Apple Bloom, Scootaloo, Sweetie Belle, Twist, Owloysius, Cheerilee, or you again. The only ones who would have any chance of still being alive would be Spike and Peewee.

“I... I don’t want to go back,” Nyx said weakly, tears pooling in her eyes. “I don’t want to be alone again.”

“Shhhh,” Twilight softly soothed, doing her best to calm Nyx. “I know; I don’t want to see you get banished either, but you need to release them. Equestria needs them.”

“But—”

Twilight moved in close, hooked her forelegs around Nyx’s neck, and hugged her tightly. “I promise that I will *not* let Celestia take you away again. I’ll figure out some way to convince her. I’ll make her understand. I’ll do whatever it takes to make sure you don’t have to be alone for another thousand years.”

Nyx looked away from Twilight, trying to resist. She was injured, but she was still a full grown alicorn. She knew Twilight couldn’t force her to undo the spell that kept the royal sisters exiled. But... Twilight’s words, along with Zecora’s firm scolding from before the monster attack, rang in her mind. It was a bitter truth she couldn’t deny.

“The banishment spell... It’s simple to cast, easier to undo, and nearly impossible to break. It’s like a cell door. Without the key, the only way to get out is to smash the door or pick the lock. The Elements of Harmony smashed Celestia free when you defeated me, or rather me and Luna, in the Everfree Forest. Before that, Luna and I, when we were one, picked the lock of the spell when the stars were in proper alignment.

“But, for the thing or pony that cast the spell, their magic is the key to the lock,” Nyx explained. “Even you, without the Elements of Harmony, could undo the spell’s lock as long as you have a bit of my magic to act as the key. It does take some time to undo the locks, but, together, you and I could free the princesses within the hour.”

Twilight smiled and hugged Nyx’s neck even tighter while being careful not to choke her. “Thank you, Nyx.”

Nyx tried to smile, but the idea of her impending banishment was sucking the joy from her chest. “Y-you’re welcome, but—” She shifted her head and looked at Twilight with pleading eyes. “Can we wait a little while... just a few hours?”

Twilight pulled herself away from Nyx and frowned a little. “You know the sooner we let them go, the better, right?”

“I know, and I know you promise you won’t let them banish me, but I’m still scared,” Nyx admitted. “If we’re going to release Celestia and Luna, and, if you can’t stop them, I want one last memory. Just one last, good memory... something I can hold onto if the worst should happen.”

A comforting smile formed on Twilight’s lips. “I suppose Equestria can wait a couple hours.”

“Thank you,” Nyx gratefully whispered.

“Well then, how about we start this memory off with some food? I could go get us something to eat from the castle’s kitchen.”

“That... that does sound nice, and, after we eat, could we read a book together... like we used to?”

“Of course,” Twilight said as she carefully stood up from the bed. She was trying to keep her voice strong, though it had an audible quiver. “What story do you want to read?”

“You can pick, Twilight... you always pick the best stories.”

Being imprisoned in the sun is an experience most ponies would find utterly torturous. The bright, glowing orb was pictured by many to be made of swirling fires that would singe, burn, and utterly cremate anything that drew too close.

Yet, to Celestia, the sun was as much a warm embrace as it was a prison. The magic of the banishment spell took everything that made the princess and mixed it with the arcane energies of the sun. It was like Celestia had been stitched into the sun like a patch sewn onto a piece of fabric. She was part of it, but she was still able to identify where she ended and the sun began. She could only assume the same was true for Luna, which was why the moon took on a dark silhouette of a unicorn head. The sun had probably done the same, though no pony could look straight into the celestial sphere long enough to be sure.

Escape from the sun was possible, but it took very delicate work and timing for an alicorn to free herself from such a prison. Celestia had already made a number of attempts, feeling and probing the magic that held her, but an understanding of the spell would not be sufficient. She would need help: an alignment of the planets, stars, or some other celestial event that she could exploit to hold part of the spell open while she unlocked the rest. Yes, escape was possible, but it was a tedious, drawn-out game of waiting until such an event occurred.

Unless she was freed by another...

Suddenly, as Celestia was exploring a certain aspect of the spell with her magic, she felt it starting to unlock. However, it did not feel the same as when she had been freed from the sun by the Elements of Harmony. When that had occurred, the elements had burst through the binding spell, washing over her and pulling her back to Equestria like an ocean wave pulling her into deeper water. This time the spell was unlocking itself. She wasn't being rescued; she was being released.

Celestia could not ponder this for much longer as the last of the binding spell evaporated away. She was free and, as the spell was designed, she found herself being carried back to Equestria. In just a few seconds, Celestia felt her physical body take shape. She felt the ground beneath her hooves, smelled the clean, fresh air as it filled her lungs, and felt the cool chill of evening on her coat.

Opening her eyes, Celestia found herself smiling as she took in her surroundings. She was in a large, elegant room she did not recognize. The stone walls, columns, floor, and

ceiling were made of a dark stone. The ceiling itself was dotted with gemstones in a near-perfect depiction of the nighttime sky. She had materialized facing a set of large, blown-out windows with traces of glass and metal clinging to the frames. Through those openings she could clearly see the beautiful lands of Equestria stretching to the horizon.

“Sister?”

Celestia turned her head to the side, and her smile widened as her gaze met Luna’s. Her sister had also been freed and was obviously a little surprised. That didn’t keep Celestia from moving over and embracing Luna like any worried older sister would.

“Luna, are you all right?” Celestia asked gently.

“Yes, I’m fine,” Luna assured as she returned her sister’s embrace. “Were you the one that freed me?”

Celestia pulled back from Luna and shook her head. “No, I had no hoof in this. It would seem we were both released early.”

“You were,” a voice assured them. It was a voice that Celestia recognized; it belonged to a pony she wasn’t sure she was ready to face.

“Twilight Sparkle,” Celestia murmured quietly as both she and Luna turned. Twilight was standing just a few feet away from them. There was nopony else in the throne room, though the princess did take notice of a pile of cushions, blankets, and pillows in the center of the floor. “I trust that it was you and your friends that defeated Nightmare Moon and freed my sister and I?”

“No, it wasn’t,” Twilight replied. “The same day you two were banished, Nyx took the Elements of Harmony away from my friends. I was trapped in the dungeon at the time, so they tried to use another mare as the Element of Magic. From what I’ve been told, it didn’t turn out well.”

“I’d imagine it wouldn’t. The connection shared between friends is what gives the Elements of Harmony their strength. It is along those lines of power the virtues are able to mix and flow together. Still, if Nightmare Moon stole the Elements of Harmony, and you and your friends didn’t defeat her, how were you able to free us?”

“We didn’t free you. Nyx let you go.”

Luna and Celestia glanced at one another, both wearing expressions of confusion before they looked back to Twilight. “Why would Nightmare Moon do that?” Luna asked.

“Because she’s not the monster you or that cult made her out to be,” Twilight said firmly. “Now, before you say a single word about her or what she’s done, I have something I want to say. Something I need to say, and I hope you’re willing to listen.”

“I am, Twilight,” Celestia answered, neither smiling nor frowning as she spoke.

With that, Twilight began telling both Celestia and Luna everything that had happened over the weeks they had been trapped in the sun and moon respectively. She held nothing back, speaking of both the good and bad that Nyx had done, though Celestia noticed Twilight was focusing more on the good.

All the while Celestia listened intently, occasionally glancing over at Luna. Her sister’s expression ran through a spectrum of emotions: shock, surprise, skepticism, and amazement. She, however, kept her face as stoic and unreadable as a blank piece of paper. She kept to her word as well; she did not interrupt Twilight. She waited until her student was done, and only then did she speak.

“That... is a very interesting story, Twilight,” Celestia commented, keeping her voice flat. “I am glad to hear that Nightmare Moon has come to her senses and agreed to assist in our release. However, I find it hard to believe that she was so injured that she could not manage the spell herself.”

“Well then,” Twilight began while she turned and trotted to the far end of the room, “maybe you should see for yourself.” When Twilight reached the throne room doors, she gently poked her head outside to speak to somepony in the hallway. A few moments later, she walked back towards the princesses while another pony limped gingerly in her wake.

Nyx kept her head hung low, trying to make herself as small as possible. She did not lift her eyes to meet Celestia’s or Luna’s, content to stare at the floor while keeping Twilight between herself and the princesses.

“Is... is she going to be all right?” Luna asked, unable to keep herself from staring at the bandages wrapped across Nyx’s body.

“Nurse Redheart says she should make a full recovery,” Twilight answered, directing a glare at Celestia, “but this should prove that I’m telling you the truth.”

“I never meant to imply I didn’t believe you, Twilight,” Celestia corrected. “I just found it hard to believe Nightmare Moon was in such poor condition. It would seem, however, you weren’t exaggerating about her injuries.”

“No, I wasn’t,” Twilight continued. She maintained her firm tone despite being in the presence of the mare who was both her princess and teacher. “Nyx helped me free you; I couldn’t have done it without her. She also wants to return Equestria to you. She renounced her title as Queen over a week ago and returned control of the government to the ponies you appointed.”

“If that is true, why did she not free us sooner?” asked Celestia, unable to hide the skepticism in her voice.

“She doesn’t want to go back to the moon. She was afraid that, if she released you, she’d be imprisoned for another thousand years.”

Celestia took in a breath, steadying herself before speaking. “That... may not be an unfounded fear.”

“Sister!” Luna snapped, her voice echoing with shock and disbelief. “After everything we just heard, you aren’t considering—”

“I don’t want to, Luna, please believe me when I say that,” Celestia interrupted. “It would not be for as long as before. She certainly does not deserve another thousand years. However, while Ponyville was saved, much of Equestria will be calling for justice, and it’s our duty as the Princesses of Equestria to ensure justice is carried out. I’m not saying it’s a certainty, but it may be what the ponies demand.”

“No!” Twilight snapped, stamping a hoof. “I am *not* going to let you send her to the moon!”

Celestia took a step towards her student. “Twilight—”

Shaking her head firmly, Twilight took a few steps back and lowered herself into a defensive pose between Nyx and the princesses. “NO! I won’t let you touch her! If you have to punish somepony, then punish me!”

The room fell silent, and all three of the alicorns stared at Twilight with varying levels of disbelief. “Twilight, certainly you don’t mean—”

“I do, Luna,” Twilight replied, flicking her gaze to Luna before quickly returning it to Celestia. “If Equestria demands that somepony be sent to the moon, then send me there in her place.”

“No! What about your friends? What about Spike?” Nyx argued as she stepped out from behind Twilight. “You can’t just abandon them all like that, not for me.”

“You don’t deserve to be sent to the moon, Nyx. Nopony does, but, if somepony has to go, I would rather it was me.”

“No,” Nyx said firmly. She stepped forward and put herself between Twilight and the princesses. “My actions were my own. You don’t know how much it means to me that you’re willing to accept the blame, but I can’t let you do it. I’m an alicorn; you’re not. There’s no telling if you’d even survive being banished to the moon, but I survived last time and I can do it again.”

“But—” Twilight tried to protest, only for her words to be cut off.

“Do you remember what you asked me a few hours ago? Do you remember asking me what kind of mare I wanted to be?” Nyx asked softly while she bent her neck down, bringing her head near Twilight’s.

“Yes.”

Nyx smiled and drew Twilight into an embrace. “I’ve thought of one more thing I want to add to that list. I want to be a mare that protects the ponies she cares about. I’ve hurt a lot of ponies, Twilight. Maybe not directly, but it’s because of me a lot of bad things happened. I don’t want to hurt anypony ever again if I can avoid it.

“But I want to do more than that. I want to make up for what I’ve done. I want to do whatever I can to make sure the ponies I care about never get hurt, so that my friends and family can continue to live and be happy.

“Right now,” Nyx continued, “it’s more important for you to be here for your friends, including Spike and Owloysius. You’re also the Element of Magic, and, if Equestria needs the Elements of Harmony again, you’ll need to be here.”

Nyx extended her wings, brought them around Twilight, and held her more closely. “And now, I think I’m ready to face this. Just let me take the blame, and I promise I can bear the weight. I can live long enough to fix what I’ve done wrong, to make up for what

I've done, but I would never be able to forgive myself if I let you take my place right now."

Twilight shook her head. "No Nyx, you don't have—"

"Thank you for always being there for me, Twilight. You're the best mother I could have ever asked for," Nyx whispered. She leaned in close and nuzzled the side of Twilight's face. Her tears smeared across Twilight's cheek, but neither of them complained.

"But I have to do this." With that, Nyx pulled away from Twilight, turned to face Royal Sisters, and sat before them with her head bowed in respect. "Princess Celestia, Princess Luna, Rulers of Equestria, Regents of the Sun and Moon respectively... I surrender to you. I have wronged you and Equestria, and I know that there is no way to change the past. What I have done can never be undone, so I await the justice befitting my crimes.

"All I ask, as my final request, is that you hold no ill will against your student or any ponies who were once poisoned by my magic. Lay all their sins and misdeeds upon my shoulders and allow me to bear them by myself. Let me defend them and take the punishment they should not have to endure.

"Promise me this one thing," Nyx said before taking a breath to steady her voice, "and I will accept my fate—even banishment to the moon—without question."

"Are you sure about this, Nightmare Moon?" Celestia asked, her voice barely louder than a whisper. "Do you truly want us to lay all that's happened, even the things beyond your control, on your shoulders?"

"Yes," Nyx answered firmly. "As an alicorn, I can bear the burdens no other pony can. I threw myself in the way of a lupus major to protect Twilight because, while the beast wounded me, it could have easily killed her. The pain I endured saved not just one life but lives all over Ponyville. It's far better for me to be wounded if it means somepony, anypony, can continue to live and be happy.

"I can be bruised, battered and beaten but, as long as there is still breath in my lungs, I will continue to protect ponies. I will protect them because what can kill them, I can survive. Because what hurts them is but a scratch for me... because it's the *one* thing I've been able to do right."

Celestia and Luna glanced at each other before looking back at Nyx. They were silent for a long time. Luna was unable to take her eyes off of Nyx's determined stare. Celestia, on the other hoof, noticed a small flash of light. It was quick, and it was gone before Celestia

could even glance in its direction. Her gaze lingered for a moment, trying to discern some clue to what she had seen. She then turned her attention back to Nyx's gaze, which seemed to demand imprisonment in the moon.

"Nightmare Moon," Celestia began, her voice regaining its usual regal strength, "though it pains me, you must face judgment for your crimes against Equestria and us, the Royal Sisters. This judgment, however, shall be deferred."

"Deferred?" Nyx and Twilight echoed in disbelief.

"Twilight has spoken on your behalf, but, before proper judgment can be laid, more voices must be heard. So I will ask my sister, Princess Luna, to seek out these other voices. I will ask her to find others to speak of what you have done here in Ponyville. Then, I will entrust her to decide your fate."

"Really?" Luna asked in disbelief. "You... you trust me to do that?"

Celestia gave a nod. "I do, sister."

As Luna's gaze lingered on Celestia, a small smile formed on her lips. But, as soon as she looked away, that smile faded and a more serious expression grew in its place. "I accept the task you have entrusted me with, sister, and I will do as you suggest. I will go out and learn from Ponyville the kind of mare Nightmare Moon has been. Then I will decide what punishment, if any, is needed."

"Can you at least promise me you won't banish her to the moon?" Twilight asked, only for Luna to shake her head.

"I am sorry, but the only thing I can promise is that I'll be as fair as possible. If Nightmare Moon has done enough wrong to justify being banished to the moon, then that will be her fate. However, I will not ignore the good you say she's done."

Twilight nodded, though the anxiety in her eyes made it clear she did not entirely like the answer she had been given. She, however, did not press the issue, and instead turned to comfort Nyx while Luna shifted her attention to Celestia.

"Where can I expect to find you, sister, while I am out speaking with the ponies of Ponyville?" Luna whispered so that only Celestia would hear.

"I will remain here with Twilight and Nightmare Moon, if only to make sure my student does not start to panic and worry about what will happen."

“Good, because I do wish to speak with you about this before I give my final decision. Still, that is for later. Right now, what I need is a pony who can be honest with me, so I can be sure what Twilight says isn’t being tinted by her care for Nightmare Moon.”

“Then, sister, I might have a suggestion of which pony you would want to speak with first.”

• • •

Applejack poked her head out from behind the tree, looking in the direction of the castle before smiling and ducking back behind her chosen haven. She was in the shade of a tree a few hundred yards away from the castle and couldn’t help but stifle a yawn as she settled in for a nap. She had been working since the wee hours of the morning, keeping the ponies in the castle kitchen churning out a bunch of good, wholesome food.

Still, after that one apple-bucking season, the farm mare was a little more aware of her limits. She knew she needed to get some sleep, just a quick nap. Yet, the Gabby Gums article her sister and her sister’s friends wrote still haunted Applejack from time to time. If somepony caught her napping, about half the time that pony would make some joke or comment about the article, and she hated it.

She wasn’t a “lazy daisy” like that article said. She worked hard. She gave her all whenever there was a job to do, but, when the work was done, didn’t she have as much right as anypony to take a nap?

Placing her stetson over her face to block the warm glow of the distant, currently perpetual, sunset, Applejack tried to settle into her nap. The grass beneath the tree was soft and the breeze was cool; it was a perfect place to doze off. That was, until Applejack heard the patter of hooves coming up beside her.

“Excuse me, I’m looking for Applejack.”

Bolting up, Applejack scrambled to her hooves and quickly spun around. “Now before y’all start, I ain’t layin’ down on the job or bein’ a ‘lazy daisy’! I was just—” she began, ready to defend herself, only for her argument to falter when she realized who she was speaking to. “P-Princess Luna.”

“I would never accuse you of idleness, Applejack,” Princess Luna said curtly. “From what I have heard of your work in the kitchens, there are few ponies who deserve rest more than you. If you would like, I can come back in a few minutes.”

Applejack worked to straighten her hat and brushed off a few blades of grass that still clung to her legs. “No, I can’t go turnin’ ya away after you came out here to find me. It wouldn’t be right, ‘specially since the last I heard, you were on the moon.”

“Not really *on* the moon,” Luna corrected before nodding her head, “but, yes, Celestia and I were banished until a little while ago. We were just released, by Nightmare Moon if you can believe it.”

“Well, honestly, I think I can,” Applejack said. “Still, shouldn’t you and Celestia be up in Canterlot? I’d imagine you two have a lot of work to catch up with.”

“From what my sister and I have been told by Twilight, our niece, Cadance, and her husband, Shining Armor, have been trying to put Canterlot’s government back in order ever since Nightmare Moon stepped down from her throne. They have, however, only managed to keep the situation from degrading further. Celestia and I will need to return to Canterlot soon so that everything can truly be set right. Before we depart, however, there are matters we have to deal with in Ponyville first.”

Applejack cocked an eyebrow. “Like what?”

Luna paused for a moment, glanced back towards the castle, and picked her words carefully. “Applejack, you are the Element of Honesty, correct?”

“I reckon I am.”

“Then I need you to tell me about Nightmare Moon, tell me what you honestly think about her, and, if you have time, I need your help to find other ponies to do the same.”

“I reckon I can do that,” Applejack said with a smile as she laid back down in the shade of the tree, “But, if ya don’t mind, could we just talk here? I’ve been on my hooves all mornin’.”

Luna shook her head and joined Applejack in the shade. “I don’t mind in the slightest.”

• • •

Normally, Nurse Redheart would have been the pony to tend to Nyx. She needed some of her bandages changed and wounds cleaned to make sure they didn’t get infected. However, Luna and Celestia had come to a silent agreement that they didn’t want everypony to know they had returned, at least not until they were able to decide what to do with Nyx.

Thankfully, Nurse Redheart was more than willing to let Twilight tend to Nyx herself. Redheart was still busy helping the sick and injured with Nurse Tenderheart, Fluttershy, and Dr. Stable, and she didn't have much time to spare. They didn't even ask why Twilight wanted to be the one to change Nyx's bandages. She just gave Twilight the supplies and a medical hoofbook which specifically detailed the proper procedure for cleaning and changing bandages.

Nyx was laid out on her makeshift bed, though she would not allow herself to go to sleep. She was unwilling to lower her guard around Celestia despite Twilight's assurances. Still, the exhaustion of healing and a sedation spell by Twilight got the better of Nyx, and she drifted off to sleep just as Twilight began changing her bandages.

As Twilight worked, Celestia stood by her side, offering what help she could. She held the materials Twilight needed and collected the used bandages and cotton balls as they accumulated. They needed no words and worked in silence for several minutes.

Yet, as Twilight was replacing a bandage on Nyx's side, Celestia chose to break the silence. She spoke softly, as if her words were unwelcome in the quiet that had befallen the room. "Twilight, may I ask you something?"

"Yes," Twilight replied as she took some of the fresh medical supplies from Celestia's levitation spell.

"Who do you blame for what happened that night?"

"Which night?"

"The night the Children of Nightmare finished their spell," Celestia replied as she took some used cotton balls and deposited them in a paper garbage bag. "Who do you blame for what happened? Do you blame the cult for finishing the spell, do you blame me for taking Nightmare Moon away, or do you place the blame elsewhere?"

Twilight placed a bandage over the wound she had just cleaned and used some medical tape to secure it in place. "I don't blame you for what happened, and, while they were the ones that caused most of this, I don't blame the Children of Nightmare... not completely.

"If anything, I blame myself for letting it all happen. I don't know if I could have convinced you that you didn't have to be afraid of Nyx, but... I don't think I can ever forgive myself for not putting up more of a fight."

"Is that why you were willing to take her place?" asked Celestia.

“I promised Nyx that I wasn’t going to let you take her away from me again, and I meant it,” Twilight answered as she turned her attention to the next of Nyx’s bandages. She carefully peeled it away and began inspecting the wound to be sure it was healing properly.

“Twilight, I’m sorry about what I put you through that night,” Celestia said softly as she took the spent bandage and passed Twilight the disinfectant and a fresh cotton ball. “I did what I felt I needed to do at the time, but the ends did not justify my means. I can understand if you do not wish to forgive me.”

Twilight sighed, took the cotton ball she was offered, soaked it in disinfectant, and began to clean Nyx’s wound. “You’re right. I honestly don’t *want* to forgive you for that night, but... I do forgive you.”

“You do?” Celestia asked as she passed Twilight a fresh bandage.

“I do,” Twilight assured her. “Everypony needs to be able to be forgiven, because we’ve all done things we wish we could undo.”

• • •

“So, she was able to take the Elements of Harmony from you without even lifting a hoof? And then she just let you go?”

Applejack nodded, obviously a bit embarrassed. After talking for a time under the shade of the tree, the pair had gotten up and started walking towards town. She and Luna were now getting close to Ponyville.

“It wasn’t like we made it difficult. I reckoned that, as long as we found another unicorn who was good with magic, we’d be able to beat Nightmare Moon. Trouble was the only one we could find was an annoyin’ show pony named Trixie. She’s not as good as Twilight, but we hoped it would be enough. Still, even after all that magic mumbo jumbo, it didn’t look like we left a scratch on Nightmare Moon and we were plumb exhausted for our effort.”

“While it is true that the magic is an important part of the Elements of Harmony, it is but another source of power. The strength of the elements come from the ties that bind, for it is through those that the power of the virtues you and your friends represent can come together.”

Applejack tilted her head to one side in confusion. “The ties that what now? I don’t recall us bein’ tied together when we first used the elements.”

Luna chuckled as she came to a stop. “Never mind, Applejack. Now, we’re getting close to town, and there is something I need to do before we get there. Do you mind stopping for a moment?”

“Not at all, sugarcube. What’cha got to do?”

“First, I have one more question to ask. If you were given the responsibility of deciding how Nightmare Moon was to be punished for what she’s done, what would you do?”

Applejack blinked a few times then looked away from Luna, scratching the back of her neck. “Well... shoot, you had to go and ask somethin’ hard like that.”

“All I ask is for your honesty, Applejack. You don’t have to explain why, I just need to know what you would do,” Luna assured her.

Applejack pondered the question for a few seconds, continuing to scratch the back of her neck before eventually sighing. “Well, I reckon... I don’t know. She did do some pretty nasty things, but Nightmare Moon has also done more than her fair share of good, ‘specially durin’ that monster attack. Personally, I’d be inclined to go easy on her, but that’s because she’s settled any debt she had with me.

“But honestly, I’m probably not the pony to go askin’ ‘bout this,” Applejack admitted.

“I only desired your honest answer, and you’ve given it,” Luna said with a thankful smile. “Now, I need to speak with other ponies about Nightmare Moon, but I would not like Equestria to know my sister and I have returned just yet. We’ve been lucky that we haven’t passed another pony on this road, but I need to keep myself hidden once we get into town, at least from the general public.”

“Well, I reckon you know better than me what’s best in this situation. Thing is, how you goin’ to be hidin’ yourself? Can you transform yourself like Nightmare Moon?”

Luna nodded. “I could, but it then becomes a matter of who I change into. If I turn into a resident of the town, then we may run into them and that would cause certain difficulties. If I were to shapeshift into a new pony, then we run the risk of Pinkie Pie trying to welcome me to town with a party.”

“Yeah, even with the town like this, Pinkie Pie would want to throw a new pony a party,” Applejack agreed. “So then, what are you gonna do?”

Luna smiled as her horn started to glow. For a moment, nothing seemed to be happening, but then she slowly faded away like a ghost before disappearing entirely. It was a sight that left Applejack a bit bewildered, and she looked around anxiously before putting a hoof out where Luna had been standing.

“Ow!”

“Oops, sorry, Princess!” Applejack apologized, quickly drawing back her hoof.

“It’s okay, you did no harm.”

Applejack leaned to one side, as if adjusting her perspective might make it possible for her to see where Luna was standing. “So are you just gonna stay invisible like that and follow me into town?”

“Yes. When you’ve found somepony you want me to talk to about Nightmare Moon, then I’ll need you to pull them someplace private where I can make myself visible again. Oh, and it’s best not to talk to me directly when I’m like this. Ponies might think—”

“That I’ve gone and lost mah marbles,” Applejack chuckled.

Luna joined in the short round of laughter. “Yes, though I wouldn’t have worded it so bluntly.”

“Well, it’s kind of weird knowin’ I’m bein’ followed by an invisible princess, but I reckon you know what yer doin’,” Applejack mused as she turned and continued to walk towards town. “Now, I think I’m goin’ to show you to Rarity first. She’s the only one of us that Twilight told the full truth to after she found Nightmare Moon, ‘cause she needed her help with Nightmare Moon’s little disguise.”

“Then please, lead the way.”

• • •

“Hey, Rarity, you home?” Applejack called out as she held the door open.

“Right here, dear,” Rarity answered back. She trotted out from the back room with spools of cloth floating in her magic. “I’m just making some blankets and the like for all the

ponies stuck living at the castle. The blankets they got from the guard barracks keep them warm, but they're made from *such* horrible, itchy cloth. I don't know *how* those ponies are getting *any* sleep at all. So I decided I was going to use some of the old fabric that's just been lying around in the back to make some blankets. I can't use it for dress making anyway."

"Why can't you use this fabric for dresses? It looks fine to me," Applejack asked as she approached Rarity and looked over the spools of fabric.

"It's a matter of quality, Applejack," Rarity explained as she set the fabric down. "The thread count on these bolts is far too low for proper, fashionable dress making. It was a little mistake by my supplier, one they rectified by sending me the correct fabric and letting me keep these. I'm just glad I finally have a use for them. They've been cluttering up the back room for ages. Still, I doubt you came in here to listen to me talk about fabric."

"No, I didn't," Applejack said. "I got somepony that needs to ask you a few questions, if ya can spare the time."

Rarity grinned. "Oh, I love chatting while I work, but may I ask who wants to ask me questions?"

"That would be me," Luna replied while her invisibility enchantment faded. Rarity visibly jumped at the sound of the third voice in the room. Her eyes then went wide and her mouth hung open as her vision locked on her unexpected guest.

"Princess Luna is in my shop?"

Applejack took a few steps back and used a hoof to hold her hat on her head. "Uh oh. Princess, you may want to brace yerself."

Luna glanced at Applejack and cocked an eyebrow. "What for?"

"Princess Luna... is in my shop.... PrincessLunaisinmyshop!" Rarity repeated, talking faster and faster before she broke into a sprint. She galloped about her shop, magic flying in all directions as she adjusted, beautified, and cleaned the front room of her boutique at speeds that would impress even Rainbow Dash. Applejack and Luna had to jump out of the way a few times as a great number of things floated about the room. Within a minute of feverish, panicked, and magic-driven cleaning, the shop was utterly spotless.

Rarity skidded to a stop in front of Luna and did her best to keep herself from panting as she bowed. “Your Highness, it’s a privilege to have you in my shop, even though I *do* wish Applejack had given me a little more warning.”

“Sorry, Rarity,” Applejack apologized, “but she kind of just dropped in on me too. She only got back from the moon a little while ago.”

Rarity perked her ears up with curiosity. “You only returned recently? How?”

“It was Nightmare Moon that released my sister and I,” Luna answered.

Rarity couldn’t help but smile. “Well, that’s good to hear. I was expecting it would happen sooner or later, but I’m surprised Nyx didn’t wait until her injuries had healed. The poor dear really got beat up during the attack.”

“You knew that Nightmare Moon would release me and Celestia?” Luna questioned.

“Well, I can’t say I knew for *sure*,” Rarity admitted as she batted at her hair: It was a nervous habit of hers. “But... oh, how best to put this? I can say that I knew there was a very, *very* good chance she would do it, and I hoped that she would.”

“But you didn’t know for certain?”

“If I may be so bold, Princess, it’s my personal opinion that you can *never* be absolutely sure about anything, at least when it comes to ponies.”

“What makes you say that, sugarcube?” Applejack asked.

“Why, personal experience of course,” Rarity said with a toss of her head. “Remember when I made you your gala dress? I was absolutely *certain* you’d all love the first set of dresses I made, but... well, you recall how *that* turned out.”

Applejack laughed. “Yeah. I still can’t figure why I thought galoshes would go with a gala dress.”

“You’re a practical pony, Applejack, so you consider function over form. You thought it might rain, so you wanted to be prepared,” Rarity reassured her friend with a gentle smile before turning her gaze back to Luna. “Still, that wasn’t the first time I’ve created something I thought my client would love, only to find out that their opinion of my work was quite the opposite. And, over time, I’ve learned that you can’t be absolutely sure of anything when it comes to ponies.”

Luna gave an approving nod of her head. “That is a good lesson. Still, while you say you can’t be absolutely sure, I would like to know how you would answer one question, Rarity.”

“And what question would that be?”

“If you were given the responsibility of deciding how Nightmare Moon was to be punished for what she’s done, what would you do? How would you punish her? Or would you simply forgive her for what she’s done?” Luna asked, the serious tone of her question causing a silence to fall on the shop.

Rarity remained quiet for several moments, pressing her lips together as she contemplated the question. She began to frown a little, as if she didn’t like the answer that was forming in her head. “In all honesty, Princess, I’m torn. There is a part of me who would want to forgive Nyx. Besides Twilight, I was the only pony in town who knew what, or rather who, Nyx really was from the start, and even then I found her so darling. She’d bounce over to my shop from time to time, eager to be taught a lesson about being a proper mare, and I was more than willing to teach.

“But,” Rarity continued with a sigh, “she also locked up my sister. She locked Sweetie Belle in a cold, dank dungeon and worried me sick. My parents came and told me why Nyx had done it and that she would be returned safe and sound, but I still lay awake many nights wondering if Sweetie Belle was safe. That, and I suppose you can’t ignore all the ponies across Equestria who will want some justice...”

“So I guess... I guess my answer would be that Nyx probably needs to be punished. Perhaps put in jail for a time?” Rarity finally concluded. She then scrunched up her face as if she found her own answer distasteful. “No, jail won’t do anypony any good. If anything, it will harden Nyx like some common criminal, and that’s the last thing we want to happen. Perhaps community service would be a better fit. Yes, Nyx could work to repay her debt to society, but she wouldn’t have to be locked up a horrible jail cell.

“I wouldn’t, however, have an inclination as to what you would have her do or for how long. I’m a dressmaker, not a judge,” Rarity concluded.

“I appreciate the fact you are trying to be as unbiased as a judge should be,” Luna commented with a smile. “But perhaps you would like to talk of less serious things, and I wish to know more about Nyx than just what she’s done recently. You mentioned that she used to come over to your shop to learn things from you. Would you mind telling me about that?”

Rarity perked up almost immediately, grateful that the conversation had shifted to a more pleasant topic. Soon she was telling short but energetic stories of some times Nyx had been over at her shop, either with Sweetie Belle and the other fillies or on her own accord.

• • •

After tending to Nyx's wounds, Twilight had been content to just lie next to her on the bed. Nyx, however, had been asleep for a while, and Twilight needed a moment to relieve the tight muscles in her legs. Getting up slowly, Twilight stretched and walked over to Celestia, who had moved to the windows and was currently looking out at the horizon.

"I'm going to get a late lunch from the castle kitchens. You want me to bring you something?"

Celestia shook her head. "No thank you, Twilight. I'm not hungry at the moment."

"Even after being in the sun for six weeks?"

"Being imprisoned in a celestial body like the sun or moon isn't like being locked in a jail cell. The body knows no wants or needs beyond sleep. It desires no air to breathe, no water to drink, and no food to eat. All the body truly needs is sleep."

"Well, good to know if I ever get banished to the moon," Twilight joked weakly in an attempt to break the stiffness in the air. She then turned to leave, but, as she did, she glanced over her shoulder at Celestia once more. "Would you mind watching Nyx while I'm gone?"

"I will keep an eye on her," Celestia replied. Twilight gave a thankful nod and had soon left the room. For a time, Celestia remained at the windows, but, when she was sure Twilight would not return, she stepped over towards the sleeping form of the mare she still considered to be Nightmare Moon.

She circled the bed where Nightmare Moon lay and once again looked over the wounds she had sustained fighting back the creatures of the Everfree Forest. It was a simple truth that most ponies in Equestria didn't always appreciate. Celestia did more than rule and guide the sun. She also protected Equestria from the hydras and similar monsters that saw ponies as the perfect mid-afternoon snack, keeping them at bay with shows of force whenever one believed they could step into her kingdom without consequence.

Yet, when she could have turned a blind eye, Nightmare Moon stood to defend the ponies of the town she called home. Celestia wasn't sure what exactly drove Nightmare Moon to such a sacrifice, but the intent behind the action didn't matter at the moment.

What mattered was that Nightmare Moon had changed. She was the same pony physically; her origins were still in the mare that Luna had once been, but something had caused her to change on the inside. Celestia couldn't be sure what had caused that change. It could have been the incomplete spell, or it could have been Twilight's loving care. In truth, Celestia wanted to believe it was her student that helped Nightmare Moon become something other than the monster foals feared would hunt them in the night.

Celestia could no longer deny that Nightmare Moon was different, just as she could not ignore the part she played in what had happened. With Luna, she waited too long to act and her sister became the original Nightmare Moon. With the pony lying on the bed before her, she had acted too quickly. Her interference only made her greatest fears come to pass.

Yet, even though her own fears had been dispelled, Celestia knew similar fears would continue to exist throughout Equestria. While there were undoubtedly those in Ponyville who now looked upon Nightmare Moon with kind eyes, the rest of the kingdom would only see the mare Nightmare Moon used to be. They would see the tyrant queen that usurped the throne and the monster that stole away their sun.

Arguably, Luna would have faced the same hatred had it not been for the Elements of Harmony. The power of the ancient artifacts not only freed Luna from her jealousy but also reverted her physically. This gave Luna a chance to prove she wasn't Nightmare Moon, that she was once more the kind, good spirited princess of the night the ancient ponies of Equestria had once known. Through the Elements and Luna's own actions, she had been able to wash away her past. To the eyes of the public, Luna had been made innocent once more.

Nightmare Moon would not share in that level of forgiveness, and that made Celestia's heart weigh heavily in her chest. Nightmare Moon had fought tooth and hoof to become something else. Yet, because she had never been blasted by the Elements and still looked the same, the ponies of Equestria would want to hold her accountable for what happened. Some would demand nothing short of Nightmare Moon's banishment.

In truth, Celestia doubted that Nightmare Moon would ever be totally forgiven. There would always be some ponies who only saw her as a monster.

Monster... Nightmare Moon would never escape that label. Her past was forever stained, and, no matter how much good she did, there would always be those who could only see those stains, like red juice spilled on a white table cloth.

Celestia heaved a heavy sigh, and she stepped away from Nightmare Moon to return to her place beside the throne room's damaged windows. In her eyes, Nightmare Moon was not a monster. If anything, the guilt Celestia felt made her feel like she, at least in part, deserved the title.

She had done what she felt was necessary, done what she felt was best for her kingdom. She believed her intent was good and her actions right, but that didn't change the fact she was the one who had torn a daughter from her home and mother.

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“So, I would ask you three, what would you do if the responsibility fell to you to decide Nightmare Moon's fate? Would you offer forgiveness or would you say she needs to be punished? And, if so, what is befitting of her crimes?”

After leaving Rarity's boutique, Applejack and Luna had gone back to the castle. With a little searching, Applejack found Rainbow Dash, Fluttershy, and Pinkie Pie, and she guided all of them to one of the castle's empty guard towers. There, Luna revealed herself, and, as she expected, the three ponies began bombarding her with questions about how she had escaped the moon. Luna cut through the questions gracefully, and finally managed to ask her own, leaving Rainbow Dash, Fluttershy, and Pinkie Pie glancing between one another.

“Well...um, it may just be me, but... uh, I would forgive her,” Fluttershy quietly admitted.

Rainbow Dash flared her wings and looked at Fluttershy in disbelief. “After all she's done, you can't *seriously* say you'd just forgive her!”

“Then may I ask what you believe should be done, Rainbow Dash?” Luna asked.

“Hey, don't get me wrong. It was cool how she helped us out during the attack, but I saw what her eternal night was doing to a lot of ponies. When Applejack said we should try and find Trixie, I was the one that flew out to nearby towns to see if anypony had seen her. I gotta tell ya, there were a lot of ponies that were taking the whole 'eternal night' thing pretty hard.”

“Would you, if you could, banish her to the moon then?”

Rainbow Dash rubbed the back of her neck. “Well... not exactly. I mean, that’s kind of harsh. It would probably be better to just lock her up in a dungeon or jail or something for a few years.”

“Years?!” Fluttershy voiced in disbelief. “Rainbow Dash, you only lock up a pony for that long if she’s done something really horrible like setting some other pony’s house on fire or... or... deliberately hurting another pony!”

Dash’s lips tightened, preparing for the coming argument. “And bringing two weeks of endless night to Equestria isn’t really horrible?”

“Well... okay... that is pretty bad,” Fluttershy admitted weakly before forcing some strength back into her voice, “but she hasn’t hurt anypony. I mean... she did have the chance to hurt us, after we tried to use the Elements of Harmony with Trixie, but she didn’t do anything. She didn’t lock us up; she didn’t hurt us. She just let us go and took the Elements.”

“But what about Twilight?” Dash argued. “Nightmare Moon kept her locked up in the castle dungeon for weeks, and Twilight didn’t do anything wrong. Oh, and by the way, I still say we should have used one of my awesome escape plans to rescue her.”

“Rainbow, those plans were half-baked and you know it,” Applejack snapped.

Pinkie Pie nodded her head in agreement. “Yeah, and half-baked plans are like half-baked cakes; nopony likes them because they’re all soggy in the middle and—”

“*Anyways,*” Dash continued, cutting Pinkie Pie off before she could go off on one of her wild tangents, “while I admit Nightmare Moon did a lot to help Ponyville, she also did a lot of things that hurt all of Equestria. Even if you only made her stay in jail for one minute for every pony in Equestria, that would still add up to years... I think.”

Fluttershy shook her head firmly, and, while her voice was at its normal quiet volume, she was still showing more fight than she usually did. “No! No no no! You punish bad ponies, but you forgive good ponies who make a few bad decisions. Nyx isn’t a bad pony.”

“Fluttershy, she threw Equestria into what could have been an eternal night. She locked up Twilight and three little fillies, and she stole the Elements of Harmony from us. She banished Celestia *and* Luna to the sun and moon,” Dash said coldly. “That’s a *lot* of bad decisions.”

“But you’re ignoring all the good decisions she’s made,” Fluttershy pointed out. “She brought back the sun, she saved Twilight, and she defended Ponyville. She’s earned our forgiveness.”

“But Fluttershy—” Rainbow Dash tried to argue, only for Fluttershy to shake her head furiously from side to side.

“No, she deserves to be forgiven. Besides, have you thought about Twilight? How do you think she would feel if Nyx was locked up for years?”

Dash lowered her ears while her strong stance deflated. “I... didn’t think about that.”

“Rainbow Dash brings up a valid point, Fluttershy,” Luna said, defending Dash’s side of the argument. “There are many in Equestria that undoubtedly want to see Nightmare Moon punished, if only for the crimes we have laws for.”

“And stealing a princess’s pet phoenix is probably against the law too, but Celestia forgave me for that,” Fluttershy argued with a rare firmness in her voice. “Nyx is *not* a bad pony, she just made a few bad decisions, and she’s fixed everything she did wrong without anypony asking her. We should forgive her.”

“One who wields unmatched compassion, wishing only to grant forgiveness,” Luna commented as she looked at Fluttershy before she turned to face Rainbow Dash, “balanced by one who embodies loyalty, not only to her friends, but to all of Equestria. I am beginning to truly see why you ponies were able to bring such power to the Elements of Harmony.”

Luna looked to Pinkie Pie, who was wearing her usual smile. “We, however, have not heard your opinion yet, Pinkie Pie. Would you forgive Nightmare Moon or see her punished?”

“I’d forgive her,” Pinkie Pie chirped without a second thought.

“And might I ask why?”

“Well, if I locked her up or banished her, then Nyxie couldn’t come to the super fun-eriffic ‘Thanks-For-Saving-Ponyville-From-A-Bunch-Of-Scary-Monsters’ party!”

“You planned a party for her?” Dash asked incredulously.

Pinkie Pie nodded. “You bet! After all, my special talent is throwing parties and making ponies happy. That, and I wanted to ask if Nyx would try turning me into a cake.”

Luna lifted an eyebrow. “Turn you into a cake?”

“Oh yeah. See, Nyx turned Fluttershy into a tree, and it was so cool, and I wanted her to turn me into a cake, but then Twilight took Nyx away to get lunch, and I figured, now that Nyx is all big like Nightmare Moon, she has to be even *more* wonderful at magic and turning me into a cake would be easy-peasy.”

“But would you not be worried about somepony trying to eat you?”

Pinkie Pie blinked a few times, confronted with an aspect of cake-ification she hadn't considered. “I never thought about that. Huh... I wonder what I'd taste like.”

Rainbow Dash couldn't help but snort. She put a hoof to her face and did her best to keep herself from laughing while Luna, Fluttershy, and Applejack looked at Pinkie Pie with utter confusion.

• • •

Nyx groaned, waking up to her still-very-sore body. She didn't know what had woken her up at first, but, after a moment of lying there groggily, she noticed something was bothering her eyes. She opened them to see what it was, but soon regretted the decision and squeezed them shut.

There was a light shining in her face, and it was bright enough that it was irritating her eyes, even when they were closed. Nyx lifted a hoof to shield her face and tried opening her eyes a second time.

The light that had awoken her was a reflection, a shimmer from the sun that was being directed into her eyes by something. That something was Celestia's crown. Celestia was still lingering by the throne room windows, though she had moved since Nyx had fallen asleep.

Nyx wanted to get up, to move so the light wouldn't be in her eyes. However, as she tried to shift her weight, she realized two things. First, she was really, *really* sore. Second, Twilight was sleeping next to her.

Smiling a little, Nyx couldn't blame Twilight for dozing off. She also found it comforting. Twilight had nestled herself into the crook of Nyx's neck and was sleeping like a filly

curled up in a parent's embrace. It was reversal of their situation, but Nyx still found comfort having her adoptive mother so close.

Still, because of Twilight she was unable to move, and because of the light she was unable to get back to sleep. That left Nyx with only one option.

"Um... Princess Celestia?"

Celestia turned her head abruptly, as if she had been startled out of her thoughts. She recovered her composure quickly and looked over at Nyx. "Yes?"

"Could you move a little, please? Your crown's making the light shine in my eyes."

Celestia turned her head to one side and took notice of the intense white spots of light, the reflections cast by her crown, that seemed to dance around the room as she moved. She then smiled, nodded, and moved to the other side of the windows, where she would not be in direct sunlight. Celestia then looked back at Nyx and asked gently, "Is that better?"

"Much, thank you," Nyx replied before laying her head back down and stifling a yawn. Before she drifted back to sleep, she bent her neck down a little, allowing it to wrap more tightly around the sleeping Twilight.

"She just fell asleep," Celestia said before turning her gaze back to the horizon. "She only left your side for a moment, when she had to go fetch lunch."

"What was for lunch?" Nyx asked, her curiosity caused more by hunger than anything else.

"She brought back some celery soup. She thought you might like some when you woke up. It's lying there by your head."

Nyx shifted and took notice of the bowl of cold soup that was sitting on the floor beside her bed. The sight of it made her smile. "I wish she would have woken me. I would like to have eaten it while it was warm... it's one of my favorite meals."

"I find it interesting you count such a simple, plain soup among your favorites. Did you not eat finer things as Equestria's Queen?"

"I did, but the reason it's my favorite isn't because of how it tastes. This and a daffodil sandwich were the first things I ever ate. It was what Twilight gave me when she first

brought me back to the library. It... it always reminds me of her.” Nyx’s gaze shifted from the bowl back to the sleeping Twilight, and she nuzzled her once more. “It’s not the most delicious meal... but it has—”

“Sentimental value?” Celestia finished softly as she glanced at Nyx again.

Nyx nodded her head and would have gone back to sleep right then. Yet, after a laying there a few moments, Nyx began to smell something. She could smell the soup, but the odd thing was that it smelled warm. Lifting her head gingerly once more, Nyx saw some trails of steam gently rising up from the soup. She also noticed a few lingering bits of magic fade away from the edges of the bowl.

Nyx looked at Celestia, and she wore a gentle smile as the last sparks of magic faded from her horn. Celestia then turned her attention back to the horizon, staring at the perpetual sunset as the gentle clatter of a spoon against a bowl began to fill the room.

• • •

After leaving Pinkie Pie, Rainbow Dash, and Fluttershy, Applejack had let Luna stay in the castle guard tower while she brought other ponies to talk about Nyx. Some spoke well, and, at times, Luna requested that Applejack find ponies that would speak poorly of Nyx, if only so she could hear a proper range of opinions.

Like Rainbow Dash, there were ponies that felt Nyx did need to be punished in some way, though a majority of them felt that such a thing also needed to be tempered with mercy. Cheerilee was among such ponies. She thought of the situation as she would a student breaking a rule in the classroom. The rules applied to everypony, and thus everypony needed to accept the consequences of their actions.

There were also those like Fluttershy, who wished only to offer Nyx leniency and forgiveness. Ditzzy Doo was almost as adamant as Fluttershy that it would be better to forgive Nyx.

Finally, there were those who were in no way swayed by what Nyx had done, who blamed her for the monster attack. They believed that banishment to the moon was a just reward for the pony who usurped Equestria’s throne. Those ponies also made it a point to mention that, unless Nyx was banished, nothing was stopping her from trying to take over Equestria a second time.

After one such harsh pony had said his two bits, Luna thanked him and allowed him to leave. As the stallion departed the tower, Applejack glared at him coldly while making a mental note to charge him extra the next time he came to her apple stand.

“Well, he was certainly adamant, wasn’t he?”

“Bull-headed if you ask me,” Applejack retorted with a huff.

“His opinion is still valid, Applejack,” Luna lectured, “even if you don’t agree with it.”

“I ain’t sayin’ his opinion isn’t valid. I’m just sayin’ he has rocks for brains.”

Luna laughed a little. “Well, I suppose you are allowed your opinion as well. Still, I do believe I have heard enough. Thank you for your assistance, Applejack.”

“Ah’ shoot, I was glad to help. If you don’t mind me askin’, have you decided what you’re gonna do?”

“No,” Luna admitted with a sigh. “If anything, I feel that I am more unsure than I was this morning.”

Applejack cursed under her breath and kicked at the dirt on the floor. “Well, shoot. Sorry I couldn’t be of more help.”

“No, Applejack, you were very helpful. The fact this decision has become difficult for me is a sign that I have come to understand Nightmare Moon. I just... don’t know what I’m going to do.”

“Well, I’m sure you’ll think of somethin’. After all—”

“Hey Applejack!”

Hearing her name, Applejack snapped her head around and looked towards the steps of the guard tower. Four fillies came running into view, each wearing a Cutie Mark Crusaders cape. Apple Bloom, Sweetie Belle, Scootaloo, and, the group’s latest addition, Twist scampered up into the tower, barely giving Luna time to make herself invisible.

“Well hey there, sis, what are you four doin’ out here this late?” Applejack asked.

“Pinkie Pie told us that we should come talk to you, that you were askin’ a bunch of ponies about Nyx,” Apple Bloom answered.

Applejack chuckled and nodded her head. “Well, I reckon I was.”

“Well then why didn’t you come talk to us?” Scootaloo asked.

“Yeah, we’re Nyx’s best friends! Why wouldn’t you come talk to us about her?” Sweetie Belle added.

“Sorry. I guess y’all just didn’t cross my mind,” Applejack said before she glanced to where Luna had been standing a few moments before. “I reckon I should go ahead and let you four get yer word in since you went through the trouble of chasin’ me down. Now, what would y’all want me to know about Nyx?”

With nothing but that single question, the four fillies were off. They talked about everything that they could about Nyx, as if they had been thinking about that very question the whole time they were looking for Applejack. They told of how good she was at games, how smart she was, how she and Twist helped the other three with school work when it got hard, and how awesome she was at magic.

It was an endless stream of things, each some small event or nuance about the filly that the four called their friend. Through it all, Applejack felt the smile on her face slowly growing larger.

“And...” Apple Bloom tried to continue a few minutes later, looking at her friends anxiously. “I can’t think of anything else.”

“I can think of something,” Twist said cheerfully. “Nyx is a really good friend.”

“Personally, I reckon that all you little fillies are really good friends,” Applejack stated. “And thank you for runnin’ me down to tell me all of this, but it’s gettin’ late. You four should be gettin’ back to yer families, and that includes you, Apple Bloom. I don’t want to get back to the farm and hear from Big Macintosh you were late gettin’ back.”

The four fillies hung their heads but did as they were told. They made their way to the stairwell that led down from the top of the guard tower. Applejack stood and watched the four cape-wearing Crusaders leave, and, once she was sure the fillies were out of earshot, Applejack gave her hat a nudge as she smiled.

“If you wanted to know about Nightmare Moon, sugarcube, those are the four fillies that’ll give you the honest truth,” Applejack said, assuming that Luna was still hiding invisibly nearby. “The others and I, we knew her because of Twilight. Those four, they’re her real friends, and real friends are the ones that know ya the best.”

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Celestia's horn began to glow gently as she shut her eyes and stretched out her magic. She had been watching the clock carefully, and, when the time was right, she reached out to the sun. While she and Luna wanted to keep their return a secret, it was important that the sun and moon were put back on schedule.

The princess's bond with the sun made setting it as simple as reaching out to an old friend, or perhaps to a child. The sun would, on some days, be willing to slip off to its slumber beyond the horizon. On other days, it would fuss and refuse, but every day Celestia found a way of coaxing it down so that the moon could rise. She had done so for a thousand years, and did it again tonight... even if she could feel the lingering magic of Nyx, who had tended the sun in her absence.

The sun was willing this evening. It was ready for a rest after being in the sky for so much longer than usual. It began to sink below the horizon with only the slightest guidance.

Celestia's attention was drawn away when she heard the doors to the throne room open. For a moment it looked as if nopony was there, but she could hear hoofsteps against the floor. Once the door was closed, Luna slowly bled back into visibility and crossed the room to sit by her sister.

"I see that they are sleeping," Luna whispered as she motioned to Nyx and Twilight.

"Nightmare Moon needs her rest, and Twilight has been so worried I would be surprised if my student hadn't exhausted herself. Though, in honesty, her concerns of what we might do aren't unwarranted."

"Despite our powers, Celestia, we are still just ponies, and at times we make mistakes just like any other. Our emotions get the better of us, and we make bad decisions. It was my jealousy of you that, a thousand years ago, led me to make the worst decision of my life, and, once that decision was made, it took the Elements of Harmony to set things right."

"That does not excuse my actions."

"I never said it did," Luna corrected, "but you know you did something wrong, sister, which means you can work to make it right."

Celestia nodded as she watched Luna raise the moon as her sun continued to set. "Perhaps I can. So, were you successful?"

“I was. I learned much about both the filly she was before and how Nightmare Moon is currently viewed by the residents of Ponyville.”

“Have you decided what you are going to do?”

“I believe I have,” Luna answered gently as she grew quiet. “I think it’s for the best, but I can’t be sure. I actually wanted to talk with two more ponies first before I really decide.”

“And they are?”

“I need to speak with Nightmare Moon, but only after discussing this with you, Celestia. You’ve been with Twilight and Nightmare Moon all day. Surely you have noticed a few things.”

A cold sternness took shape on Celestia’s face. “I have. Much like Twilight and her friends, I am one of the few who has seen the true Nightmare Moon. I have seen the mare that I was forced to banish, who desired the night eternal, and who banished me to the sun during that fateful Summer Sun Celebration. I knew the monster and I feared her.

“Yes... I have seen the true Nightmare Moon,” Celestia continued before a smile started to form on her lips while her eyes softened, “and, while the alicorn who lies in this room is the same mare, she is no longer a monster. She is the same in form, in power, and in history, but she has also changed. She is not like what she once was, and I can now truly see that for myself.

“For while you have come to know Nightmare Moon as she was seen by Ponyville, sister, I have come to know how she is seen by the pony that cares for her the most,” Celestia said, looking over her shoulder at the sleeping form of Twilight Sparkle.

“To my faithful student, she has only known Nightmare Moon by another name. Through her eyes, she sleeps beside a mare that is not a monster and was never a queen. To Twilight, Nightmare Moon... no, Nyx is a daughter, one that Twilight is willing to do anything to protect. I have, honestly, never been prouder of my student.”

Celestia heaved a weary sigh. “Though, perhaps it is better to say my former student. I cannot be sure Twilight will ever be able to look upon me as her teacher again, considering what has transpired between us.”

“I think, sister, that an action is only unforgivable if we choose to make it that way,” Luna corrected softly as she leaned against Celestia’s side. “By calling something we’ve done

unforgivable, we do nothing to try and change it. We let the mistake we made define who we are, even if it's not the pony we want to be.

“But everything is forgivable in time. Anypony can earn redemption. They have to be willing, and sometimes they need help and a lot of time... but anything can be forgiven.”

Celestia bent her head down, bringing it next to Luna's as she smiled. “Forgiveness. Truly, if there were meant to be a seventh Element of Harmony, it would be the Element of Forgiveness. I will work to earn my forgiveness for what I've done.”

“You will not work alone, sister,” Luna replied. “It was my past, my bad decisions, and my wrongs that turned me into Nightmare Moon. This alicorn inherited all of my sins, whether she wanted them or not, and it is a burden that I intend to, at least in part, take back.”

• • •

Nyx glanced anxiously over her shoulder. Twilight was being shown out of the room by Celestia, who whispered something to her before sending her outside and closing the door. Celestia then sealed the door with both physical locks and magical barriers, something that made Nyx swallow nervously before turning her head forward. The bed she had been recovering on had been removed, she was standing where it had once been, and Princess Luna stood before her.

Luna, despite being smaller in stature than Nyx, stood with her back to the room's broken windows with her wings spread and a firm, serious expression on her face. In all, Luna gave off an aura of leadership and power. Every part of her body language shouted that, at the moment, she stood not as a younger sister or a friend. No, in that moment, she stood as a Royal Sister of Equestria, as the Regent of the Moon, and as the one about to pass judgment on Nyx.

“Nightmare Moon, you stand accused of high treason against Equestria. You have committed crimes against the ponies of this kingdom as well as my sister and I, the High Princesses of Equestria. You have brought about two weeks of constant night to this land. You unjustly imprisoned one adult mare and three young fillies. Your agents, the Children of Nightmare, spread fear throughout the land and almost succeeded in executing an innocent unicorn. Above all, you usurped Equestria's throne by imprisoning both me and my sister in the moon and sun respectively.

“Do you deny these crimes as I have spoken them?” Luna asked.

Nyx hung her head as everything she had done was verbally thrown back in her face.
“No... I do not.”

“Before I pass my judgment, Nightmare Moon, I would ask you one question. Are you willing to answer it truthfully?”

Nyx replied with a simple nod.

“Earlier, just before you surrendered yourself to Celestia and I, you said something to Twilight Sparkle. What did you say?”

“I simply told her that I had decided what kind of mare I wanted to be.”

“And what kind of mare are you? Who are you? Are you Nightmare Moon, or are you Nyx? Are you the filly Twilight took care of, or are you the mare I used to be?”

Nyx swallowed, glancing over her shoulder to the closed throne room doors, beyond which she knew stood Twilight Sparkle. “I cannot deny my past nor my origins. I was born of a spell meant to resurrect Nightmare Moon. In power, in form, and in memory, I am the same mare you once were. And, in truth, if it were not for that past, I would not have had the courage and determination to protect the ponies I care about.”

Nyx then smiled and turned her eyes towards Luna as they filled with a firm conviction. “But I am now much more than your twisted shadow, Princess Luna. As Nyx, I learned what it was like to be cared for by a mother, to have friends and play in the sunshine. As Nightmare Moon, I was born into your jealousy and hatred. Yet, I was given a chance to know happiness, and that has left its mark on my soul.

“I am both Nightmare Moon and Nyx, because they are one and the same. They are both me, but the name I choose as my own is Nyx.” She finished with a stomp of her front right hoof. The last echoes of that proclamation lingered in the air before dissipating into the night.

Luna nodded in understanding, and shut her eyes as she listened as the last traces of Nyx’s words faded. She then took in a deep breath, and, when Luna next opened her eyes, both they and her horn were glowing.

“Then, Nyx, I lay my judgment upon you.”

Twilight paced anxiously outside the throne room. She could hear Luna and Nyx talking from the other side of the door but could not make out what was being said. No matter how intently Twilight listened, all the words just sounded muffled. She even tried putting her ear right up against the door, but it didn't help.

Celestia had whispered just before shutting the door that "it would only take a few minutes." Well, it *had* been a few minutes, and Twilight's patience was wearing thin. What was Luna going to do to Nyx? She needed to know.

She was so wrapped up in her thoughts that she barely noticed the seams of the door beginning to glow, which spawned greater concerns in her mind. What was going on? Was Luna passing her judgment? What could she be doing that would be producing that much light? All these questions danced within Twilight's mind, and, almost instantly, her thoughts flew to the worst case scenario.

They were banishing her! Luna was banishing Nyx to the moon for another thousand years!

That had to be what was happening! Twilight was sure of it, and she quickly began to buck and beat on the throne room doors, trying to get in. She needed to convince the princesses that banishing Nyx to the moon wasn't the answer. If they locked her up in a dungeon or banished her from Equestria, Twilight could at least visit her, be with her, comfort her.

But the *moon*? She couldn't go to the moon! In her panic, Twilight called on her magic and tried to teleport herself into the throne room, only to feel her spell falter. Somepony was stopping her, interfering with her magic. Twilight could only guess it was Celestia. The princess was probably standing right on the other side of the door, making sure she couldn't get inside.

With her magic blocked, Twilight resumed bucking at the door. She screamed at the top of her lungs to be let in. She assaulted the door, yet it held strong against her hooves and her voice. Still, Twilight did not relent. She fought for what felt like an eternity, stopping only when she saw the light coming through the cracks in the door grow dark.

Her blood ran cold.

She dropped to her flanks and sat there, staring up at the door she had been unable to get through. She... she had failed. She had failed Nyx again. She had let Luna take her

daughter away, and she hadn't been able to do anything to stop it. Why hadn't she insisted on staying in the room? Why had she let Celestia lead her outside? She should have been there, should have stayed with Nyx. Why did she trust Celestia? Why hadn't she...

Twilight jumped when the throne room doors opened and Celestia poked her head out. "Twilight, we're—"

Like somepony had struck a match and thrown it into a tinderbox, Twilight's anger exploded. Her mane was consumed with fire and her coat glowed white-hot. She rage-shifted, screaming so loudly that her voice echoed throughout the halls of the castle, causing anypony that could hear her to stop dead in their tracks and listen.

"You banished her! After all she's done **you banished her!**" Twilight bellowed. She began grabbing at anything she could, ripping chunks of stone directly out of the walls and hurling them at Celestia.

"Twilight!" Celestia said firmly as she employed her own magic to catch the volley of stones.

"Why didn't you at least let me SAY GOODBYE!?"

"Twilight!"

"That's why you didn't want me in the room! You didn't want me to stop you! She didn't deserve this! She didn't deserve t—"

Celestia furrowed her eyebrows and spread her wings as her horn's glow grew to a blinding intensity. Celestia then threw out her magic, the energies washing over Twilight like a tidal wave. Twilight's own magic was overwhelmed, and her rage-shift ended like a fire doused in water.

"Twilight, we *did not* banish her to the moon," Celestia said when she was finally able to get a word in.

"YOU... you... you didn't?" Twilight asked, her voice changing from an indignant scream to a disbelieving whisper.

"No, we didn't."

“But, the light... and you were taking so long! What were you and Luna doing if you weren’t banishing her?”

Celestia let a smile blossom onto her face as she slipped back through the throne room doors. “Come see for yourself.”

Twilight followed Celestia into the throne room, and, the moment she was inside, she began to look around frantically. She wasn’t sure what she was supposed to see, but she still searched for Nyx. Her gaze, however, was quickly drawn to another figure.

At the far end of the room stood Princess Luna, but she had undergone a transformation. She had grown as tall and slender as Celestia. Her own starfield of a mane had also transformed. Nightmare Moon’s mane could be described as a dark night with a faint twinkling of stars. Luna’s old mane was a clear summer’s night. Her new mane, however, was the night sky at its finest. Millions of stars, nebulae, and other wonders that were normally only visible through a telescope could be glimpsed within her mane. It was a living tapestry.

In all, Luna truly looked like a Ruler of Equestria and the Regent of the Moon, a true equal to Celestia in both power, stature, and beauty. Twilight couldn’t tear her eyes away for several seconds. She was as dumbfounded as she was the first time she met Celestia in person. When she was finally able to look away, her gaze turned downward where she noticed the black mass on the floor just in front of Luna.

It was a little black filly with a unicorn horn, pegasus wings, purple hair, and a few lingering bandages lying lazily across her flank.

“N... Nyx!?” Twilight said breathlessly, her mind struggling to grasp what she was seeing. It was at that moment that Twilight felt a gentle nudge on her side. Looking back, she saw the nudge had come from Celestia. The princess nodded gently once, silently assuring Twilight that what she was seeing was real.

That single gesture was all Twilight needed. She burst into a full gallop, raced across the room, and dropped to her knees beside Nyx. The rejuvenated alicorn was passed out on the floor, but Twilight held her all the same. She embraced and nuzzled Nyx, all the while wearing the biggest smile that would fit on her face.

As Twilight hugged Nyx, Celestia and Luna moved closer, standing side by side. They watched the scene before them silently, sharing gentle smiles. “Careful,” Celestia said, “I think it would be wise to let her rest.”

Twilight was brought back to reality by Celestia's words. She loosened her grip on Nyx, but she did not let go. She just held Nyx for a while, as if fearing it was some cruel joke. In time, she looked up at the sisters. "But... but I thought... how could she?"

"My sister and I, as well as Nyx, are different from normal ponies, Twilight, and not just because we have both wings and horns," Luna explained. "We are also different for we are very closely bound to the magic we wield.

"Not only does our immortality and strength come from our magic, but so does our maturity. That was why, after I was saved by the Elements of Harmony, I was so much smaller, so much younger, than Celestia. The Elements of Harmony took away much of my capacity for magic, and thus I became a pony barely mature enough to be considered a young adult."

"So what did you do?" Twilight asked.

"I took back what was mine," Luna answered with kindness, rather than cruelty. "The power Nyx possessed was never her own. Nexus's spell gave her the portions of my power that remained in the shreds and supplemented what was missing by drawing in raw magic from Equestria itself. I took most of that magic for my own, since it was mine to begin with, and dispelled what remained, leaving Nyx the way she was before the cult ponynapped her.

"I also," Luna continued, her gaze shifting to the passed out filly, "took back the memories that never should have been hers. The memories of being trapped in the moon and everything that preceded that, when she and I were truly one and the same. She will remember the facts about our shared past, but she will no longer know the torment of spending a millennium in banishment.

"To put it simply, Twilight, I took back what was mine and mine alone."

"Will she remember everything else that's happened?" Twilight asked cautiously.

"Yes, Nyx must live with the decisions she made for herself. She possesses every memory from the moment she took her first breath as her own pony, until now. After all, it was the events of these last few weeks that helped her discover the kind of mare she wants to be. She'll also retain a few key memories from the day of the Summer Sun Celebration two years ago, mostly because of how closely those memories are intertwined with her memories of her school play and the following evening.

“But otherwise, Nyx is as she once was. With her magic drained, her physical maturity has regressed. This has also affected her mind. Much like her body, it is once again youthful and innocent; it is the mind of a child.”

“But I thought you were going to punish her. Banish her to the moon, or—”

“Nyx has worked to undo the mistakes she’s made,” Luna interrupted, maintaining her gentle tone while still silencing Twilight. “That is a sign of a pony that deserves a chance to redeem herself, not one that needs to be punished.”

“But what about the rest of Equestria? They know Nyx is Nightmare Moon. If they see her—”

“Do not doubt that Nyx will have to face those she has hurt,” Luna explained as her voice took on a warning tone. “There are those across Equestria, even in Ponyville, who will strongly disagree with what I’ve done, but that is something Nyx must face. It is a consequence of her actions.”

“But what if somepony tries to hurt her?” Twilight asked nervously, once again imagining the angry mob she thought should have formed at the Spring Festival.

“She is like us, Twilight. Even as a filly she is much more durable than most ponies. However, if anypony gives you too much trouble, I am simply a letter away,” Celestia assured calmly.

“And, for the moment, let me and my sister worry about what Equestria thinks,” Luna added. “If there are any ponies that do not agree with what has been done, then they can come and voice their concerns to me. It was, however, my decision to make, and I stand by my belief that this is for the best.”

“So you’re going to let her go, just like that?” Twilight asked, finding the situation almost too good to be true.

“No,” Luna stated firmly, her lips bending down in a frown. “There is one other part of her punishment, and it involves *you*, Twilight Sparkle.”

Twilight winced and held Nyx tightly against her chest as she dreaded what the now-much-larger Princess Luna was going to do. Luna’s gaze was harsh, and she stared Twilight down for a few moments before leaning in to speak. Yet, as she spoke, the tone of her voice was serious but not threatening.

“Twilight Sparkle, I hereby place Nyx in your care. You shall be her legal guardian, and it will be your responsibility to ensure that she never again repeats her crimes. You shall watch her as she grows up. I want you to ensure she laughs, learns, lives, and has friends. I ask that you help her enjoy the childhood that was almost lost to her and make sure she becomes the mare she wants to be.”

Luna let her voice slip into a more pleasant tone, and she smiled mischievously. “Think you can do that?”

It took a moment for Twilight to process the order she had been given, but, the moment her brain connected the dots, she nodded her head furiously. She proceeded to hold and nuzzle Nyx while her face remained locked in a huge smile. Tears rolled down Twilight’s cheeks, and she made no effort to stop them. She was too happy to care.

It was then Celestia leaned in close to Luna and whispered quietly, “Good job, sister.”

• • •

Celestia and Luna departed for Canterlot soon after, planning to announce their return to Equestria in the morning. News would spread across the kingdom quickly and, if Twilight knew anything, Pinkie Pie would probably throw a “The Princesses are back” party as soon as she found out.

Despite that small, lingering concern, Twilight chose to focus on one thing: going home with Nyx. The Golden Oaks Library had survived the attack and, at the moment, Twilight wanted, maybe even needed, to have Nyx to herself for a little while.

After sneaking out of the castle, Twilight quickly strode through the empty streets of Ponyville. Upon entering the library, Twilight was thankful to find Owloysius wasn’t there. She did see Spike, but he had fallen asleep in the middle of the floor, dozing off during his chores with Peewee asleep on top of his head. It was a sight that really made Twilight feel like she was home: a single, simple familiarity. Taking a moment, Twilight levitated Spike’s basket down from the bedroom, ensuring that both he and Peewee were sleeping comfortably before she took Nyx upstairs.

Having her magic drained away had knocked Nyx out, something Twilight was a little thankful for. If Nyx had woken up at the castle, it would have been more difficult to get her back to the library without drawing attention. At the moment, however, she was still asleep, and Twilight carefully levitated her into bed. She then gently nuzzled Nyx, intending the touch to be a good night gesture.

Nyx, however, stirred and groaned a little as she opened her eyes. Confusion flashed across her face as she looked about the room. When she noticed Twilight and how big she seemed to be, Nyx looked down at herself, gaping in disbelief at her tiny body.

“How are you feeling?” Twilight asked.

“Okay... kind of—” Nyx began to answer, only to squeak a little and lift a hoof to her throat. Her voice was back to the way it was, something that only confused her further.

It was no surprise that Nyx asked what had happened, and Twilight was more than happy to tell her everything. It was an explanation that Nyx listened to intently. She hung on Twilight’s every word until the very end, when she asked, “So, Princess Luna took it all back?”

“What was originally hers, but you should still remember everything that happened since I found you in the forest.”

“I... I do remember,” Nyx admitted, “but it’s weird.”

“How is it weird?”

“I can remember. I remember how I used to think, how I used to know all sorts of things, and I remember what I did, but it feels like it was a nightmare. It’s like I went to sleep, dreamed all those things, and now I’ve woken up.”

“But you do know that everything really did happen, don’t you? You do realize that it wasn’t a nightmare.”

“I know what I did,” Nyx said before looking up at Twilight nervously. “So, what happens to me now? Are the princesses going to take me away again?”

Twilight shook her head. “No, they aren’t.”

“Then... are they going to banish me to the moon?” Nyx asked as she tried to imagine what punishment awaited her.

“No, they aren’t,” Twilight said again, beginning to smile.

“Are they going to punish me at all?”

“Yes, they are.”

“W-what are they going to do?” Nyx asked with a small tremor in her voice.

“They are going to make you stay here and be my daughter,” Twilight answered, offering a big, toothy grin.

The words made Nyx’s eyes light up in disbelief. Unable to contain her joy, she leaped out of bed and tackled Twilight. The pair was soon lost in a fit of giggles, for Twilight was taking her revenge for being tackled by playfully tickling Nyx.

It was the kind of fun both of them had been missing. Twilight knew Nyx would grow up eventually, that someday she would once again become a tall, regal alicorn with enough power to move the sun and moon. But for the moment, she was just happy to have her daughter back, to be able to enjoy raising and caring for Nyx for longer than just a few months.

After Twilight finished tickling Nyx, she helped her back into bed. Like the many nights before Nyx had been taken away, Twilight carefully tucked her in and kissed her on the forehead.

“Welcome home, Nyx,” Twilight spoke sweetly, sneaking another kiss on Nyx’s cheek before she crawled into her own bed and extinguished the lights. As her eyes adjusted to the now dark room, Nyx yawned and snuggled into the covers of her bed. It was strange to be a filly again, for her mind to be like it had been before.

In the dark of the room, her eyes were once again playing tricks on her. Nyx noticed strange shadows around the room that caused a twisting sense of fear to build in her chest. She felt defenseless again. Without all the power she’d had as a grown-up, the world was once again a threatening place.

It was a *lot* easier to be brave and courageous when one possesses enough magical power to fry almost anything with lightning.

Despite the fact that the world was a scarier place than when she was an adult, Nyx still found a reason to smile. She turned her gaze over to Twilight, who was lying in her own bed. She had a mother that loved her more than anything, one that she knew would never abandon her. It didn’t matter anymore that she was Nightmare Moon. That didn’t mean she had to be a monster or a bad pony. She didn’t have to be a tyrant or a queen. She could be a normal filly just like her friends and just be herself.

She could just be Nyx.

Yet, as Nyx watched Twilight, a thought crossed her mind. It was a silly thought, a stupid thought, but one that made her anxious all the same. It was a thought that came from her younger mind, and it made Nyx worry, even though it was a concern that an older mare would be able to disregard.

“Um...Twilight?”

“Yes, Nyx?” Twilight asked as she lifted her head off her pillow.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“I know Princess Luna already gave me her judgment, and I’m glad to be a filly again, but... well... I did do a lot of really bad things. So, I was wondering, and if you say yes I promise I won’t get mad, but... am I grounded?”

A snort of laughter escaped Twilight’s throat before she could stop it. While Nyx wasn’t sure what Twilight found so funny, she regained her composure quickly and said, with an assuring tone, “No, you’re not grounded. You’ve been through a lot, and I think you’ve learned your lesson. Now don’t worry about it anymore and go to sleep.”

Nyx stifled another yawn, laid her head down, and shut her eyes. “Okay, Twilight,” she muttered out as sleep began to overtake her. Going from being a full adult mare back to a filly was a tiring experience and, with her fears sated, Nyx soon drifted off to sleep.

• • •

BURRRRPPP

Twilight’s eyes slid open at the familiar sound of Spike burping up a letter. It was a sound Twilight had longed to hear for the several weeks she was locked in the castle’s dungeons. Sitting up, Twilight yawned before slowly slipping out from her covers and making her way to the staircase.

Both Spike and Peewee had been abruptly woken up by Spike’s belch. By the time Twilight had arrived at the library’s main floor, Spike was already out of his bed and reading the note with Peewee perched on his shoulder.

“Good morning, Spike,” Twilight said as she began crossing the room in the direction of the kitchen.

Spike visibly jumped at the sound of Twilight's voice and spun on his heels to face her. After he had seen that it was just Twilight, Spike was able to calm himself and say, "Hey Twilight, I thought you were going to stay at the castle last night."

"I was, but... a couple things happened. Now, what does the letter say?"

"It's great news! Princess Celestia and Princess Luna are back!"

Twilight paused, glanced at Spike, and said, "Oh, I already knew that." She then continued walking towards the kitchen.

"Yeah it's—" Spike began, only to stop and look at Twilight quizzically. "Wait, you know? How do you know?"

"I'll tell you over breakfast, Spike," Twilight replied. "Now, would you go upstairs and wake Nyx?"

"Nyx is upstairs!?" Spike exclaimed before he turned to look towards the library staircase.

"Don't tell me you're scared of her, Spike."

"Twilight, she's an alicorn ten times my size that shoots *lightning*! She locked you in a dungeon and did a whole bunch of other stuff!" He looked back over his shoulder anxiously. "Can we really trust her?"

"Spike, she's just our Nyx. The princesses let her go because they think she deserves a second chance. You don't have to be scared of her," Twilight assured him.

"I'm not scared," Spike argued before he lowered his head and looked at his claws. "I was just... really worried about you and what she was going to do to you. I didn't know where you had gone until I found out you were in her dungeons. And then... then you almost got hanged and... and..."

"Spike," Twilight said quietly. She rested her neck on him in a close embrace, and he returned the hug warmly, wrapping his short arms around her neck. "I'm sorry I worried you, but, I promise, you don't have to be scared anymore. I'm not going anywhere anytime soon."

Spike nodded and pulled away from Twilight, rubbing his eyes to fight back the few tears that were trying to form. "I guess I should go get Nyx now, huh?"

“Only if you feel up to it, Spike.”

He waved Twilight off, turned, and began walking towards the stairs. “I think I can manage. I just hope she doesn’t wake up on the wrong side of the bed.”

Twilight laughed a little and watched Spike until he disappeared up the stairwell. She then turned and made her way into the library’s kitchen. With her magic, she began drawing out ingredients for a nice, hearty breakfast. It would be Nyx’s first breakfast back at the library, and Twilight wanted to make it a good one. That, and she’d missed dinner the evening before, so she was looking forward to enjoying a big meal.

Opening the cupboards, Twilight levitated out some bowls and basic ingredients. “Let’s see, I feel like pancakes,” Twilight thought out loud to herself as she remembered the recipe and looked over what ingredients were available in the library. “We have flour, sugar, cinnamon, baking powder, milk, vegetable oil, water, vanilla, butter. Good, looks like I have everything I—”

SLAMMM!

Twilight almost dropped all the ingredients she had been levitating, but managed to keep a hold of everything... except the bag of flour, which dropped to the floor like a rock. It threw up a huge white cloud upon impact and filled the air with a smoke screen of white powder.

Twilight hacked and coughed as the flour settled, the front of her body covered in white dust, as was much of the kitchen. It was a sizable mess, one that Twilight could only frown at before turning her eyes to the kitchen door where Spike was smiling back sheepishly.

“Oh... uh... sorry Twilight.”

“It’s fine,” she huffed, “though I would like to know *why* you just burst through the door like that.”

“Twilight, Nyx is a filly again!”

“Yes, I *know*, Spike,” Twilight replied as she shook her body, trying to throw off the flour that was covering her.

“Wait, you knew that too? When did all this happen?”

“Yesterday evening,” Twilight answered. “Princess Luna was the one that changed her back.”

“But why would the princess—”

Twilight cut Spike off by putting a broom and dustpan into his claws. “I’ll explain while we clean up this mess.”

Spike nodded and, as the pair worked together, Twilight filled Spike in on everything that had happened. There were a couple times she had to back up and repeat herself, but, by the time the kitchen was clean, Spike had a fairly strong grasp on what had transpired.

“So... Nyx is mostly back to the way she was, but she still remembers everything that’s happened? And at the same time, Princess Luna’s now as big and tall like Princess Celestia, because she took back the power Nyx had?”

“Pretty much.”

“Wow... a lot happened yesterday.”

“Yes, it did,” Twilight agreed as she threw the last bit of the spilled flour away. “Now, would you please go upstairs and get Nyx while I start on these pancakes?”

Spike nodded and scampered out of the kitchen while Twilight turned her levitation spell on the ingredients. She began to carefully measure out and pour them into a mixing bowl. Soon, the batter was perfect and Twilight was cooking the first pancake on the stove. Feeling just a little adventurous, Twilight chose to forgo using a spatula and tried to flip the pancake with just her magic.

SQQQUUUUUEEEEEE!

The sound of Nyx’s voice made Twilight jump a second time that morning. The half-cooked pancake, which was being lifted by Twilight’s magic, soared skyward, flipping and turning in the air before it came back down. With a thick splat, the uncooked side landed on Twilight’s head, splattering white batter across her face while she furrowed her eyebrows in annoyance.

“Twilight, Twilight!” Spike chanted as he and Nyx came running through the kitchen door, only for both to come to a stop dead in their tracks.

“Whoa, Twilight, you trying to cook that pancake on your head?” Spike joked, which only drew a frown and an annoyed glare from her.

“No, I’m not,” Twilight grumbled as she levitated the pancake off her head and grabbed a wet rag from the sink to clean herself. “Now, why did I hear a scream?”

“Nyx has her cutie mark!”

Twilight’s annoyance disappeared, and she lowered the washrag from her face. “She does!?”

“Yeah!” Nyx chirped back, turning to the side. “See?”

Twilight leaned forward a little and focused her eyes on Nyx’s side. Her cutie mark was a single, simple image: a night-blue kite shield which tapered off to a single point at the bottom and crested to a single point on top. The blue color was steely, with a slightly lighter-toned metallic highlight that, if Twilight wasn’t mistaken, almost looked like a narrow crescent moon.

“Isn’t it amazing?” Nyx asked.

“Yes, it is,” Twilight answered. “Did you just get it?”

“No, and that’s the thing we couldn’t figure out,” Spike explained. “I saw it when Nyx climbed out of bed, and I’ve never heard of a pony getting a cutie mark while they were asleep... well, unless their special talent is sleeping. Anyways, that means she had to get it before she went to sleep last night, but she doesn’t remember seeing it before she woke up.”

“We were wondering if you know when it showed up and if you know what it means,” Nyx added.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t. Maybe Princess Celestia knows.”

“Why would the princess know?” Spike asked.

“She stayed with me and Nyx most of yesterday, so maybe she saw something. Spike?”

The baby dragon smiled, slipped out the kitchen, and appeared a few moments later with quill and paper in his claws. “Ready.”

“Dear Princess Celestia, I hope you are having an easy time settling back into Canterlot,” Twilight began as Spike wrote. “I know you must be busy, but we discovered this morning that Nyx has her cutie mark. We do not, however, know when it appeared. I was wondering if you, by chance, noticed anything yesterday, since we know that Nyx did not have her cutie mark before the attack. Your Faithful Student, Twilight Sparkle.”

“Twilight... Sparkle,” Spike echoed as he finished the letter. Then, in a flash of emerald fire, the letter was sent to Canterlot by Spike’s magical dragon fire.

With the scroll gone and a little encouragement from Nyx and Spike, Twilight began a third attempt at making breakfast. As Twilight cooked, Spike and Nyx tried to guess what Nyx’s cutie mark meant. It was a conversation Twilight joined once she had three plates stacked high with light, fluffy pancakes.

“You really think that’s what it means?”

“Oh yeah, that *has* to be what it means,” Spike assured as Twilight placed a plate in front of him. “Twilight will back me up.”

“Back you up on what?” Twilight asked as she set down Nyx’s plate.

“I think Nyx’s cutie mark means her special talent is being tough.”

“Really?” Twilight said, making no effort to hide the skepticism in her voice.

“Well, think about all the stuff she did when she was Nigh—, I mean... when she was big. She fought back a bunch of monsters and beat Celestia. A pony has to be tough to do all that, and shields are tough.”

“But Applejack, Pinkie Pie, and Fluttershy helped me fight all those monsters, and Celestia wasn’t really trying to beat me when we fought,” Nyx pointed out as Twilight sat down at the table with her own plate of food.

“But you still beat her,” Spike argued.

“I’m sorry, Spike, but, if you’re right, then wouldn’t Nyx’s cutie mark have appeared after she defeated Princess Celestia?” Twilight asked as she watched Spike drown his pancakes in maple syrup.

“Well, I guess you’re—” Spike began, only for his cheeks to puff out. A moment later he belched out a cloud of smoke, which swirled and materialized into a scroll. The letter

dropped out of the air a moment later, and Twilight had to use a quick bit of magic to keep it from landing on top of Spike's syrup-drenched pancakes.

"So, does Princess Celestia know?" Nyx asked, the letter completely distracting her from breakfast.

Twilight laughed and waved a hoof in Nyx's direction as she unrolled the scroll. "Just a second, let me read."

To My Faithful Student,

Things are busy around the palace, mostly because everypony wants to celebrate that Luna and I have returned. Still, it is good to be home and we are settling back in.

As to your question, I do believe I know when Nyx gained her cutie mark. It was yesterday, when she was surrendering herself to me and Luna. It was just after she finished speaking that I noticed a flash of light coming from her side. I was unable to see the mark at the time, due to Nyx's bandages, but I do believe that was when Nyx's cutie mark appeared.

Hopefully you find that helpful, and I offer my congratulations to Nyx.

Sincerely,

Princess Celestia of Equestria

P.S. Luna offers her congratulations as well.

Twilight's mind slipped back to remember that moment in time. She had wanted her to stop, but Nyx had surrendered herself to Celestia and Luna all the same. It was then, at the end, that Nyx had spoken what could have easily turned out to be her final words.

"I can be bruised, battered and beaten but, as long as there is still breath in my lungs, I will continue to protect ponies. I will protect them, because what can kill them I can survive, because what hurts them is but a scratch for me, because it's the one thing I've been able to do right."

"So, what did Princess Celestia say?" Spike asked through a mouthful of food.

"She remembered seeing a flash of light, and she thinks that's when Nyx got her cutie mark. If she's right, then I think I know what your special talent is."

"What is it?" Nyx asked anxiously.

“I think your special talent is protecting other ponies.”

“Protecting other ponies?” Nyx echoed quizzically.

“Yes, like how you protected Ponyville from the monster attack. Like how you were willing to surrender yourself not only to make up for what you had done, but also for the things done by the Children of Nightmare. Like a shield,” Twilight continued, pointing at Nyx’s cutie mark, “you are willing to put yourself in danger to protect other ponies, no matter who they are.”

Nyx glanced down at her cutie mark and then turned to look at her pancakes. She stared at them while the thought of her special talent rolled around in her head. Nyx then looked back at Twilight, obviously a little worried. “Um... Twilight? If my talent is protecting other ponies, does that mean I have to fight monsters now?”

Twilight chuckled before shaking her head.

“No, you don’t have to worry about fighting monsters right now. You’re just a filly, and Luna took away most of your magic. Even if you *did* have all your powers, I *still* wouldn’t let you fight anything from the Everfree Forest.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t want to even *think* about you fighting anything until you’re at least my age. But don’t get me wrong, I still think it’s a wonderful cutie mark.”

A smile spread across Nyx’s lips. Despite wanting to jump out of her seat from having both a cutie mark and Twilight’s approval, she managed to keep herself contained to her chair. She, however, quickly began expressing her joy through other means. Each forkful of breakfast was consumed with a huge smile, and even her chewing seemed happy.

“That *is* a nice special talent,” Spike commented after taking a drink of water to wash down a bite of pancake, “but I think that makes me kind of right.”

“Right about what?” Twilight asked.

“Well, Nyx’s special talent. I mean, to be good at protecting ponies she has to be pretty tough.”

Twilight laughed a little, about to take her first bite. “Well, I think it takes a little more than *just* being tough, but—”

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK

Twilight sighed, wondering if she would ever get to eat breakfast that morning through all the interruptions. Twilight had every intention of ignoring the pony at the door, but a second set of knocks forced her to set her fork down and step away from the table. She walked to the front door, and, upon reaching it, Twilight opened it to reveal a pink earth pony with bright blue eyes.

“Hey Pinkie Pie.”

“Twilight, what *are* you doing inside?” Pinkie Pie asked with her usual level of energy.

“Trying to eat breakfast,” Twilight answered before cocking an eyebrow. “Why?”

“You silly filly, if you want to eat breakfast you should come to the party!”

Twilight cocked her head in confusion, but Pinkie Pie just responded by pointing down the street with her hoof. Twilight followed Pinkie’s point and stuck her head out of the library door to see that, a few blocks away, the streets of Ponyville had been transformed. Every lamppost, store front... basically anything that could be decorated had been decorated with banners and flags that featured suns and moons. Ponies were outside, laughing and dancing in the streets, and Twilight could even hear music in the air, though it sounded like it was coming from several blocks away.

“What’s all that about?”

“It’s my ‘The Princesses are back’ party!” Pinkie Pie answered with a bounce. “A pegasus came from Canterlot this morning and told the mayor that Celestia and Luna were back, and then she told Ditzzy Doo, and Ditzzy Doo told Carrot Top, and then Carrot Top told Mr. Cake, and then Mr. Cake told Mrs. Cake. Then Mrs. Cake told me. Now, since everypony knows the princesses are back and I don’t have to keep it a secret, I threw together the biggest, most exciting block party *ever!*”

“Wait, so you threw a party together already?”

“Of course!” Pinkie Pie replied. “I mean, I put together a party just as big for when we saved Princess Luna, and I barely had any time then! This time I actually had ponies to put up decorations, and I’ve got punch made, and I have five cakes baking!”

“Wait, how do you have five cakes baking? There’s only one oven at Sugarcube Corner.”

“That’s easy, silly! I just used other ponies’ ovens.”

“I guess that would make sense,” Twilight replied, though she was honestly expecting a much stranger answer.

“So,” Pinkie Pie began as she leaned in to Twilight, “are you going to come to the party?”

“Actually, I may not, Pinkie Pie.”

“Awwww, why not? I mean, it’s going to be so terrific and I’d think you, more than anypony, would be happy that the princesses are back!”

“I am happy, but I wouldn’t want to make Nyx stay here at the library by herself, and it’s probably not a party she would like to go to. While it is a party for Princess Celestia and Princess Luna, there have to be some ponies out there celebrating the fact that they think Nyx is gone.”

“Oh, everypony already knows about Nyx.”

Twilight’s eyes widened and her mouth hung open slightly. “They... do?”

“Yeah. The message the princesses sent out said that Nyx let them go, that they punished Nyx by taking away her powers, and that they had put her in the care of a pony that would make sure she wouldn’t be a threat to Equestria ever again, a pony Princess Celestia trusts completely.

“And,” Pinkie Pie continued, “Princess Celestia doesn’t trust anypony more than you, so I *knew* Nyx was staying with you. That, and a couple of ponies saw you leaving the castle last night with a little black filly. Still, Princess Celestia’s punishment sounds so silly. Anypony that knows you and Nyx would know that the idea of her living with you isn’t a *real* punishment!”

Twilight found herself smiling as she silently thanked the princesses. They had told Equestria the full truth about Nyx, but had done it in such a way that most of Equestria would believe Nyx was actually being punished. To the common pony, it sounded like she was being carefully guarded and that her powers had been taken away by force.

Yet the residents of Ponyville, who knew Nyx better, could see the full truth. Most would be angry that she got off so easily, but some would be happy to know she was back with

the unicorn that cared about her. It was probably a foal's hope, believing all of Equestria wouldn't find out the full truth sooner or later, but Twilight was thankful for what the princesses had done all the same.

"It does sound like a lot of fun, Pinkie Pie, but I think Spike, Nyx, and I should just spend today together."

Pinkie Pie smiled knowingly. "Okay, Twilight, I hope you three have fun! Oh, and, if you change your mind, you're welcome to stop by the party and get some cake."

"I'll keep that in mind," Twilight replied. She was about to slip back inside the library when a thought struck her. "Hey, Pinkie Pie?"

"Yeah?"

"Do the Cakes have any parties planned in Sugarcube Corner over the next few days?"

"Not that I can think of. Why?"

• • •

"Spike... Twilight!?" Nyx called out, slowly descending the stairs of the library's main floor.

It had been a few days since the princesses' return, a few days of fun for Nyx as she got back into a normal routine with Twilight, Spike, Peewee, and Owloysius. It hadn't all been peaceful; a few ponies had come to the library to argue with Twilight that Nyx needed to be locked up or even taken away. Twilight, however, proceeded to chew out and slam the library door in those ponies' faces, and afterward she always reassured Nyx that she didn't deserve any of the punishments they were demanding.

It had been okay until three ponies came at once with every intention to take Nyx by force and lock her up until they could convince Celestia she needed to be banished. It had been a tense evening, but with her magic and Spike's help, Twilight chased those three ponies off. Then, to make Nyx feel better, Twilight broke her usual rule and read two stories before bed.

Nyx had been so excited that she made herself stay up for both stories, which resulted in her sleeping in. It was almost ten in the morning and, while Nyx wasn't surprised to see Twilight and Spike weren't in bed, she was surprised to find they weren't in the kitchen or the library's main room.

“W-where is everypony?” Nyx asked herself after checking most of the library. For a brief moment, a flicker of fear sparked inside Nyx as her more youthful mind betrayed her. She couldn’t stop herself from wondering if she had been abandoned again, but she dispelled the thought with a firm shake of her head.

She knew Twilight wouldn’t just leave her like that. Not now, not ever.

That still left Nyx wondering where everypony was, and she began to search the library. It was when she was in the library’s basement that the rapping of a hoof on wood reached her ears.

Somepony was knocking on the front door, and, for a moment, Nyx wasn’t sure whether or not she should answer. The ponies at the door could have easily been some of the ponies from town that wanted to take her away. On the other hoof, Nyx realized that the pony at the door could be Twilight or one of her friends. So, she decided to at least see who it was.

Nyx galloped to the door and reached out her magic to open it. She, however, couldn’t help but fumble with the handle for a few moments. Her magic was much weaker, and she was still getting used to it. It was even weaker than it had been when Twilight first found her for some reason. Still, with some effort, Nyx got the door unlatched and pulled it open with a hoof.

“There you are!”

Nyx jumped back, and a small “eep!” escaped her throat as she retreated into the library. The party pony of Ponyville, Pinkie Pie, had been standing right on the library doorstep, catching Nyx off guard. Yet, even after startling her, Pinkie Pie quickly zipped inside and got right up beside Nyx, giving her a playful noogie.

“I was so worried you were going to go and sleep through the party, but Twilight said I couldn’t wake you up until it was eleven. I thought that was kind of sad, since you’ve missed so much fun already, but then I heard somepony moving around. So, I guessed you were awake, decided to try knocking on the door, and I was right! Now you can come to the party earlier and have so much fun! I bet if we really try really hard, we can make up for the hour you were being a sleepy McSleeperhead!”

“Pinkie Pie, stop it!” Nyx half-giggled, half-whined. She escaped Pinkie’s relentless, but playful, noogie, and stumbled back a few steps from her. “What’s going on? What party?”

“Oh, my ‘Thanks-For-Saving-Ponyville-From-A-Bunch-Of-Scary-Monsters-party. Hey, can you guess who the guest of honor is?”

“Twilight?”

“Nooooo~,” Pinkie Pie replied with a sing-song voice.

“Rainbow Dash?”

Pinkie Pie giggled. “No!”

“Applejack?”

“Not even close.”

“... Fluttershy?”

“Wow, you *really* need to practice at guessing games. It’s *you*, you silly filly!”

“Me?”

“Well *duh*. Yeah, Applejack and Rainbow Dash and Twilight and Fluttershy all helped, but *you* were the mare that really saved the day. You went and broke yourself into all those clones, and then you flew around helping ponies like an army of super heroes! You brought lightning down with big KA-CRACKS, and you bucked with some KA-POWS, and threw some of the monsters back into the forest with a NEEERRR-THOOOOM! It was so totally amazing!”

A smile slipped onto Nyx’s face. “You really think so?”

“Yep! Now come on, everypony we know is over at Sugarcube Corner, and they’re going to be so excited to see you! Well, it’s actually more everypony you know. I know everypony in Ponyville, and Sugarcube Corner is too small to really fit them all. That, and a lot of ponies I know are being mean-meanie heads. Some actually heard about the party and came to tell me I shouldn’t be throwing it. They said that you didn’t deserve a party. How mean is that?”

“Anyways,” Pinkie Pie continued, “all of *my* friends and all of *your* friends are there, and there are some other ponies too.

“Now, come on!” Pinkie Pie chirped. Before Nyx could react, Pinkie Pie had slipped a hoof under her belly. All it took after that was a single, swift, upward motion from Pinkie’s hoof, and Nyx found she had been popped into the air. She yelped, waved her limbs, and fluttered her wings as she toppled through the air. Nyx landed on Pinkie Pie’s back, and, before she could get her bearings, Pinkie reared energetically.

A moment later, Pinkie was charging through the streets of Ponyville while Nyx held on for dear life.

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“WE’RE HERE~!” Pinkie Pie sang as she burst through the doors to Sugarcube Corner, startling a number of ponies around the room with her sudden arrival. After barely dodging a few ponies unfortunate enough to be in her path, Pinkie Pie skidded to a stop in the center of the room, a slightly shell-shocked Nyx holding tightly to her back.

When Nyx dared to open her eyes, her vision was met with a Sugarcube Corner decked out in party decorations, complete with streamers, banners, and balloons. Nyx could even see a cake, which had been decorated with a simple but recognizable rendition of a grown-up version of herself standing over a defeated Lupus Major, which had X’s over its eyes and its tongue sticking out comically.

Most importantly, Nyx saw the friendly, smiling faces of ponies, something she had sorely missed during her time spent as Nightmare Moon. There weren’t a whole lot of them. The room was maybe halfway full, but there were still more than Nyx expected. Twilight and her friends, Cheerilee, Sweetie Belle’s parents, Scootaloo’s parents, and a few other mares and stallions from the community were in attendance. There were even a few faces Nyx didn’t recognize, but even those ponies seemed happy to see her.

It wasn’t just the adult ponies though. Before Nyx could really recover from being whisked through Ponyville by Pinkie Pie, she found herself at the bottom of a pony-pile. Apple Bloom, Scootaloo, Sweetie Belle, and Twist had jumped up, clearing Pinkie Pie’s back and tackling their friend in a fit of laughter and giggles.

“Guess Twilight was tellin’ the truth! You *are* back to normal!” Apple Bloom cheered as she pulled herself out of the pile of equines, the others quickly getting back to their hooves as well.

“Must be weird not being all grown up anymore,” Scootaloo noted, “but it’s good to have ya back, Nyx.”

“Th-thank you. It’s really good to be back. I missed you all so much,” Nyx said with a smile, though it was a grin that quickly withered into a frown as she hung her head. “Listen, I’m so sorry that I locked you in the dungeons. I really didn’t want to, but Spell Nexus convinced me that—”

“We know,” Apple Bloom reassured while she placed a hoof on Nyx’s shoulders. “It was scary, but Twilight told us why you had to lock us up.”

“I’m still really sorry, girls. I promise, I didn’t want to do it.”

Sweetie Belle was the next to come up beside Nyx, and she was wearing a comforting smile. “It’s okay, we’ve all forgiven you.”

“Yeah, it’s totally— HEEEEYYYYY!” Scootaloo zipped over to Nyx’s side and pointed a hoof to her hips. “Since when did you have that?”

“Have what?” Twist asked, tilting her head quizzically to the right side.

“Nyx has her cutie mark!” Apple Bloom chirped with a bounce before she, Twist, and Sweetie Belle moved over beside Scootaloo to inspect the new mark. “What is it, a shovel?”

“No, it doesn’t have a handle. I say it’s an arrow head,” Sweetie Belle argued.

“It’s not shaped right to be an arrow head. Uh, maybe it’s a... uh...” Scootaloo began, only to be cut off.

“It’s a shield,” Nyx said with a proud smile, despite the quizzical looks from her friends.

“A shield? What kind of special talent do you have that gives you a shield for a cutie mark?”

“Twilight says my special talent is protecting other ponies, even when I have to put myself in harm’s way, like how I protected Ponyville during the attack.”

Scootaloo nodded her head. “That’s pretty cool. It’s not as cool as Rainbow Dash’s cutie mark, but still cool.”

“But... I can still be a Crusader, right?” Nyx asked.

“Of course!” Sweetie Belle chirped. “After you made Twist a Cutie Mark Crusader, we’ve started a new membership policy. Ponies who already have cutie marks are allowed to be members as long as they help members who don’t have cutie marks discover their special talents. Though, you’ll have to work pretty hard to keep up with Twist. She’s been helping us out a whole bunch.”

“Aw, I just bring snacks,” Twist admitted while rubbing the back of her neck.

“But the snacks you bring are great, and you also help us find more things to try out for our special talents,” Apple Bloom pointed out.

“Hey,” Scootaloo began, “maybe one of our cutie marks are like Nyx’s! Maybe we should try defending other ponies.”

“But, what can we defend ponies against?” Sweetie Belle asked.

Nyx felt a bit of unease rising up in her chest. She did *not* want to let her friends go running into the Everfree Forest to try and defeat one of the monsters she had chased away. It was then, however, she noticed a hydra-shaped piñata hanging off a hook in the ceiling.

A sly smile formed on her face, and she pointed in the direction of the piñata. “You know, that big hydra looks pretty mean and scary. We wouldn’t want it hurting any ponies here at the party...”

“Yeah, it *is* pretty big and nasty,” Scootaloo agreed, rubbing her chin. The other four fillies soon caught onto Nyx’s idea and, with large smiles, the five friends shouted out in unison, scaring half the ponies at the party.

“CUTIE MARK CRUSADERS PIÑATA MONSTER SLAYERS! YAY!”

The Crusaders, now numbering five energetic fillies, quickly ran off to find a blindfold and stick so that they could crack open the piñata... or, rather, defend the innocent party goers from the paper-mache monster that just *happened* to be filled with candy.

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“No cutie marks, but this candy is great,” Apple Bloom said as the Crusaders sat at a table. Nearby, the broken remains of the piñata lay scattered across the floor. Scootaloo had been the one to bring down the brightly colored paper-mache hydra, which had been *such* a threat to the party and all the ponies in attendance. It was a glorious explosion of

candy, and the few other fillies and colts that were at the party cheered and scrambled to get their share of the bounty when the beast had been slain.

“So, Nyx,” Sweetie Belle began after she swallowed a piece of chocolate, “what was it like to be queen?”

Nyx stuck her tongue out at the sour memories. “I honestly didn’t like it that much.”

“Really? I mean, wasn’t it cool to live in that big castle and have all them servants workin’ for ya?” Apple Bloom asked. “I bet the food was good too, like those desserts we ate.”

“Sometimes, but the castle cook always made my food too fancy. I’d ask for a sandwich and the chef always turned it into an art project.”

“But those pastries he made were really good!” Scootaloo exclaimed, “They were good even after Sweetie Belle sat on one.”

“I still can’t believe you ate that,” Sweetie Belle commented.

“What? It was still good, just a little squished,” Scootaloo defended before popping another small candy in her mouth. Sweetie Belle wasn’t ready to drop the issue so quickly, and, within moments, she and Scootaloo had gotten into a discussion about when it was and wasn’t okay to eat a dessert. Apple Bloom, Twist, and Nyx weighed in from time to time, but the trio mostly just sat back and grimaced as Scootaloo openly admitted that she would eat a pastry even if it was dropped in the mud, at least after brushing most of the mud off first.

It was during this conversation that Nyx noticed a glint out of the corner of her eye and looked to her side. A familiar pair of fillies was coming in the front door of Sugarcube Corner, the shimmer of light coming from the tiara that one of the fillies was wearing.

“Isn’t that right, Nyx?”

Nyx shook her head and looked back at her friends. “What? Sorry, I wasn’t listening.”

“I was asking if it was cool to have a mane like Princess Celestia’s,” Sweetie Belle repeated.

“I thought we were talking about what Scootaloo is willing to eat.”

“We were, but then Apple Bloom said something about the mane and tail you had when you were all grown up, and we started talking about that. Weren’t you listening at all?” Twist asked before taking a bite of taffy.

“Sorry, I got distracted, but, yes, I guess it was pretty cool.”

“I wish I had a mane like that,” Sweetie Belle admitted. “It was so pretty.”

“Pretty nothin’!” Apple Bloom argued. “I just wish I could get my mane to *do* things. I could get to the cookie jar Big Mac hides on the top shelf if I had a mane like Nyx did.”

As her friends shifted into a conversation about the benefits of having a magical mane, Nyx excused herself a moment. After trotting around the party for a while, Nyx found Twilight talking with the mailmare, Ditzzy Doo, near the punch bowl.

“Are you sure it’s okay?”

“I don’t mind at all,” Twilight assured. “I’d be happy to help Dinky with her magic.”

“Thank you, Twilight. My little muffin has just been so excited about magic since she played you in that spring play. Sparkler’s been trying to help her learn but she’s just had her heart set on learning from you. I know she’ll be so excited to hear you’re willing to teach her.”

“Um, Twilight?” Nyx quietly interrupted, seeing a small break in the conversation.

“Oh, hey Nyx, are you having fun?”

“I am, but—” Nyx paused and glanced over her shoulder to look at two fillies who were standing in the corner, who weren’t playing or talking with anypony else at the party. “Why are Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon here?”

“I know you don’t like them, Nyx, but I asked them to come.”

“Why would you want them here?”

“Do you remember what you did to them when you first became an adult?” Twilight asked, her tone becoming more parental and stern.

Nyx flattened her ears against her head, remembering how she had singled out the pair of fillies and practically blamed them for her completed resurrection. “Yes... I remember.”

“Don’t you think they deserve an apology?”

Nyx frowned and glanced a second time at the pair of fillies that had been the bane of her existence when she was in school. “I guess, but what if they don’t want to accept my apology?”

“Then that’s their loss,” Twilight answered before she gave Nyx a gentle nudge with her hoof. “Now, go on.”

Nyx pouted, but she started to walk across the room all the same. She was not looking forward to the conversation at all. She couldn’t foresee the apology turning out very well. Still, Twilight was right; she needed to apologize to everypony for what she did, and that included Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon.

“Oh look, Silver Spoon, it’s Equestria’s ‘glorious’ queen,” Diamond Tiara mocked as the pair noticed Nyx walking up to them, her words dripping with sarcasm. “What do you want, *Your Majesty*? Oh, wait, let me guess. You want to humiliate us in front of everypony in town, *again*. Or maybe you want to take my dad away, *again*.”

“I... I...” Nyx fumbled under Diamond Tiara’s accusing gaze. Once again, Nyx had to deal with her younger mind. When she was Nightmare Moon, she wouldn’t have taken that kind of lashing, but as a filly...

Well, as a filly she didn’t want to take it either. She felt guilty, Diamond Tiara’s words were scalding, and she couldn’t deny that part of her wanted to break down. Still, that didn’t mean she had to. She was a filly again, but that didn’t mean she had to wilt and wither like she used to. She would be brave and face Diamond Tiara. After all, if she could face a bunch of big monsters, then she could handle a couple of bullies.

“I wanted to say I’m sorry.”

Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon glanced at each other. The two obviously had not been expecting that to be the reason why Nyx had come over to talk to them. Still, Diamond Tiara’s mouth quickly bent down into a frown. “Sorry? *Sorry!*? Like, who do you take us for? We’re not stupid! You hate us almost as much as we hate you, so why would *you* be sorry?”

“Because what I did wasn’t right, and... and it doesn’t matter if I like you or not. You still deserve an apology.”

“Well, thank you *sooo* much. That makes things, like, *sooo* much better.”

Nyx felt herself bristle. “I was just trying to be nice. Why did you two even come anyway?”

“We just wanted to see how lame this party was going to be and get some free cake. Now, why don’t you go and *be nice* with your blank flank friends?” Diamond Tiara dismissed, waving Nyx off with a hoof. “We don’t need your sympathy, *Nightmare Moon*.”

Nyx furrowed her eyebrows and tried to fight the urge to flip Diamond Tiara upside down with her magic. It was a part of her old personality, her Nightmare Moon side, that remained despite her return to fillyhood. It was the same temper that made her lash out at her guards and servants when they disobeyed or questioned her. It was the same temper that made her want to strangle Spell Nexus’s scrawny neck for almost killing Twilight.

It was a temper that now remained with Nyx, but one she managed to wrangle before she did something she’d regret. She had given her apology, and, if those two wanted to be snooty and mean, then that was their business. Turning on her hooves, Nyx began walking away, doing her best to remain calm. She wanted to deny the bullies the pleasure of knowing they had gotten under her skin, yet she couldn’t keep herself from stomping a little and fluttering her wings.

Nyx was so wrapped up in being angry at Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon that she almost walked right past Twilight. Twilight, however, stepped on Nyx’s tail before she could and asked firmly, “Did you apologize?”

“Yes,” Nyx replied with a mixture of a grumble and whine, “but they didn’t accept it.”

“That’s fine,” Twilight said before she released Nyx’s tail and let her turn around. “What matters is that you did the right thing. Now, why don’t we go cut the cake?”

Nyx smiled as her anger over Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon subsided. She didn’t need them to like her; she had Twilight and her friends. She knew that was all she needed.

That, and the cake looked delicious.

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“Well, sister, it seems that most of Canterlot is taking your transformation well,” Celestia commented as she and Luna strode through the royal castle, having a short respite between meetings and announcements. It had been very hectic for the Royal Sisters,

trying to balance the work that needed to be done with the number of public appearances they had to make.

“They take it as a sign of Nightmare Moon’s defeat, that I ‘conquered’ the great monster and reclaimed my power. It may not be the proper truth, but I see no point in correcting them.”

“An honorable motive, sister, but I fear that the ‘proper truth’ will come out in time. Some ponies from Ponyville have already sent letters to me about the fact that Twilight isn’t *punishing* Nyx as they think she should. Shining Armor has been surprisingly vocal, and a letter from one Filthy Rich complained about the fact that his daughter, Diamond Tiara, was invited to a party for Nyx.”

“A party?” Luna echoed quizzically.

“From the invitation I personally received, it was a ‘Thanks-For-Saving-Ponyville-From-A-Bunch-Of-Scary-Monsters’ party, thrown by the bearer of the Element of Laughter, Pinkie Pie. If memory serves me right, the party is going on right now.”

A small chuckle escaped Luna’s lips as she thought back to her own encounters with Pinkie Pie. “She does throw very grand parties. I hope Nyx enjoys it.”

“Speaking of Nyx, I must admit I was curious about something. I feel you made the best decision for Nyx and Twilight, taking back your power and memories, but—”

“You want to know how I did it?” Luna interrupted.

Princess Celestia nodded her head. “Yes, it isn’t a spell I’m familiar with.”

The smile slid from Luna’s face, and she choose to focus on the corridor ahead. “It was a spell created out of dark jealousy and ill-intentions. My plans to try and keep the moon in the sky began before I properly became Nightmare Moon. I knew that I wouldn’t be able to resist you and the sun for long, considering back then you were my elder and superior in terms of age and power.

“So I studied and developed a spell that allowed me to steal magic. Flowers, trees... ponies... I stole not only their magical power, but, if I came across a pony with a unique knowledge of magic, I would steal that as well.

“I used the spell to build up my power,” Luna admitted with hints of disgrace within her words. “When I had enough knowledge and magic gathered, I used it to transform into

Nightmare Moon. I infused myself with the power and became a mare that could easily stand against the pony you were a thousand years ago. It... it is a horrible and dark art.”

Celestia shifted, gently nudging up against Luna as the pair continued to walk down the hall. “Do not worry yourself, sister. All that is in the past, and you found a way to take that spell and put it to good use.”

“I’m glad you agree. I didn’t want Nyx to have to live with the mistakes I made. I wanted to take it all back from her, and that desire made me think of that spell for the first time in centuries. I had almost forgotten it completely. It hadn’t crossed my mind since I became Nightmare Moon. Perhaps that is why Nyx does not know of the spell. It is a small miracle that she only knows the things I thought about when she and I were one and the same.

“Still, once *I* did remember the spell, I knew that was the best thing I could do for her.”

“It was the best outcome we could have hoped for, I believe,” Celestia agreed. “Many in Equestria may still fear and despise Nyx for what she did, but, as long there are those who see the good in her, I’m sure she will be able to find her way.”

“That, and you didn’t mention to Twilight you’ve put a couple royal guards undercover in Ponyville to make sure Nyx doesn’t get attacked by an angry mob,” Luna added knowingly.

“Just a precaution, nothing more.”

“Don’t worry, sister. Your secret is safe with me,” Luna assured her as the pair reached their destination. It was the castle dining hall, which was already filled to the brim with ponies. The occasion was another celebratory meal, hosted this time by the elite of Manehattan, who were more than eager to welcome back the Royal Sisters.

Celestia and Luna took their seats at the head of the table. The Mayor of Manehattan, along with a few of the city’s biggest businessponies, had the privilege of sitting right next to the Royal Sisters, and, after the princesses offered some welcoming words, lunch was served.

The businessponies around Celestia and Luna were soon lost in a discussion about the economic impact of Nightmare Moon’s short-lived reign. It was a conversation the princesses only half-listened to, Luna eagerly digging into her food after the long morning while Celestia picked and nibbled at her meal.

“What’s wrong, sister? Aren’t you hungry?” Luna whispered quietly before putting a forkful of food into her mouth.

“I am starving, but I already ate too much at breakfast,” Celestia whispered back, not wanting to draw the attention of the nearby ponies. “After what we’ve already eaten today, I honestly shouldn’t be eating anything more than a green salad. Otherwise I’ll have to skip dinner.”

Luna laughed to herself. “I still say you worry too much about your weight, Celestia.”

“You may be able to eat whatever you want, but, as you may recall, I’ve always had to be a little more conscious of my figure,” Celestia snipped before she glanced to her side. A servant had come up beside her. He whispered something into her ear and then retreated as quickly as he had approached.

“What’s wrong?” Luna asked, pausing with a fork in front of her mouth.

“It’s Spell Nexus,” Celestia whispered. “He’s broken into the castle dungeons.”

“Broken *in*?”

“He’s distraught because of the role he played in Nightmare Moon’s resurrection, even though it is my understanding that he and all the other Children of Nightmare were being influenced by parasitic magic.”

“So he broke into the dungeon to reprimand himself?”

Celestia nodded, taking up her napkin and gently cleaning her mouth. “Yes. Spell Nexus has always been a little over-dramatic. You should have seen him this one time when he was still my student. He accidentally broke a vase in the castle and was sure I needed to banish him from the kingdom. He can be such a drama queen at times.”

“Don’t you mean ‘king’?”

“No, queen,” Celestia corrected with a small grin. “Don’t tell anypony else, but he has a very high-pitched scream.”

Luna chuckled a little at the thought. “I’ll take your word for it, sister. Still, what are you going to do?”

“I am going to leave you to entertain our guests while I go convince Spell Nexus he does not need to imprison himself in the dungeon,” Celestia answered as she stood from her seat. “That, and, if I know him as well as I do, I’ll also need to convince him that he doesn’t have to resign from his position as headmaster of my school.”

“Do you want me to save you a piece of dessert? It’s supposed to be cloud cake, your favorite.”

Celestia winced, coming to a stop just a few steps away from her seat. After a few tense moments, she cast a glance back at Luna. “Save me one small piece... a *small* piece, Luna.”

Luna nodded, watching as Celestia left before returning to her meal. Then, when a servant drew close, Luna waved the mare over, leaned in, and whispered quietly as she smiled devilishly.

“Please be sure to save my sister a large, corner piece of cloud cake with as much frosting as possible. Actually, why don’t you just set aside one of the cakes for her, and make sure it’s delivered to the bed chamber this evening.”

“Of course, Your Majesty,” the servant replied, quickly scuttling away while Luna placed a forkful of food in her mouth, imagining just how Celestia would react when she found a whole cloud cake in her bedroom. She couldn’t help but wonder if her sister would be able to resist eating it.

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Twilight had a weary smile on her face as she walked back to the library. Spike and Nyx were passed out on her back, the all-day party having utterly worn them out. Beside Twilight strode Rarity, who was carrying a dozing Sweetie Belle on her back.

“I think that even Pinkie Pie is tired after today,” Rarity said, her own exhaustion apparent in her voice. “I, for the first time ever, saw her walking up to her loft instead of bouncing.”

Twilight laughed and nodded. “Yeah, but it was still a lot of fun.”

“That it was, Twilight, that it was,” Rarity agreed. “Still, there is something I wanted to tell you before I forget.”

“What is it, Rarity?”

“Well, at the beginning of all this, I thought you were crazy taking care of a filly that turned out to actually be Nightmare Moon. And not just because of Nyx, but because of you as well. I know you’ve taken care of Spike, but I always assumed you got help raising him from Celestia.”

“Well, from her and some of the professors at the school.”

“Exactly. I was worried about what Nyx really was and for your safety, but I was also worried that you didn’t realize what you were getting yourself into. Taking care of a filly is a *lot* of responsibility, and Spike is really more of an assistant since he’s capable of taking care of himself.

“I wanted to say that I’ve never been happier to be proven wrong. You’ve done an amazing job taking care of Nyx. I mean, you helped *Nightmare Moon* change. Not many ponies can boast their parenting skills reformed one of the most feared villains in Equestrian history.”

“Thanks, Rarity. That means a lot coming from you.”

“Just don’t let it go to your head,” Rarity warned. “You may have done well so far, but you can’t let your guard down either. Trust me, if you don’t keep an eye on a little filly, she’ll get into trouble faster than you can imagine. I still can’t believe Sweetie Belle was able to get into my gold silk to make her crusader capes without me even noticing.”

Twilight giggled a little, having heard more than once about the kind of trouble Sweetie Belle could cause for her sister. “I’ll be sure to keep that in mind.”

“I hope you do,” Rarity remarked as the pair reached an intersection in town. “Unfortunately, it would seem this is where we part ways for now. I need to take Sweetie Belle back to my parent’s house. So, I must bid you adieu, Twilight.”

“Night, Rarity,” Twilight replied with a small chuckle. She watched Rarity take a few steps down the other street before she turned and continued on her way. It only took a few more minutes for Twilight to reach The Golden Oaks Library, and, after she tucked both Spike and Nyx into bed, she slipped downstairs. She summoned a scroll and ink jar to her side and began to write by light of the candle on her writing desk.

Dear Princess Celestia,

I just wanted to thank you and Luna again for letting Nyx stay with me. While most of Equestria may not be as welcoming to her, I can assure you that, after today’s events, Nyx

has friends among the ponies in Ponyville. Ponies who are willing to see her for who she is, not who she was.

The one thing that I've learned from raising Nyx is that if anypony wants to change for the better, they can, especially if they have help from good friends. When I first saw Nyx, I was, just like you, afraid that she was Nightmare Moon. Even after discovering her, at the time, timid personality, I was still afraid of the truth, and I realize now that I was actively denying all evidence that pointed to who she really was just to alleviate my own fears.

And yet, despite all that happened, things didn't turn out as dark as they could have. From what I've heard, even when she was fully resurrected, Nyx didn't act like Nightmare Moon from the legends or the books. The time she spent with me as my daughter, the time she spent with her friends, had changed her for the better.

And if Nightmare Moon herself can become a better pony, then I think anypony can.

*Your Faithful Student,
Twilight Sparkle*